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THE FABULISTS

BY

BERNARD CAPES

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FOREWORD

DURING the year that is past (writes Duxbury) a company of four young men essayed a new experiment, but on old lines, in the way of itinerant entertainment. They went from village to village telling short stories. They were all men of substance, ingenious, inventive and, withal, true patriots, their object being to revitalise gratuitously the literature of the wayside, and reclaim to the wandering Fabulist his romantic prerogatives, long lost to him through the mechanic production and perpetuation of what of its nature should be as ephemeral as a tale told by a bird in a pause of the wind.

Each member of the party was equipped, for his sole baggage, with a lightly-furnished knapsack and a camp-stool. One carried a guitar in addition. They all wore efficient waterproof suits and soft hats of an impermeable material. When they reached a village, they would seat themselves on their camp-stools on the green, or in some befitting leafy spot, and call upon the "Guitar" to charm about them, with his melodious "Ducdame," the first circle of an audience. That purpose accomplished, each would then rise in turn to tell his story.

The names of the little company were Raven, Duxbury, Scarrott, and Heriot, who sang. A selection from their pieces is here given. They stand for the most part as written to be delivered ; though, in actual process of delivery, policy had occasionally to counsel the simplifying of a phrase or the omission of an obscure passage. The majority of the sketches are of the briefest description ; but a few of greater length, designed for weather-bound occasions in bar parlours, or about the post-prandial fire in commercial rooms, are added for ballast. Duxbury is responsible for the choice, throughout.

LIFE

Heriot Sings.

VENTURE and rise, venture and fall ;
Round on the spindle comes the ball.
Life is a game of Rouge et Noir—
We may chance to win whatever we are ;
We may chance to win, we may chance to lose,
Be praised for a swan or plucked for a goose.
Life is a game of Rouge et Noir ;
Nothing depends upon what we are,
 Worthy a noose,
 Worthy a star.
The man who has luck is the man to choose,
And he alone shall be god in the car.

GUN PRACTICE

Duxbury Speaks.

PICTURE to yourself a waste of troubled sea, grey-green as ploughed stubble, and sown all over with white bosses like scattered stones. The wind is southerly and vicious, the sky stoops torn and low. Away there over the long Bill of Portland stretches a tiny streak, whose ashen under-shadows half obscure, half reveal, a populous city of battleships, as unsubstantial in seeming as lightning-charged clouds. But long ago there was one which, detaching itself from the mists, forged slowly into definite being, and now rests inert, preparing for gun practice, some three miles off the coast of Lulworth where we stand.

To the north you can see the target, in charge of an Admiralty tug. Laboriously the little vessel hauls the floating mark to its ground, moors it in position at a range of some 2,000 yards or so, and casts off. You know the moment by the sudden increase in its speed, patent even at this distance. You can see it pitch and roll, wallowing like a porpoise as it tears away, hidden sometimes for seconds, in a manner to bring your heart into your mouth, then emerging, a blink

of sunlight firing its copper funnel, so that it looks like a flaring buoy. It is in a flurry to escape.

Snap ! As you look, a light winks from the watching monster, and over the stubble-field rise in succession three little puffs of white dust. Not till the third has sprung up does the slam reach your ears, and by then the engulfed shot is wobbling down to its everlasting rest on the ocean floor.

All that you can see or imagine ; but what you cannot see or imagine is the tragedy that has occurred between the casting-off from the target and the firing of the first gun. During those hurried minutes a man has fallen overboard, unnoticed, from the tug, and his loss has never been observed until all hope of recovering him from that trackless welter is seen to be a vain thing. The poor fellow has perforce to be abandoned to his fate.

Years after I had the story from this man's own lips. He was one of the strangest looking souls I have ever seen, perfectly colourless, and with his skin all over fine crackles like china. He was young, and yet his hair was white. If a child screamed or a boy whistled near him he would involuntarily duck his head. But his manner was quite quiet, and his voice low.

“ It was blowing stiffish when it happened, with a nasty sea. A gust took me under the oilies as I was bending down and, the tug heeling at that moment, lifted me clean over the side like an

umbrella. There was one that noticed me with the tail of his eye, and thought it just a tarpaulin flapping. I went down, sir, and the screw thrashed at me, and missed. I had my sea-boots on, and what with them and the oilies I believed I was done. Somehow I came to the top, where I kicked and struggled free of all. But by then, at the rate she was going, and in that wind and sea, the tug was out of hail, even if I'd had a voice to hail her with. I swam after, desperate-like, but she ran away, 20 yards to my one, and it was evident that those aboard hadn't missed me. My God, thought I, it's all over, and I stopped, treading water. Then I looked back and saw the target. With luck I might reach it—and what then? But it was a chance anyway and my only one.

“I wasn't a fanciful man—not then. I reached the target, pretty nigh spent, and clung on to the raft with both hands, gasping to get back my heart. And then suddenly the truth burst upon me. Not that patched triangle of canvas, but I, was the devil's mark for the guns pointing at us a mile and a half away.

“In the first shock of the thought I was for scrambling up on the raft, in the hopes that they might see me and stay their hands. I was clinging to its further side, and I had already got my right knee and elbow hitched over, when I saw a flash in front, and down I went again with a choke. It was a 4-incher, and its last ricochet sent it skip-

ping, with a scream like an engine-whistle, 20 ft. over the target. Safe for that once; and I thanked God for the report that followed. There's no thunder for the ears of the man struck and killed by lightning. Well, now I was in for it—the 4-inchers, eight of them in all, as many Hotchkiss quick-firers, and the Maxims. I knew the armament, and I had to swallow the lot. Likely you can imagine what I haven't the gift to describe. For as long as I could I hung by my hands to the raft, my head no more than above water; but I knew that couldn't last for ever. The time would come when my strength would be all gone, and I should have none left for emergencies. So, while I could do it, I hooked my elbows over the raft and, lying as low as I could, watched the shells coming. Yes, sir, you may wonder at it, but I watched them; and I felt in my forehead, as each flew down, the sort of crawling one gets there when a pointing finger's slowly moved towards it. It was a queer sensation; and a queer sight to see those specks coming out of the flash, and growing from leap to leap—and then over, with a screech and a flop. I felt it then, all alone with the flying devils, and my poor soft body their butt; but I didn't feel a thousandth part of what I felt afterwards when it was finished. The raft ducked and rose like a gull; and the gunners made bad practice, for which I was the only one thankful. But at last it had to be neck or nothing with me. I could

hold on no longer ; and I had only just strength left to get aboard, where I flopped down and lay like a log. And it was at that moment that there came a hell's crash overhead, and the water leapt all round as if a shoal of mackerel had passed. They had fired a charge of shrapnel, and ' My God,' says I ; ' but that does me ! ' ”

But the shot was already out of the muzzle as he climbed from the water, and they had seen him in the act. Then the tug signalled and bore down. He took it coolly, they said, at the time. It was during the long subsequent reaction that the man bleached in that astonishing way. But to one with imagination enough to read between the lines of his unaffected narrative it is perhaps not so astonishing.

THE PETROLEUSE

Raven Speaks.

THE house stood alone, and quite isolated, on the edge of a piece of waste suburban ground. Magnified by the dark, it was yet of proportions obviously sufficient to supply a Latimer-Ridley blaze, enough, to a fanatic imagination, to flood all England with the fierceness of its illumination. The flat-chested, hectic-cheeked young woman looking up at it felt herself already an acclaimed heroine and, in some fantastic way, martyr.

The gaining an entrance was a laughably easy matter—just the lifting of a latch in a side-door, and a cautious step within. The house was simply deserted, simply unoccupied—a remote and lifeless shell. It might be unlettable; it might be potentially profitable; it might again represent a chief asset in the income of a sympathiser with the cause. It was convenient, that was the main point. The incendiary paused, breathing hurriedly, to deliver a handbag she carried of its compressed load of newspapers, fire-lighters, turpentine and a small dark lantern. Then, detaching from the pile, for subsequent use, a copy or two of the periodical which voiced her views, she stealthily kindled the

lantern, and prepared, as stealthily, to examine her ground.

It gave her a little thrill and shock at the outset to discover that the place was not so wholly unfurnished as she had been inclined to suppose. There were signs of some late occupation, not substantial or many, but enough to imply an abandonment only as yet provisional. A rickety kitchen table, one or two drunken chairs, a torn jack-towel behind the door—these and other discarded litter confessed themselves leeringly to the little misty eye of the lantern. But a hasty half scrutiny revealing the things all thick with dust, the woman turned from them, reassured, to pursue her purpose and design.

Ordinarily, the mere thought of a solitary night-vigil in an empty house would have been enough to fill her with unspeakable terrors; now the ecstasy of the *exaltée* had uplifted her above all such temporal weaknesses. Going forward, she saw the bare hall, the white slope of the carpetless stairs and, as if irresistibly impelled, mounted to the room above.

Here, also, were some attenuated relics of occupation—tattered window curtains, a half-disembowelled easy chair spilling flock, a broken packing-case or two. Congratulating Providence on its foresight, the intruder began at once and hastily to dispose her materials in the most effective places. She went round the large room by the wall, taking advantage of each combustible object. When all was prepared

she would re-make the circuit, firing each little heap in its turn.

Suddenly she started, and her skin crept from crown to heel. What was that in the room with her? She flashed the lantern-light from wall to wall—over the floor—even over the ceiling. No sight, no sound whatever: only the constriction and expansion of dark palpitating emptiness. With a gasp, which spoke her half-way already on the road to collapse, she hurried to make an end of her task. Lantern and matches in hand, she crouched to ignite the first heap of inflammable rubbish. It was gone.

It was gone; the second was gone—the third—the fourth. More noiselessly than she had disposed them, each had been removed behind her back as she passed on, and carried—whither? She reeled; then made like a mad woman for the door, found it, and began to descend the stairs. And instantly she understood. The soaked paper, the firelighters had been transferred by unseen hands to places more cunningly meet than hers to produce a wholesale conflagration. Fire a house from the ground floor if you would wholly consume it; it is half measures to start half-way. And so the little heaps, like peering demons, winked up at her from hall wainscot, and partition corner, and stair-foot. Yes, the deadliest there. It seemed to smoke already, emitting a phosphorescent light, which was horribly contorted. The woman sat down upon the stairs because her knees would no longer support her. But she was

up again in a moment, with a screech. For in that moment the smoke had burst like a shell, and the whole well of the house was a storm of spouting flame. She turned and fled before it—up, up, while it followed in crackling breakers. Was ever fire so insistent and so hellish! Up, up, until only the unattainable skylight stood between her and freedom. The fire was coming in at the door: a tunnel of blackness seemed to open before her, and she fell into it—and into instant deep unconsciousness.

With the growth of morning came a little crowd about the place. Two policemen were engaged within the walls of a long-blackened ruin, endeavouring to persuade thence a raving white-faced woman, who persisted in frantically defying their efforts.

“Whoth that?” asked a curious, thick-nosed newcomer, with a pack on his back.

“One of them crazy militants,” was the answer. “She’s been caught a trying to set fire to a burnt-out house.”

“Burned-out, thay?”

“This three year and more, old man. Arson, it was supposed; and him that did it caught in the trap he’d set for the insurance companies—caught and burnt himself, before he could make his escape. A bloomin’ ass, I call ‘im!”

The Jew stared, and went into a noiseless chuckle.

“Thertainly, thir,” he said. “The man must have been a fool. But thith woman must be

a greater, thince there is no policy at all in question? ”

“ That’s just it,” answered the other; “ though they call it one, poor misguided creeturs. And here it is nat’rally ended in the madness it promised.”

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Scarrott Speaks.

DAVY'S Aunt Sophy was not a very spoiling aunt. She had not at all approved of Davy's father's marriage with a pretty, penniless worldling, and when Davy, through the death of first one then the other of his parents came to be an enforced encumbrance on her hands, she was inclined to visit the sins of that connection upon its very innocent fruits. Not that she was actively unpleasant to the child—and, indeed, in her inmost heart, she was jealous of his affections—only her way was the way of the "I told you so's," and she had to justify her prophecy of moral catastrophe by fitting Davy into its scheme of retributions. He *had* to be a tiresome boy, a boy of some natural depravity, before she could hope to vindicate her system of reforms on his small person. Therefore she often made him out to be what he was not, a backward and stubborn infant.

Aunt Sophy was, to begin with, a highly religious woman; and Davy, sad to say, at six years old knew nothing of religion. What stories he had heard tell of the Child Christ presented the little Saviour in nowise as a proselytising phenomenon,

terribly above the heads of such small folk as himself ; but rather, after his father's imaginative method, as the sweetest and most natural of play-mates, divinely considerate and fair, never cheating, never telling tales, only illustrating the superfluity of all tale-telling in his own candid and innocent conduct. Aunt Sophy's presentment of this dear comrade failed lamentably, on the other hand, to tally with Daddy's portrait.

"At twelve years old," she would say, "He argued with the learned doctors in the Temple. At six you cannot even write your own name. Is that to qualify yourself to be His true comrade and emulator ? "

Davy's cacography was indeed sinful. Yet he tried hard, with his little finger-nibs crumpled anyhow on the pen. This severity was amazing to him, so went to petting and indulgence ; but he really did his best—and for more reasons than one. He wanted to please Aunt Sophy : he wanted particularly not to be refused admission into Heaven when his time came. "How would you feel," she had said in a transcendent flight of fancy, "if, when you presented yourself at the Celestial gate, and were told to write your name in the Book, you could only put a mark for it, like the poor ignorant people when they sign their pension and insurance papers ? A nice companion you would be thought for Him who, at twelve, disputed with Rabbis. They would never let you in,"

It was that forecast which came to haunt the child's imagination. It really got upon his nerves, and affected for the time his bodily constitution. That he would not be able to write his name when summoned to do so by the keeper of the Celestial gate, and would in consequence be turned back into the cold, immitigable darkness where no love was, and no pity, and no dear Daddy and Mummy waiting to welcome him, was a terrifying thought. He felt it, not specifically, but in general terms of wretchedness. And the more he felt, the more he tried; and the more he tried, the more he failed. The very terror made success impossible; the way was long and difficult enough without such a burden to hamper him. With Christ, the Christ of his old copybookless confidence, developed into a formidable Metaphysician, what hope could he have of being excused his criminal childishness. Presently, though no one guessed it, he was wrought to that state of nervous susceptibility when any wandering germ might strike favourable ground in his tissues. It was measles that found him out.

Then Aunt Sophy was sorry; she was quite desperately sorry and alarmed, though Davy knew nothing about it. He was beyond anything but grievously tossing and babbling when the worst time came, and he let out things enough to betray, clearly and monotonously, what the trend of his thoughts had been—or his thought, rather, for that haunting terror about the signature appeared to

possess him. How wretchedly, then, the strict mind repudiated its own unwitting cruelty. She would have given her soul to recall this other from its torture. If he died, surely she must die too—of a broken heart.

Let us not dissect remorse. It is in bad taste ; and Aunt Sophy was always such a stickler for the proprieties. Besides it is not necessary, because Davy recovered, quite orderly and sensibly. She was watching him, bending as near him as allowed, when the crisis came and passed, and on the top-most of the mad struggle the blessed dew of life broke out, and there followed a sweet exhausted smile, and the profound relaxing of demon-exorcised limbs.

“ O, God bless you, God bless you, my baby ! ” she whispered, for she really believed him to be *her* baby at last.

But what had evoked that dear revivifying smile ? Not bodily ease and relief alone ? Most certainly not. Davy remembered perfectly well, and told her about it by and by. He had gone to Heaven—up a long ladder that was dreadfully difficult to climb—and there were clouds, and music, and an old man, with a face like a dog, waiting for him to sign his name in a book. And then he knew that the test had come, was actually upon him, and a mortal terror of his incapacity seized him, and he stood unable to cry, unable to move. And at that moment there had come

following him up the ladder such a *dear* little boy, rosy and golden like a Cupid, and of about his own age. And the boy had laughed to him as he turned to the keeper—so that in some wonderful way he seemed to explain everything—and, “I want to come into Heaven,” said he. Then the keeper held down his book, barking, “What name, please? You must sign here first.” And the boy answered, “Jesus Christ—but I cannot sign my name, for I am only six.” And instead he put a cross, shaping it awkwardly, with cramped little fingers, and the keeper let him through.

“So you see, Aunt——” but she had seen long ago, though she sat with her hand over her eyes.

R.I.P.

Heriot Sings.

Foolish! Why fear you death,
 That, in kind sort,
From this poor harassed isolated fort—
This desperate hope hemmed in with dreadful
 mines,
This outpost of the spheres, enwrapped in clouds
At each day's end like bloody shrouds—
 Grants at a breath
Your passport through the impenetrable lines,
 And sends you home the way Love beckoneth?

A DANSE-MACABRE

Duxbury Speaks.

CARLEON and I had been talking fitfully, as the train sped on, of things suggested, perhaps, by that sense of volant instability with which a rapid journey in a third-class brake-van is calculated to possess one—the mysteries of Life and Death, and the greater mystery of Life-in-Death, to wit. I had lately been reading Myers's "Human Personality," and my mind was full of Individualism, and Hypnotic Suggestion, and those fathomless strata of sub-consciousness which lie under a man as the forty mattresses lay under the True Princess, without obliterating the sensation of the single pea which, placed at the bottom, made its irritation felt through all. Whence, perhaps, that state of mental excitation which was responsible for the illusion that followed.

Silence had fallen between us when, about sunset time, the train entered into a long, deep-sunk valley. I looked up, and saw the ridges all crested with a running fire of rays, as in some titanic battle, the drifted smoke from which hung in the hollows like blue water. Carleon swept his hand through

the sunbeam which came in at the window, thereby setting its motes gyrating as if they boiled.

“The fourth dimension,” he said, smiling—“imagination. We live upon it all the time, and never know, except when some chance ray like this reveals it to us.”

I nodded indulgently, but did not answer. Something in the twilight peace of the valley was beginning to hypnotise me. The slope of it on which I looked went up in a luminous haze, through which the purple swell of trees, the dim gold of quarries, the milky greenness of the grass showed all distinct, but subdued to a phantasmal loveliness. Somehow there stole into my spirit a strange sense, born of that dreamy mental detachment, of its all being antiquely familiar to me—not in the local meaning alone. I might or might not have travelled that way before; the impression borrowed from infinitely remoter distances. Absorbed by it, absorbed into it, I passed beyond my surroundings—forgot myself; forgot Carleon. I was roused by feeling the quick touch of his hand on my knee.

“Look!” he said.

He was gazing fixedly from his window; I followed the direction of his eyes. We were running at the moment past a scattered line of trees—slender birches inter-thronged with darker thorns—which stood on the hillside; and wreathing itself around and about the congregated trunks in a glimmering fantastic dance was a number of pallid forms.

Mystic, infinitely graceful, but at first indeterminate, they took shape to my enthralled imagination as I stared—and were spirit girls, beckoning, alluring, with white arms raised, and white robes, shot with faint iridescences, clinging and floating.

I struggled to dismiss the illusion, or to seek its correlation in Carleon's eyes ; but my own would not forego their fascination for an instant.

And still, as we passed, the white shapes wove their paces—in and out, in and out—in silent loveliness. I began, I thought, to distinguish, like roses seen through mist, the unearthly sweetness of their faces—a gleam of smiling teeth, a least flush of pink, the phantom blue of eyes that laughed and faded. But as they came they went, witcheries proffered only to be withdrawn. I seemed to hear old music sounding in my brain ; somehow I was approaching a bourne of hills and grooves long foundered in the deeps of memory ; there was wonder in my heart and a great ecstasy of expectation—the train ran beyond the trees, and in an instant the dancers were gone.

Ceased ; snatched out of being in a moment. I sat as if stunned ; and then, as before, Carleon's voice awakened me :—

“ Look there ! ”

I flung myself beside him, and stared back the way we had come.

A little darkling church stood on the hillside, and all between it and the lower belt of trees was a crowded graveyard. The stones stood up or leaned

awry in every arrested pose—erect and sharp white, or tumbled and moss-grown—hundreds of them, and each stiffened to “attention,” after that Danse-Macabre, at the ghostly word of command. It was the tree trunks and those innumerable memento-moris which had woven between them as we sped past that fantastic optical illusion.

At least, so we were bound to suppose.

Or one may suppose, if one prefers it, that Imagination is the parent of being, and the true begetter of all visualised Manifestation.

THE MARBLE HANDS

Raven Speaks.

WE left our bicycles by the little lych-gate and entered the old churchyard. Heriot had told me frankly that he did not want to come ; but at the last moment, sentiment or curiosity prevailing with him, he had changed his mind. I knew indefinitely that there was something disagreeable to him in the place's associations, though he had always referred with affection to the relative with whom he had stayed here as a boy. Perhaps she lay under one of these greening stones.

We walked round the church, with its squat, shingled spire. It was utterly peaceful, here on the brow of the little town where the flowering fields began. The bones of the hill were the bones of the dead, and its flesh was grass. Suddenly Heriot stopped me. We were standing then to the north-west of the chancel, and a gloom of motionless trees over-shadowed us.

“ I wish you'd just look in there a moment,” he said, “ and come back and tell me what you see.”

He was pointing towards a little bay made by the

low boundary wall, the green floor of which was hidden from our view by the thick branches and a couple of interposing tombs, huge, coffer-shaped, and shut within rails. His voice sounded odd; there was a "plunging" look in his eyes, to use a gambler's phrase. I stared at him a moment, followed the direction of his hand; then, without a word, stooped under the heavy, brushing boughs, passed round the great tombs, and came upon a solitary grave.

It lay there quite alone in the hidden bay—a strange thing, fantastic and gruesome. There was no headstone, but a bevelled marble curb, without name or epitaph, enclosed a gravelled space from which projected two hands. They were of white marble, very faintly touched with green, and conveyed in that still, lonely spot a most curious sense of reality, as if actually thrust up, deathly and alluring, from the grave beneath. The impression grew upon me as I looked, until I could have thought they moved stealthily, consciously, turning in the soil as if to greet me. It was absurd, but—I turned and went rather hastily back to Heriot.

"All right. I see they are there still," he said; and that was all. Without another word we left the place and, remounting, continued our way.

Miles from the spot, lying on a sunny downside, with the sheep about us in hundreds cropping the hot grass, he told me the story:

"She and her husband were living in the town at

the time of my first visit there, when I was a child of seven. They were known to Aunt Caddie, who disliked the woman. I did not dislike her at all, because, when we met, she made a favourite of me. She was a little pretty thing, frivolous and shallow; but truly, I know now, with an abominable side to her. She was inordinately vain of her hands; and indeed they were the loveliest things, softer and shapelier than a child's. She used to have them photographed, in fifty different positions; and once they were exquisitely done in marble by a sculptor, a friend of hers. Yes, those were the ones you saw. But they were cruel little hands, for all their beauty. There was something wicked and unclean about the way in which she regarded them.

“ She died while I was there, and she was commemorated by her own explicit desire after the fashion you saw. The marble hands were to be her sole epitaph, more eloquent than letters. They should preserve her name and the tradition of her most exquisite feature to remoter ages than any crumbling inscription could reach. And so it was done.

“ That fancy was not popular with the parishioners, but it gave me no childish qualms. The hands were really beautifully modelled on the originals, and the originals had often caressed me. I was never afraid to go and look at them, sprouting like white celery from the ground.

“ I left, and two years later was visiting Aunt Caddie a second time. In the course of conversa-

tion I learned that the husband of the woman had married again—a lady belonging to the place—and that the hands, only quite recently, had been removed. The new wife had objected to them—for some reason perhaps not difficult to understand—and they had been uprooted by the husband's order.

“I think I was a little sorry—the hands had always seemed somehow personal to me—and, on the first occasion that offered, I slipped away by myself to see how the grave looked without them. It was a close, lowering day, I remember, and the churchyard was very still. Directly, stooping under the branches, I saw the spot, I understood that Aunt Caddie had spoken prematurely. The hands had not been removed so far, but were extended in their old place and attitude, looking as if held out to welcome me. I was glad; and I ran and knelt, and put my own hands down to touch them. They were soft and cold like dead meat, and they closed caressingly about mine, as if inviting me to pull—to pull.

“I don't know what happened afterwards. Perhaps I had been sickening all the time for the fever which overtook me. There was a period of horror, and blankness—of crawling, worm-threaded immurements and heaving bones—and then at last the blessed daylight.”

Heriot stopped, and sat plucking at the crisp pasture.

“ I never learned,” he said suddenly, “ what other experiences synchronised with mine. But the place somehow got an uncanny reputation, and the marble hands were put back. Imagination, to be sure, can play strange tricks with one.”

THE SOUL OF A BOTTLE

Scarrott Speaks.

BRICKLAYERS, for some eccentric reason, will occasionally introduce the heel of a broken bottle into the surface of a course. Such an one caught my drowsy eye as I lay in the hammock over against the walled garden. I watched it, and it watched me : until presently, conscious that it was about to speak, I yielded myself to its bright, hypnotic stare and, closing my eyes, prepared to listen :

“ There was the melting-pot, and within was molten chaos—lime and alkali and, most of all, sea-sand. A man thrust in an iron tube, thin as a reed, and detaching me, clinging to its end, placed me within a brass mould, and blew with his lips, blew with his soul, so that his soul entered into my being, becoming one with it. Thenceforth I was a bottle, an entity, imbued with the man’s soul, with his imagination. A crumb of vitalised chaos, I knew consciousness and memory—memory as a dream of immemorial sands, trodden by uncouth and monstrous leviathans ; consciousness, as form and individuality. The man, opening the hinged mould, severed me from the tube with a touch of cold iron

—as it were, cutting the umbilical cord—gave me a neck and a mouth, and I was complete.

“Softly translucent, aquamarine, like the sea from which I drew, I believed myself to be a very noble work, destined for high honours. What was my sorrow upon discovering presently that I was, like the man who had conceived me, a fine spirit condemned to ignoble uses. I had inherited, in the breath of a glass-blower, the soul of a knight-errant; and I was carried away, with a gross of others, and filled with British brandy.

“No 1870 vintage, no pure, distilled grape even; but an adulteration and a fraud. That British brandy was the keynote of my destiny. So in this base world are the noblest spirits made the fools to circumstance, and forced by it to live the lie to themselves. The man blowing his bottles in that sorry place had roamed meanwhile, in fancy, on wide, adventurous wings. So my own imagination, deriving from his, had filled me with dreams of ‘the blushful Hippocrene,’ of rare vintages, ruby or topaz, every drop of which should count to some illuminated brain for its genius and inspiration. And, instead, here was I deposited on a bar-shelf in a low pot-house, and used to inflame the minds of boors to squalid and insensate violences.

“Abortive aspiration—such, it seemed, was to be my eternal sentence. My last three-pennyworth, before I was returned, in a mixed company, to the bottlers, drove a fool to suicide. There are men

and women suffering imprisonment because of me to this day. I have divided lovers and ruined whilom modest girls ; yet I never opened my mouth to deliver myself but the message I sought to convey to a responsive brain was all of fine thought and goodly effort. O, in truth, the bottle is not answerable for its wine ! If only once I could be used to some fruitful end I could die, I thought, happy.

“ I was shipped at last, refilled, on board a barque trading to Nova Scotia. The captain and owner died, with my help, in mid-voyage, a raving maniac, and the mate, conspiring with the crew, placed written messages in bottles, reporting the imminent sinking of the vessel after foul weather in such and such a latitude, purposing to sell her all-standing in some obscure port, and thereafter scatter with the profits. I sailed the seas with many another, that lying message in my belly. Six weeks I sailed, borne merrily on the north-east drift, nosed by great fish, hammered by tinkling hail-stones, buoyant and alone. It was a free time, a wonderful time ; I could have felt it a happy, had it not been for that inner sense of abuse. But so were my lines decreed : of the soul of the man was I—a soul to be for ever misrepresented through its deeds.

“ One day I was scooped up in a bucket by a lubberly deck-hand on a passing brigantine. He drew the cork, cursed me for my contents, flung the message into the sea and me upon his bunk below for future service. So even in falsehood was I

denied consistency. Arrived in port, I was half-filled with rum, and carried by train Londonwards in the sailor's pocket. But now at last my time was at hand ; and in the blow that finished me—and another—was to be writ my triumphant epitaph. The sailor emptied me and, while the train was running at full speed, flung me from the carriage window. Perhaps you may recall the Lane-End affair ? ”

Recall ? To what tragic colophon had this thin, flinty voice been conducting me ? Recall ? Had I not witnessed the act ? Had I not been one of that unsuspecting train-load whom its illegality had providentially, miraculously, saved from instant and terrific destruction ? I had observed how the passenger, having sped his missile from the window, suddenly leaned back in his seat with a very sick white face ; I had observed how that garrulous, somewhat aggressive jaw of his ceased in a moment to work. And then had come the abrupt grinding of brakes and, the train being brought to a standstill, the gruff, sharp questioning of a guard's voice from door to door. Something, gathered as the voice approached, some foreshadowing of the truth, focused all other aghast eyes in the compartment on those of the mute, livid creature ; and then came the denunciation. The bottle had struck a plate-layer on the temple, killing the man instantly.

“ You were that bottle,” I murmured luminously to the glitter on the wall ; “ an instrument, certainly,

in the hands of Providence. It happened during the great railway strike, and the victim, at the very instant of his being killed, had had his hands upon a point lever, with the purpose to send us crashing and smashing into a siding fifty yards further on. The truth came out at the inquest, and the sailor was discharged. A savage, ghastly time! I give you my compliments."

"I was that bottle," came proudly from the wall. "The bricklayer had me from the gardener, who had me from his cousin the policeman, who had me from the guard who picked me up on the track. A hundred living to-day owe their lives to me: I died to save them. If only the man my parent might know!"

THE DOCTOR'S INSTANCE

Duxbury Speaks.

“Do you know,” said the doctor, who was in some measure literary, “that painful story of Hawthorne’s, ‘Young Goodman Brown,’ in which all human nature is confessed, to supernaturally enlightened eyes, a lust, an hypocrisy and an uncleanness? Well, sometimes in the exercise of my profession I have been sorely tempted to admit a concrete truth behind that intolerable generalisation. Sometimes only, mind you, for the man was a morbid dreamer, and his melancholy ecstasies are not to be interpreted like gospels. Still they have a substratum of that truth which becomes disquieting when it is too often manifested. A couple of instances from my own experience will serve to show what I mean. You may laugh at the first, if you like: it is fair food for laughter.

“I once attended an old lady, in whose mouth [the man had a vulgar strain in him] teeth were far less frequent than texts and godly phrases. She lived alone with one deaf and dumb servant and a talking parrot, who could pick up everything he was

allowed—a most decorous household, and a byword for exacting propriety, social and religious. Never a wrong expression was permitted in that establishment. I have seen it bristle and stiffen over a topical phrase of the mildest: to have taken the Lord's name in vain would have been pronounced by it tantamount to moral suicide. Even the parrot—a recent acquisition at the date I refer to—got no chance, but was forced against his will, like a reluctant neophyte, to model himself on the reverence he detested.

“Well, the old lady got asthma, and I attended her for it. It would be, ‘The Lord's will be done, doctor! Ugh-ugh-ugh! O, I suffer, but must not repine! Ugh-ugh-ugh!’ And so on. One morning she was particularly oppressed and wheezy, and when I entered, opened upon me with her cough, a little aggravated for my behoof. The door into the next room stood open, and I could hear the parrot there clawing and biting at his bars. Somehow he sounded to me wicked—and exultant. ‘Ugh-ugh-ugh!’ went the old lady. She compressed her thin chest, and put a hand on it. ‘O, I'm very bad this morning, doctor. Ugh-ugh-ugh! It takes me without ceasing—I get no rest from it—ugh-ugh-ugh-ugh!’

“And suddenly the parrot followed suit from the next room:

“‘Ugh-ugh-ugh—G—d d—n it!’

“Thank you,” said the doctor; “but now my

second instance invites no laughter. There died some time ago, at a ripe old age—never mind when or where—a patient of mine. He was a man as full of local honours as of stately years, an impeccable tradesman, a trusty councillor, a churchwarden and the rest of it. He had taken certificates for good conduct in his youth, prizes for skilled industry in his prime ; his name was a text for clean-dealing, and for something better than the honesty which rests upon no sounder basis than policy. The sort of soul, one would have thought, with his shop-window, unlike Browning's tradesman, in his breast, and all the goods behind it open to public inspection.

“ He had been awarded prizes and testimonials sufficient, I say, in his time ; but there was none of them all in which he, and his family and friends, took so much pride as a simple bronze medal, with the inscription on it, ‘ *Lateat scintillula forsan,*’ which had been bestowed upon him by the Royal Humane Society in his young manhood for a brave attempt to save life from drowning. ‘ *A little spark, peradventure, may be hid.*’ It may, but in a sense other than that implied by the Society's motto. There is an indestructible spark of hell, perhaps, in most of our breasts which many waters may not quench, but rather, in some flagrant cases, inflame, as with potassium, into active being.

“ Well, there was the medal, for a moral *pass-partout*. It stood him in perpetual good stead, I think, for all men like bravery and to honour its

exhibitors. I had heard the tale more than once, as he, a still stalwart figure of a man, stood modestly by, not contributing to it, but wholesomely conscious of his deserts. The victim had been a young boon-friend, and they had gone together to bathe, very foolishly, in a river in flood. The friend had got into difficulties, and had been carried away, and the medal-owner, after a plucky attempt at rescue, had brought the body to shore ; but by then life was extinct. The affair had been witnessed from an adjacent bridge, and the old vicar, the witness, had been instrumental in procuring the award.

“ *Lateat scintillula forsans.* Now, my old respectability came in due course to pay the debt to Nature—to yield the vital spark. He died hard, as the old women say ; but before he passed he made a last confession to me. It was a damnable confession, and it amounted to this. He had not tried to save his friend, but he had wilfully and deliberately drowned him under the guise of attempted succour. ‘ It was just a question of a girl,’ he said in that exhausted voice between the paroxysms, ‘ and *he* was making the running. My supposed deed turned the tables finely and she took me for a hero. He was as good a swimmer as I, but not near so strong, and he was not really in difficulties at all, until I made them for him. I took care to keep his head under water all the time I was towing him in. I don’t think he himself knew.’

“ And so during all these long years he had been smugly pluming himself on a lying reputation—turning the tables on his rival, forsooth. My God, he did! and without genuine contrition at the last, I do believe. There was the shadow of a chuckle in him over the way he had hoodwinked the Society. The medal, that ought to have been a hangman’s noose, had become a habit with him, you see. And yet in all else he had been an upright and a justly respected man.

“ Can you explain such moral turpitude? It is that little hell-spark which circumstances fan. And why did he confess, after all? The ‘ girl,’ you understand, whom he had gained by that device, was the ever-unsuspecting wife who had pre-deceased him by a few years, and he was about, in his creed, to meet her again. Perhaps that was the reason.”

THE GLASS BALL

Raven Speaks.

IT happened in the winter of 1881 (said my friend). You remember that winter? It began to freeze hard early in November, and the frost never fairly broke until the second or third week in March. I had come up to town by the South-Western Railway, travelling through a white and windless country; and the cold was stupefying. I lay most of the way in a sort of torpor, gelid from toe to brain, and only just sensible of the still and silent flow of things outside the window. A desolate day, with hardly a human shape abroad to emphasise its loneliness. I don't know if I slept at all. I was alone in my compartment, and in a sort of mental stupor, as I say. And then suddenly I was awake and staring. It was snowing outside, and something had spoken to me—or tried to speak. There was an impression in my brain as of a little, black, leaning figure, infinitely small as if infinitely distant—a mere oblique accent on the sheeted immensity of things—of a staggered white face, of a loud, sub-conscious voice. And here, without and within, were only void and running silence. I shook, as one shakes

escaping by a hair's-breadth the insidious clutch of a nightmare. It had been a nightmare, I supposed, of the kind that discovers a minute rent in the veil over the unseen, synchronously with some malefic horror on the further side. And, as always, the rent had been closed, only just timely for me. Such dreams are momentarily demoralising: oddly enough the fear of this one dwelt with me for days. I could not shake off its memory, in the tremor of which was mingled, nevertheless, a strange emotion like pity. Imagine some lone survivor in the Arctic wastes uttering instinctively, as he sinks to his death, that call for human aid which none, even the most daring, may forego at the last. For some nameless reason that image, or its like, hung constantly in my mind, until presently it wrought in me an only half-reluctant desire to have my dream again. What, I thought, if that dreadful approaching face seen through the rent had been addressed to me not in malignity, but in an agony of supplication?

That was a morbid fancy, resolutely to be dismissed. A few strenuous days in London promised to see the last of it. Christmas was near, and with it an engagement to a family of young relatives, who would certainly expect seasonable presents. I prepared for the sacrifice.

It was then that the name of John Trent swam suddenly into my field of mental vision, and with a click, stood focused there. Who was John Trent? I knew no more than that he was a lost gentleman,

whose whereabouts his family, or lawyers, or natural representatives were daily seeking through advertisement in the papers and police-stations. It was only one case like fifty others, and there was no known reason why it should suddenly absorb my attention. Yet quite unaccountably it did. Each morning I turned for first news to that reiterated paragraph in the agony column offering money for whatsoever information as to the movements of the vanished John Trent. He had last been seen, it appeared, on the afternoon of my journey to London (perhaps it was that slight coincidence which attracted me), when he had left his lodgings at Winchfield for a walk ; and thereafter he had been seen no more. Some later particulars gave his age as forty, his disposition as solitary, his temper as peculiar and inclined to rashness. He had been something wont, in the past, to self-obliterations, it seemed ; yet hardly after this senseless fashion. And there the tale of him ended.

One afternoon I walked down to the Lowther Arcade, then drearily existent, to effect my purchases. It was all a long medley of toys and fancy stuff from which to select ; but I chose with an eye to meetness and economy, even down to the baby, on whose behalf I had the inspiration to buy a glass snowing-ball. You know the sort ? I hadn't seen one since I was a child myself, and I was delighted. There is a man inside, with a little wintry landscape, and a Swiss ch[^]âlet, and when you turn the ball

upside down and round again, thick snow is falling. That is the rule, but I observed at once that the specimen I received from the superior young lady was an exception to the rule. It had inside it only the solitary figure of a man, and the man was skating. Yes, he skated actually, moving in little swoops and circles over a sheet of ice which seemed to dissect the ball ; and as he skated the snow fell.

I stood staring stupidly and, as I stared, the man went through the ice and disappeared.

“ That’s different from the others,” I said loudly to the girl. I suppose my tone startled her ; I’m sure it startled me. “ Is it ? ” she said. “ I don’t think so.” And no more it was. When I looked again at the thing in my hand, there were the peasant and the *châlet*, and the little landscape, all correct and all motionless in their places.

I didn’t buy the ball, but something else ; and from the Arcade I went straight to the nearest police-station where, among the posted bills, figured that relating to the disappearance of John Trent. “ I think,” I said to the inspector, “ I can tell you where he is. He is under the ice in Fleet pond.”

And so he was ; and thence they dragged him when the bitter frost came to an end. The little oblique accent on the whirling white sheet half seen, half dreamt, by me, the mortal expression, the loud cry—they had all represented the fate of John Trent skating, like a madman, solitary and unsuspected, on that vast plane of ice beside the track.

He had gone insanely to his doom, on that stark, inhuman day, without a word to, and unseen by, a solitary soul save myself, and by me only in that exchange of sub-conscious recognitions which obliterates intervening space. To mine alone, in all that running, close-shut train, had his been able to appeal—yet with what purpose from such a man?

I think I know. He had a young child—one—legitimately and wholly dependent on him. Until they could produce certain evidence that he, John Trent, was dead and not merely disappeared, that child would be a beggar. And that was why he had wanted his fate to be definitely known—why, to my still deficient understanding, he had turned its little inmates out of their glass snowing-house, and had taken their place.

A LUCKY THRUST

Scarrott Speaks.

IN that pedestrian proverb, "*Truth is stranger than fiction,*" the public has seized on, and converted to its own pious usages, a characteristic cynicism of Byron's. Thus may a brass farthing be guilelessly mistaken for a gold piece, and be given the currency of honest metal. The axiom, to be sure, is no less respectable, as an axiom, than many another which, having wandered wide of its original significance, has yet acquired, even in its misapplication the dignity of a tradition. But it is not justified by facts. If truth were really stranger than fiction—which it is not, and cannot be, because it is truth—imagination might very well, like the divine Astraea, abandon a world whose sordid realism had no longer a use for her. But, fortunately, as regards this proverb, "the bearings of the observation lays in the application on it"—and the application is all wrong. Wherefore imagination shall still remain with us to assert her pre-eminence in strangeness.

Truth, nevertheless, can have its fantastic moments, as the following incident will serve to prove. It was related to me by one who had it at first hand from a living witness of the marvel.

Mudiford—or Muddyford, as the modern maps more uncompromisingly spell it—is a little sea-board village situated on the western curve of Christchurch Bay in Hampshire, near the estuary of the River Avon. It is not, in these days of swift and swarming transport, a “popular holiday resort,” I presume, since I find it not so much as mentioned in county handbooks; but in the “forties”—that decade of rabid projection and cautious realisation in railway enterprise—it was largely affected by sea-bathers, drawn for the most part, on the authority of my informant, from the Wiltshire county families. They would descend to it, no doubt, as to a quiet haven, remote from the vulgarity of contiguous watering-places, and be glad to compromise with its titular disadvantages for the privilege of exclusiveness which they procured them.

Among these families was one named Bolingbroke, with a member of which the incident to be related is concerned. We will call him, on our only historical authority, Mr. Henry St. John, and picture him, if you please, as a somewhat tall, slender, fastidious-looking gentleman, with dark hair, brushed forward in two macassar'd locks over his temples, moustache, mutton-chop whiskers, and a “Charlie” on his lower lip. He wears a narrow-brimmed, glazed, straw hat, a rough blue pilot-jacket with brass buttons, a very ample buff waistcoat, and a Gladstone collar with a loose shepherd's-plaid bow at his throat. His trousers are white duck, his hands

are kid-gloved, and he carries a telescope under his arm.

There were bathing-machines at Mudiford, the property of a Miss West, from whom came the story. Miss West, I am told by way of authenticity, was a person of intelligence, of a religious education, and of the strictest moral probity. She superintended the bathing, received the money, and allotted the machines. To enter or leave one of those dry-shod on a rising tide necessitated the use of a primitive landing-stage—a mere sloping board on two trestles.

Now we are to picture Mr. Henry St. John approaching this gangway one day at the moment that a bathing-machine, drawn up near the sands, discharges from its door a couple of merry, blooming girls—his sister and a cousin, shall we say. They trip down the boards—don't we know them in Leech's pictures?—their little feet in hideous side-spring boots, their long, wet hair sagging from under spoon-shaped hats upon the shoulders of plain bodices like dressing-jackets, their tongues as jocund as their eyes with the salt rapture of the sea. Well, have they enjoyed their bathe?

Enjoyed? It was simply stunning!

With a smiling, shocked "Tut-tut!" Mr. St. John ascends the plank in order to pay Mrs. West, who is busy within the machine. He pulls off his right glove to fetch out his purse, utters an exclamation, and stands an instant motionless. A valuable

ring has been drawn in the process from his finger, and has dropped plump into the water.

There is hurry and consternation at once, wading, dipping, plunging and raking of eager hands. As the tide steadily rises the search grows frantic, then slackens, and ceases at last in desperation. The spot is marked, a reward offered; day after day avid hunters probe and claw after the foundered treasure, and in vain. At length it is concluded that the ebb has claimed the ring to the everlasting deeps, and, any hope of recovering it being vanished, the matter is forgotten.

The following "season" finds Mr. St. John again at Mudiford. He walks with a friend on the sands at ebb; he meets Mrs. West airing towels; and, her presence recalling the incident to his mind, he stops beside her to relate it to his companion. Presently, glancing about him, with an eye to his bearings, he utters an exclamation.

"Why," he says, "I believe we are standing on the very spot where I lost the thing!"

He has a cane in his hand and, to emphasise his conviction of his correctness, he stabs its point smartly into the sand, removes it—and there is the ring sticking on the ferule.

This story was told me by an old gentleman, who had it in youth from the "own lips" of the unimpeachable Miss West herself. But, after all, fiction could add points to its strangeness.

TO N. C. C.
INKING HER COPY-BOOK

Heriot Sings.

MARCH came in storm and fled ;
In all its swelling wombs
The buds seemed witheréd—
And now how perfected !
Sharp frosts bring lovely blooms.

The pretty pouting rose
Shut eyes on frigid glooms.
How lusty now she shows,
For all the wintry snows !
Cold frosts make lovely blooms.

Blue eyes, to window strayed
From doleful lesson-books !—
Remember, sweet my maid,
Though golden lambs their trade,
E'en shepherds have their crooks.

In little cloud in sky,
In little bruise on fruit
Life's ripeness we descry—
Some frost on celery
A crispness gives the shoot.

Much sun makes sapless flowers,
 Much gin makes little grooms ;
No rain brings withered bowers,
All play long peevish hours—
 Dark times bring lovely blooms.

WOMAN

Duxbury Speaks.

“ I NEVER,” said Whyte Melville, “ knew but one woman who understood reason ; and she wouldn’t listen to it.”

That woman, for all the purposes of my tale, was poor Cynthia Grant, and she was engaged to be married to rich Neville Porson.

One day the two met, and the man was melancholy and preoccupied in manner. The girl rallied him. “ What is the matter with you ? Are you beginning to repent your bargain ? ”

“ Yes,” he said ; and the answer took her like a blow.

Then she collected herself, and spoke perfectly calmly and temperately : “ Tell me about it.”

“ It is hateful,” he answered ; “ but it is best to be candid, is it not ? ”

She nodded. “ Certainly it is. Go on.”

“ An engagement is a time of probation,” said Neville. “ It is designed to test the mutually suitable qualities of a couple. Those cannot be gathered in a day ; certainly not in that emotional moment when two people commit themselves to an ever-

lasting bond. On the other hand, pre-committal understandings would be open to the objection that they might mean valuable time, especially for the lady, wasted; and, even more likely by her, resented, to the advantage of any rival would-be suitor and the discomfiture of the reasonable one. It is better to accept the compromise of a probation-period, and so put the matter to a fair trial. But in this wholly common-sensible arrangement the Law should have no right to interfere, and probably would not, save for its desire to make unhappy marriages which it profits by annulling. In business we do not take a partner without minute investigation as to his character and antecedents; or, if we do, we are permitted to insert a time-clause in the deed of partnership, entitling us to a possible dissolution. But in matrimony, by far the most solemn and fateful of all alliances, we are allowed no such provisional clause in case of differences; and in this respect the Law counts betrothal as matrimony. That, I think, is neither right nor reason. Nor is it right that the Law, having so protected betrothal, should love to hold the whole business up to ridicule in its Courts, and drag the name of what should be a very sacred compact through the mud. Do you not agree with me?"

"Perfectly," said Cynthia; "with every word you say. Then you have tried me, and found me wanting?"

"I do not think," said Neville, "that we could be

permanently happy together. I do not reflect upon a single one of your qualities, Cynthia, of which you have an abundance that are admirable. I feel only that we are unsuited to one another, and that a union between us would prove disastrous. Better to say that out, than to risk a lifetime of misery or estrangement. That is the conclusion our period of probation has forced upon me."

"Neophytes," she said, "often feel like that and yet, by persisting, win to resignation and happiness."

"The neophyte in matrimony," he answered, "that is to say the *fiancé*, cannot, if he finds on probation that he has made a mistake, legally 'cry off.' He must perpetuate his error, propagating the very discord he would have foregone. That is the curse of it. What should we think of a man who, qualifying for a post of trust, and realising his utter moral unfitness for it, yet persisted in submitting himself to the temptation? The fact is that, in these days of earnest sexual adjustments, breach of promise has become an anachronism. Fear of it is a great breeder of misalliances, and, consequently, of matrimonial dissension. I am sure you must see that."

"Quite clearly."

"Then what do you intend doing?"

"I intend bringing an action against you for breach of promise of marriage."

The young man pressed his hand a moment to his brow.

“ You are disappointed—in me,” he said. “ That is very natural. I have only, then, to tell you the whole truth, which I had wished to spare both you and myself. I have recently discovered, Cynthia, that we have hereditary madness in our family, and I am assured by our physician that marriage would be morally certain to develop the seed in myself.”

“ I understand you,” said Cynthia, “ and our responsibility to the unborn future. But a woman’s reason is her will, and I am not going, like clever Alice with her hatchet sticking in the wall, to disturb myself over problematic accidents that may never come to pass.”

“ Then your fate be upon your own head.”

“ You called it once a very pretty head.”

So they were married ; and a month or two after, as she was standing dressing before her looking-glass, Neville shot his wife. He had been lusting to do the deed, but, the thing done, the mist of madness cleared from his eyes and he was seized with an agony of compunction.

“ Admit only that I warned you,” he said, as he held her in his arms. “ But you would not listen to reason.”

“ O ! I listened,” she whispered, “ and agreed with everything you said. But what had I to do with reason ? ”

“ Why not ? ” he asked.

“ Because,” she said, “ I loved you——” and died.

THE QUEER PICTURE

Raven Speaks.

It was standing with its face to the wall in a dark corner of the dingy old shop in Beak Street, whose miscellaneous litter had peered at me through a window so dirty as to make its owner appear rather to wish to baffle custom than to court it. Nor in that respect was its owner's manner reassuring. His eyes peered dimly out of an unwashed face, like the pale blue oriental saucers through the window. He seemed to regard me with indifference and a little weariness, as if the profit of chaffering were hardly worth its trouble. "O, yes!" he said, in a weak, hoarse voice, to my appreciations of this or that, as I edged my way through the labyrinth of Chippendale chairs, bureaux, coffin-stools, and gate-legged tables piled with Staffordshire figures, brass door-knockers, candlesticks, and "genuine antiques" of every sort, description and plausibility.

A little nettled by the creature's apathy, I stooped, somewhat truculently, and turned the picture round for myself. It showed a landscape, pretty dark and mellow in tone, of, I fancied, the Crome or

Nasmyth period. A woodland road, receding from the middle foreground of the canvas, presently took a curve round some palings to the left, and disappeared into greenery. Prominent over the near palings towered a huge oak ; on the other side was a close medley of foliage gradually dimming into blue distances. The whole was feelingly painted and composed, the large oak tree, quite superbly rendered, forming its predominant feature. It all only suffered slightly to my mind as a composition from the white emptiness of the road and the absence of figures. I said so to the dealer. "O yes!" he answered, with a dry cough, and I shrugged my shoulders.

I have had one or two "finds" in my time—enough to stimulate my adventurous nerve. This thing seemed to me good: there was power in it, and knowledge. The time was evidently near twilight, still and darkling—a lonely, solemn place. The atmosphere was unmistakably suggested. Its canvas measurement was some 34 by 28 inches, and it possessed a frame, a little dingy and battered, but of the right sort. "Whom is it by?" I said.

The dealer made as if to bend, cleared his thin old throat and stood up again. "It's unsigned," he said.

"But don't you know?"

"If you were to ask me," he answered, "I should say—no more than that, mind you—that it was Urquhart's work." Then, in response to my mute

inquiry, "He was a follower of John Constable, you know."

I didn't know; I knew nothing about the man; but, whoever he was, his capacity was plain. I decided to risk it. "Well, how much?" I said.

"Twenty pounds," said the dealer.

As a matter of principle I protested—"Unsigned; of disputable origin; preposterous!" "O yes!" he said, in his indifferent way. "Twenty pounds is the price. It's a greatly admired piece. If you change your mind, I will take it back any time within a week, less ten per cent."

That seemed a fair offer, and I ended by carrying the picture home with me in a cab. Alone, I cleared the mantelpiece of my sitting-room, and stood the treasure up on it. I thought it distinctly an admirable piece of work, and so far rejoiced in my bargain. It seemed to reflect the very spirit of the twilight which was even now creeping over my room, to assimilate and conform to it. As I gazed I grew penetrated, possessed, by what I gazed on. I was on the wide, white road, standing or crouching somewhere down here out of the picture, and staring into its diminishing distances. The great oak was motionlessly alive; there seemed "a listening fear in its regard." An expectation, an indescribable awe, held me amazedly entranced. And then my breath caught in a quick gasp. Round by the bend of the road, far away, there occurred a minute stirring, and something came into the

picture that was not there before. The thing came on, increasing in regular progression as it advanced—and it was the figure of a young man, in a bygone costume, swinging airily towards me. I sat petrified, dumb-stricken; and all in an instant there arose between me and the illusion, blotting it out, a vague, shadowy shape. That receded quickly, shrinking as it withdrew, until it also was the figure of a man going away from me along the road to meet the other. The two encountered, and had passed, when the second wheeled suddenly in his tracks, and struck the first on the neck, so that the young man fell into the road. I saw something—a running stain of red, and simultaneously broke, with a cry, from my stupefaction and, leaping to the mantelpiece, turned the horror with its face to the wall. As I did so I saw that the canvas was empty of figures.

The old dealer made no demur whatever about my returning the picture. "It always comes back," he said impassively, as he paid me in cash eighteen pounds out of the twenty I had given for it. "It stands me in well, you see, as an investment. It's a fine work. I dare say you'll be the dozenth or more who's been struck by it, and carried it away with the same result. Twilight's the time, they say."

"Don't you know it is?" I responded warmly. "Haven't you seen it yourself?"

"No," he said, with a thin cough, "no." (He had returned the picture to its former place and

position.) "I don't bother to look. It wouldn't be policy, and it wouldn't be fair, you know, for me to sell it if I had. I'm not bound to go upon hearsay; and it doesn't trouble me where it stands."

"But"—I turned on my heel indignantly, and came back—"you said it was an Urquhart."

"On its intrinsic evidences," he responded; "not in the least because it happens that Urquhart was hanged for the murder of his wife's paramour on a country road he was engaged in painting at the time. He stuck him in the neck with a palette-knife. That *may* have been the very picture—or it may not—before the figures were filled in. Urquhart generally used sheep and countrymen. But all that's no concern of mine. I say it's an Urquhart because of the style. No one but him, in my opinion, could have painted that oak."

“TOO TOO WILL IN TWO”

(Cheshire Proverb):

Scarrott Speaks.

JOHN Eyre sat alone with the dead man and his own ripening purpose. He knew what he was going to do, what nothing should prevent him from doing, even while he debated the risks and profits in his mind.

The room was in melancholy shadow, for, although it was hot noon, the blinds were down. That silence, unbroken, unbreakable, which reigns only in the presence of Death, immured and half petrified him. He rose in a sudden instinct to recover his circulation, and stood, stiff and motionless, gazing down on the bed and the dehumanised caricature of its occupant hidden rigid beneath the sheets. Yet all the lesson of pitiful mortality which the grotesque shape conveyed had no power to affect the current of his thoughts, or to divert his mind for one moment from the purpose which was constantly maturing in it.

The young man was in black clothes, which he had ferreted out from his uncle's wardrobe. They were worn and ungainly, but they were sufficient. His uncle, his only relative, his rich benefactor it was

who lay under the white pall, his face, his folded hands, his feet alone indicated, as if the thing were some rough draught of mortality sketched in stone by a sculptor. Yet, formless as it lay, it was more potential in the ordering of futurity than the living force had ever been. The will of the dead shapes the destinies of the quick to the ultimate generation.

No soul could have realised this truism more completely than John Eyre. It was the Will of the dead for which he had been grubbing and hunting these two days past, and on which he had at length alighted, hidden away in a disused bureau. The document was complete, of recent date, and satisfactory in all respects save one. It bequeathed the whole of the testator's considerable fortune to his nephew, saving a single legacy of £500, which was to go to a certain clergyman, a former dear friend of the deceased. Barring this latter bequest, barring any Will at all, the nephew, as heir-at-law, would have inherited the entire property.

And therein, to the soul of inborn covetousness, lay the gall.

John Eyre had, in these two days, wholly satisfied himself as to the singleness of the document and his own sole possession of its secret. He had ransacked every hole and corner of the house ; had instituted cautious inquiries ; had made an exhaustive investigation into the matter—and all without result. There was no record anywhere of a later Will, or of so much as a codicil to the other. Proverbially rich men

were reluctant testators, and his uncle had been no exception to the rule. Save for the £500 he, the nephew, was heir to the whole estate.

Save for the £500! It stuck in his throat like a bone. The thought of the bequest haunted, had haunted, him day and night ever since he had discovered the Will. *If his uncle had died intestate, the entire fortune would be his.*

If? He might have, for all practical purposes, since only one other, and he the most interested, possessed the secret. What if he, that other, were to destroy the Will, of whose existence he alone was cognisant?

He knew, I say, what he was going to do, what nothing should prevent him from doing, even while he temporised with his own depravity. The dead had no moral terrors for him; he felt towards the kind, foolish old man little but a tolerant contempt, and not least because it had been so easy to gull him with a pretence of disinterested devotion. He recalled his own first acquaintance with his benefactor, and how he had been summoned to fill the gap in a lonely life caused by the departure of the clerical intimate and confidant. He had made good hypocritical use of his time during the interval since, and the rich fruits were to show. Only they might be richer yet. It depended upon himself, and himself alone.

Quite suddenly he came to his decision. It was offered to the manes of the departed as representing

their common view, reached after reasoning and discussion. That was why he had come into the death-chamber, since a certain order of meanness always seeks uneasily to justify itself in the eyes of its presumptive contemners. The dead man, he pretended, quite agreed with him that the bequest had been unnecessary, that his once friend neither expected nor needed it, and that the shortest way to rectify a momentary weakness was by destroying its evidences. Straight downstairs he stole on the thought to burn the Will.

He had to light some paper in the grate with flint and steel before he could effect his purpose. The roar of the chimney terrified him like a voice of hidden discovery; even when it was subdued it angered him by its low persistence, while he strained his ears to listen through it for imagined whispers and footfalls outside the locked door. The preternatural silence of the house seemed to have discovered new sounds and undertones ordinarily inaudible. He stared over his shoulder.

But at length the document was consumed, the flame expired, and he rose to his feet—sole heir at last to all the coveted thousands. And at that moment a loud knock sounded through the hall.

Visitors! He stood aghast and petrified an instant; then, in a hurrying panic, stamped out the last lingering sparks, and, stepping softly to the door, softly unlocked it. As he did so, his nerve returned to him. What had he to fear, now or evermore?

Two gentlemen were ushered in, in one of whom Eyre recognised his uncle's former intimate, the just disinherited clergyman. A suspicion that this man had come to prey upon the dead filled him from the outset with a sort of triumphant insolence. He showed his mood, no doubt, for the covetous possess no manners. His lack of them probably brought the visitors, for their part, to an early explanation.

“ Well, gentlemen,” said John Eyre ; “ an ill-timed visit, you must confess. You are bound to state its purport with all despatch.”

The lay stranger, forceful and composed, took the answer upon himself.

“ I am an attorney, Mr. Eyre, and acting for my friend here. I am to ask you on his behalf if your uncle made any testamentary disposition before his death ? ”

“ If you mean a Will, sir,” answered Eyre rudely, “ no, he did not. The fact is ascertained beyond dispute, and your friend must swallow his disappointment without sauce. My uncle died intestate.”

“ That is not so,” said the lawyer drily ; and he produced a document from his pocket. “ This, Mr. Eyre,” he said, “ is a Will made by your uncle three years ago in favour of this his old friend and my client, to whose custody he forthwith committed it. Its provisions are simple, comprising a legacy of £500 to the testator's nephew, John Eyre, with residue of the estate to my client. If no subsequent Will

exists, the disappointment, I am afraid, will be yours."

"*Qui trop embrasse*—you know the proverb? Was mere mortification the word? Tongue-tied from any possibility of remonstrance, John Eyre glanced distractedly towards the grate in which crumbled the ashes of his hopes.

But was it strange that such a man should come ultimately to amass a fortune of £30,000, or that, possessing it, he should be convicted and transported for stealing a few paltry quires of note-paper? You will find his case in *Junius*.

Heriot Sings.

O, NEVER a room in a strait, dull house
But has its thrill, if no more than a mouse !
O, never a heart, dull, formal and blind
But has its closed door, and a ghost behind !
A whisk, or a flash, or a laugh, or a prayer—
And you enter and look—and there's nothing there.

THE APOTHECARY'S REVENGE

Duxbury Speaks.

PROMINENT, under the shadow of the projecting gable, the little gilded bason and lancet above the door reflected back the light from a single dismal lantern, burning a cotton wick, which hung from a bracket over the archway opposite. It was nearing sundown, and the few pedestrians abroad walked hurriedly and stealthily, keeping in the middle of the street as if they feared some lurking ambush. One of these, a tall, muffled figure of a man, with a drawn, agitated countenance, wheeled suddenly, and, pushing without a pause through the unlocked doorway under the gilded sign, mounted the flight of complaining stairs which rose before him in the gloom beyond. Evidently familiar with the place, the visitor, on reaching the landing, knocked fearfully but resolutely on a dark oblong in the obscurity which betokened where a closed door broke the panelled surface of the wall.

A groan or sigh, some sound indefinite but sufficient, responding, he turned the handle, his long fingers clouding it with a clammy moisture, and, edging round the door, closed it softly behind him

and stood looking eagerly towards the end of the room. Its sole occupant, the learned Quinones, that miserly apothecary whose wisdom, nevertheless, served him for a perennial harvest, was, he knew well enough, notoriously chary of speech, grudging it to others as though, like the fairy-gifted maiden's, there were a present of a jewel in every word he let drop. Saturnine, austere, caustic in his few utterances, he was wont to vouchsafe small comment on the catalogues of ills and vapours that were perpetually laid before him ; but a phrase with him, so famous was he, took all the force of a prescription. Thus regarded, it was little likely that he would forego the principles of a lifetime for the sake of him who had now broken in upon his solitude.

He was seated at a table in the window opposite the door, his back to the intruder, his left ear turned a little, as if in some listening irascibility over the interruption. The fading alchemy of the sunset, dropping in flakes and dust through the diamond-paned casement, rimmed the hunched silhouette of him with a faint aura, and made an amber mist of the dry thin hair on his scalp, and turned the narrow section of cheek visible from lead to gold. It was to this strangely-crowned and indeterminate shadow that the visitor addressed himself, in hurried, fluttering speech, the true purport of which only gathered form as desperation lent it eloquence :

“ You know me, Quinones—yes, you know me, learned master—as I know you. No need to waste

a look on recognition. My voice is stored in your memory, with other debts to be liquidated. You do not forget these things."

He took an impulsive step forward, and the board creaked and jumped under his foot. It seemed as if the figure in the chair started slightly, and then settled again to its listening. The visitor held out his hands with an imploring gesture.

"I did you an ill deed in the past, Quinones, and it is written against me in your books. What is the use to tell you that I have repented it since in sack-cloth and ashes? And yet let it be of use. O, in these mortal times, when all the world should be in one brotherhood of help and sympathy, let your resentment sleep—forgive, and prove by that nobility your true title to the greatness that all men allow you. I have bitten the hand, I confess it, that cherished me: let that hand retaliate in the finest spirit by ministering to the wound I inflicted, not first on you, but on my own miserable nature. Be generous to me, Quinones, for I have lived to know and suffer."

He paused; and in the pause there rose a melancholy cry from the darkening street: "Bring out your dead; bring out your dead!" The sound seemed to goad him to a frenzy.

"Listen, Quinones; I have learned to know, I say. Love, that in its purity can redeem the worst, has been my teacher. For love I would live—I, who until it transformed me, feared no death,

refused no risks. Now, for its sake, I am a coward ; I shrink in terror that this mortality may claim me—me, who have learned at last the glory and the fruitfulness of life. O save me, Quinones ! You alone among all the Galenical masters can do so, if you will. Fortify my blood ; render me immune ; give me the secret of your plague-water, the one specific, as all admit, quite certain in its results. Give it to me and mine, and earn for evermore the name of saint, the gratitude of hearts that wait upon your bounty not to break.”

The seated figure seemed, in the uncertain light, to stir and chuckle—or was it a sound of water gurgling in the basement. Still no response came from it ; and, hearkening vainly through the thick silence, the mood of the man roared up in a moment from submission to deadly fury :

“ Inhuman, unforgiving ! Not for you to forget, in your God-feigned aloofness, the least, the most paltry hurt to your vanity. You hear, but you will not answer. Answer to this, then. I came to appeal to the great in you, as other blind fools have certified it ; but I came prepared with sharper weapons than entreaty, should, as I foresaw in my heart, the fools prove fools indeed. I am a desperate man, Quinones, and you are alone—quite alone with me, I do believe. It is either the secret yielded, or your life. Make your choice, and quickly. A poor revenge, will you not think it, to lie there

in your blood while I am ranging free and unsuspected in this welter ! ”

He half crouched, peering through the deepening twilight, a sudden blade in his hand, the tumult in his brain grown rabid—then, with a shriek, “ Let your plague-water save you now ! ” leapt on the unresponsive figure.

It swayed, swung, and rolled stiffly to the floor, revealing a livid face, blotched and plague-stricken, and fangs—good Lord, they grinned !

Quinones mortal had not half the sinister significance of Quinones dead and rigid. He had sat there, waiting his age-delayed but never-forgotten revenge—sat there a stiffening corpse, long after the rest of his household had fled.

With a scream, the other rushed from the room, into the street—and so in a little for the cart and the plague-pit. Quinones was quits with him at last.

THE FOOTSTEPS

Raven Speaks.

TWICE she had heard them, she told me, and on each occasion with indescribable terror : if she were to hear them a third time, it must surely mean death.

It was this way. Like some other people, she had her dream-house—a place which she was convinced existed in fact, and which some day she would chance upon and instantly recognise. She was able to describe it to me minutely—with an exactness of detail which I cannot aim at reproducing. It was a Victorian house, substantial, standing in its own grounds, and with nothing in the least ghostly about its aspect. Entering up the drive, one passed a block of blind-fronted stables to reach a long conservatory, by way of which, for no explained reason, one entered the building. A large drawing-room, sumptuously furnished and carpeted, succeeded ; and thence one passed up a couple of shallow steps, extending almost the width of the room, into a second considerable chamber, crowded this one with china, having all an odd suggestion of something wrong

and rather horrible about it, and leading in its turn into yet a third room, which was peculiar only for its gloomy panelling and the door fast shut at its further end. She knew that the whole vast house was empty of life ; that its chambers and corridors throughout were open, if she wished it, to her inspection. Only this one closed door was forbidden—impossible. She had an awful desire to penetrate its secret ; and yet with a sickness of terror for what it might reveal to her should she succeed. But she dared not try. And then came the footsteps—of some one, of something, moving within the hidden room. They rustled and spoke, now receding, now approaching ; and suddenly they stopped, while horror breathed through the keyhole, as if in the very crisis of some terrific decision. And at that she woke.

Such was her dream—the paralysing nightmare which she had twice experienced, and lived in mortal fear of suffering for a third, and final, time.

She was young, and she spoke her fancy playfully, as if to deprecate any serious acceptance of her mock-heroics. Yet I could see plainly enough that a real apprehension lay behind her pretence.

“ Take it this way,” I said. “ You feel positively convinced that that house exists in fact somewhere ? ”

“ Yes, positively,” she answered.

“ Well, I don’t doubt it. Too many authentic instances of dream-houses proving real are on

record to permit me to. And you haunt it in some astral or sub-conscious form. Well, how are you to know that that other sub-conscious form, represented by the footsteps, is not as terrified about you as you are about it? *You* may be the walking ghost in *its* fancy."

"O, I hope not!" she said. But it was evident that my suggestion had opened up in her a train of reflection unmorbid, by contrast with the other, and even, strangely, a little pitiful and emotional.

Well, I did not re-encounter my young lady for years after that; and, when I did meet her again, she was a mature lady, married and with children. But she knew me at once, and greeted me with a fervour which I hardly understood until, chancing on one occasion to be alone with her, she opened out her heart to me.

"I have always so wished to renew our acquaintance. Do you remember that time we met when I told you about my dream-house?"

"Certainly I do; and about my own efforts to reassure you."

"I wanted to tell you—I have always wanted to; and you have the best right to know, because you gave me the true clue to my riddle. The footsteps I heard *were* the footsteps of fear, and *I* was the unconscious ghost that caused it."

I nodded, in no whit surprised. "Go on, if you will," I said.

"You must keep my confidence," she answered;

“but I want you to know—you alone of all people. It was so very strange, so very tragic. *He*, the owner of the house, used to dream that he was down in that room, his own study, and that silence and an awful emptiness closed him in, so that he had to walk, walk, to forget. And then came the footsteps—in the panelled room—right up to the door; and horror would seize him—horror of the thing that waited there outside—it might be death, or something unspeakable, but he had not the courage to open and face it.

“We had not met then, he and I; and when at last we did, in another place, it was the familiar story of a spoilt girl, and slanderous tongues, and a great heart slighted and abused. I am not going to palliate or defend, but only to relate. He was wounded to the soul; he was alone in the world, and his life was his own. There came a time at last when he stood—in that room—and his hand was not empty——”

I begged her not to go on; but she was resolved.

“The girl, the wretched girl, had learned the truth late—the vindication of the name she had loved and honoured in her heart before all the world. She was passionate and wilful, and she flew at once to make atonement——”

She stopped. “You must not,” I said. “Besides, it is unnecessary; I can guess the sequel. You saw it, with your living eyes, for the first time—the house of your dreams.”

“ Yes, I saw it : it was all exactly as I had pictured—the silence, the emptiness, for the household had long been dismissed. And I knew where I had to go ; what I had to do. At the last it was opened, and—and it was not Death.”

She ended, gave a little sigh, as of a soul unburdened, and after that a little laugh.

“ It is the children’s play-room now,” she said ; “ and is not that wonderful ? Not many people, I expect, come to be the mistresses of their own dream-houses.”

A CURE FOR CONSUMPTION

Scarrott Speaks.

UNCLE JOHN was very poorly ; and poorly in a new way for him. Being an ex-civil servant, Anglo-Indian, he was accustomed to regard his liver as a captious quantity, to be reckoned with on all occasions of festivity. But this chest trouble, with its continuous nausea and hacking cough, was something out of his experience, and frightening because of its novelty. There was consternation in the house, too, because Uncle John was a favourite, and had only recently, during the Christmas Day jollifications, proved his full claim to the title. If it had been the turkey, or the plum-pudding, or the champagne-punch, he would have known how to meet it with philosophy ; a perpetual cough, to one of his generally sound constitution, was another matter, and one that, morally, rather "floored" him. He stayed in bed, and meditated somewhat funereally on the proverbial fatness of churchyards during green winters. There had been a good deal of rain in this, and he had shown, perhaps, some recklessness in his careless exposure of himself to conditions of damp and sopping feet.

A man, especially of his age, had to learn not to presume upon his long immunities. He was, secretly, considerably disturbed about his condition.

His married sister, with whom he was staying, pooh-pooh'd his fears; but he seemed conscious of something significant in the assiduity of her attentions. "Saucy," his pet niece, stared at him, when she was allowed to minister, with preternaturally solemn eyes, in which was evident the instinctive estrangement of health from sickness. The old family doctor, moreover, gave him no real comfort, but was elusive about his state, in a pompous, fatherly, and entirely non-committal way. Altogether, Uncle John, disquieted and a little shocked, as all men must be over their first real encounter with the shadows, was beginning to turn his thoughts to the dismalest of contingencies. The thing, after all, always most difficult to teach the individual man is his excessive proneness to death.

It was the night-sweats which finally gave some direction to the doctor's genial speculations. Uncle John did not know when or how the word consumption first sounded in his mental auricula. It seemed impossible, preposterous. That *he* could have developed consumption, and on such ridiculously trifling provocation! Still, assuredly, there was the pain in his chest, the temperature and, above all, the incessant, worrying cough. He could force no appetite, and began to take on something

the aspect of the disease professionally imposed upon him. By the end of the fourth day, dating from the first symptoms, things were beginning to look bad.

On the morning of the fifth, his sister coming to visit him, with "Saucy" obligato, proposed with some diffidence a remedy.

"You may as well try it," she said, "pending the arrival of the London specialist. These old recipes can at least do no one any harm, and at most may give real relief. They were the sum of much simple wisdom. If it was only effective in easing your cough a little! Phillida, if you giggle I shall send you out of the room."

"What old recipe?" asked the invalid querulously.

"It is called 'A good water for consumption,'" answered his sister, "and comes out of an ancient recipe book possessed by Martha Gamage. The good old creature was up nearly all the night before last preparing it for you. Come, take it, to reward her."

Uncle John made a wry face. "I don't fancy these rustic medicaments. Where did she get the book from?"

"O, it's been in her family for generations, she says. Of course, you haven't got consumption; but at least your cough can't be made worse by it. Come."

Uncle John, with a melancholy resignation,

sat up in his bed. His cough was really racking him. He was given two large dessertspoonfuls of a mucilaginous fluid from a bottle, Phillida looking on curiously and expectantly the while.

“There,” said the lady. “It wasn’t so bad, was it?”

The invalid shuddered, with a decidedly queer look. “No,” he whispered heroically.

At that instant the mistress was called away, and Phillida, being bidden to be very careful not to upset her uncle, was left alone with the invalid. She opened upon him with a gleeful precipitancy, producing something from behind her back. “Uncle John! I’ve got it!”

“Got what?”

“The book that that—*that* was taken from—what mother gave you. Shall I read it to you?”

“What do you mean? Yes, go ahead.”

And Phillida began to read hurriedly:—

“‘A good water for consumption. Take a peck of garden snails’” (she glanced tentatively at the patient), “‘wash them in beer, put them in an oven, and let them stay till they’ve done crying. Then, with a knife and fork, prick the green from them, and beat the snails, shells and all, in a stone mortar. Then take a quart of green earth worms’” (she looked up, the wings of her little nose quivering: “There were simply millions of them in the garden that night,” she said), “‘slice them through the middle, and straw them with salt. Then wash them

and beat them, the pot being first put into the still with two handfuls of angelico, a quart of rosemary flowers, then the snails and worms'—she broke off, and hurriedly removing the basin from the washhand-stand, put it on the floor, and shoved it with her foot towards the bed. Then she backed. "There's lots to come," she said.

"Thank you," said Uncle John, after an interval, "I think not; I think that does me, I'm obliged to you."

He was leaning over. He uttered a sudden exclamation, and sank back upon his pillows. "Sixpence, by Jove!" he said.

The young lady gave a shriek, dropped the book, and clapped her hands

"There!" she cried, "I *knew* you'd swallowed it in the pudding. And now all the money's accounted for."

AN APOSTOLIC CATSPAW

Duxbury Speaks.

SIMON PATRICK episcopus, expository theologian, practical divine, and, since the nonjuring clearance of 1690, Bishop of Ely, came rolling in his great strap-hung coach towards the gates of his town-house in Holborn. It was not the Holborn of to-day, by any means. The cluster of streets encroaching on the episcopal preserves, and dating from but a few years back, though already a lusty earnest of the life to come, still left to *Ely Place* something of its pleasant aspect of rural isolation. If the palace no longer stood, as in Tudor times, in the midst of "vineyards, meadows, kitchen-garden and orchard," there was yet enough grass and timber about its shorn splendours to dispute very rustically the increasing impositions of the town. Indeed, it resisted those so stubbornly that almost into our own times there survived some fragments of the ancient buildings, to testify to the enduring nature of the struggle carried on in that district between rus and urbs.

Grave, kindly, human—if a little pompous, as befitted his office—Bishop Patrick stood well for

that period of moral transition when the Church, free, and finally, from a degrading coercion, was beginning to look to its own unfettered responsibilities. He was a scrupulous pastor, a voluminous pamphleteer, he loved nothing better than to meet and defeat a waverer on his own grounds of schism. And no doubt that weakness of his was well known to an irreverent scamp who here appears upon the scene.

The Bishop's coach, turning into Hatton Garden—one of the then newly constituted streets—found itself held up for a few minutes by the press of the throng, and the Bishop, in order to ascertain the cause of the stoppage, put his venerable head, bonnetted in a wig like a fat puff-ball, out of the window. Beyond the ordinary congestion of traffic there appeared to be nothing to account for the delay, unless it might be the local interest concentrated on a little group of men at altercation hard by. These men were three in number, two of them rough and illkempt fellows of a dubious aspect, the third, of a disputative cast, being a rather overdressed macaroni, displaying, through a wide-flung waistcoat, a lavish bosom of lace, and wearing, tilted back on his head, a rich three-cornered hat with feathered edges. This was in fact, though quite unknown to the Bishop, no less a person than Mr. Joseph Haines, playwright and comedian, one-time keeper of a droll-booth at Bartholomew Fair, Pepys's "incomparable dancer," and in

general popular scapegrace and daredevil wag. He was very red and voluble, appearing to expostulate with the others in a manner marked by much vehement emphasis and gesticulation, while the two stood stolidly listening but unconvinced.

“Bustle about, bustle about!” cried the coachman from his box. “Way for his Lordship of Ely there!” “Way for his Lordship of Ely!” bawled the footman over the coach roof.

The voluble disputant turned sharply round, took in the situation, re-faced his recalcitrants, appeared to persuade them to something, and came hurriedly towards the carriage, the others following pretty closely at his heels.

“My lord,” he said, putting his head in at the window; “my lord”—in a confidential undertone. “I presume upon your lordship’s well-known disposition to proffer a request. Here are two poor fellows of my acquaintance, more waverers than sinners, who are so tormented between truth and disbelief, so torn by scruples and racked by despair, that, if nothing intervenes, they are like to make an end of themselves. I have wrestled with them to no purpose; but if your lordship—”

It was to touch the pious soul on his tenderest, and perhaps vainest nerve. Certainly there seemed something in the face addressed to him not all compatible with the godly purposes the lips conveyed. Yet who was he to judge of a Christian by his

exterior? He looked very kindly towards the two hovering in the background:—

“Very well,” he said, and called to the pair of doubters:

“You men, come to me at ten o’clock to-morrow morning and I will satisfy you.”

The fellows pulled a forelock apiece to his lordship, the coach rolled on, and Mr. Haines, turning triumphant, swept off his hat with ironical unction.

“You saw and heard, bully-huffs?” said he. “So God and my cousin quit ye”; and with that he swaggered away.

Punctual to their appointment, the men came to be shown in to his lordship on the following day. He had his pamphlets “Parable of the Pilgrim,” “The Friendly Debate” and another, on the table before him. He was a busy man, and he lost no time over preliminaries. “Now, my friends,” said he, “what are your difficulties, your scruples of conscience? State them as clearly and briefly as you may.”

The fellows gaped, and one of them pulled a paper from his hat.

“Scruples be blowed!” he said. “This here’s the writ, and this here the amount of debt and costs—suit of Sampson and Lilly—that your lordship engaged to pay on behalf of your cousin.”

“My cousin!” exclaimed the astounded Bishop: “what cousin?”

“What cousin?” said the man. “Why Joe

Haines, to be sure—him that we'd arrested yesterday for a debt of twenty odd pound, when your lordship came by and offered to settle the bill."

"I offered?"

"Didn't your lordship say, 'Call to-morrow at ten o'clock and I'll satisfy ye'?"

"I never meant it—not in that way!"

"Zounds, then! In what way? Sure your lordship's not going back on your word, and the gentleman your own cousin!"

"He is not. I don't know him from Adam. I had never to my knowledge seen him in my life before."

"Never seen him—not Count Joe? Phew!" The bailiffs—bandogs in popular parlance—looked at one another in dismay. "Another of his tricks, Jimmy," says one—"He's been and sharpened us again." Then he turned on the cleric: "'There's my cousin,' he says to us—'the Bishop of Ely. Let me but speak to him, and I lay he'll go bail for me.'"

The Bishop's hand dropped rigid on the third pamphlet lying before him—"The Christian Sacrifice" it was entitled.

"Well," he said, with a sigh. "It is an unscrupulous rogue; but if it appeared that my word was pledged before witnesses—sooner than innocently propagate a scandal—"

He rose, and went reluctantly towards a locked armory in the wall.

THE WHITE HARE

Raven Speaks

You know the Mendips or you don't know them—their beauty, their savagery, their wide-flung loneliness sweeping miles down into the haunted valley called the moors, where, in the moonlit nights, strange craft come floating from Glastonbury on mystic waters long since sunk and lost. There may be trippers in this place and that to vulgarise the brooding hours, and if you see with their eyes you see nothing; but they are local, after all—mere profaners of places already profaned to show. One may leave them behind, to resettle like flies disturbed from carrion, and, entering into the fastnesses of the hills, forget them in a moment.

The place belongs to legend and the past; it murmurs with inarticulate voices, drums and rustles under visionary footfalls. Once, long ago there stood a little ruined church, difficult to strangers to find, among the high, far thickets, and there the dead lay tumbled and neglected, because the building had been desecrated of old, and never since reconsecrated; so that it was avoided by the people, and the fence surrounding the grave-

yard rotted piecemeal and grew choked with fungus and brier.

There was an evening when young Modred, abroad with his gun, found himself benighted, a little cold, but curious, near that thicket—and suddenly a white hare slipped from the palings, and ran before him like a jumping snowball. He fired on the instant, and could have sworn his unerring eye had not failed him; but the hare ran on and melted, verily like snow, into the glooms. He was startled, awed, but not to be browbeaten by puss or devil. Another evening he sought the place, sighted his quarry, and again failed inexplicably to bring her down. Then he remembered—white hare, white witch—silver alone could prevail against the cursed thing. On the third evening therefore he loaded with a silver button from his coat, a keepsake from his maiden love, and, biding his time, let fly at the loping succuba. There was a scream like a woman's—and the hare sped on and vanished. But she was hit at last.

The next day Modred learned that his love was dead. She had taken down her father's gun, not knowing it was loaded, to clean, and by some means the charge had been exploded into her breast.

Hideous the tragedy; hideous the moral to be drawn from it. From that time the man went like a mad thing, his heart broken, his soul an alien from earth and heaven. That it should have been she, and her gift to him her death! But most he

raved against the cynic God, who might have ordered things differently, but would have them thus and thus to make sport for himself.

And then the dead girl's mother came to die ; but she could not die ; and she screamed and stormed on life to let her go ; but life held her still fast in her agony. Then one day she sent for Modred.

"Cut the cursed thing from my shoulder," she said, "and let me pass."

"What thing?" he asked stupefied.

"Your silver button," she said, "that mauled, but could not end me. It has lain there ever since, keeping me from the churchyard and my friends the outlawed dead. I killed the innocent girl myself to mislead you, and I bore the pain of this, until now I cannot bear it. Cut it out."

Her shoulder was bare, and the button stood under the skin of it like a little blue plum. Modred, with a howl of fury, took it in his fingers and tore it away.

At that the woman screeched and fell, and out of the window leapt a white hare and vanished up the hill.

DEUS EX MACHINA

Scarrott Speaks.

"It is simply amazing," ejaculated Strype, lowering his morning paper, like a window, for a breath of fresh air—"Simply amazing!" He was of a gaunt, cavernous constitution, bony, prematurely bald, and almost as fleshless as a ladder.

Pouncey, seated at the breakfast table, just glanced at the speaker, and back to his scrambled eggs. A cherubic man he, with a tiny mouth which he fed lusciously, like a crab. This was at Welcome's boarding-house, where the two were long acquaintances.

"This ineradicable belief of man in his creative power!" continued Strype, desperately apostrophising space, his paper held down to his knees.

"I came across a lovely instance of that yesterday," said Pouncey.

"Surely," said Strype, with a glassy eye fixed on the invisible, "the world, until our incredible age, has never known so preposterous a misuse of a term."

"Don't let it affect your health," said Pouncey. "What I was going to say——"

“ *Pro-creative*, if you like,” said Strype. “ That was a reasonable and sufficient word for our ancestors. It is too impersonal for us—too impersonal for these days of individualism run mad—when we confidently discuss the origin of life, and challenge the Almighty on his own ground.”

“ What I was going to say——”

“ We have dispensed, in our insane arrogance, with the prefix altogether: we create. The poet creates, the novelist creates, the artist, the modiste, the actor—*he*, of all performing apes, the most imitative and insufferable.”

“ It was this way——”

“ Does any one of the gibbering maniacs who use this term so loosely and so flagrantly consider for a moment its meaning and significance? To create is to beget out of nothing.”

“ Well, that’s to say an empty head; and very modest of the novelist to admit it. What I was going to say——”

“ To create is the sole province of the One, of the Omnipotent. It is a term single to Him and totally inapplicable to any creature deriving, in spirit and substance, from the work of His hands. Put any one of you scientists, who talk so glibly and so smugly of the near-discovered secret of the principle of life, into an air-pump——”

“ There’s not one of ’em would go in—not even into a vacuum-cleaner. But what I was going to say——”

“ Let him create *there*. Let him first produce out of Nothingness his life-jelly, or whatever the precious rubbish is called, and then out of Nothingness impregnate it. Stuff!—pernicious, outrageous and impossible stuff! He knows he couldn't do it: he knows that every one of his experiments is based upon given and existing facts, and dependent upon certain laws of chemical combinations, which he accepts as if he himself originated them. Given your materials, you can apply them; but, if the faculty of creation were man's, he should be able to produce actually new materials, and not be dependent on those to whose uses, or possible uses, he was born. His capacity is not to create, but to discover—to ring some new change upon the myriad conceivable changes that matter presents to him.”

“ Yes, that's true. But to mention my instance——”

“ Your poet create—your novelist—bah! He takes what he finds about him, either in character, nature, or idiosyncrasy—there's plenty of choice in a world where no two are, or ever have been, in facsimile—makes a blend after his individual taste, and presents a figure. He has not created it: he has produced a new result out of a novel combination, that is all. And as to your actor”—Strype lifted his *Daily Mail* in his left hand, and smacked it violently with the knuckles of his right —“ Listen to this, if you please: ‘ Mr. Lawrence Theobald, who

created the part of *Dewbury* in *Playful Fanny*'"—he paused, looking towards the other with a grin of fury—"Created!" he whispered hoarsely—"created!"

"Of course," said Pouncey emolliently, helping himself to marmalade, "your play: you wrote it. It was you who created *Dewbury*."

"These fools would never admit it," said Strype. "It is always the monkey actor who gets the credit for the feat."

"I know. It's infamous. What I was going to say——"

"Well, what?"

"Only *à propos*—what was it? 'the ineradicable belief of man in his creative power.' It extends, it seems, to grocers. I found one out in it yesterday."

"Found one out? How do you mean?"

"Why, I was buying sardines, and a lady came into the shop to give an order. 'By the way,' said she, 'two of those eggs you sent yesterday were bad.' 'Indeed, madam,' answered the man; 'then we'll make them good.'"

"Well?"

"That's all."

"Have you really been interrupting me all this time to——" Strype got up, paused, looked as if about to do something dangerous and stalked rigidly out of the room. Pouncey, his eyes agape,

his cheek bulged motionless on a piece of toast, watched him go.

"I didn't know," he murmured, "I really didn't know that when he talked about the Almighty he meant himself."

THE OPERATION

Duxbury Speaks.

“THE question is,” said Carleon, “whether the absence of one or more senses in a subject is a sign of that subject’s mental deficiency or of his subnormal intelligence. I will put it figuratively. Imagine a living human entity submerged in fluid all but its eyes—it will see only ; release its nostrils—it will see and smell ; its ears—it will see, smell and hear ; its mouth—it will see, smell, hear and taste. But supposing, for some inexplicable reason, the process of emergence never to have extended beyond its eyes, or its nostrils, or its ears ; will, then, that entity smell, hear and taste, or hear and taste, or taste alone, subconsciously ? That is my point. Because a sense or a faculty is wanting, does it follow that that sense or faculty is not active in the antecedent and subliminal state from which it has failed to emerge and materialise ? In other words, does not a blind man see sub-consciously, a deaf man hear and speak sub-consciously ; and are we not often inclined to regard such as ‘wanting’ when in fact it is ourselves who are the real deficient ? Granting such to be the case, a blind man,

or a deaf-mute, or one who is both, must be so infinitely our sensory superior as to be unintelligible to us in his sensory manifestations, since those are recording things unknown to us, while they themselves are perhaps as much out of sympathy with his positive and material senses as they are with all ours."

"You mean, in short—it amounts to it—that the sillier we appear, the wiser we may really be."

"I mean that marred or unperfected entities may possibly have failed to make good their succession to certain material faculties, but that those faculties may exist to them sub-consciously as their finest possessions, and, in their self-manifestations as such, may appear to us monstrous by very reason of their subliminal perfection. Very well: now imagine the case of a stone-blind person unexpectedly given its sight; what would be the result as regarded the transformation of its vision from a spiritual to a material standpoint?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Well, I have; and perhaps just that and no more. I will tell you on what based. A great many years ago I happened to be interested in a case of ophthalmics at Minneapolis, Minnesota. The patient, a prematurely aged woman, respectably connected, had been blind from birth—congenital opacity of the membrane of both eyes. There was a fellow there called Buckmaster, rabid on theories of transfusion and transplantation, which were

going to revolutionise surgery and cut a way at last into our long-suffered-for Millennium ; and this chap got hold of the old lady and her responsible relatives, and persuaded them all to the experiment of trying the effect of ingrafting freshly-killed rabbit's corneæ on the sightless optics. They agreed, and the operation was performed ; and sight, for a quite appreciable time, *was* actually bestowed on the patient."

" You don't mean it ! Well ? "

" Just so. The point was this. I knew something of the ' case,' as, professionally, they dub the subject of one. She was a harmless, gentle-minded soul, who had always been regarded by her belongings as ' queer '—difficult to understand, and prone to eccentricities of speech and act. A great deal of her profitless time she had been wont to devote to drawing with a pencil on paper—things and people familiar to her by touch, but quite unrecognisable for themselves in her fantastic presentments of their features. To the unsophisticated folk about her these curious concepts, designs—I don't know how to describe them—had figured for the very extremes of grotesque—uncanny, almost indecent ; for me, on the other hand, they possessed a quite extraordinary attraction. I made great friends with the old lady, and used to sit with her, and ' draw ' her, in a different sense from the other. I found, as I had suspected, that she was quite the brightest and most intelligent spirit of her small

circle ; only she had learned to hug her own inexplicability as something it were fruitless, and a little perilous, to air. Her drawings, she said, represented the characters and objects about her as she *saw* them. I found them—what shall I say ? geometrical rhapsodies, without visible relation to realities, yet somehow intimately expressive of reality's informing spirit. In their labyrinthine complexities there were motive, purpose, vision—and there was a marvellous beauty, whether of symmetry or deformation, of love or horror. It is all difficult to express. It was the sub-conscious interpretation, the sub-conscious portrayal of mind by mind. I tell you for a fact that, after a while, I could identify the subjects of those apparently meaningless scrawls and patternless patterns, and *that* from a mere knowledge acquired of their subjects' inherent characteristics. It was a new language to me, in which recognised form played no part, and I learned, though imperfectly, to read it.

“ Well, after the operation, her vision having temporarily materialised out of the depths, a startling change took place in my old lady. At first, lying with bandaged eyes, she called for her usual implements with which to while away the hours ; but, lo and behold ! her strange faculty had deserted her. Instead, her hand wandered into the feeblest, most childlike caricatures of actualities—the persons of her friends, the face of her sister, and so forth—undistinguished, unremarkable things, suggesting

nothing but incompetence, but quite understandable in the common view.

“ And then one day she, whose eyes had never looked on living form, saw for the first time and in glimmering revelation, the face of her lifelong companion ; and the shock killed her—killed her with sheer and actual horror. The reality—the fantasy, as we must call it, to her—was so hideously remote from the spiritual truth she had always been accustomed to regard, and to trace as it were in facsimile, with her sub-conscious hands.”

“ H'mph ! Then we are all really mad except the mad ? ”

“ *They* would say so, anyhow ; and they very often do. Certainly the young surgeon showed no supreme intelligence in boasting transatlantic originality for an operation long known, and long ruled out as profitless, by his European confrères.”

THE THING IN THE FOREST

Raven Speaks.

INTO the snow-locked forests of Upper Hungary steal wolves in winter ; but there is a footfall worse than theirs to knock upon the heart of the lonely traveller.

One December evening Elspet, the young, newly-wedded wife of the woodman Stefan, came hurrying over the lower slopes of the White Mountains from the town where she had been all day marketing. She carried a basket with provisions on her arm ; her plump cheeks were like a couple of cold apples ; her breath spoke short, but more from nervousness than exhaustion. It was nearing dusk, and she was glad to see the little lonely church in the hollow below, the hub, as it were, of many radiating paths through the trees, one of which was the road to her own warm cottage yet a half-mile away.

She paused a moment at the foot of the slope, undecided about entering the little chill, silent building and making her plea for protection to the great battered stone image of Our Lady of Succour which stood within by the confessional box ; but the stillness and the growing darkness decided her, and she went on. A spark of fire glowing through

the presbytery window seemed to repel rather than attract her, and she was glad when the convolutions of the path hid it from her sight. Being new to the district, she had seen very little of Father Ruhl as yet, and somehow the penetrating knowledge and burning eyes of the pastor made her feel uncomfortable.

The soft drift, the lane of tall, motionless pines, stretched on in a quiet like death. Somewhere the sun, like a dead fire, had fallen into opalescent embers faintly luminous: they were enough only to touch the shadows with a ghastlier pallor. It was so still that the light crunch in the snow of the girl's own footfalls trod on her heart like a desecration.

Suddenly there was something near her that had not been before. It had come like a shadow, without more sound or warning. It was here—there,—behind her. She turned, in mortal panic, and saw a wolf. With a strangled cry and trembling limbs she strove to hurry on her way; and always she knew, though there was no whisper of pursuit, that the gliding shadow followed in her wake. Desperate in her terror, she stopped once more and faced it.

A wolf!—was it a wolf? O who could doubt it! Yet the wild expression in those famished eyes, so lost, so pitiful, so mingled of insatiable hunger and human need! Condemned, for its unspeakable sins, to take this form with sunset, and so howl and snuffle

about the doors of men until the blessed day released it. A werewolf—not a wolf.

That terrific realisation of the truth smote the girl as with a knife out of darkness : for an instant she came near fainting. And then a low moan broke into her heart and flooded it with pity. So lost, so infinitely hopeless. And so pitiful—yes, in spite of all, so pitiful. It had sinned, beyond any sinning that her innocence knew or her experience could gauge ; but she was a woman, very blest, very happy, in her store of comforts and her surety of love. She knew that it was forbidden to succour these damned and nameless outcasts, to help or sympathise with them in any way. But——

There was good store of meat in her basket, and who need ever know or tell ? With shaking hands she found and threw a sop to the desolate brute—then, turning, sped upon her way.

But at home her secret sin stood up before her, and, interposing between her husband and herself, threw its shadow upon both their faces. What had she dared—what done ? By her own act forfeited her birthright of innocence ; by her own act placed herself in the power of the evil to which she had ministered. All that night she lay in shame and horror, and all the next day, until Stefan had come about his dinner and gone again, she moved in a dumb agony. Then, driven unendurably by the memory of his troubled, bewildered face, as twilight threatened she put on her cloak and went

down to the little church in the hollow to confess her sin.

“Mother, forgive, and save me,” she whispered, as she passed the statue.

After ringing the bell for the confessor, she had not knelt long at the confessional box in the dim chapel, cold and empty as a waiting vault, when the chancel rail clicked, and the footsteps of Father Ruhl were heard rustling over the stones. He came, he took his seat behind the grating; and, with many sighs and falterings, Elspet avowed her guilt. And as, with bowed head, she ended, a strange sound answered her—it was like a little laugh, and yet not so much like a laugh as a snarl. With a shock as of death she raised her face. It was Father Ruhl who sat there—and yet it was not Father Ruhl. In that time of twilight his face was already changing, narrowing, becoming wolfish—the eyes rounded and the jaw slavered. She gasped, and shrunk back; and at that, barking and snapping at the grating, with a wicked look he dropped—and she heard him coming. Sheer horror lent her wings. With a scream she sprang to her feet and fled. Her cloak caught in something—there was a wrench and crash and, like a flood, oblivion overswept her.

It was the old deaf and near senile sacristan who found them lying there, the woman unhurt but insensible, the priest crushed out of life by the fall of the ancient statue, long tottering to its collapse.

She recovered, for her part : for his, no one knows where he lies buried. But there were dark stories of a baying pack that night, and of an empty, bloodstained pavement when they came to seek it for the body.

THE GUNPOWDER SHIP

Scarrott Speaks.

SUPPOSING yourself to be cast away on a desert island, with a choice of a single book for company, what book would you choose? The question, you know, has been mooted. The Bible, says one, and very resourcefully—more than appears on the face of it; Shakespeare, says another; a Scrap-book, says a third (myself, I have written a little article to explain why, which no editor will accept); a Dictionary, decides a fourth. Well, for the sake of illumination, I have opened each one of these at random and taken from it the first phrase which my eyes encountered, with the following result:—

The Bible: "On that day the Lord magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel"; Shakespeare: "Then wherefore dost thou hope he is not shipp'd?" The Scrap-book: "The Persians, as we are told by Posidonius, chose their King by his quantity of nose . . . at the present day the form of salutation universally used by educated persons is, 'Is your nose very fat?'" ; The Dictionary: "Levulose—a sugar isomeric with dextrose, but turning the plane of polarisation to the left." There

it is. Chambers's English Dictionary, at the very top of page 529 ; there they all are ; only I am as remote as ever from a decision.

But at least the last, if not instructive, is suggestive. How many dictionary words are there which are fain to interpret themselves through inadequate alternatives ! Inadequate, because the substitute is often no more than a compromise with the truth—frequently not even an actual shade of the same colour. Take, for instance, a word on the Levulose page—Liberal. " Liberal," says the Dictionary, is " becoming a gentleman ; generous-minded ; candid ; free." Well, so I used to think, for I was bred a Liberal. Only one's pause comes with the next definition, " free from restraint." There is the compromise, you see, which explains the value of dictionaries to politicians. To be a Liberal is to be free from restraint—to be free, if you wish it, from the duties becoming a gentleman.

And so with other words. Here, for example, is " Folly," with its definitions, " silliness, or weakness of mind." I reject them utterly. One may be foolish without being weak, and indeed through misapplied mental strength. Folly is a perverse flying in the face of reason ; silliness is acting without any reason at all ; the former is mostly an exacerbating manifestation ; the latter often a loveable. As a supreme example of the first I should quote militant suffragettism ; the Irish

servant who, being prescribed Seidlitz powders, and reading in the directions that she was to take one blue and one white paper, obeyed literally, throwing away the powders, may serve for an instance of the second. It seems impossible, but it is true—an illustration of the silliness, with a half-grain of intention in it, which conciously laughs at itself. Or would appear to? One doubts, but does not know; and that is the fun.

Hogarth's man sitting on the projecting signboard which he is sawing away from under himself represents the silliness so silly as almost to achieve the sublime. I know, nevertheless, by hearsay, of an instance to equal it. It was told me—or rather us, for we were several together—by Verity, who owns a seven-ton yawl, *The Flapper*, in which he and his friends have made some adventurous voyagings. Here is his description:—

“ We were cruising in the Irish Channel, somewhere off Holyhead, when we sighted her at dawn. It was a dirtyish morning, with an ash-coloured sea, and the lid of the day just lifted to it like a dead eye. And there against the white streak she drifted under bare poles, and with every look of the abandoned derelict about her.

“ As we neared her we could make out her name and character. She was a two-masted ketch, *The Ruby*, hailing from Milford, and there was something odd about the look of her forward. Not a soul appeared on board; our hail remained un-

answered as we rounded under her stern and brought up alongside.

“ Reaching her deck, we saw what had been the matter. She had been on fire ; the forecastle was near burnt out ; the butt of the mainmast was charred, and the gear and rigging hanging in black cobwebs. It was evident that her crew had deserted her.

“ And then suddenly a sailor-man came out of a little cabin aft. He had a sixpenny novel in his hand. I can tell you its name ” (Verity gave it). “ Do any of you know that picture of Millais’, ‘ Cymon and Iphigenia ? ’ Well, he was the double of that Cymon—red-haired, gawky, a grinning, half-satyrish loon—tickled and abashed at once, through the dawning consciousness of a soul within himself.

“ We put a leading question or two—which he answered. The ship had caught fire from an overturned stove, and the crew of seven, barring one, had bolted, after a brief, ineffectual attempt to douse the flames. Why so hurriedly ? Why, simply for the reason that the ketch carried a cargo of twenty tons of gunpowder in her hold.

“ We tumbled into *The Flapper* without ceremony, carrying the castaway, rather against his will, with us. We needn’t be in such an incarnadined hurry, he said : the fire was out long ago. Nevertheless we waited to put a mile or two between us and *The Ruby* before we questioned the man again.

“ Now this is offered merely as an illustration

of the silliness which verges on sublimity ; wherefore I give no more than the sum of that inquisition. I wonder if you will believe it ? It was a case of Cymon's soul-awakening, only *per* a sixpenny novel in place of a nymph. He had brought the treasure aboard from Britonferry, where he had shipped, and, becoming absorbed in it to the neglect of his duty, had had it confiscated by the skipper at an intense moment. The fire gave him his opportunity to retrieve his property ; he had seized it, sat himself down in the captain's cabin, and incontinently lost himself in the mystery now so happily resumed—at the very moment that his panic-struck fellows above were lowering the boat to escape. They went, without bothering about a roll-call ! and he sat on tight, reading his book. It was the chance of his life. And while he sat the fire had burned itself out, quite naturally and un harmfully ; and—there he was ! ”

Verity, I say, told this story to several of us ; and one of us rose.

“ What did you say was the title of that book, ? ” he asked.

Verity told him.

“ And you can say, ” responded the author of the book itself, “ that the man was a loon ! To me he was the one of them all who showed real presence of mind. The soul's awakening, in good sooth ! He ought to be a critic. I shall send, by your leave, that story to the papers. ”

TO ANEMONES

Heriot Sings.

I saw the moon in white Selene's form
Bathing her tired feet within a storm ;
And thick, next day, beneath where she had stood,
Pale shaken drops of windflower starred the wood.

A MIRACLE

Duxbury Speaks.

THE Law, as represented by its executive, does not concern itself much with the emotional side of religion, save in its obstructive, or brawling, or sacrilegious aspects. I have a fancy, indeed, that it never goes to church, in the sense that a master-editor does not go to schools of journalism, of whatever denomination, to learn his business, that is to say; but there I may be wrong. In any case I never met, or heard of, but one policeman who was converted out of the ranks by what he chose to consider a miracle experienced by him in the ordinary exercise of his duty.

He was a very commonplace policeman, too, having black, rather pantomimic, side-whiskers and a professional fixity of gaze. He had been in the detective force at the time of his secession, and was afterwards, to the date of his death, a valued and influential visiting officer to a charitable Society, largely devoting itself to the reclaiming of so-called fallen women. He told me the story in a spasm of confidence, induced by—but all that it is essential to relate here *is* the story. I will give it in, ostensibly, his own words:—

“ What I saw happen, sir, I saw happen with these eyes, and there was another present to corroborate their evidence. It was in a certain church in London—Roman Catholic—I dare say you know it by name. Some especial occasion had been bringing crowds of visitors, and, as the congregation was a fashionable and wealthy one, the offertory boxes filled. I only mention that fact because it brought me on to the scene through frequent robberies of their contents. There was evidently some clever thief about, and I was put on to watch. I was up in the organ-gallery one dull afternoon—plain clothes, of course—when the first and only reward of my observation was granted me, and that in a different direction from what I’d expected. From where I sat I could pretty well rake the building, which was empty at the time. It was a darkish place—gloomy you might call it; and yet something about it always gave me a queer sensation, friendly in a way, and yet solemn. However much alone, I never felt that I was alone there; which may have been due to that sense of the true Presence the Romans believe in. Whatever many people believe sort of gets into one’s blood, I think, and makes one—anyhow for the time—believe it too.

“ Well, the Church was gloomy, and what made it gloomier, though it sounds odd, was the lights. Three little stars there were, twinkling before as many altars; but the brightest spot of all was what they called the shrine of the Sacred Heart. That was

set against a pillar nigh the chancel, and it fair blazed with candles. In the midst stood a painted statue of the Virgin, carrying the Babe on her arm, and between the extended hands of the infant was held a silver heart, that shone and glittered like a jewel. It all made such a fire in the emptiness did that shrine that, what with the dusk and the hanging incense, the place looked as if filled with the smoke of it.

“ Sudden, as I was watching, I heard a step below and I saw that a woman had come in. She was a low-class young woman, and I understood at once, from the knowledge I’d gained, no Roman. She never kneeled or crossed herself; but she went straight up to that shrine and she stood before it. I heard her muttering; and then in a moment she’d stretched out her hands—and there was the silver heart gone. I can’t say I saw her take it—the dazzle was in my eyes—but I was as sure as sure, as she turned, that it was gone and that she had got it.

“ She was out of the building before I could get down; but I was on her heels, soon as the sacristan would let me. He had seen it, too, from the sacristy door, and, being an old, palsied fellow, could do nothing but gasp to me to follow. I did, and more from luck than cleverness caught her and brought her back.

“ She showed some fight at first, but not long. And then she took to pleading—her kid was sick,

and all that. She'd got the thing in one of them cheap rush baskets, and I took the basket from her and marched her in. The sacristan was waiting us, all of a cold sweat, and 'Have you got it?' says he. 'Now, then,' says I, holding up the basket. 'What have you to say about what's in here, my lady?' She shrugged her shoulders, and her breath kind of caught. 'It was Mrs. O'Flynn told me to come,' says she. 'She said if I awsked the bloomin' himage for what I wanted, it'd be sure to give it me.' 'O indeed!' says I. 'And so you asked and took the silver heart.' 'No, I didn't,' she says. 'S'elp me Gawd, I never touched it. I just held out my 'ands, a-begging, as she'd told me, and there it was.'

"I didn't laugh; no self-respecting officer would; and, besides, the place was sacred. But I'd heard enough. The poor critter stood sniffing and wiping her eyes. 'You can put me in the jug,' she says; 'and then the bloody kid'll starve, and there'll be an end of it.' 'What made you do it?' says I. 'The doctor,' she answers. 'It was always jelly and 'ot-ouse grapes with 'im—the hon'y things what 'is pore stomach could stand. My Gawd—grapes for the likes o' we! 'Tain't in reason, is it? But Mrs. O'Flynn she says, "Go and awsk the himage," she says, "and if you say what for, bein' a Child Hisself, his blessed little 'art will go out to you.'"

"Plausible? Well, sir, I'll tell you. She'd just spoken, when the sacristan he gave a cry; and I

followed the direction of his eyes—and there was the heart in its proper place between the little hands. It must have been there all the time, and we two blind fools, you'll say. But that isn't all. Listen to this. As I stood gaping, the basket still held up, something—a knowledge, a weight, a fragrance—came upon me, and I looked. Yes, sir, it was full to the brim—great clusters of them—lovely, life-bringing things. You may believe me or not as you like. O no! they hadn't been there from the first; you may take my professional word for that. Life-giving, I say, and that's the truth. I could point him out to you at this day—a stout, hard-working fellow, and his mother's blessing and support.

“Why did I never testify? Well, you see, professional habits was against it; and then my other witness was no good—senile, as they call it, and not to be credited. But, for myself, nothing will ever convince me that what I saw that day was not a miracle.”

JOY-HOMICIDE

Raven Speaks.

HIGH up in the building Valmy sat writing his weekly "turnover" for a paper to which he contributed. He had a good subject, "Joy-Homicide" (*vide* the "Joy-rides" of transatlantic motor Thugs), suggested by a recent crime, whose mystery and apparent motivelessness appeared likely to place it within the category, already uncomfortably extended, of insoluble murder problems. An errand boy, of thirteen or fourteen years of age, had been found done to death on one of the seats of the Victoria Embankment, his neck broken and his face smashed to a pulp. The night preceding the discovery of the body had been frosty and foggy, and no clue of any sort existed. The boy had not been a good boy; he had played truant; he had more than once slept abroad: he became absolved, a piteous lamb, an excusable wastrel, in the horrible tragedy of his end. And there seemed no motive whatever for the deed; it was just for the time being a penniless waif, worth nobody's evil attentions. One single *pièce de conviction* was alone to be sought—a green leathern watch-guard, with a silver token-pig attached,

which the mother swore to have seen on her boy the day he left her for ever. It had a key at each end for its sole safe-keeping ; and it had disappeared. Scarcely an adequate instigation to a crime so foul ; yet, such as it was, its tracing was the only hope of the authorities. But it had not been traced.

Valmy entered into his subject with relish ; and also with some vague feeling of exultation. It was not only that it was one which gave scope to his enjoyingly analytical and inductive habit of mind ; he thought what a gratifying thing it would be if in the process of postulating his theories he should actually hit upon the spoor of the criminal. He would rejoice could he be instrumental in bringing that scoundrel to justice, even though he could do no more than adumbrate the type of mind to be sought for in the connection of unprovoked homicide. It was a beastly crime, under whatever impulse committed, and the kindly, shepherding instinct in him craved for retaliation on the wolf who could so vent his damnable ferocity on a weakling of the human flock.

Killing for joy ! That was surely a suggestive theme—an unworked vein. And yet it was a quite plausible hypothesis. For what bloodshed and self-mutilations was not religious exaltation responsible ? Excess of joy, like other excesses, was wont to manifest itself grotesquely, indecently, indicating, as it were, an over-oxygenised condition of the moral

constitution. Women especially, when intensely exhilarated, would do things, commit hilarious violences, of which they were normally incapable—slap, rend, and shriek with laughter. It was the *joie de vivre*, uncultivated and unrestrained, which moved trippers of the hooligan type to the wanton destruction of trees, turf, and so forth. But a step further was needed, to find them smashing heads and limbs in an uproarious self-abandonment.

He dotted down a few such headings, preparatory to elaborating them into a consecutive thesis. He wrote with a certain difficulty; his hands felt a bit stiff—from rheumatism or something—had been curiously so for days past. What a jerry-built structure was a man, even one like himself boasting great bones and muscles, always to be going wrong in his joists and jambs, and ready to drop to pieces if a brick fell out. He paused a moment, stretched himself and yawned. Certainly his profession was a test of a man's full capacities—at least as he used it for his sins and virtues. It served him for the enormous exercise of body and intellect his sanity required. He might overdo the thing at times—did, he knew, taught by reactions, exhaustions, periods of infernal apathy when he seemed conscious of organic existence as only a torturing immurement in matter. But generally it satisfied the insatiable "go" in him, the craving for movement, variety, sensation, emotion—all

things, in fact, which made life living and potential. He was perpetually losing himself in the crowd of his own interests, which was the blest and only state for a soul of his overwhelming nervous virility. Penalties? Well, they were hardly worth considering in the sum of gratifications. He took up his pen again.

Joy-homicide! He could almost understand it—from a psychologic point of view. Men had died from joy: why should they not kill from joy, since joy was thus proved kin to death? Better to kill than, when lifted to the threshold of Nirvana, risk the least recall from that moral supremacy. The gods were gods by sacrifice; the lambs must die to vindicate them. He thought suddenly of a picture which had always appealed vividly to his imagination, Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne," the divine rapture, with its madcap Satyr flourishing a ghastly severed joint. There was the thing epitomised—the delirium, the ecstasy, the bloody holocaust. What was it a limb of? An innocent steer—a once glad young life? Poor beast—poor boy! Joy? Of course, overprojected, it flashed into the opposite pole of rage, bestial and insensate. He had known it to do so in himself more than once, jarred by some extrinsic influence—in himself, a cultured and reasonable creature. There must be something in us all of epilepsy, that mysterious, undiagnosable condition, with its mad ebullitions, its blank stationary intervals, its intensified emotions. One

should be careful never to venture one's nerves beyond the reasonable limits; never to over-step the border-line between the normal and the forbidden. To do so meant strange lapses of memory, strange things done and forgotten, but recorded in secret places.

Those opposite poles—the meeting of the extremes in a flash and stunning shock. Joy transcendent—it might be evoked by any recent ecstasy—love, music, the soft intricacies of dancing feet. And yet a sound, a touch, could shatter its perfection, like a drop of grit falling on a lightly sailing bubble. A cough, a sniff, often repeated, would be enough. How he hated a sniffer!

Valmy sat up abruptly, leaned back in his chair, and felt instinctively for his handkerchief. It was not in his pocket. Never mind; there would likely be one in the overcoat hanging on the door-peg. He got up, lifting that shambling-jointed, huge frame of his, as if it were a burden a little in excess of his will-power, and walked to the door. Feeling vainly in one pocket after the other, his fingers caught in something which seemed to communicate a galvanic shock to their tips. One moment he paused, then resolutely drew the thing out. It was a green leathern watch-guard, dangling a tiny silver pig, and carrying a key at each end.

He may have stood a full minute, absolutely motionless, his eyes fixed in an unwinking stare

upon the token in his hand. Then very softly he dropped it and walked to the window. It was wide open. Sixty feet below lay the pavement. He put his hands above his head like a bather, and dived out.

THE LAST DROP

Scarrot Speaks.

“THERE is a providence, we know,” said the gaunt, melancholy man, “that watches over drunkards. There is another, or another side of the same, that rejoices in a fool. The heavenly autocracies must have their jesters, I suppose; and that is the reason. Anyhow, fools grow fat on sufferance where wise men starve on esteem. That is so much a truism as not to be worth the discussing. Look at me”—he revolved slowly before us: there couldn’t have been an interval of three inches between his lower waistcoat buttons and the two on his coat-tails behind—“I have never said a foolish thing in my life; and what is the result? You might pass me through a mangle, and send me home with the washing in mistake for my own pyjamas.

“Of all fools the verbal punster is the most intolerable—I was going to say god-forsaken, but that would not be true. Still, it is possible even for him to presume too far upon his favour in high places, as was proved in the case of Futvoye. Futvoye went one too many—just that; and there was no doubt he had to suffer for it. He was not the first fool,

either, who has had to pay for a foolhardy utterance with his life. I was present at the time, and it was, of course, painful in a way ; but it was impossible to deny the stern justice of the thing. If there *is* such a recognised law as the *lex talionis*, here was a case calling clearly for its application. No smaller penalty would have been adequate to the offence.

“ But let me be sure that you realise Futvoye, his execrable propensity. We went a walk together once, and lunched, detestably, at a country pothouse, ‘ The Cat and Fiddle ’—or, as amended by Futvoye, the ‘ Cat and Vile-inn ? ’ You see ? If you do, that one example will suffice. He was a stumpy, rosy man, with little brown side-whiskers like cutlets, and a small, moist mouth ; and after he had said things like that he would sit staring at the table before him, self-consciously waiting for what I may call the laugh obligatory. In all my experience of him and his kind, I have never known such idiotcies to evoke more, though often considerably less. Yet Futvoye was not once discouraged by such hollow and mechanic receptions of his buffooneries from the practice of his particular vice. It seemed as incurable as a stammer. I have known him, sitting goggling with a smiling fixity of gaze at the tablecloth, to insult a mixed company throughout a two-hours dinner with a running, punning commentary on the general conversation, under the apparent impression that he was sustaining a

reputation for humour. And the least of casual forced laughs had all the effect upon him of a triple encore.

“Understand, I mean that lowest form of pleasantry which consists in distorting words or phrases into others of an approximate sound. There are classical examples, of course, such as Lamb with his Hannah More and his not ‘Hany more’; but it is not to be assumed that because a clever man condescends once in a while to a verbal villainy, many verbal villainies constitute a genius. Keats made abominable puns; but, if you would be a poet like him, you need not seek to fortify your Muse by punning. That was Futvoye’s mistake—or curse. He was congenitally insusceptible to ‘season.’ One of the signs of the born criminal, they say, is an insensibility to influences of weather. Days short or long, wet or fine, affect him only in their material aspects: he is not morally happier because the sun is shining, or depressed because the sky is dull. So with Futvoye: all atmospheres and seasons, however incongruous, were as one to him in the exercise of his contemptible faculty: he would have been as ready, so to speak, to crack nuts in the stalls as in the sixpenny gallery.

“Well, it is the last drop, says the proverb, that makes the cup run over; and the time came when Futvoye’s cup was brimming, and the providence that suffers fools gladly—up to a certain point—could stand no more of him. And I, as I have before stated, was present at the execution.

“ We were talking together in Cranston’s Saw-Mills, the machinery of which I was inspecting on behalf of the firm of engineers I represented. They were situated in the very suburb where Futvoye lived, and Futvoye, having encountered me outside by chance had, quite unnecessarily, accompanied me into the works, where, standing by the big circular saw, he kept me fretting and fuming over a silly description of a Shakespeare Reading Society he had just joined, and one of whose meetings he had attended. The play had been “ Macbeth,” and presently I found myself asking Futvoye what part he could have taken in it, as there was no Fool. Futvoye was quite unabashed ; nothing of that sort ever offended him in the least ; but he winked an eye and answered : ‘ No ; so they invented a part for me—Macduffer ; and that reminds me——’

“ There was a pause—or a poise, I might say—that ominous steadying of the thunderbolt in the hand of an over-tried deity. The moment had come. Then :—

“ ‘ The witches,’ purred the wretched man, confiding it to the floor, ‘ shouldn’t have said “ All hail ” to Macbeth when they only meant him to reign.’

“ And so it fell.”

“ He was caught by the circular saw ? ” we asked.

“ Nothing so commonplace,” answered the melancholy man. “ Futvoye wasn’t the least a fool

in practical matters. Those glassy eyes of his saw a great deal more than they seemed to confess. No ; the building in which the saw was situated was an old, somewhat crazy one, and the vibration of the machinery had for some time been impairing its stability. It had a timber roof, and it happened that at that instant a truss fell from it spang upon the saw, was whirled round, and brained Futvoye on the spot. He never spoke again—the Lord be praised.”

A MATCH

Heriot Sings.

Minutest seed of fire, epitome
Of all that life was, is, can ever be ;
Wee cosmic germ, containing^r in thy womb
The whole of rapture and the whole of doom ;
Imprisoned spark, holding a sun in fee,
Tamed to a pipe, a lamp, yet, once broke free,
The world thou buildedst rushing to consume.

SUB SPECIE

Duxbury Speaks.

Courage is a perverse quality. I think there are no men actually fearless, and there is none actually a coward; but always the coward in one respect has it in him to be the hero in another, and *vice versa*. There was an individual once who, when volunteer assistance was called for to man a lifeboat in a great emergency, came forward and took an oar, and acquitted himself heroically in the face of imminent death. That person, some time afterwards, betrayed the most abject cowardice in the matter of having a tooth drawn. The incident was related to me at first hand, and I thought of it on the occasion when I was present at Carleon's hypnotising of Thewlis.

Thewlis was an extreme example of the neurotic—physically no craven, while a prey to infinite qualms in the abstract—yet he unhesitatingly dared an ordeal which nothing would have induced me to undergo. For its purpose was no less than to unearth, by way of the successive strata of sub-consciousness, the root origin of his malady. He had an idea himself that the process would prove terrifying; he faced the test unflinching, nevertheless.

The experiment was conducted at night in Carleon's sitting-room—a shabby, ill-furnished apartment, but so acoustically arranged, like a torture-chamber, as to consume all sound within itself. The light from a single shaded lamp fell quietly upon Thewlis's closed lids and upturned face, whose repose—for it appeared quite restful in that initiatory trance—gave its meanness an aspect of dignity which it was far from possessing normally. Carleon, with his lank, exhausted look and belying seer's vision, stood above, debating, as it were, like a skilled operator, where first to get his knife in. And at last he spoke :

“ Do you know me, Thewlis ? ”

“ Yes, you are Carleon.” The voice was strangely still and toneless ; but it was Thewlis's voice without any question.

“ Speak to him, will you ? ” said Carleon, turning to me.

Much against the grain I complied with : “ Hullo, Thewlis ! know me too ? ”

Not a response of any sort ; not a flicker of acknowledgment on the white, impassive face. It was clear I did not exist for him. Carleon bent towards the motionless figure.

“ Who is that sitting near you to your left ? ”

“ I don't know.”

“ It is Hendon.”

“ Yes, it is Hendon.”

Carleon motioned to me to rise and walk apart, a direction which I obeyed rebelliously.

“Go and shake hands with Hendon sitting in that chair, and then return to your seat,” said Carleon to the figure.

Thewlis rose, made a step to the chair I had vacated, went through the process of shaking hands with its imaginary occupant (I observed that his fingers actually remained unclosed in the act, as though they grasped something tangible between them), and reseated himself. Carleon, with a gesture, bade me approach.

“Now speak to him again,” he said to me.

“Hope I didn’t hurt you, Thewlis,” I said. “You know I always forget your flabby paw.”

Silence again; no consciousness whatever, it appeared, of my voice or presence.

“We are *en rapport*,” said Carleon, addressing me. “I only desired to convince you. He sees nothing, feels nothing, but through this medium.” He tapped his own forehead; then took Thewlis’s right arm, and held it out horizontally. “You cannot lower that,” he said.

“No,” answered Thewlis.

“Bear on it,” said Carleon to me, “and see if you can force him.”

I responded reluctantly. The arm remained stiff, but a slight spasm of pain seemed to twitch the features of the sleeper.

“Curse it!” I muttered: “that was beastly.”

“No, no,” said Carleon. “Don’t take it in that spirit.” He made a pass or two above

the face of the seated figure. "Now," he said.

I bore on the arm again; the only effect was to lever the figure slightly forward. I quitted my hold, and it returned to its former position. But there was no least suggestion this time of wincing.

"I have deepened the trance," said Carleon. "He has sunk below the region of physical sensation."

It was odd that he might talk to me freely about Thewlis without eliciting any more comment from him than my own words could evoke. He had to switch on, as it were, the connection between them to make a full circuit of the hypnotic current.

"Lower your arm," said Carleon; and the arm dropped and subsided.

Carleon dwelt a moment, considering, his long fingers grating at his chin.

"Thewlis," he said, "do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear."

Something indescribably different in the tone struck me. It was thicker—adenoidy, if I might so express it.

"Are you happy, Thewlis?"

"No. I am very unhappy."

"Try to explain to me why."

"I am leading the double life—a ghastly, whited sepulchre; a mask of hypocrisy veiling filth and corruption."

I made a violent gesture of protest.

“Hush!” said Carleon, his eyes alight. “Don’t be a fool, Hendon; don’t mistake me. He is down in a former existence—the one immediately precedent. Didn’t you hear his voice?”

His hands were busy once more. I half started to my feet.

“I have had enough of this,” I said. “Set the man free.”

“No,” said Carleon, “no. That spent fire explains much, but not all. It is not quite the demon we seek. We must go yet a stage lower.”

Thewlis looked like death; but it was useless for me to protest. The operator knew what he was about.

“Thewlis,” he said suddenly; “you are to answer me.”

He was answered—and in such manner as to make me leap and the hair prickle on my scalp. A torrent of blasphemy and derision, uttered in a shrill woman’s voice, broke from the unsealed lips. I cannot repeat it; I cannot explain the inevitable moral of ruin and degradation which it conveyed. It all ended as abruptly as it had begun.

I looked aghast at Carleon; he looked at me. We were both silent. Then suddenly he cried out, “Good God, Hendon! Two generations back Thewlis was a woman—and that explains it all!”

THE ACCIDENT

Raven Speaks.

I HAD never been in the town before, he said, and I have no desire to visit it again. It is the sort of place that exists to be forgotten by the casual stranger as soon as possible—modern, tawdry, commercial, having the stamp of municipal vulgarity all over it. Its very ghosts are mechanic, as I had the best reason for discovering—poisonous, petrol-animated things, that leave an exhaust of oil fuel in their wake in lieu of the good old-fashioned brimstone.

I came into this undesirable town at sunset, after a long day's tramp. The outskirts of any properly-constituted borough are commonly but the uncommendable prelude to warmth and hospitalities mellowing as one advances: this seemed all outskirts. To a dreary monotony of grey brick, flaring pothouses, pinchbeck emporiums, exhibiting, in dingily-lighted sections, parks of cheap perambulators, rolls of linoleum and suites of colourable furniture tart with French polish, succeeded more grey brick only more pretentious, flaunting gin-palaces, co-operative stores like bar-

racks, and that was all—not a crevice with so much as a scrap of antique moss in it ; not a curio shop in all the place.

Somewhere about the depressing midmost of this town I struck a casual trail for bed and dinner. There was an hotel, so-called, which suggested an ostentatious mean between champagne and swipes, and made no appeal either to my taste or my pocket : my destiny gravitated towards a quieter and more melancholy hostelry whose name caught my eye at a point where the High street took a sudden half-turn to the left, as if it shied from the very neighbourhood of a thing so dull and joyless.

It was a dismal inn, there was no denying ; its very name, "The Ark," suggested desolation, a lonely stranding in the back-waters of life, its use past, its custom staled. And yet it was obviously new, raw, a destined failure from its inception. It stood spiritlessly aloof from the main stream of traffic, blinking dim eyes at the throng that would not be diverted its way—a common thing, but even tragic in its excommunication. I entered through its dingy portals without fervour.

The coffee-room was of a piece with the rest, long, gaunt and empty, its cruets tarnished, its table-cloths, for all I knew, "filthy dowlas," its knives and forks black-handled, the smoky, featureless wall paper blistered at the seams and peeling from the corners. And the single waiter appeared the right sexton for this mortuary—an old-young,

unearthly-eyed creature of the resuscitated corpse type, wax-faced and blue-chinned, appavelled in the mouldy livery of festivity, as if he had been erroneously buried after some debauch of second-hand hope, and dug up at the last moment prematurely aged and earth-stained. His very presence imparted a funeral flavour to the baked meats—or to the meat, for there was but one, a cold, a deathly cold, sirloin of beef.

The room was as quiet as a church at midnight. In all its hollow emptiness, the shuffle of the waiter's pulpy shoes, the soft intimate crunch of my own jaws, were the only sounds to disturb the small dust of its silence. I ate as noiselessly as possible, yet my teeth seemed to snap like castanets. I grew nervous, oppressed; I longed for some other sound, some cheery entry to break the intolerable stillness of things; it was like the proverbial hush before the storm. And then quite suddenly I had my wish.

The waiter was away at the sideboard, cutting me a second helping; I was aware of a quick stop in his operations, of an odd little cough, of his gaping furtively round at me, the carving knife and fork poised in his hands. And then my ears were pricking.

It was very small and remote at first, a mere pattering throb, beating as if from a vast distance, hardly to be associated with any definite cause. But rapidly, as I listened, it grew, as it were, into

focus, and was the detonating pulse of a motor-cycle, flurried, mad, recording a speed which in that time and place appeared nothing less than insane. The thing, at the pace it was advancing, must be past the windows in a moment; involuntarily I held my breath, awaiting the approach, the crashing diapason, the closing swell and the subsequent receding into silence. It was near—within fifty yards: at the bend of the road it must swerve to the left, giving "The Ark" a wide berth—I jumped to my feet, with a gasp, upsetting my chair behind me. It had not taken the bend; it was coming straight on, through the wall, into the room, right upon me, a rushing indefinite shadow. There was a crash, one thin, agonised scream, a slam of light like the flap of a great ghostly wing—

"Beef, sir," said the waiter.

He was standing there with the plate, waiting placidly for me to resume my seat.

"God Almighty!" I muttered, looking stupidly down. Was I mad, over-tired, delirious? He had put the chair softly on its feet again, and mechanically I dropped into it. I had taken up my knife and fork, when I heard his whisper at my ear: "It's all right, sir. Some will hear it, and some won't."

I clapped down the implements again and leaned back. "Hear it!"—my voice was thick and trembling. "It wasn't my fancy, then? What was it, in God's name?"

“He ran away with her,” he said, “just stopped at the garden gate, and she jumped behind him pillion, and off they went harum-scarum. Polly Truelove was her name—a handsome bit of flesh, I’ve been told; but the parents wouldn’t permit it; and so they eloped together like that. It was neck or nothing; but the odds were against them; the street was too narrer, and what with dodging—they had a slip at the lamp-post, and crashed right into it.” He backed a step or two, and stamped with his foot on the floor. “Here it stood,” he said, “as near as you might guess. They were both killed on the spot—smashed to a pudden; and burnt, too.”

“Here!” I exclaimed.

“Ah!” said the waiter; “you see in them days the High Street run straight through where this house stands now. They deflected it when they built the new Municipal Offices. Here on this very spot stood the lamp-post. It’s always on a Friday it comes; and some will hear it and some won’t. Sleeping in the house, sir?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not sure I’m sleeping anywhere to-night.”

THE LOST PANACEA

Scarrott Speaks.

HE was standing near a modest headstone in the graveyard surrounding the Ordnance Chapel on the road to Plumpton. His left arm supported his right, the nervous shabbily-gloved fingers of which restlessly chafed his chin, while his frowning eyes pondered the inscription on the stone. Instinctively my own followed the direction of that concentrated gaze: "William Trivett." they read: "'Death but entombs the body; life the soul'"—very fine and simple, but uninformative as regarded the watcher's expression. The key, I thought, might lie to his individual hand, since something seemed to intimate that his presence in the dreary place was associated with the very spot on which he stood. As for myself, the mere accident of my waiting for a friend, who was visiting in the neighbourhood, accounted for my idle happening among the graves.

The aspect of the stranger was melancholy, his pose tragic. I should have thought it, perhaps, assumed for my benefit, had I not come upon him already unconsciously committed to it. He had

taken off his hat, a mouldy "topper," which stood among the lean grass by his side; a gap of bony wrist showed between his gloves and coat-cuffs; he might have been an undertaker's mute, acquiring through a private study of epitaphs the right mortuary expression. Certainly the place was well situated for such suggestive meditations—deadly in its loneliness, in the drab and geometric inelegance of its walls and buildings, in the lifeless marshes upon which it neighbored, in the drifting smoke of the arsenal town, a mile away, which hung over it like a veritable pall.

I was moving on, when he seemed to see me for the first time. I think I have never known eyes more moving than the pathetic blue orbs he turned on me. A whole life-story of visionary ineffectiveness seemed to speak from them. They looked blind from too much gazing on the sky. He greeted me, as one stranger encountering another in some desolate outpost of the world. "A peaceful spot, sir."

"Peaceful—m'yes," I acquiesced, but without enthusiasm.

He smiled wearily. "The very source and springhead of peace," he said, "if you only knew. It is the world's tragedy that it lies locked there, beyond hope of release, for all eternity."

That was his strange, rather staggering introduction to a personal relation which it needed but a small pressure of curiosity on my part to extract

from him. The following forms but a bare compendium of the tale :

“What is war? The disease of one brain and the infection of many. It is a transmitted zymotic fermentation, originating in the greed, or policy, or inhumanity of a solitary entity, thence to multiply itself, like the plague, and spread its devastation abroad over continents. You may mostly, if you take the trouble, trace its inception back to its single propagator.

“It is singular that men fight to regain what but for fighting they need never have lost—peace. It is singular, too, that having once lost peace, they go the most unreasonable way about to find it again. If I lost a friend on the slopes of an active volcano, I should not go to seek him by way of the crater ; yet that is what the pursuit of peace through war means.

“The simplest way to keep the peace, one would think, would be to deprive oneself of the means to break it. Commonsense recognised that fact when it discarded the ready rapier at its hip. So, were civilisation and humanity to discard armaments, there would be no temptation to war.

“That is the propaganda I have been one half of my life preaching—to ears of stone : the other half I have devoted to what I may call the homeopathic alternative. If war must be, then give them war in surplusage.

“What is war, again? A wickedness, an abomina-

tion, a horror, quite unrealised by those who lightly advocate it. Since these insensate hordes are deaf to the pleas of prevention, there is nothing for it but so to increase the abomination a thousandfold as to make war no longer a moral possibility. That is what, through long years of research, experiment and minute chemical analysis, I at length came within theoretic touch of doing. I discovered a gas which, confined and discharged from even an incredible distance, could lay out a whole army, as dead as the host of Sennacherib. A world depopulated rested on the touch of my finger; the secret of the great renunciation was mine."

"Was?" I said, seeing he paused significantly.

"Was," he repeated solemnly, pointing to the grave. "It rests now, for all eternity, in *his* keeping."

"What rests?"

"The chemical formula of my discovery—the prescription, I may call it, for ending that world disease. On that last day of days, my awful purpose vindicated and triumphant, I placed on record, on a single sheet of parchment, the sum of my minute investigations. It was the death-warrant, did I choose to decree it, of mankind; and, with that terrific document in my hand, I went down to the arsenal yonder to commit its charge to a friend—William Trivett. He was a foreman of the castings, and I looked to his personal regard and interest to procure me presently an opportunity for having my invention tested. I sent in the

packet with a note, and he returned a message to the effect that he could not attend to it at the moment, but would see me later on. He received, as I afterwards heard, that pregnant enclosure with a good-humoured laugh, and thrust it into his pocket with a jocose reference to my incurable 'crankiness.' God help him! It was the last laugh he ever uttered."

"How was that?"

"He was superintending at the moment, sir, the raising from its mould of a huge ingot of steel. It was a Saturday, near closing-time, and the gang under him, impatient to get the job finished, started the lifting gear prematurely. Some hitch occurred, and William Trivett descended into the pit to ascertain the cause. That, the next instant, became only too apparent. The core of the ingot had not been given time to harden, and, as the mass rose, a flood of still molten metal rushed out into the pit and overwhelmed and completely immured my friend.

"*It* was brought here, and buried as it was."

"But you had kept a record of the formula?"

"Not a note. I had not dared to duplicate so awful a testament. And then a brain fever, the result of such catastrophic events, came to blot out from my mind the last detail of my discovery."

"You can remember nothing about it?"

"Nothing, sir, except that it began with safety-matches."

THE LOST CHILD

Heriot Sings.

AH ! he was lost, and cried and cried—
A butterfly his path beset,
And all his gasping sobs were dried,
While still his eager feet he plied
To reach it—caught in Daddy's net.

“ Rare luck ! A prize, by Jove !—Hullo ! ”
The gratified aurelian
Exclaimed : “ Here's something fine to show
Mama. What's up ?—I did not know
What had become of you, my man.”

STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES

I.—JAMES WEDMORE

Duxbury Speaks.

ON the Steyning to Brighton Road, in the Rape of Bramber, there stood some thirty years ago, at about a mile distant from the former, a little group of cottages, the easternmost of which had been, until the general clearance in the late seventies, a toll-house. It abutted on the highway, which was here nothing less than the ancient Stane Street; and, with the exception of Downing's farm a quarter of a mile beyond, was the last house out of Steyning on the Lewes side. Somewhere midway between it and the farm-gates a covered well, common to all the cottages, stood off from the road. The water in this well rose sufficiently high to be dipped for with a bucket slung from a short rope.

At the time of which I write the ex-pike house was inhabited by a married couple called Wedmore, who had an only child James, a lad of fourteen. The boy was an unsatisfactory boy, moody, idle, and addicted, as they say in Sussex, to the sowing of gape seed—a loafer, in fact. Or, still dialectically

considered, he was "buddy"—a stupid, dreamy fellow who made nothing but discontent of his lot in life, and yet had not the spirit or energy to try to better it. And his parents, for all the poverty of their circumstances—perhaps because of it—spoilt him. It is a mistake to suppose that there are no foolishly indulged children among the poor: the pampered darling of the aristocrat is actually, on the whole, a creature nearer fiction than your petted James or Jamesina of the Wedmore type. And, in this respect of fondness, the father, an honest carter, or "wenman," in Downing's employ, was every bit as much to blame as the mother. It even gave him some secret gratification to think that something in the boy held itself instinctively superior to the drudgery and soilure which he had never a thought to resent on his own account. So might a mixen congratulate itself on the fastidious aloofness of the lily which its richness had made to grow so fine and tall up and away from it.

One bitter January evening John Wedmore, the father, came driving a one-horse field roller up the road from Steyning, whither it had been sent for repair. A little beyond the village they turned, all three, into a narrow lane, a mere cart-track, which ran up near parallel with the turnpike behind the group of cottages to Downing's stead—ing some hundreds of yards beyond. Thence the carter, having deposited his charge, made his way back to his own home, which he entered through a

wicket in the garden hedge. He found his wife preparing the tea ; but no son. Where was James ? He had gone, it appeared, to fetch a bucket of water from the well up the road ; it was twenty minutes earlier, maybe, that his mother had despatched him on the errand. She had called to him that she was running in to see a sick neighbour, and would be back almost as soon as he.

The boy, nevertheless, had not returned : he did not return ; in fact, he was never from that moment seen again. The father, becoming anxious, went out to reconnoitre. It was a hard frost, and a light fall of snow, now long ceased, in which the track of the lad's footsteps was clearly impressed, covered the ground. The marks, keeping well in the open, proceeded from the cottage door some half-way to the well, when they abruptly ceased. There, at that point, stood the empty bucket, upside down, and nothing whatever else. All around stretched an unbroken surface of white. The footprints, clearly defined, and all going one way, just stopped there and were no more.

Bemused now, and thoroughly alarmed, John Wedmore hurried purposelessly on to the well. He found the water encrusted with a thick coating of ice, which obviously had not been broken since it formed. Nor could he distinguish the smallest sign of anyone having been latterly in its neighbourhood. Twilight was closing in ; he hurried back, utterly aghast, and procured assistance. For hours

thereafter, by starlight and lantern-light, the search continued, but without result. The lad, it seemed, reaching a certain point, had simply stopped and disappeared. Apart from its tragedy, the thing was weird beyond conception.

Now nothing is so certain as that there is a way, if you can hit on it, out of every mortal conundrum. Well, how would you have solved this, given the errand, the snow, the solitary foot-tracks, and their abrupt termination? The boy was not in the well or in the ground; he was too far from the hedge to have leapt into it from where he stood; no sign or trace of him was then or ever after discovered.

And yet he had disappeared on his own volition, and with a very calculating eye to contingencies. His purpose had been to vanish, and in such a way as to baffle whatever immediate hue-and-cry might ensue. And his method had been this. Turning the bucket upside down, he had sat upon it, after slipping his feet standing from their shoes, which he had then resumed, only transposed as to right and left and reversed as to position, his toes, that is to say, going into the heels, and his heels over the toes. Then, taking care to make no fresh footmarks, he had managed to lace the shoes firmly in place, and, treading in his own tracks, had returned rapidly to the cottage. Thence, having restored his shoes to their proper position, he had run hastily down the little garden path, from which he had earlier swept away the snow, swung

himself over the hedge by an apple-bough into the lane before mentioned, and scuttled along it in the Steyning direction, until the sound of the approaching roller had sent him hiding behind a rick. The danger past he had emerged, and, a little short of Steyning, had struck across country in the direction of Worthing, whence he had made his way along the coast to Portsmouth.

It is unnecessary to pursue his career further. A combination of luck and cunning had enabled him to accomplish what he did. His tell-tale footmarks along the lane, which might conceivably have given him away, were, by a cruel irony of fate, unconsciously obliterated by his father himself driving the roller over them. And by the next day a thaw had set in, which finished the business.

Why had he planned the disappearance at all? An innate viciousness is the answer, culminating in his robbery of his parents' hard-earned savings. It was as a prematurely decayed reprobate, doddering on the brink of the grave, that he recalled to certain ears that long-forgotten mystery, and confessed with a chuckle the part he had played in it.

THE DARK COMPARTMENT

Raven Speaks.

I REMEMBER once, when hunting for a seat in a crowded train, finding unexpectedly an empty compartment, the door of which, when I came to try it, was locked. Holding on to the handle, I looked about for the guard. At that moment another hurrying passenger halted beside me, peered over my shoulder into the carriage, and went quickly away. Something in the man's manner striking me, I also investigated, and saw that the floor of the compartment was sprinkled thick with sawdust. Incontinently I let go the handle, and hastened to find a seat elsewhere.

There cannot be many engines, after all, which do not trail the ghosts of past tragedies in their wake. That was an experience unforeseen enough to give one a sharp little qualm; but I would not willingly exchange it for Manby's. In his case—but let him tell his own story:

“I had been visiting the old Hampshire Abbey town, and a run thence of thirty minutes by rail would take me to the next stopping-place on my itinerary, where there were barracks, and a cathedral, and a public school, and a gaol—not to speak

of cosy hotels. It was a dark November evening, and soppingly wet, so that, dawdling over my tea-board comforts at the inn, I came near in the end to missing my train altogether. It was actually starting when I gained the platform, and I had to make a dash for it, and scramble into the first compartment that offered.

“The light in the roof burned so dim that, what with that and the momentary flurry of my entrance, I did not recognise at once whether I were alone or had broken into company. As my eyes, however, accustomed themselves to the obscurity, I saw that there were two men sitting together opposite me at the further end of the compartment.

“The lamp, I say, was so down—a mere night-light in suggestion—that it was difficult to distinguish the character of my travelling companions. Moreover, as one of them seemed thickly bearded, and the other wore a dark felt hat slouched over his eyes, their faces, or the section of each of them visible to me, appeared nothing but featureless white maps, hung up, as it were, in the gloom. The two sat very quiet, close together, but without exchanging the least communication that I could see; and presently, from under cover of my own hat-brim, I took to scrutinising the silent shapes. I was the more emboldened to that inquisition by the utter indifference with which they had accepted my abrupt invasion. They seemed now, even, to be wholly unconscious of my presence.

“ The deathliness of that disregard, rigid and motionless; the huddled cohesion of the twin shadows, with those blots of white representing their faces, affected me strangely and uneasily after a while. I wanted one or the other of them to stir, to resolve himself into a detached human entity—and quite suddenly I had my wish. How it happened I don't know; but there came a sort of local shifting of the gloom, a sense of a quick gleam in its midst, and in that moment I understood. The man with the slouched hat had handcuffs on his wrists, and he was travelling in charge of a prison warder.

“ And almost as I realised the truth the prisoner began to speak:—

“ ‘ I'm sick; I want air.’

“ I say he spoke, and I might say the other answered. A sense of those words, anyhow, throbbed in my brain, and they had their instant corollary in his rising and standing at the window unopposed. I felt the rush of wet air, and saw the wing-like filling of the dark Inverness cape he wore. And then suddenly there was a tiny snap, and he went out of the window like a flying crow. I saw the warder snatch at him, and follow the way he had gone, pulled off his feet by the wrench and jerk. And there was I alone in the dark compartment, with only the window guard, broken and bent askew, to witness to the stunning tragedy which had passed in a moment before my eyes.

“ Even as I leapt to my feet I grasped what had

happened. Under cover of his cloak, and the roar of wheels and rain, the prisoner, though manacled, had managed rapidly to file through the bar to breaking point.

“ I tore at the alarm communication cord, and stood gasping and shaken. Almost against my expectation, the train slowed down within a few seconds and came to a stop. I put my head out of the window on my side, and beckoned frantically to the shape I saw beating towards me along the blown track-side. The guard came below, looking up with the staring, rather combative, expression of the official summoned against his own better faith. ‘ What is it ? ’

“ ‘ For God’s sake, come here ! Two men have just gone out of the window. ’

“ He climbed grudgingly to the footboard, and so into the carriage. ‘ Yes, sir,’ he said. ‘ Where were they sitting ? ’

“ His cool, incredulous tone maddened me.

“ ‘ There, by that open window,’ I said. ‘ Isn’t it plain enough ? ’

“ He crossed the carriage, pressed his hand on the seat, turned to me again. ‘ That won’t do. No one’s been sitting here. The cushion’s cold. Feel for yourself. ’

“ ‘ God in heaven, man ! ’ I cried. ‘ Do you take me to be mad or drunk ? They sat there, I tell you—a warder and his charge ; and the prisoner stood up on some pretext and went clean out,

dragging the other after him. There's the broken window rail to witness.'

" 'Is there?' He had had his back to it; but moved now, just glancing over his shoulder, so that I might see. And there was the window-rail whole and sound, and the window itself closed.

" Presently, after I don't know what brief interval, I found myself giggling hysterically.

" 'Look here,' I said, 'I think I'll change my carriage.'

" 'I would,' said the guard, 'if I were you.'

" Both his tone and his look were odd; but he formally took my name and address, with an intimation that the minimum penalty was five pounds. It was, on the face of it, a serious offence, you will agree. Yet, curiously, I received no summons from the company, or ever heard another word on the matter."

THE BLOODHOUND

Scarrott Speaks.

HIS name was Faust, and he was only symbolically a bloodhound. In actual truth he was, I think, the mildest-natured dog of his length in England. Also, saving viciousness, he had every vice which a dog could have—or almost. His habits, due, I am sure, to an irreclaimably well-meaning and somewhat pathetic opportunism, were deplorable: he over-ate himself, with results similar to those afflicting the infant in the melancholy Jacques's soliloquy on the Seven Ages of Man; he swarmed with fleas; he suffered from an eruptive mange, and—well, not to mince matters, from that which is associated with the predatory instincts of the early-rising bird; he snored apoplectically the long nights through. He was a humiliating coward, and, did another dog approach him in the street, fell over instantly, with a yelp, on his back, and lay there, ungainly supine, until he was heaved or kicked into something approaching a normal posture. His eyes were sorrowfully houndish; his ears, deep and flapping, fell into his food; on decent legs he could even have been convincing; but those

were nominal supports, mere rudimentary things, like the first efforts of a tadpole towards froggishness. Figuratively he might have been likened to a huge black and tan German sausage on castors ; it was a common infantine gibe to ask one if he had been bought by the yard. In short he was a Dachs-hund, and, with all his melancholy failings, be it said, a pedigree dog of quite singular distinction. His " points," I believe—though I knew nothing whatever about them—were superlative. And that, for a dog of his confiding and spiritless disposition, proved his near undoing. If it had been otherwise, the world, in the immortal Mr. Huttle's phrase, would have had no use for him.

Faust was an affectionate charge from a friend who had shut up house and gone, in a volunteering capacity, to the wars—never mind to what wars. Of course, in our fond innocence, we undertook the trust, pledging ourselves to be its loyal stewards. He was sick on the brand-new drawing-room carpet—a delicate felt of an evasive blue—the moment he arrived, and the stain—the first thing you encountered on entering the room—proved indelible. Thereafter followed the catalogue of distressful discoveries, including not one virtue save attachment. To me, personally, his devotion became fulsome and insupportable. I could not go out but he would follow me, though he dreaded the risks and publicity of the streets ; he snored at my door ; he artlessly made me his seeming confidant and

abettor in all the errors of conduct of which he was persistently guilty ; he took punishment in a way to make me feel an ashamed and ungrateful brute. I grew to loathe him, and felt myself a beast for doing so. Was he not in his wistful way vindicating his master's complete belief in my affection and humanity ?

And then one day he was stolen—and I tried to be sorry.

He was stolen—there was no doubt about it. There had latterly been an epidemic of such cases in the district, and the police were definitely coming to the conclusion that there were expert dog-stealers about. We did all that was right, without undue officiousness, even to the offer of a perhaps insufficient reward. If occasionally a twinge of guilty uneasiness would seize us in the knowledge that the war was threatening to draw to an end, we took refuge in the thought that the executive, not ourselves, was now responsible for Faust to Faust's owner. We could do no more than await—with trepidation—the chance of his restoration to us. But, like King Philip, Faust persistently went, and never came.

One day, weeks later, I happened to be in a "Picture-House." Amongst the scratch films exhibiting was one of the Trooping of the Colours. One saw the double line of spectators crowding the Mall, and the sentries at regular intervals like the posts of a fence. And then suddenly a dog ran out into the road—a Dachshund—which, as his

master darted from the press to recover him, yelped and rolled over on his back. Yelped, I say; you could somehow see it; and I cried in my suffering soul, "Faust!" The figures of the little incident were small and not near; but the thing was plain enough to make the people in the hall laugh.

But I did not laugh. I endured a long, silent struggle with my conscience, and it was a bitter one; but in the end the honest steward prevailed, and I went to Scotland Yard and reported.

The police acted promptly and efficiently. They visited the Picture-House; procured an enlargement of the tiny section of the film in question, and showed me the result. It was shattering. The dog-thief, as plainly revealed in the very act of rescuing his property, was my friend himself, Faust's owner. He had returned betimes, as I afterwards discovered, from the seat of war, and, on his way to us to reclaim his pet, had encountered the actual thief escaping with his booty in tow. A brief, fierce altercation had ended in the delinquent taking to his heels, and leaving the beast in the hands of its legitimate master.

I learned all that later, I say; as also of the impassable breach which our so-called broken trust had effected between me and my friend. He had abandoned then and there his intention of visiting us, and had indignantly shaken the dust of our very neighbourhood off his munition boots.

But at the moment I was concerned only with the

absurd fiasco of the thing as regarded the intelligent action of the police. The inspector, however, took my blushful apologies with unexpected good humour—with jocosity, even. He explained the reason for his jubilation presently, with some official reserve. A certain brute, accused of the foul murder of a child, was at the moment awaiting his trial in prison. Before the magistrate his defence had been an *alibi*; he had not, he declared, been in London on the day in question, that of the Trooping of the Colours; and the prosecution could bring no evidence to refute that assertion, confirmed by lying witnesses. And here he was, gaping forward from the group that watched Faust's master rescuing his property. The film camera had betrayed him; he stood quite prominent in the enlargement—squint and hare-lip and all; the date had given him away, and in the end the camera hanged him.

And that is how Faust earned his title to Bloodhound.

UNINSURED

Heriot Sings.

Fame and heroic deeds, wealth and desire—
Dreams I left, glowing in the unguarded fire,
To dream again! A spark—and lo! in flame
The ashes of my fame!

STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES

II.—ABEL KENT

Duxbury Speaks.

SCATTERED at long intervals over the wild and beautiful country which surrounds the confluence of three counties, Gloucester, Hereford, and Monmouth, exists a number of old houses—granges, fortified farms, and manor-seats—many of which are of Tudor origin, while not a few can claim for themselves a considerably remoter antiquity. Of these manors, *Redmanshaugh* is one not least entitled to consideration, both for its aspect and its history, with only a single detail of the latter of which, however, we need concern ourselves. It relates to the capture and arrest, on the hearthstone of his own great hall, of Sir Humphrey Landen, who in the year 1807 was hanged at Hereford for the murder of a Miss Boyd, of whom he was enamoured.

During the subsequent half-century the fortunes of the Hall, beautiful example as it is of perpendicular architecture, remained chequered; until, some time in the sixties, we find it, in a state of considerable disrepair, under the charge of caretakers,

a Mr. and Mrs. Kent, who were a very respectable couple, but in impoverished circumstances. It was here, nevertheless, that during the second year of their occupation, they undertook the charge of Abel Kent, who was the husband's brother, had been a seaman, and was now a helpless paralytic.

Redmanshaugh stands in a very lonely position, a little to the north of the Forest of Dean. It is a massive, two-storied building, with heavily mullioned windows, timbered ceilings, fantastic chimneys of the Tudor era, and a labyrinth of rooms. Its outstanding feature is the great hall, with its flagged floor and mighty chimney-piece. This last, built entirely of Caen stone, and curiously carved, rises to the ceiling, and is fronted by a huge, semi-circular hearthstone, suggesting the "D" in billiards in its relation to the line of the room-end, and extended to embrace the chimney jambs, which are both high and wide.

On this hearthstone one still and sunny day Abel Kent, the paralytic, had been put to sit in his elbowed Windsor chair. He had always, in the uncouth inarticulations which had come to stand him for speech, shown his liking for the place, and, as it was quiet and out of the way, it suited Mrs. Kent very well to humour him in the matter. She had brought him his dinner at mid-day on a tray, had superintended his eating it, and afterwards, called away suddenly by her husband who had returned unexpectedly from work, had deposited the tray

hurriedly on the floor, and never thought of it again until a couple of hours had elapsed, when she remembered, and returned to the hall to remove it. It was not there; the chair was not there; the invalid was not there. All three had disappeared: the hearthstone, blank and empty, showed not a sign of any recent occupation.

To incredulity, as may be imagined, succeeded amazement, terror, finally hysteria. The woman, after a rushing search, ran out to seek her husband. He returned with her, and together they continued the fruitless quest. Not a sign of Abel, his chair, his dinner, was to be discovered anywhere. The paralytic who could not walk, the palsied who could not speak coherently had, it appeared, come suddenly to life, shouldered that contiguous furniture, and departed with his burden into the unknown.

Or had he been kidnapped as he sat, and noiselessly removed in some vehicle? Surely a motiveless and profitless abduction, and accomplished with incredible secrecy. Yet the wild forest was near, with its rude, half-civilised population. That was a speculative solution, which, in default of a more plausible and of any proof whatsoever, might or might not serve. The only certain thing was that Abel had vanished.

The story became a story, to be included, as the months went on, among the legends of the Hall. Recovered from the first shock of the thing, Mrs. Kent even acquired a placid taste for relating it to

chance visitors. It was already eighteen months old when a certain antiquary heard it for the first time from her lips, and became instantly and greedily interested in the problem.

He was a little, spare man, this antiquary, with a scrap of beard, a high, creaking voice, and red rims to his eyes. He was also a past expert in latency, ambuscade and everything pertaining to mysteries, labyrinthine and arcane. During three successive days he haunted the place of that disappearance, and on the third—*he produced Abel*.

Mrs. Kent was dusting in the room at the time, with her back turned to the visitor. She heard him squeak and leap back, switched round—and there was Abel sitting in the chair exactly as she had left him, with the dinner-tray at his feet. Only the scraps of cold meat were dust, and the body itself a grinning mummy. She fainted, of course.

The stone, you see, which was in fact a complete circle, the hearth its centre, revolved on a pivot, like an engine turn-table, carrying with it the lower halves of the two chimney jambs, whose reverses were exact duplicates of their fronts. A half revolution of the table would thus, you understand, transpose the jambs, while leaving them in appearance precisely as they were, and would convey, through one of the openings caused by their displacement, into a secret chamber situated in the thick of the wall behind the fireplace, any object happening to be deposited on the stone at the time.

Here was revealed, in fact, an ancient hiding-place of a very cryptic and ingenious character.

How was the machinery which moved the table set in motion? Why, by dropping a leaden disc, some two inches in diameter and six ounces in weight, through a crack in the stone, cunningly made to look accidental, a similar fissure, brought into evidence by the half turn, on the opposite side, enabling one to reverse the process; while in the chamber itself was a lever, which, acting independently on the machinery, served any one immured there for a means to escape.

But the machinery, rusting or stiffening from disuse, had failed to act what time Sir Humphrey Landen had sought that means to elude his pursuers, with fatal results to himself. The necessary lubrication had been supplied by Abel Kent's dinner-tray, from which a cruet of salad oil had toppled over when Mrs. Kent had placed it hurriedly on the floor. By an actual coincidence, the oil had flowed into the crack, gradually eased the clogged parts, let down the disc, and despatched the poor dumb and helpless paralytic into his living tomb behind the fireplace.

It was ghastly enough; but let us hope the end came quickly. Poking and prying, the antiquary had solved the mystery. As an early example of the slot machine, it all delighted him hugely; but he had the decency, before making a minute investigation of the details, to summon assistance to Mrs. Kent.

THE BLUE DRAGON

Raven Speaks.

I RAN across Gilroy in Christie's show rooms one view day before a sale of heterogeneous china. That had been formerly a not uncommon encounter ; but of late years the keen edge of Gilroy's virtuosity seemed to have dulled, and though, as I understood, he still collected, friends spoke of an abatement of enthusiasm in him, at least in a certain marked direction. Rather to test that report than from any desire to ask his opinion on a coveted object, I got him to come and look at a Ming saucer, a green dragon on a mustard-yellow ground, which stood with other exhibits in a case in a corner of the room. He acquiesced, though I thought unwillingly, and stood a little aloof regarding the thing, but without a sign of that minute particular interest he would once have displayed in it. I fancied even I detected a hint of repulsion, of contemptuous dislike in the long, white face with its set, thin lips. And that amused me and tickled my curiosity.

"Don't you take an interest any longer," I said, "in Oriental ware?"

He wore habitually gold pince-nez, with a broad

black ribbon, and his eyes, naturally contracted, but absurdly magnified by the lenses, now regarded me with an exaggerated inquisition.

"Not much, to tell the truth. Why do you ask?"

"Why not? You used to be an enthusiast."

"Eclectic, I flatter myself. I never specialised. Old Bow and Chelsea are my present fancy. I'm not a rich man, you know."

"I've known prices paid for Old Bow and Chelsea."

"Not by this child. And they're so clean and wholesome, innocent of the least hint of latency—Shamanism—whatever you like to call it. There's something rather bestially suggestive, to my mind, in much Mongolian art—a sort of pervading demonism which infects even its representations of inanimate objects."

I laughed. "But didn't Chelsea borrow something from the Orient?"

"The innocent may touch pitch without being defiled, the Apocrypha despite. Think of the baby who shared his milk-sop, unharmed, with the venomous serpent."

"Gilroy; is it that you've had an experience?"

He stood looking at me silently a moment; and then suddenly took my arm.

"Come into the open air," he said, "away from that—and I'll tell you. Yes, I've had a sort of experience."

We went down the sunny Mall together, and he spoke as follows :—

“ It was the last piece of Oriental ware I ever bought, or shall buy ; and I picked it up at, of all places in the world, a marine store-dealer’s in Deptford, a queer old cabin with a black rag doll hanging over the doorway. How it, the thing, got there I don’t know ; probably brought by some Chinese sailorman ; but anyhow I saw it, and bought it—for a trifle too—a blue and white cylindrical brush-pot, *A Yung Ching* period, about five inches high, and closed with a wooden lid that fitted it like a plug. There was a beastie, of the usual grotesque type, painted on its side ; but I made no particular examination of my ‘ find ’ until I got it home, when, in the growing dusk, I sat me down before the fire and took it from its paper. It was quite an acquisition at the price ; but there seemed nothing remarkable about it, unless, perhaps, in the anatomy of the little sit-up monstrosity, dog or dragon or devil, which struck me as unusual. The skeleton, in short, or certain articulated indications of it, appeared either on the outside of the animal—like that of Hartley Coleridge’s imaginary chimera—or showed through—it was impossible to tell which—from the inside, as if the thing had been X-rayed. Its jaw was a compromise between a beak and a snout, and its body displayed a pelt of fine long hair.

“ Now I was moved to take the lid off, because, oddly, there seemed a sort of faint shifting bias to the

pot, as if it contained some small soft object. But the lid would not be induced to move, and I could get no purchase on its sloping edge. I grew impatient at last, and tried to lever it up with a pen-knife ; when the thing happened that any ass might have foreseen. There was a crack, and off flew the lid, carrying with it a triangular wedge of china from the lip. The ' piece,' from the virtuosic point of view, was ruined.

“ Utterly disgusted with myself, I threw the pot into a soft easy chair close by, and damned to all eternity the folly of the collector in investing his capital in fragile articles which a misplaced touch could render comparatively valueless. Then I sat sulking and glowering into the fire, until its soft reverberations, and the twilight stillness of the room, began to weigh upon my lids and senses, and I found myself nodding. I did not go to sleep ; but I dozed ; and, as I dozed, a consciousness of intense depression gradually came to overwhelm me. I neither knew nor troubled about its cause or constitution : it was there, and threatening swiftly to master my power of resistance—a sense of the weary futility of life, and of a desire to end it. Death was in my soul, a scarce resistible longing—and at that instant something tickled my ear. I put up my hand impatiently to brush away the irritation ; and felt nothing. But a second time it occurred, and my fingers touched something pulpy and hairy, which leaped from under them. I don't think I'm feminine

enough in general to scream at a mouse—but a mouse on one's neck! I shot up into a sitting posture; and—I'm not a self-destroying man—and in that moment I knew my own morbid folly. But I was sickeningly scared—shaking all over; and I sat staring about me. There was something going down me at a soft, scrambling rush—something that traversed my leg and reached the carpet. A little spurt of coal gas was momentarily illuminating the room and—I don't know what made me go for it—but I jumped and snatched up the Ching pot. And there was nothing on it, not a sign of beast or painting, only the smooth white glaze. Nothing, I say; and why? Because *it* was on the floor, blue and in movement—a tiny thing that ran round and round, and then made for my leg as if to remount it and reach what was in my hands. With a gasp I threw the pot away from me into the easy chair; and, as I did so, the running thing seemed to make a spring for it and disappear. I was sick, I tell you, but with nerve to snatch up the wooden stopper and clap it in place. And as I jammed it down, I saw the dragon come out on the surface of the pot again as wicked and fantastic as ever. That was the experience."

"H'm! What did you do with it?"

"Why, I took it as it was, gripping on the lid like death, and stopping the fracture with my thumb (I could feel it there inside, nuzzling and palpitating all the time), and, my landlady being out, put it into the kitchen fire. There was an explosion that

cracked the range—a close one; and for days afterwards a horrible smell of burnt fur about the house.”

“ Seems as if the beast appeared on the pot inside out, and your taking off the lid pulled him right way round again.”

“ Doesn't it ? ”

“ Well, I'm afraid, in spite of your experience, I shall go for the Ming saucer.”

“ That's all right; only—no, it really wasn't an Oriental variety of the blue crocodile and pink oyster genus.”

PROVIDENCE

Scarrott Speaks.

HAVE you ever heard of the Gorlestone Tunnel murder? Probably not, since it belongs to your father's generation, and many more notable railway mysteries have interposed themselves between then and now. But of one thing I am quite certain, that any shadowy recollection of it which may exist in your minds will not be associated with the name of Mr. Trillet Boomby. It could not fail to be, could it, supposing that extraordinary name *had* figured in any way in the case? As a matter of fact, it did not: at the same time, as a matter of fact, the case owed its ultimate issue entirely to the unconscious intervention of Mr. Trillet Boomby, always working, be it understood, under Providence.

Now, circumstance is like an endless revolving band, the world its fly-wheel, the driving force somewhere up in the blue yonder. If you would think to trace the genesis of any particular "providence," so called, by reversing the wheel and hunting backwards, you would reach of course in time the primal protoplast from which everything derives. That is true enough; still, in the case of these special

“providences,” it is possible sometimes to detach and isolate, for the purpose of proving and illustrating them, a special group of coincidences, which date from a more or less definite point in the train of events. That point, to be sure, is an insecure one, and of loose interpretation: you may trace back, for instance, the fly that choked the pope to the maggot that was the fly, to the carrion that bred the maggot, to the huntsman who made the carrion; or you may continue, through the family history of the huntsman himself, to the particular circumstances which led him on a particular day to kill a particular beast, which bred a particular insect, which a particular accident at a particular moment deposited in the papal wine-cup. For all essential purposes, however, we may elect to date Mr. Trillet Boomby’s association with the Gorlestone murder case from the moment when he slipped on the pavement outside the Lowther Arcade (it existed in those days), and sat down rather hard.

There was a piece of orange-peel—but let that pass. The main point is that it was outside the Lowther Arcade that Providence brought Mr. Boomby to this abrupt stop. He got up, unnecessarily ashamed—it was no fault of his—and instantly sought refuge from his confusion in the Arcade itself. It occurred to him to try to look natural, so he pretended that he had come to buy a toy. The pretence, as it happened, was both an inspiration and a reproof, for he had actually been on his way,

when he collapsed, to Waterloo Station, thence to journey on a week-end visit to the father of his godson, who lived a half-mile outside Swithunminster on the Ramsley road. Some earnest of his spiritual relationship would be expected of him by Johnny, and undoubtedly not less by Johnny's parents on Johnny's behalf. They were all very religious people.

"Uncle" Trillet thought of a clockwork engine. The stall at which he applied happened to be out of the article. He thought, with diminishing inventiveness and without success, of a few other things. Finally, time pressing, he was inveigled by the astute young lady into purchasing, what she had mentally imposed upon him from the first, a flying top—the very latest thing in toys. You pressed a grooved metal rod, or centre-bit, into a miniature propeller, which, violently set revolving thereby, rose into the air and whirred away in eccentric flight—a weapon of destruction to delight any boy. With the packet under his arm, Mr. Trillet Boomby hurried off to catch his train.

Now, I ask you to consider the absolute irrelation of two nevertheless converging forces. I doubt if Uncle Boomby, a kindly-natured man, had even read about the Gorlestone case. Certainly it never for one moment occurred to him, as he drove past the grim prison on the Ramsley road, that lying immured within its walls lay the young seaman convicted, though on circumstantial evidence, of a very brutal

murder, and condemned to suffer for his crime on the morrow. The visitor drove past and on, beaming benevolence, and was only a little dashed, on reaching his destination, to receive a message to the effect that his host and hostess were temporarily called away, but that Johnny would do the honours in their absence.

Johnny, in fact, was nothing loth, and presently godfather and godson were out in the garden, the latter excitedly eager to test the new purchase. Once, twice, thrice he essayed the trick, and on the fourth attempt let fly with vigour. And at that moment——!

At that moment the prisoner lay in his place, Mr. Trillet Boomby stood in his, and a strong, thickset man, carpet-bag in hand, was walking up the hill from the station towards the prison. Dusk was already falling, and——!

The propeller spun, rose, hovered a moment, and whizzed away with a little buzzing song. It made straight for the wall overlooking the road, and hit a cat that was dozing on top (rotating and edge-on, it had almost the cutting force of a knife). The cat, bouncing up with a screech, and leaping anywhere, landed full among a tray of plaster images an Italian hawker was bearing past on his head below. The Italian cursed and jumped, the tray, with its ruin of casts, went crashing into the road, and so startled a horse drawing a cart-full of washing that the beast bolted incontinent, and went tearing down the hill,

leaving its pedestrian master gaping and hooting in the rear. A little below the prison the cart smashed on a lamp-post, and vomited its load all over a toiling cyclist, who, being overturned from his machine, was shot with considerable force into the middle of the thickset man with the carpet-bag, who in his turn went down with a broken thigh. And so the end, prepared for outside the Lowther Arcade, was fulfilled.

For the thickset man, do you see, was the public executioner, arriving overnight in preparation for his job ; and, since he was *hors de combat*, and no other could be obtained immediately to fill his place, the execution had to be postponed for twenty-four hours, late during which interval, some startling new evidence having come to light, a reprieve arrived for the condemned man, who was ultimately pronounced innocent and discharged.

So the gods will sometimes make a practical joke of even their mercies, as the orange-peel witnesseth. But to the day of his death Mr. Trillet Boomby remained ignorant of the part he had played in averting a tragedy. Indeed, certain ominous sounds following the flight of the cat had made him rather shy of revealing himself. And in any case there was a second propeller in the box.

THE BROKEN WINDOW

Heriot Sings.

The keen glass cut his fingers red,
And he was scolded, left to smart.
O, broken pane by which he fled!
O, little fingers, cold and dead,
Come back—break everything but my heart!

A PATHETIC EXPIATION

Duxbury Speaks.

GREAT families, through their monuments, often lend to little churches a distinction they would otherwise lack ; and so runs the world. There is such a little church, a very little church, standing six miles due north of Winton in a grassy field, with the prettiest of gurgling brooks beyond. It is a quite inconsiderable ark, stranded, on that musical waterside, in a perfect green quiet. But within are antique brasses, and early Norman sculptures, and tombs of old local families more than you would guess. It is those the casual visitor turns from the road to inspect ; and mostly, likely enough, he has a vacant eye for the poor scattered headstones he must pass by to reach them. Yet among those unconsidered stones is one at least embodying a story more human, I think, than any recorded in those stately panoplies of brass. On it are written the names of the small Jemmy and his mother, Veronica.

These two, together with Jemmy the greater, lived, when they lived, in a good county house in the neighbourhood. Veronica had been married for her looks, which were sweet, but she had not much character to back them. She was rather of

the Amelia type, born to be some tyrant's slave and victim. No doubt pretty helplessness is effective as a pre-matrimonial asset ; in the daily domestic relations it may come, with the intolerant sort of man, to prove a daily exasperation.

But there is no doubt about it that Jemmy senior was a brute. Having wrung from his wife all that, in his creed, was worth taking from her, the discharmed residue became for him nothing but a subject for contempt and oppression. That, had Veronica possessed the least independence of will, would have meant no more than the common tragedy of disillusionment ; but she was a burr of that constitution that clings the faster the more ruthlessly it is sought to detach it, until it is rent into pieces for its faith. So, in proportion as Veronica clung to her tyrant, the more detestably he used her. It is the way with such Vandals.

Women like this put a fanatic value on the outward symbols of their estate. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at, when we consider their otherwise unprotected position. The ring is their justification for all that they suffer meekly ; it is the pledge of that which gave moral security to themselves, and to their children legitimacy ; and they regard the actual things as a sort of dividend warrant, to be deprived of which would render their matrimonial securities worthless. So, when one day Veronica lost her wedding-ring, she felt as if the world had crumbled about her feet.

Jemmy minor was the delinquent. He had appropriated the little glistening hoop when his mother was washing her hands after gardening, and, slipping the thing unobserved on his own pudgy but inadequate finger, had incontinently dropped it off again—somewhere. No doubt his immature wits, his butterfly memory (he was only four) were wholly unequal to the instant test of their capacities that followed. The more he was questioned, the more impossible became his answers; tears, agitation and distraction only confused the issue for him and involved his babyish mind in increasing entanglements. He recollected, vaguely, that he had “lifted” the ring; but whither, after the theft, he had betaken himself with it, or when become conscious of its absence, was a dark book to him. He was a ubiquitous baby; in fine weather here, there and everywhere about the place. He simply, could not “bremember”; and there, it seemed, was an end of it.

He was dreadfully distressed to see his little mother so agonised and distraught. He did not even resent the strange violence to which her first frenzy subjected him. But he sought, full-throated, to propitiate her, to expiate his naughtiness in love and tears. And then he forgot, of course—forgot all about it; and remorseful Veronica hated herself, and went like a desperate thing without her ring.

It was an opportunity for Jemmy the brute. He did not fail to take advantage of it, or of the poor

creature's superstition. Lacking, he said, that symbol of servitude, she was his wife no longer ; her own criminal carelessness had reduced her to the level of a kept—a hatefully kept—chattel.

And then one day the boy died. He was seized all in a moment with croup, and paid out his last little strangled breath before the nearest doctor could be summoned.

Veronica did not go mad ; you must have a mind to lose it, and she was simple. But she fell into a long illness of apathy, from which she did not arouse for many months. Then one day she turned a jewelled ring on her wedding finger, so as to show the plain gold band uppermost, and crept to visit her darling's grave in the old churchyard. It was already neglected and overgrown. The father had felt the child's death as much as he could feel anything, but selfishly, of course, and with rather an increase than an amelioration of his feelings towards the mother, now doubly disintitiled.

The effort, the emotion, had exhausted Veronica ; still she feebly tidied the green mound, dressing it to what neatness she could contrive. There was a little bunch of yellow ragwort sprouting among the coarse grass, and she weeded it up with the rest. And at once a thought came to her. She was a country-bred girl, innocuously versed in simples, and this weed was not ragwort to her, but St. James wort, Jemmy's own name-flower. Perhaps it had represented the conscious yearning of his

spirit towards hers—it had blossomed just above where his small hands would have lain crossed upon his heart—and was at once a lovely message and a symbol. Shedding weak tears, Veronica made to replant the rooted spray in its place, but paused in the act. Would she ever, perhaps, in her state of increasing lassitude, be capable of visiting the grave again? She would take the flower home and plant it in her own window-box, where it would grow to remind her perpetually of the tender thought which had quickened it. Jemmy's own little loving offering sweetly contrived.

She obeyed her impulse, with some wonderful sense, in the act, of a satisfaction other than her own. The spray was planted in the box, in a wee hole made with a stick-end, and flourished, and died down in season, and in season appeared again above the soil. And then a marvellous thing happened. As the thick, swelling sprigs broke the ground, they pushed up before them into the light a buried wedding-ring, which a year before had been thumbed down into the mould by a careless little boy. It was Jemmy minor's expiation.

Even Jemmy major was startled and touched. There is always a vein of superstition in the brutal. The South African War was just at that time in its opening phases, and he had joined a corps of yeomanry. He showed some repentance and kindness towards his wife in the days before he sailed, and afterwards, when a Boer bullet had disposed of him,

she revered his memory proudly as that of a saint and hero. I knew her as a quiet, colourless little woman, unearthly big and shining about the eyes, and with a habit of keeping her left hand ungloved, and, as it were, on show.

THE SHADOW-DANCE

Raven Speaks.

“YES, it was a rum start,” said the modish young man.

He was a modern version of the crutch and tooth-pick genus, a derivative from the “Gaiety boy” of the Nellie Farren epoch, very spotless, very superior, very—fundamentally and combatively—simple. I don’t know how he had found his way into Carleon’s rooms and our company, but Carleon had a liking for odd characters. He was a collector, as it were, of human pottery, and to the collector, as we know, primitive examples are of especial interest.

The bait in this instance, I think, had been Bridge, which, since some formal “Ducdame” must serve for calling fools into a circle, was our common pretext for assembling for an orgy of talk. We had played, however, for insignificant stakes and, on the whole, irreverently as regarded the sanctity of the game; and the young man was palpably bored. He thought us, without question, outsiders, and not altogether good form; and it was even a relief to him when the desultory play languished, and conversation became general in its place.

Somebody—I don't remember on what provocation—had referred to the now historic affair of the Hungarian Ballet, which, the rage in London for a season, had voluntarily closed its own career a week before the date advertised for its termination ; and the modish young man, it appeared, was the only one of us all who had happened to be present in the theatre on the occasion of the final performance. He told us so ; and added that "it was a rum start."

"The abrupt finish was due, of course," said Carleon, bending forward, hectic, bright-eyed, and hugging himself, as was his wont, "to Kaunitz's death. She was the bright particular 'draw.' It would have been nothing without her. Besides, there was the tragedy. What was the 'rum start' ? Tell us."

"The way it ended that night," said the young man. He was a little abashed by the sudden concentration of interest on himself ; but carried it off with *sang-froid*. Only a slight flush of pink on his youthful cheek, as he flicked the ash from his cigarette with the delicate little finger of the hand that held it, confessed to a certain uneasy self-consciousness.

"I have heard something about it," said Carleon. "Give us your version."

"I'm no hand at describing things," responded the young man, committed and at bay ; "never wrote a line of description in my life, nor wanted to. It was the *Shadow-Dance*, you know—the last thing

on the programme. I dare say some of you have seen Kaunitz in it."

One or two of us had. It was incomparably the most beautiful, the most mystic, idyll achieved by even that superlative dancer; a fantasia of moonlight, supported by an ethereal, only half-revealed, shimmer of attendant sylphids.

"Yes," said Carleon eagerly.

"Well, you know," said the young man, "there is a sort of dance first, in and out of the shadows, a mysterious, gossamery kind of business, with nobody made out exactly, and the moon slowly rising behind the trees. And then, suddenly, the moon reaches a gap in the branches, and—and it's full moon, don't you know, a regular white blaze of it, and all the shapes have vanished; only you sort of guess them, get a hint of their arms and faces hiding behind the leaves and under the shrubs and things. And that was the time when Kaunitz ought to have come on."

"Didn't she come on?"

"Not at first; not when she ought to. There was a devil of a pause, and you could see something was wrong. And after a bit there was a sort of rustle in the house, and people began to cough; and the music slipped round to the beginning again; and they danced it all over a second time, until it came to the full moonlight—and there she was this time all right—how, I don't know, for I hadn't seen her enter."

“ How did she dance—when she *did* appear ? ”

The young man blew the ash from his cigarette.

“ Oh, I don't know ! ” he said.

“ You must know. Wasn't it something quite out of the common ? You called it a rum start, you remember.”

“ Well, if you insist upon it, it was—the most extraordinary thing I ever witnessed—more like what they describe the Pepper's Ghost business than anything else I can think. She was here, there, anywhere ; seemingly independent of what d'y'e call—gravitation, you know ; she seemed to jump and hang in the air before she came down. And there was another thing. The idea was to dance to her own shadow, you see—follow it, run away from it, flirt with it—and it was the business of the moon, or the limelight man, to keep the shadow going.”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, there was no shadow—not a sign of one.”

“ That may have been the limelight man's fault.”

“ Very likely ; but I don't think so. There was something odd about it all ; and most in the way she went.”

“ How was that ? ”

“ Why, she just gave a spring, and was gone.”

Carleon sank back, with a sigh as if of repletion, and sat softly cracking his fingers together.

“ Didn't you notice anything strange about the house, the audience ? ” he said—“ people crying

out ; girls crouching and hiding their faces, for instance ? ”

“ Perhaps, now I think of it,” answered the modish youth. “ I noticed, anyhow, that the curtain came down with a bang, and that there seemed a sort of general flurry and stampede of things, both behind it and on our side.”

“ Well, as to that, it is a fact, though you may not know it, that after that night the company absolutely refused to complete its engagement on any terms.”

“ I dare say. They had lost Kaunitz.”

“ To be sure they had. She was already lying dead in her dressing-room when the *Shadow-Dance* began.”

“ Not when it began ? ”

“ So, anyhow, it was whispered.”

“ O I say,” said the young man, looking rather white ; “ I’m not going to believe that, you know.”

A QUEER CICERONE

Scarrott Speaks.

I HAD paid my sixpence at the little informal "box-office," and received in exchange my printed permit to visit the Castle. It was one of those lordly "show-places" whose owners take a plain business view of the attractions at their disposal, while ostensibly exploiting them on behalf of this or that charity. How the exclusive spirits of eld, represented on their walls in the numerous pictured forms they once inhabited, regard this converting of their pride and panoply to practical ends, is a matter for their descendants to judge; but no doubt the most of them owed, and still owe, a debt to humanity, any liquidation of which in terms of charity would be enough to reconcile them to the indignity of being regarded like a waxworks. For my part, I am free to confess that, did I see any profit in an ancestor, I should apply it unequivocally to the charity that begins at home.

I discovered, when I entered, quite a little party waiting to be personally conducted round the rooms. Obviously trippers of the most commonplace type (and what was I better?), they stood herded to-

gether in a sort of gelid ante-chamber, pending the arrival of the housekeeper who was to act as cicerone. A hovering menial, in the nature of a commissionaire, had just disappeared in quest of the errant lady, and for the moment we were left unshepherded.

Assuming the nonchalant air of a chance visitor of distinction to whom palaces were familiar, I casually, while sauntering aloof from it, took the measure of my company. It was not in the least unusual or interesting. It comprised a couple of rather sickly 'gents' of the haberdashery type; two flat ladies in pince-nez, patently in search of culture and instruction; a huge German tourist, all bush and spectacles, with a mighty sandwich-box slung over his shoulder, and a voice of guttural ferocity; an ample but diffident matron, accompanied by a small youth in clumping boots and a new ready-made Norfolk suit a size too large for him, and, finally, a pair of tittering hobble-skirted young ladies, of the class that parades pavements arm-in-arm. All whispered in their separate groups, each suspicious of the other, but with voices universally hushed to the sacred solemnity of the occasion. Only the German showed a disposition to truculent neighbourliness, proffering some advances to the hobble-skirted damsels, which were first haughtily, and then gigglingly, ignored. Whereat the flat ladies, though intellectually addicted to his race, showed their sense of his unflattering preference by turning their backs on him.

The room in which we were delayed was the first

of a suite, and very chill and melancholy in its few appointments. There were some arms, I remember, on the walls, and a sprinkling of antlers—of all mural decorations the most petrifyingly depressing. They offered no scope to my assumption of critical ease, and—conscious of an inquisition, a little derisive, I thought, in its quality, on the part of the company—I was gravitating towards the general group, when we were all galvanised into animation by hearing the sound of a light, quick footfall approaching us from the direction of the room we were about to traverse. It tripped on, awaking innumerable small echoes in its advance, and suddenly materialised before us in the form of a very elegant gentleman, of young middle-age and distinguished appearance.

“Permit me,” he said, halting, hand on heart, with an inimitable bow. “I make it my pleasure to represent for the nonce the admirable but unctuous Mrs. Somerset, our valued housekeeper, who is unfortunately indisposed for the moment.”

I could flatter myself at least that my manner had so far impressed the party as to cause it to constitute me by mute agreement its spokesman. I accepted, as they all looked towards me, the compliment for what it implied, though with a certain stiffness which was due as much to surprise as to embarrassment. For surely courtesy, in the person of this distinguished stranger, was taking a course as unusual as the clothes he inhabited were strange. They consisted of a dark blue, swallow-tailed coat, with a high velvet

collar and brass buttons, a voluminous stock, a buff waistcoat, and mouse-coloured tights, having a bunch of seals pendent from their fob and ending in smart pumps. His hair, ample and dusty golden, was brushed high from his forehead in a sort of ordered mane; the face underneath was an ironically handsome one, but so startlingly pale that the blue eyes fixed in it suggested nothing so much as the "antique jewels set in Parian marble stone" of a once famous poem. He bowed again, and to me, accepting the general verdict.

"It is most good of you," I said. "Of course, if we had known, if we had had any idea——"

He interrupted me, I thought, with a little impatience:—

"Not at all. It is, as I informed you, a pleasure—a rare opportunity. I fancy I may promise you a fuller approximation to the truth, regarding certain of our family traditions, than you would ever be likely to attain through the lips of the meritorious but diplomatic Somerset."

He turned, inviting us, with an incomparable gesture, into the next room. He was certainly an anachronism, a marvel; yet I was willing to admit to myself that eccentrics, sartorial and otherwise, were not confined to the inner circle of society. As to the others, I perceived that they were self-defensively prepared to accept this oddity as part of the mysterious ritual appertaining to the sacred obscurities of the life patrician.

“The first two rooms,” said our guide, halting us on the threshold, “are, as you will perceive, appropriated to family portraits. The little furniture that remains is inconsiderable and baroque. It is what survives from the time of the fourth marquis. We observe his portrait here” (he signified a canvas on the wall, representing a dull, arrogant-looking old gentleman in an embroidered coat and a bob-wig), “and can readily associate with it the tasteless ostentation which characterised his reign. He was really what we should call now a complete aristocratic bounder.”

His tone suggested a mixture of flippancy and malice, which was none the less emphatic because his voice was a peculiarly soft and secret one. Somehow, hearing it, I thought of slanders sniggered from behind a covering hand. The young ladies tittered, as if a little shamefaced and uneasy, drawing his attention to them. He was obviously attracted at once. Their smart modernity, piquant in its way, proved a charm to him that he made no pretence of discounting. He addressed himself instantly to the two:—

“Sacred truth, ladies, upon my honour. He was a ‘throw-back,’ as we say of dogs. The mark of the prosperous cheesemonger was all over him.”

“Ach!” said the German, vibrantly asserting himself, “a dror-back? Vot is dart?”

“A Teutonic reaction,” said the stranger, taking the speaker’s measure insolently, with his chin a

little lifted, and his eyes narrowed ; “ or rather a recrudescence of barbarism in a race or line that has emerged from it. Your countrymen, from what I hear, should afford many illustrations of the process.”

The flat ladies exchanged a little scornful laugh, which they repeated less disguisedly as the German responded : “ I do not ondorrstand.”

The common little boy, holding to his mother’s skirts, urged her on to the next picture, a full-length portrait of a grim Elizabethan warrior in armour.

“ Look at his long sword, mothre ! ” he whispered.

“ *He* didn’t wear corsets—not much,” said one of the haberdashery youths facetiously, in an audible voice to the other ; and the nearest spinster, with a sidelong stare of indignation at him, edged away.

“ A crusader ? ” said the second flat lady, as if putting it to herself. “ I wonder, now.”

The stranger smiled ironically to the hobble-skirts, one of whom was emboldened to ask him : “ Was he one of the family, sir ? ”

“ By Heraldry out of Wardour Street,” answered our guide. “ Very dark horses, both of them.” And then he added, going a few steps : “ You do us too much honour, sweet charmer—positively you do.” He tapped the portrait of a ponderous patrician : “ The first marquis,” he said, “ created in 1784 out of nothing. The King represented the Almighty in that stupendous achievement. God save the King ! ”

“ Let’s go, mothre,” whispered the small common

boy, pressing suddenly against the ample skirts. "I don't like it."

"Hush, 'Enery dear," she returned, in a whispered panic. "There ain't nothing to be afraid of."

"Wasn't there none of you before that, sir?" asked the second haberdashery youth."

The stranger sniggered.

"I'll let you all into a little secret," he said confidentially. "The antiquity of the family, despite our ingenious Mrs. Somerset, is mere hocus-pocus. The first marquis's grandfather was a Huntingdonshire dairy-farmer, who amassed a considerable fortune over cheeses. He came to London, speculated in South Sea stock, and sold out at top prices just before the crash. We don't like it talked about, you know; but it was his grandson who was the real founder of the house. He was in the Newcastle administration of '57, and was ennobled for the owlish part he took in opposing the reconquest of India under Clive. And, after that, the more fat-headed he became, the higher they foisted him to get him out of the way. Fact, I assure you. Our crest should be by rights a Stilton rampant, our arms a cheese-scoop, silver on a trencher powdered mites, and our motto, in your own admirable vernacular, 'Ain't I the cheese!'"

The young ladies tittered, sharing a little protesting wriggle between them. Then one urged the other, who responded *sotto voce*: "Ask him yourself, stupid."

“ Charmed,” said the stranger. “ Those roguish lips have only to command.”

“ We only wanted to know,” said number two blushfully, “ which is the wicked lord—don’t push so, Dolly ! ”

“ Ah ! ” The stranger showed his teeth in a stiffly-creased smile, and shook a long forefinger remonstrantly at the speaker. “ You have been studying that outrageous guide-book, I perceive. What is the passage—eh ? ‘ Reputed to have been painted by a mysterious travelling artist of sinister appearance, who, being invited in one night to play with his lordship, subsequently liquidated the debt he incurred by painting his host’s portrait.’ ”

He turned on his heel and pointed into the next room. Full in our view opposite the door appeared a glazed frame, but black and empty in seeming—an effect I supposed to be due to the refraction of light upon its surface.

“ A most calumniated individual,” he protested, wheeling round again. “ There is his place ; we shall come to it presently ; but only, I regret, to find it vacant. A matter of restoration, you see, and much to be deplored at the moment. I should have liked to challenge your verdict, face to face with him. These libels die hard—and when given the authority of a guide-book ! Take my word for it, he was a most estimable creature, morally worth dozens of the sanctimonious humbugs glorified in the Somerset hagiology. Pah ! I am weary, I tell you,

of hearing their false virtues extolled. But wait a minute, and you shall learn. The 'wicked lord,' young misses? And so he is the flattered siderite of your regard. Well, it is well to be sought by such eyes on any count; but I think his would win your leniency. Only excess of love proved his undoing; and I am sure you would not consider that a crime."

We were all struck a little dumb, I think, by this outburst. The two girls had linked together again, both silent and somewhat white; the gaunt spinsters, rigid and upright, exchanged petrified glances; the fat woman was mopping her face, a tremulous sigh fluttering the hem of her handkerchief; the two young shopmen dwelt slack-jawed; even the German tourist, glaring through his spectacles, shook a little in his breathing, as if a sudden asthma had caught him. But our host, as though unconscious of the effect he had produced, motioned us on smilingly; and so, mechanically obeying, we paused at the next canvas—the uncompleted full-length of a beautiful young woman with haunting eyes.

"The Lady Betty," he said, "as she sat for 'Innocence' to Schleimhitz. The portrait was only finished, as you see, as far as the waist. He was a slow worker, and not good at drapery."

The German cleared his throat, and pushing his way past the flat ladies (I thought for the moment one was near furiously hooking at him with her umbrella), glanced with an air of amorous appropriation at the hobble-skirts, and spoke:—

“Schleimhitz was fery goot at drapery. There was a reason berhaps——”

“Ah—tut—tut!” exclaimed the stranger, with a little hurried smile; and led us on.

“Portrait,” he said, “by Gainsborough, of a boy—unidentified. There was a story of his having been mislaid by his father, the second marquis, on the occasion of that gentleman’s first marriage, and never discovered again.”

“Poor little chap,” murmured one of the hobble-skirts. “I wonder what became of him? Isn’t he pretty?”

“An ancestress,” said our cicerone, at the next canvas, “who married an actor. He played first gentleman on the stage, and first cad off it. I believe he broke her heart—or her spirit; I forget which. She kept them both in one decanter.” He sniggered round at the two girls. “No, ’pon honour,” he said, “I vow to the truth of it. You must trust me above Mrs. Somerset.”

“A collateral branch this,” he said, passing on. “He buried three wives, who lie and whisper together in the family vault. He himself was buried, by his own direction, at sea. They say the coffin hissed as it touched the water.”

The little common boy suddenly began to cry loudly.

“I’m frightened, mothre!” he wailed. “Take me away.”

The stranger, bending to look for him, made as if

to claw through the group. I saw a most diabolical expression on his face.

“ Ah ! ” he said, “ I’ll have you yet ! ”

The child screamed violently, and beat in frantic terror against his mother. I interposed, an odd damp on my forehead.

“ Look here,” I said ; “ leave the boy alone, will you ? ”

They were all backing, startled and scared, when there came a hurried, loud step into the room from behind us, and we turned in a panic huddle. It was the commissionaire, very flustered and irate.

“ Now, then, you know,” he said, “ you’d no right to take it upon yourselves to go round like this unattended.”

“ Pardon me,” I said, resuming my charge of spokesman ; “ we did nothing of the sort. This gentleman offered himself to escort us.”

I turned, as did all the others, and my voice died in my throat. There was no gentleman at all—the room was empty. As I stood stupidly staring, I was conscious of the voice of the commissionaire, aggrieved, expostulatory, but with a curious note of distress in it :

“ What gentleman ? There’s nobody has the right but Mrs. Somerset, and she’s ill—she’s had a stroke. We’ve just found her in her room, with a face like the horrors on her.”

Suddenly one of the women shrieked hysterically :

“ O look ! He’s there ! O come away ! ”

And, as she screamed, I saw. The empty picture frame in the next room was empty no longer. It was filled by the form of him, handsome and smiling, who had just been conducting us round the walls.

OLD HARRY

Duxbury Speaks.

JUST outside the little country town, where Haggart's Lane, with its swing-gate betokening a semi-private way, gave straight upon the wide stretches of Wickenham Common, a substantial man, dressed in worn tweeds, and with gaiters round his calves, came to a slow, meditative stop and looked up at the sky. It was dark with sagging clouds, packed to bursting with electricity; the air was densely oppressive, like a physical weight. It was evident there was going to be a storm, and a big one.

Yet, though he appeared to brood on its signs, it was not of the weather that old Harry was thinking at all. An even sultrier atmosphere possessed his soul; emotions, which one would never have suspected from that stolid exterior, were at work there; some greater heat surmounted the lesser, and he smiled, not because he felt mirthful, but because he had little more than that one facial expression at command for all occasions. He smiled, as the poet sang, because he had to.

Old Harry was biggish, inert; in complexion like a great cherubic baby, in years some thirty-

five or so. A man may be called old because he is old; or the sobriquet may be applied to him in affection, or in patronage, or in a sort of humorous contempt for his slow perceptives, his lack of skill, verbal and physical, his ready submission to chaff. It would have been difficult to assign the term its particular popular significance in Harry Ford's case. Moreover, it is odd that, although most people of his acquaintance used it, as if instinctively, in their allusions to him, a few felt themselves quite remote from the least inducement to do so. Still, since Truth, as we are told, speaks through the majority, *old* Harry shall be, in the fondest sense, for us.

Standing by the swing-gate, before emerging upon the Common, Old Harry smiled. He could have done no less, indeed, considering the subject of his meditations and her thrilling contiguity. He could actually see from where he stood the glimmer of Miss Dolly Silver's skirt behind the hedge of the little garden across the road. There were two or three scattered cottages there, modest, thatched affairs, and Dolly's father—ex-postmaster, and present deputy registrar for births and deaths—owned the midmost.

We are dealing, you will understand, with folks in quite moderate circumstances, to whom the possession of a very few pounds more or less represented the whole question of matrimonial eligibility. Old Harry had no reason to hesitate on that score,

if, indeed, we are not misrepresenting his feelings altogether. He was popularly regarded as a "warm" man, who had judiciously nursed the little patrimony left him by his deceased father—a builder in a small way—after investing part of it in the purchase of old Wickham Pike, a toll-house half a mile distant across the Common on the now abandoned Scarchester road. That purchase had been made fifteen years ago, and had been followed by some enlargements and improvements necessitating the taking out of a fire insurance policy to the tune of three hundred pounds, which policy reposed in the safe custody of Mr. Jarvis, attorney-at-law, who was an agent for the company, and a shrewd man to boot. He was one of those, by the by, who persistently refused Mr. Ford his popular prefix.

Old Harry smiled fixedly down at the turnstile—or kissing-gate, as he preferred to regard it—his lips cherubic, his lids half-closed; then, with a sigh that seemed to blow the thing open, passed through and crossed the road. He made straight, if leisurely, for the garden wicket opposite, on the top of which he leaned his fat arms, while he addressed the fair young figure beyond.

"No need for that watering, Miss Silver. Your beds are going to have enough and to spare."

"If I didn't, not a drop of rain would fall, Mr. Ford. Don't you know that?"

She turned her face to the sky, her blue eyes shining like porcelain. The action threw out the

shapely curves of her throat and bosom. The watcher stirred slightly, and sucked in his lips.

"You want to bring on the storm, then?" he said. "Ain't ye afraid of thunder?"

She laughed; but checked herself on the instant and stood looking at him.

"I usen't to be. I don't know so much now."

"Why?"

"Because my life's worth more to me, perhaps." Her lips parted. She came rosily to the gate. "Are not you afraid?" she said—"of being caught in the storm, I mean? If you are going home, I think you had better make a run for it."

The smile, habitual to his face, appeared, just perceptibly, to flicker.

"O, I don't mind!" he answered. "I wanted to ax ye, by-the-by, what's this about Dick Hunston's great find?"

"The stamps? It's quite true. They were inside an old book—six of them in a sheet. They are said to be of tremendous value. I am keeping them for him."

"You?"

She looked down, laughing, and tracing with the point of her shoe a pattern on the brick path.

"Why not?" she said. "His father says, as he found them, he may keep them, sell them, for—for his own."

A little pause, during which the smile seemed to

become a petrification, a deformity on the cherubic face, succeeded.

“ *I see,*” said Old Harry at length; “ *I see.* What luck for you and Dick! And when’s it to be, may I ax? I declare if I were inclined that way myself, I could envy him his starmps.”

“ Would you like to see them? ” said Miss Dolly Silver, jumping to escape her embarrassment.

“ That I should. You know *I’ve* been a bit of a collector in my day.”

She ran in, re-emerged, holding a thick envelope in her hand, from which she delicately slipped the treasure. “ There! ” she said.

“ No! ” he exclaimed, his mouth open, his eyes goggling: “ I do believe—Miss Silver—if I harn’t got one of that sort too! ”

She echoed his “ No! ” with a rather falling expression. He put a puzzled hand to the back of his head. “ Yes,” he said, “ I could a’most swear it—only—is Dick coming here to-night? ”

“ No; he’s gone over to his uncle’s.”

“ Do you think—would he mind now—if I could just take this home to compare with mine, and return it to-morrow? ”

She looked serious. “ O, I don’t know! You see so much depends on them; and he’s been told——”

“ Why, sure you can trust me, Miss Dolly. I’d bring them back without fail the first thing to-morrow morning. But, never mind, if you’d rayther not.”

He was an old acquaintance, and of sound repute ; no direct embargo had been laid on her ; what harm could there be ? Besides, she had thought more than once—it might be her fancy, of course, but supposing—a jealous, unnecessary slight, it would seem, on a perhaps disappointed suitor. She acquiesced in a moment, a little reluctantly, a little faintly—even pressed the packet upon him at last, when contrition seemed to detect signs of hurt in his face. He went off, beaming, with the treasure, and she retreated into the cottage, panic-struck now it was too late to recall her act. As she passed over the threshold, the first far boom of thunder sounded along the levels.

Old Harry heard it, and put on speed heavily, smiling all the time. He had half a mile to go, and the darkness of premature night and of the coming storm was gathering thick and fast about him. His cottage stood quite isolated, the nucleus of a little thicket of gorse, and he would be alone in it at this hour, the woman who charred for him sleeping out. But he was not nervous about lightning or other such elemental disturbances ; what did trouble him was the oppressive heat. It raised a fury in his breast like a physical injury. He strained to be at home, and under shelter, with full opportunity to think.

He was a slow thinker, but a tenacious. The cud of reflection would roll many times up and down in his throat before it was finally absorbed. There

was just the germ of an idea forming for discussion in his mind as he reached his solitary door ; but he would not admit or indulge it until he could settle down to fast communion with himself. The sky was all one incessant blink and flicker by then, though the air remained dry as that from an oven ; and the accumulating reverberations of thunder left no intervals of silence. He entered his little parlour, and felt about for the matches. It was so dark in there that he stumbled once or twice, and said things under his breath. He would not even swear yet without reserve.

Presently he found the matches and lit the lamp. It flared up murkily until he slipped the chimney on it ; and then the small room woke suddenly to brilliant illumination. It was a comfortless room, mean, a little dilapidated, seeming to confess to a spirit of parsimony somewhere, or else to a popularly over-rated competence. There was slight token of the " warm " man about it. Its master glanced uncordially, a thought curiously, around its walls, before he turned to see that all was fast and the window curtains closed. Then at last, that stereotyped smile or grin persistent to his expression, he threw his cap into a corner, sat down before the empty table, took the envelope from his pocket and the stamps from the envelope, and, laying the frail treasure before him, propped his face on his hands and prepared to think.

So this was the find, Dick Hunston's find, which,

by implication, was to supply that young man with the short means to matrimony. He, Harry Ford, had heard the report, and had taken the directest means to verify it. Hunston's was the little town's main curio-shop, and from a lumber of old leaves amid its dusty recesses had casually blossomed this flower of six petals, costly as any orchid. Dick, who was an eager philatelist, had had the wit to detect its presumptive value, which after all was to exceed his modest computation by hundreds of pounds. There was only one specimen of the stamp hitherto known to exist—a single survivor from the withdrawn penny misprint of '47—and that was worth—well, exactly what it would fetch.

But at present the interest and curiosity in the find were local—little more than personal. Old Harry thought of that as he sat, quite motionless, gazing down on the treasure. He knew nothing about its rarity; about stamps at all. His pretext to the girl had been uttered on a momentary inspiration, as an instinctive snatch at first means to an end faintly adumbrated in his mind but not at once made clear. His nose wrinkled as he looked down now on the insignificant plunder. That a man's and woman's destiny, that of their unborn progeny, could dare to stake itself on this scrap of perishable rubbish! An odd sound came from his lungs.

That double destiny—he had guessed, feared: he had not known until this accident came to confirm it. So they were really lovers, eh?—lovers con-

fessed ; and the banns would be cried on the strength of this preposterous trifle ! Six tiny squares of thin paper, and worth—but not too fast. There might be others convinced of their prior claim to a certain property, long coveted, long gloatingly relished in anticipation. Because a man was slow to fancy a maid, he was not necessarily insensible ; the strength of a passion lost nothing from its having been conceived in maturity. And he had given sure indications—it was damnable thus to have foreclosed on him without warning. Well, was it too late ? Perhaps not.

His thoughts flowed with a sort of furious sluggishness. The storm by this time was blazing and roaring overhead, flash and crash almost synchronous, and only now he seemed to awaken to its fact and significance in the context of his ripening purpose.

Yes, his purpose ; for that was formulated at last. The stamps must be destroyed—somehow—he had felt that from the first. The question had merely been how—in what seemingly accidental way, so that neither suspicion nor responsibility should attach itself to him in the matter. How ? The answer had burst upon him, shaken him, in a crackling slam that seemed to split the house. The house !—dry, thatched, decrepit, jerry-built from the outset ; its appointments cheap and worthless ; always something infinitely less than the snug possession that local gossip had painted it ; hard to maintain on an insignificant income, yet

worth, supposing it were burned down——? And, once set alight, it would burn like tinder.

Ah! That was the inspiration: to destroy the stamps by the very act that should qualify himself for a sum of three hundred pounds in the way of compensation! Rule out Dick in that case, and hail his own conquering eligibility. And even though he were to fail with her after all, his lust of jealous vindictiveness would have received its satisfaction. Dick Hunston would have to forego his little dream of riches and matrimony, curse him.

Before the storm passed! His mind had been labouring slowly towards this crisis; once it was attained, he acted with sureness and despatch. Swiftly he examined the glass-reservoired lamp, and found it, to his satisfaction, near full of oil. Then, gathering together everything combustible within reach, and disposing all about the floor and table, he threw the stamps on top, hurried to the door, cushion in hand, stood in the opening, waiting for the next terrific flash and roar, and, in the instant of their tumult, flung his missile full-pitch at the burning lamp, falling back himself into the passage as he did so. There came a bursting crash from the room, and an instant wind of flame. Stooping low, Old Harry hurried from the house and, crouched among the bushes at a safe distance, waited to mark the result of his deed. Everything—the rending storm, amazing, bewildering, near rainless, the isolated position, the hopelessness

of succour—lent itself to the success of that. He watched, as the lightning leapt and the thunder rattled overhead, the house catch fire ; and not until it was involved beyond redemption, did he leave his covert and make, as if for help, across the common.

They had seen it at last—a little thing in that enormous welter, glowing and sparkling like a burning bush across the flats. He met them, only hardly emerged from their homes, a startled group appalled from too great venturing, yet palpitating to know and, human-like, relish the worst. He staggered upon them, holding his hands to his head : and they closed about him, clamouring and staring. And then the word went from mouth to mouth : Th' old Pike House—stroock by lightning and fired ! Poor Old Harry ! He had been mazed, stunned by the shock, but had come to in bare time to make his escape. Nothing could be done ; the building was hopelessly involved ; and that, privately, was a relief ; but each was eager to outdo the others in offering temporary home and shelter to the houseless castaway. And then the rain came down in a blinding sheet ; while still far away, licking and spouting up into the night, rose the flame of Harry's holocaust.

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Old Harry sat on the edge of his chair, his hands supported on the knob of his stick, his eyes staring into vacancy, the smile on his lips a little ghastly. Somewhere in the dull corridors of his brain uttered

words were reverberating in a way to mix and bewilder their meaning: he was struggling to get them into line, as it were. Mr. Jarvis, who was responsible for this confusion, sat and watched its surface manifestations. He sat, leaning back in his chair in his own office, his raised finger-tips lightly bridged, his expression, as ever, very dry and keen. And the sentence he had spoken was something to this effect:—

“No, Ford, no; you need be under little concern as to the fate of the stamps. It was really a fortunate accident which involved them in the ruin of your house; and it will comfort you, if you have not already been told, to learn why. There was, it appears, a seventh stamp included in that extraordinary find; and that seventh stamp, inasmuch as it figured on its original wrapper, was of greater value than all the rest combined. Hunston, it seems, had retained that single example to show to an expert, and the loss of the others, whose ascertained existence would have lowered the abnormal market price of this particular rarity, has in fact raised the value of the one surviving to a quite potentially extravagant figure. I understand it is pronounced of prodigious importance—I confess I have little sympathy myself with these costly crazes—and that Hunston has already been offered for it a sum which I should be afraid to mention. So your misfortune has actually been the young philatelist’s gain.

“ So far, then, your conscience may rest at peace. A more serious matter for you, I fear, is the complete loss of your house.”

The slow eyes had come round to the speaker, strained, questioning.

“ Sure, Mr. Jarvis, sir. But still there’s the policy.”

“ I am afraid, Ford, you have forgotten that *Visitation of God* clause in it. It is directly designed to protect the company against claims for compensation in the case of lightning, flood, earthquakes, or other such divine manifestations which cannot be foreseen or provided against. Your house was, by your own assertion, struck and destroyed by lightning. You may try to recover; but, in my opinion, you have no case whatever.”

Old Harry, having at last got his thoughts into some sort of order, rose unsteadily.

“ Thank’ee, sir,” he said. “ I’ll just go and take a week or two and think it over.”

THE CLOSED DOOR

Raven Speaks.

THE Wanderer, the water squelching in his broken boots at every step, splashed his way across the melancholy estate. A drenched moon, seeming to pitch at its moorings as the running clouds lifted it, glazed with a lamentable light the wet roofs and palings of the surrounding houses. Those, scattered loosely over a wide area of swampy ground, illustrated the latest word, in one direction, of suburban expansion. They would close up some day and become part of the city of which they were now only the advanced outposts; at present they stood in their pretentious instability for nothing better than the smart foresight of a speculative builder. So much, in the flying moonshine, was evident to the Wanderer. He marked the little barren, stony gardens, the rows of forlorn saplings, the weedy wastes—dumping-grounds for pots and broken crockery—the unmade roads scarred with their wildernesses of soggy ruts; and his soul yearned for the flare of city slums, whose squalor was still the sweltering over-ripened fruit of exotic ages. A lonely gas-lamp here and there blinked testily, like a light-ship in a waste of waters, whenever the

wind smote its solitary eye ; for the rest, scarce ten o'clock as it was, drab dejection seemed on all sides to have extinguished its tapers and gone drearily to bed.

The Wanderer, going forward with that stoic, hunch-shouldered aspect which is common to those long familiar with shrunk vitals and the filter of rain into coat-collars, raised his head suddenly and looked about him. A sound of universal running and dripping had succeeded on the passing of the last brief hammering storm.

"*The Laurels*," he muttered: "That was the name the old woman told me—*The Laurels*! Curse these bally houses! When shall I reach the one I want? Uncle Greg, like all the rest of them, will have gone to bed, if I'm not quick."

He had not, after all, much to hope of the sinister old man ; but anyhow he was Uncle Gregory's own sole sister's child, and any chance was worth risking in this deadly pass to which he had come. If he could only induce Uncle Greg to ship him off somewhere abroad—just to be rid of his intolerable importunities! Surely, for his own sake, he would not drive him to desperation. Uncle Greg was a wicked old Pharisee and humbug, but respectability was the breath of his nostrils. He lived by it and prevailed by it, witness this very estate exploited by him, and on which he himself was established, the crowning expression of its social orthodoxy. It would be ruinous business to have a profligate and

pauperised nephew haunting its decent preserves. Yes, his case was strong enough to warrant a descent on Uncle Greg, much as in his heart he feared the malefic old man.

He had come to an abrupt stop in the houses ; beyond seemed to stretch a moon-dappled hiatus of broken ground. But, looking intently across this, he perceived distinctly enough a solitary house, standing remote and lone on the limits of the estate. Towards that house, since he had investigated all others, it was necessary for him to make his way. He distinguished a track of some sort, and followed it.

As he approached the building, apprehension stiffened in him to fury. It was dark and lifeless like the others. Not the gleam of a light twinkled anywhere from its windows ; the household, to all appearance, was a-bed.

Cursing between his teeth, he came up to the gate, and read without difficulty its inscription. *The Laurels*, safe enough. He had reached his goal at last, and to what end ?

One moment he stood, deliberating the prospect before him ; the next, in a rage of decision, he had opened the gate and walked in. A black shrubbery, of the nature to justify the name, appeared to accept him into its yawning arms. There was a gloom of trees about the house, in whose shadow the white shutters in the windows seemed to open and stare at him secretively. Not a sound proceeded from the building anywhere ; yet its vulgarity, its raw new-

ness, were enough to allay any sensation of eeriness which its silence, its ghostly isolation in the moonlight, might otherwise have conveyed.

The Wanderer, standing before the hall door, held his breath to consider. His feet had crunched on the gravel path; yet it seemed to him that to breathe were more certainly to betray himself. To betray himself to what?

Yes, to what? Why should he fear or hesitate? Desperate men need dread no ambushes. There was no lower than the bottom of things, and he lay there already, bruised and broken. To turn now were to turn for shelter to the booming wind, the rain-swept waste. There was none other possible to him, save through the door of crime. He might open that yet; Uncle Greg should decide for him. He had one negotiable asset—himself. There was a positive value in self-obliteration; it was worth money. The lesson could not be better conveyed than through self-assertion. He lifted his hand to the knocker.

The blow sounded startlingly through the silent house; and yet he had knocked but timidly at the outset—too timidly, it appeared. He raised his hand again; louder this time; and still no one answered.

Then anger grew in him; he refused to be ignored; if he had to wake the whole household he would stay and not desist until he was admitted. The reverberations, violently continued, gave him heart and courage, gave him confidence. Conversely with his own determination must be rising the palpitations

of the silent listeners within. It was impossible that they could not hear him. He rained at last a very battery of blows upon the door. Still there followed no response. Then, in a sort of derisive perversity, he took to delivering second taps with the knocker, regular, monotonous, up to fifty or so. That must goad the most resolute inmate to rebellion.

Suddenly, quite suddenly, he paused.

“If you knock too long at a closed door, the devil may open to you.”

Where had he heard that—read that? Superstitious drivel, of course; and yet, the spectral night, the lonely house, and this silence! Pooh! It was Uncle Greg he demanded and was resolute to arouse. Uncle Greg was devil enough for anyone. Let *him* appear, to vindicate the proverb if he liked; he asked nothing better.

He had raised his hand once more, when he fancied he heard the faintest echo of a response within the house. It might have been a faint call or a footstep. “Ah!” he breathed to himself, “the old devil at last!”

The sound increased—came on. Unquestionably it was the stealthy tread of a footstep in the hall. A tiny ray of light shot through the keyhole. The Wanderer clutched the rags upon his chest and stood rigid. In the very act of steadying himself, he saw that the hall door was open and Uncle Greg standing motionless on the threshold.

The same heavy, sly figure as of old, beaming hairless self-complacency in its every slab feature. He wore a shawl dressing-gown of a flamboyant pattern; his stumpy feet were encased in gorgeous carpet slippers; in one hand he held a lighted candle, in the other a revolver. He betrayed no astonishment, but only a sort of furtive glee.

“Charlie!” he said, in his whispering chuckle: “poor Charlie, is it, that has been knocking fit to wake the dead.”

“I was desperate to get in—to make you hear,” muttered the Wanderer. “Look at my state, Uncle Greg.”

“And you made me hear,” said the old builder. “What a determined fellow, to be sure. There was nothing for it at last but to get up and come. I have brought my pistol with me, you see.”

“Not to use it on me, I hope, Uncle Greg?” said the Wanderer, with a ghastly jocularly.

“No,” said Uncle Gregory; “no. It’s not the kind of weapon for your sort. I’ve a better way of retaliating on you.”

The visitor, in this visible presence, was stung to wordy violence on the instant.

“O! a better way, have you?” he said sneeringly. “We’ll see about that. I know where I’m not wanted, and the value to be put on my undesirability. If you wish to hoof me out of this precious dove-cot of yours, you’ll have to pay for the privilege, you know, Uncle Greg.”

“ Shall I ? ” said the old man. “ Why, how you go on, Charlie. There are Christian ways of retaliating, ain’t there ? Suppose in my old age, I have come to that.”

“ Come to that ! ” The Wanderer drew in his breath as if to a sudden pang. Was it conceivable that out of such ineffable slyness and hypocrisy as he remembered of old had blossomed this aftermath of Christian charity and forgiveness ? He tried to read the change in the familiar face, but the swaying candle-light distorted it absurdly.

“ I can’t make out if you’re getting at me or not,” he said. “ Anyhow my misery is plain enough. May I come in, Uncle Greg ? ”

“ Why not ? ” said the old man. “ It’s the very thing I want.”

He turned and went silently along the hall. The Wanderer, following half dazed, observed stupidly how the candle-light seemed to have awakened a very phantasmagoria of shadows on the walls and ceiling. They jerked and frolic’d above and around ; they tumbled over the stair-rails as if in some fantastic scramble for place and precedence. The effect was so bewildering, that it came as a quick shock to him to notice suddenly, through the thick of their gambolling, the echoing emptiness of the passage he trod. It was without carpet or furniture—bare to its limits.

And so it was with the room into which Uncle Gregory preceded him. From door to shuttered

window it was void as death ; only a faint, sickly odour pervaded it ; only a very little litter of damp straw was scattered about its boards. The Wanderer stopped, petrified, staring before him—staring hither and thither, and then at Uncle Gregory. The old man stood, swaying the candle high, swaying it to and fro so that his own shadow, obeying its motions, danced and leapt and dilated on the walls and floor.

“ Damn it ! ” cried the Wanderer, finding his breath in a gasp ; “ stop that—stop it, will you ! What is the meaning of this ? What trick are you playing on me ? ”

“ Trick, Charlie ! ” The old builder bent in a soundless chuckle. “ It’s all right ; it’s all right, you know. If I’d known you were coming, I’d have delayed the bankruptcy proceedings.”

“ What ! Sold up ? ”

“ That’s the word, Charlie. Nothing left—only this.”

He held out the revolver, balancing it in his hand.

“ A heavy bullet,” he said—“ fit to splash a man’s brains all over the shop. What a curse you intended to make of my life, didn’t you ? A mean, squalid ruffian—you were always that, you know. I hated you, Charlie, my dear ; I always hated you, you poisonous prodigal. Now I’m going to have my turn with you at last. You’d come here, would you, to bleed the old man ? You shall bleed for him, hang for him, you hound ! They’ll think you did

it, and you shall answer with the red witness on your hands."

The Wanderer's face was white as drained veal; he had thought for an instant that the other meant to murder him; and then he saw in a flash his more terrific purpose. He gave a scream like a run-over woman, and leapt forward—but it was too late. The pistol crashed, and Uncle Gregory's brains flew all about the room.

Or so they appeared to us, on the moment, darkness rang down. He staggered back, with a sob that was wrenched from him like a hook from a fish's throat. He put his hand to his forehead, and it seemed to adhere there with a little treachery suggestion, and a more overpowering sense of that odour which had already nauseated him. And then he turned and fled. The hall door was still open, revealing a livid oblong of watery moonshine. Into that he fell, rather than plunged, as a man leaps from the side of a burning ship. He had no thought or care for his direction, so long as it bore him from that horror. Once, as he tore along, he stumbled and fell, his hands in a pool of water. That suggesting something to him, frantically, hurriedly, he rinsed his palms and bathed his forehead before he rose again and sped on. He had only one purpose in his mind—to reach the city lights and find shelter from himself in their glare.

Little by little he had come to recognise that the

doom imposed upon him was unavoidable and irrevocable. What insidious pressure, intimate and satanic, had persuaded him to that necessity, gradually enveloping his mind until escape from its torture seemed possible in only one direction, he knew well enough, while he was helpless to resist it. There was a limit to the endurances of reason ; better the condemned cell and the rope and the pinioned arms than this long-drawn-out agony of apprehension. After all, if he were to die, a self-accused though innocent man, perhaps the sacrifice might be accepted by the Unknown in some sort as an atonement, and he might be spared in the hereafter that company which alone he unspeakably dreaded. But a man could not continue for ever with that shadow at his shoulder, which no word of his—he believed it truly—could conceivably dissipate. He might have washed his flesh and his clothes : the stains of blood were indelible. So surely as he confessed his visit to the house on that night of terror, so surely, viewing his antecedents and the purpose for which he had come, would he place the noose about his own neck. He could not resist his impulse the less for that ; the diabolical thing which inspired it was more powerful than himself. He was so weary, so nerve-worn in the end, that even the thought of temporising with the truth seemed an intolerable ordeal. Better to confess at once that he was guilty of murder, and get it over. Only that way lay peace from it all.

During all these three days, so haunted, so marked as he was, his immunity from arrest had not ceased to astonish him. It was inconceivable that he had not been observed on his way either to or from the fatal house ; it was incredible that that persistent knocking of his had failed to find its echo in some panic heart. He had dared no attempt to leave the place ; he had possessed no means to lie hidden in it. On the contrary, some little dawn of luck, which had found him out since that night, had brought him more prominently than usual into the open. Was not that the common irony of Fortune—to bestow her grudging favours at the moment when for all moral purposes they had become valueless ? So now, though she was represented by no more than a job to distribute circulars, that respite from starvation was gained at the expense of bitter bread to eat.

On each of the three days he had bought and feverishly perused a halfpenny paper ; but never one had contained any mention of the tragedy. No shouting headline rushed into his ken ; no report of discovery or inquest appeared to confirm him in his sickest apprehensions. Was it possible that the police, for their own purposes, were lying low ? That were an unusual course, at least in these days of sensational publicity. And then there flashed into his mind another explanation of this silence, and the most hideously plausible of them all. The bankruptcy ; the emptied house ; its unsuspected inmate. Of course the body was lying there yet, undiscovered ;

and the crisis, in the prolonged expectation of which he had been lingering out the exquisite torment of these days, were merely postponed.

To the madness of that thought his reason succumbed, and finally. He could endure no more. One morning he walked into the local police-station and addressed the inspector on duty.

"I have come to give myself up for the murder at *The Laurels*."

The inspector, immovable, grizzle-bearded, with overhanging eyebrows, betrayed no least hint of emotion; but he just signed to a subordinate to keep the door.

"Yes," he said evenly. "What is your name?"

The Wanderer confessed it; as also his relationship to the dead man, the purpose for which he had called upon him and, more excitedly, the measure of his own worthlessness and iniquity.

The inspector stopped him, with official aplomb, in mid-career.

"This occurred three nights ago, you say? I want you to give an account of your movements up to that time."

"That is easily done," said the Wanderer, with a little panting laugh, now that the horror was off his mind. "I had been discharged only a week before from B—— Hospital, where I had been an in-patient for two months and more. You won't expect me to tell you for what."

"No," said the Inspector; and "Exactly," he

said. "Well, I shall have to detain you for inquiries."

The magistrate, a precise, benevolent man, with a certain soldierly compactness about his attire, ended some remarks he had been making on the advisability of contriving some punishment for those who increasingly took up the time of the Court with unfounded self-accusations, the result commonly of drink.

"Your statement about the hospital," he said, addressing the prisoner, "has been confirmed. It is possible that some mental distemper, induced by your recent condition, was responsible for this wild appropriation of a crime which, amounting as it did to an unquestionable case of self-destruction, occurred quite a month ago, when you were lying ill. Not less can excuse you for this wanton imperilling of your own life. What is that you say?"

His words had to be interpreted to the magistrate, so thickly inarticulate they came from his lips.

"I knocked, and knocked, and he opened to me at last. He had a pistol in his hand, and I saw him do it."

"Come," said the magistrate kindly: "you must forget all that. Leave closed doors alone for the future, is my advice. Remember what is said—that the devil lays snares for the importunate; only not being omniscient, he sometimes over-

reaches himself on the question of an alibi. Nevertheless, it is not safe to count upon his anachronisms. He has succeeded once or twice, I am afraid, in getting innocent men hanged. The best thing for all of us is to avoid knocking him up when we find him asleep.

“ I think, for your own sake, I shall remand you for a week into the hands of the prison doctor.”

COX'S PATENT

Scarrott Speaks.

MR. GASTER, manager of the Barstock branch of the Counties Deposit Bank, sat in his official snuggerly one dusky November evening. It was past four o'clock and closing time, the last of the staff had departed, and the Bank porter was in the act of securing the doors, when the sound of hurried voices accosting the man became audible to the manager in his den.

Probably some belated customer appealing uselessly to the inflexible Williams. Mr. Gaster sat tight, impatiently awaiting the intruder's withdrawal. He was a bachelor; he lived on the premises, and a cosy fire and an attractive novel before dinner appealed to him irresistibly from the upper storey. In person he was small, with a somewhat droll face, thin staring hair, and red eyebrows that came close together. They met now in a rather petulant frown.

"Do, for goodness' sake, clear out," he muttered to himself.

But the colloquy continued, and, driven beyond patience, the manager rose, opened his door and

looked out. There were two men in altercation with the porter at the half-closed entrance. Beyond in the street throbbed the lungs and shook the lights of a motor-car.

"What is it, Williams?" called the manager.

"They say they must see you, sir," answered the porter, half turning. "I tell them it's past closing time and agen the rules.

"Who are they?"

"One's a police-officer, sir."

Mr. Gaster stepped to the door. "Well?" he said.

"Can't we see you private, sir?" protested one of the strangers—he in uniform. "We don't want to raise a scandal."

"Scandal about what?"

"Marston's the name, sir. Your head cashier, isn't he?"

"Well; he's away on a holiday."

"He *is*," said the stranger emphatically; "on a holiday—a rare one."

"Come into my room, will you? Williams; wait there and keep the door on the latch for a little."

Mr. Gaster led the way to his sanctum, and the visitors followed. Motioning them in, he closed the door and turned to regard the two. The one who had spoken stood square and upright, patently the expressionless official, spotless and self-possessed—by his trim silvered cap and beltless jacket an inspector; the other, a tall, bent, rather gasping

weed of a man, in a long tight-waisted brown coat, was, as Mr. Gaster learnt, a plain-clothes detective.

“ Who are you ? ” demanded the manager.

“ Inspector Jarvis, sir, of the Southsea police. This here’s P.-C. Billiken. We’ve got your gentleman under observation at Southsea.”

“ Mr. Marston ? ”

“ Mr. Marston.”

“ He’s stopping there, is he ? And why have you got him under observation, inspector ? ”

“ For suspicions of our own, sir, aggravated by a chance discovery.”

“ What’s that ? I understand nothing of your implication at present.”

“ Why, sir, when you see a young Bank gentleman going it on his holiday, putting up at the best hotel in the place, flinging his money about in every direction, and spending seemingly at the rate of five thousand a year, you begin nat’rally to ask yourself questions. That’s what the manager of the ‘Portland’ did, and the failure of a satisfactory answer worried him. He came to me, bringing with him a piece of evidence that one of the maids had found in the gentleman’s room tucked among his collars.”

“ What was that ? ”

The inspector produced from his breast a folded canvas bag, which, on examination, was seen to be imprinted with the Bank mark and number.

“ Did that or did that not come from here ? ” he demanded.

"It looks like it," said the manager. There was a note of keen distress in his voice, apparent for the first time.

"You recognise it for the Bank's property?"

"Yes."

"It is such a bag as is used to contain money—gold?"

"Yes."

"Had Mr. Marston free access to the strong room?"

"I see what you mean. For all practical purposes—yes."

"Ah!" The inspector drew himself up from the hips, like a man relieved. "It give us the clue, that did. I thought I'd run over and make sure. Now, sir, the rest lies with you. Take my word for it, where the place of that ought to be you'll find a hole—possibly a row of holes."

"It's easily proved. You had better come with me and look."

He turned stiffly, obviously in part to command the emotion with which this ugly revelation of a crime had overcome him. "I hope you are mistaken, inspector," he said, a little hoarsely. "It is a terrible charge—a terrible charge. And I had such complete faith in the man."

He took some keys from a safe in the wall, and silently motioned the two men to follow him. As they obeyed, the inspector just glanced at the detective and the detective at the inspector.

The manager, leaving his room by the back, led the way across a little lobby to a flight of iron stairs, which descended thence to the basement. At the bottom he unlocked a massive iron door, which, being opened, admitted them into a little close compartment, a mere four-square cell hewed out of fireproof cement, having the chilled steel door of the strong-room sunk in its further side. Switching on the electric light, he then closed and secured the first door, before proceeding to unlock and swing open the second, when the great maw of the strong-room yawned upon the visitors like the mouth of some cold subterranean monster. Mr. Gaster, leaving the key in the lock, stepped in.

It was a wonderful place, eloquent of a profound and impregnable security ; solitude fast-locked in an eternal mausoleum ; sunk out of human reach like a treasure barque foundered in fathomless waters, and hugging its massed riches in a silence that no voice of man, no throb of life's pulses could penetrate. There were stacks of strong-boxes here, arranged on grilles, each box classified and docketed, the property, on deposit, of some customer of the Bank. There were safes within the safe, and, beyond all, a night of impenetrable darkness.

The manager, inserting a key into a hole in the wall, disclosed a recess loaded shelf above shelf with canvas bags such as that produced by the inspector ; only these bulged, and were fat with

inviolable opulence. He ran his eyes along the orderly rows. "No sign of despoliation here," he said—and, with the word, felt himself caught from behind in a staggering grip. He recognised the truth on the instant, and after the first shock did not even struggle.

"Right you are," said the voice of the weedy stranger, speaking, and for the first time, into his ear. "I've got him, Jemmy, tight as a trivet. Bale out the swag while I hold on."

The pseudo-inspector needed no urging. He cleared the safe of its treasure, bag by bag, throwing each as he removed it upon the floor of the cemented cell.

"How many can we carry, Tim?" said he. "We've got to guy the porter, mind you."

"Trust to my blessed coat-skirts. I've got the strength of a dozen porters in me."

Mr. Gaster, resigned to his hopeless position, fully endorsed the statement. The man's strength, for all his slack appearance, struck him as infernal. He felt as limp as a mouse in a cat's jaws.

"Nip his weasand there if he squeals," said Jemmy.

"I'm not going to squeal," said the manager. "Nobody could hear me if I screamed my lungs hoarse. What are you going to do to me?"

"No harm, if you keep quiet," said Jemmy. "How about the flimsies, Tim?"

"Leave 'em alone, boy. I'm all for real property,

and we've got our bellyful. Now, mister, by your leave ? ”

The bags were all out, scattered upon the cell floor. Gaster, reading a sudden determined purpose in the eyes turned upon him, struggled in the deadly grasp.

“ Good God ! ” he cried, “ you are never going to do such a diabolical thing ? ”

“ Aren't we, though ! ” said the weedy man. “ Where's the harm. The porter won't be long in smelling a rat ; and there's plenty cubic feet of air for you to draw on in the meantime. Come, you little devil ! ”

Actually they were going to shut and lock him into the strong-room. The cruelty of the deed roused the manager to frenzy. He fought and maddened in the merciless grip. It was all of no avail. In a moment he was thrust in and the key turned upon him.

“ Phew ! ” said Tim, giving a little dry whistle. “ What a spitfire ! ” He looked gloatingly upon the heaped bags and began to unfasten his coat. It was accommodated within the skirts with a number of ingeniously contrived pockets, so calculated and placed as to give little hint of the weighty secrets they might contain. “ Now for the loading, Jemmy.”

It took the two a considerable time to dispose to their satisfaction as much of the swag as they could safely carry ; but at length the task was completed.

"Now, sonnie," said the uniformed criminal, "you go first, and I follow, pretending, as I come, to speak back to the gentleman. Savvy?"

"Go on, Jemmy. I wasn't pupped yesterday."

"Where's the keys, then? O! in the lock."

He took the little bunch from the strong-room door, and stepped across to the door of the cell, whose wards he manipulated for some time without result.

"What," he said, "the hell's the matter with the thing?"

"O, here! let me try," said the other impatiently.

"It needs a little coaxing, that's all."

But he too had to desist after some minutes of barren prodding and twisting.

"There must be some trick in the blamed thing," he said. "I've tried every blessed key on the bunch, and——"

"We shall have to ask him."

"Ask—Hullo, Jemmy. I've got it!"

"Got it open?"

"No. There must be a second bunch, that's it, and he's taken it in there with him."

He came erect. The two rogues stood grinning at one another.

"To think," said Jemmy, "of the cust little sharp hoping to gammon us like that!"

"We must have the things off him."

"No question of it. Unlock the strong-room again, my boy."

The tall man took a hurried step, drove in the key, swung open the door.

"Here, you, Gaster!" he called into the depths. "Come out of that. We want you."

No answer whatever was vouchsafed.

"He's skulking," said Jemmy. "Or—God o' mercy, he can't have died of fright!"

There was an electric switch just within the cavern. He hastily snapped it on, and the gloom sprang into light. Together they plunged in.

Not a sign, not a sound of the captive anywhere. He had vanished utterly.

Suddenly Tim uttered a stifled roar:

"Here's another door in the wall!"

It was placed further in at right angles to the first—placed handy for any such emergency as this. They had boxed up the manager, with the means to his own escape lying ready in his pocket. And he had got *them* securely trapped between two impassable exits.

"Goosed us, by thunder," whispered Tim. They stared at each other in blank dismay. Here, with all the treasures of the Bank opened to their choice, they were worse than condemned paupers. They could only stand and curse one another's insanity, waiting for the end.

It came soon enough. As, in a last frantic effort to falsify their own convictions, they were striving feverishly once more to force the outer lock, the door was swept open upon them and there on the stairs

thronged quite a posse of constables. The manager was waiting for his prisoners in the office above, when they were brought in to him handcuffed. He rose with a chuckle and a bow.

"Cox's patent, gentlemen," he said. "It was most considerate of you to have left me in possession of the second bunch of keys. Really I calculated on that, you know, when I decided to lure you into the trap. Your story was extremely convincing; your possession of the canvas bag a real surprise; your scheme altogether very elaborately and cleverly worked out; only, unfortunately for its success, Mr. Marston himself returned to his work this morning—from Broadstairs; and we happened to have tallied together our stock of gold. Cox's patent, gentlemen. Don't forget. It's full of surprises. You will find your chauffeur outside waiting to take you—and himself—to the station."

TO R. B. C.

1908.

Heriot Sings.

How sweet our little baby lies !
The pale lids rest upon his eyes,
As on blue flowers butterflies
 Their weary wings.
His lips, as parted from the kiss,
Which last was mummy's own and his,
Seem breaking in their dreaming bliss
 To blossomings.

They'll ope' anon when morning blows,
All dewy like the briar rose;
And in quaint pretty guise disclose
 New flowers of speech.
Those be the blooms whose shape and scent,
Fresh gathered for our merriment,
We look to for our hearts' content,
 And most beseech.

That day is still a day of days
When, plodding on our various ways,
Some laugh-provoking baby phrase
 We bear with us.

Not wisdom crying in the street
With that dear nonsense can compete,
Or make our labours half so sweet
 As baby does.

And will that little tongue still go
In dreamland, mispronouncing so?
I would give half-a-crown to know
 How last it ran.

The shadows jerking on the wall
Seem twitched with laughter one and all,
As if they'd heard it just miscall
 Some bogey man.

A small grey mouse downstairs has run
Squealing to tell its mates the fun.
Why should I be the only one
 That jest denied?
But wait a little, manikin!
I'll slip, once snug in bed, my skin
And flesh and bones, and just step in
 The other side.

THE LADY HOPE

I

Duxbury Speaks.

I HAD never seen Vane Court until it was doomed, though I had heard much about it, in a fitful way, from my friend Rupert Vane, to whom it belonged by succession. He was the last representative of his race, and in the way, indeed, to end it altogether. The man was hopelessly in love—hopelessly, in the extreme sense of the word; that is to say, there was only one woman in the world for him, and she was *not* for him. I had no personal knowledge of Lady Letitia Berkeley; and, save as my friend's lodestar, she has no place in this story. But she was a generous and high-minded girl, who, without doubt, would have permitted, of her own free will, no considerations of fortune to come between her and her love. That barrier was provided by more interested parties, no less than by the natural pride of an impecunious suitor. The two were of a social condition that has more exalted ideas than yours and mine, perhaps, of what a suitable marriage provision consists. Vane himself was of a very ancient family, and, had he chosen, might likely have found it feasible to trade

upon his name and position to the tune of whatever was *not* expected of him in the way of settlements. The columns of the newspapers supply countless instances of people who live in the lap of luxury on nothing a year. It is just a trick, like producing a rabbit out of a hat. But Vane was not of these; he was even morbidly sensitive in money matters; and his love was shrined in a temple into which no thought of usury had intruded or ever could intrude. For nett result of all, therefore, his antique house seemed doomed in him to extinction.

He was a man of an introspective temperament, curiously quiet, reserved, enduring. A certain sympathy in tastes brought us together in the first instance. Vane Court was closed at that time, and its master excogitating various schemes for bolstering, nursing, saving the property—propping its crippled limbs under the weight of debt which encumbered it. But they were idle all, and he knew it. The estate was embarrassed beyond redemption—at least through any sum that he could raise. It was mortgaged up to the chimneys, and the highest reserve he could venture to put upon its sale, should that prove inevitable, would just about clear his honour and his pocket at the final bid, and throw him, virtually penniless, upon the world. And that, in short, came to be the prospect which he had to face.

In the first full realisation of it, I think the hair about his temples showed some early threads of

silver. The house was himself ; the thought of his uprooting a virtual death. With its loss, too, was associated another even more intimately pathetic. He must forego for ever that last clinging hope of the love that was to have mothered in it a new generation.

It was about this time that I made my first acquaintance with the old haunted residence. Vane had asked me down to it, as the one friendly soul who could appreciate his feelings at their true significance. Those were his words, not mine. It proved, at least, a fortunate choice, as I was to be the unconscious instrument under Providence in disencumbering the estate, and restoring happiness to a very admirable fellow. I take no credit for my part, and deserve none. It was a purely accidental suggestion that did it.

✓ Vane Court is a midland property, situated not very far from Northampton. The actual fabric of the house is early Tudor, with Perpendicular windows, though later additions have confused the original design. It is a fine, antique pile, and was, I was a little surprised to discover on my first view of it, in a sound state of preservation. But that was for the structure. Within were desolate corridors, denuded walls, an atmosphere as of grey famine. Its many treasures had, indeed, been withdrawn one by one to keep the fabric standing. The stables hard by were empty and neglected, their latches rusted with disuse, as was the handle

of the pump in the shippen-yard ; but a curious, great brass vane, shaped like a ship in full sail, which surmounted a squat octagonal tower in their midst, still turned erect and noiseless on its pivot. I could have imagined the sleeping beauty lying remote within those silent walls

Vane received me in his study—almost the only literally “ living ” room which remained to him. A fire burned upon the hearth ; a clumber spaniel was stretched on the rug before it ; a litter of books, papers, personalia of every description lay on shelves and tables around. There was even a solitary picture hung over the chimney-piece, an execrable sporting subject perpetrated in the worst early nineteenth century style. He saw me looking at it, and laughed in melancholy mood.

“ Not much in our way, perhaps,” he said ; “ but it’s the only one left to me. The dealers wouldn’t touch it.”

“ Likely not,” I answered drily.

“ Yes,” he said, musing and amused, pondering the thing ; “ it’s bad. But I’ve a certain affection for it. It was painted by a sporting ancestor of mine, who was also a bit of an amateur artist ; and I only wish it had been his worst act. He was the one most responsible for the present state of affairs.”

“ Ah ! ” I said, sitting down. “ So it’s really come to parting, Vane ? ”

He lit his cigarette, and sat on a table, his hands

clasped over his crossed knees, his eyes dreaming into the fire.

“ Yes,” he said.

“ I should like to investigate the old place before it goes, Vane. I should like to make some sketches of it.”

“ For me, you mean? Thank you, Fitz. You shall do what you please to-morrow. To-night you’re mine. Yes, it’s an old place. The Rover’s grandfather built it.”

The wind came under the door from the vast empty spaces beyond. The whole desolate house seemed to wail and lament as under an intolerable infliction. The carpet rose to the sob of it; the canvas of the picture swelled just perceptibly like a sail. I saw the frame rock gently on the wall.

“ The Rover—yes,” I said, but half attending. “ You’ve told me about him, I know. He was——”

“ He was our ancient mariner,” said Vane. “ He learned ‘ sea-divinity ’ under Drake—the theology which justified any robbery from anyone who differed from you in religion. He was one of the noble young gentlemen who accompanied that famous filibuster during his circumnavigation of the globe. They went to study sea-craft. It was astonishing how profitable a study it proved. The Rover was enchanted with his experience and, on his return, bought and commissioned a ship of his own—the *Lady Hope*. You can see her portrait

in brass to this day turning on my stable-roof—Dutch work—it was put up by the Rover himself. The name was the name of the lady who was his—his——”

“ His wife ? ”

“ No, his sweetheart. Somehow the terms aren't synonymous with us. She jilted him, according to the story. He'd succeeded, as I have, to an embarrassed estate, and he went boldly away to make himself that buccaneering fortune which he was resolved to bring home and lay at her feet. He made it, and he brought it home ; but the feet had flown. Lady Hope was Lady Hope no longer. Her faithlessness, it was said, wrecked him, mind and soul. He dwelt on at the Court a few years, moping and misanthropic, then sailed away once more and was never heard of again—at least to his credit. I'm afraid he visited his disappointment in a very base way on the sex.”

“ And what became of the fortune ? ”

“ O ! the Lord knows ! Some of it was devoted, no doubt, to refinancing the estate ; but the bulk, probably, he carried away with him. There used to be a family tradition of some great stones hidden by him about the house—especially one enormous diamond called the ‘ Dogstar,’ which was said to be larger than the Kohinoor after its first cutting. He took it from an Indian carrack off the Azores, and, if the tale's to be believed, it was simply of incalculable value.”

“ Well, Vane, legend or not, I think I should have looked for it.”

“ Looked ? Are we Vanes all fools, Fitz ? ”

“ O ! I beg your pardon.”

“ Trust us. There’ve been some of us, I think, would have routed it out if it had existed, though it had been buried deep as the foundations. We’re very hogs after such truffles. An empty fable, of course. Why should he have left it behind him ? ”

“ Well, for the reason that explorers leave provisions in caches that they may come to visit again. One couldn’t realise on a thing like that in a hurry.”

“ Nonsense—utter nonsense. If it had been within our human reach, Harry Vane would have found it.”

“ Who was he ? ”

“ The painter of that picture—a mixture of dandy, gamester and blackguard—notorious at White’s and hazard, and a plunger if ever there was one. It was he rattled away the Vane oaks in the dice-box, and left the estate crippled to an extent from which it has never recovered.”

“ I wonder you feel sentimental about him ? ”

“ Well, I dare say you do. But the fact is, he was unfortunate in an attachment, too. He fell in a duel because of her. There’s a fatality about us.”

We were silent for awhile.

“ You have never seen Lady Lettice, Fitz ? ” he said suddenly.

"No, Vane." He had never mentioned her name to me before.

"It's funny," he said reflectively. "I wonder, if you were to see her, if you would understand?"

"Your love? your loss?"

"I dare say you wouldn't even call her pretty," he said. "I don't know that I should myself. Would you call this face pretty?"

He took a photograph from his breast pocket, and held it out to me.

"Frankly, not very," I said, after conning it.

"But there is nothing in it that offends?"

"O, no!"

"That's it. She's the very angel of innocence. Her thoughts all come out of lavender."

He sighed, restored his treasure to its shrine, and once more a silence held between us.

"Vane," I said presently; "I can't understand what made your accomplished ancestor waste himself on a canvas of those dimensions."

"Eh!" he said, coming out of a deep reverie. "The picture? O, yes! It was rather absurd, wasn't it."

It certainly was. The subject was a ridiculous little hunt, with figures preposterously disproportionate with the amplitude of their surroundings.

"I shouldn't be surprised," I said, "if the conjunction was accidental. He had the canvas and he had the idea, and the two didn't fit."

He looked at me a little without answering, his

eyes curiously lack-lustre ; then got up suddenly, and, crossing to the fire-place, examined the work of art intently. He was still about his scrutiny, when the first dinner-bell rang.

II

“ Return at once if possible. I particularly want to see you.”

I had been back in town but a day or two when this telegram from Vane reached me. Within a few hours I was on my way to Northampton.

He met me at the hall door, and I swear I hardly knew him. This staid, melancholy soul was translated. His eyes shone as if with fever ; his measured manner was replaced by one perpetually restless and spasmodic.

“ Good God ! ” he said, seizing my hands, “ good God, Fitz ! ”

“ Vane, in heaven’s name, what is it ? ”

He hurried me eagerly into his sanctum and closed the door.

“ I haven’t the nerve at last, Fitz,” he cried. “ I simply can’t venture the final test. You must do it for me—you must—you were the cause.”

I thought his troubles had unhinged his mind.

“ There, come, old fellow,” I said. “ It’s all right. I’ll do anything you want.”

“ Of course you will,” he said. “ Give me time

to recover. You don't know what I've endured waiting for you."

He turned away, bent, and rubbed his hands before the fire; but in a minute he was facing me again.

"I'm making an enormous effort," he said. "You'd appreciate it better if you knew what it signified to me. Now, look. Do you notice any vacancy here?"

"You've sold the picture!" I exclaimed.

"Not I," he answered. "I wouldn't part with it for a fortune."

"What then?"

"Ah!" he said, "what then? That's for you to discover. You've got to be my catspaw for the chestnut you put down to roast. You really have, Fitz. I'm afraid of burning my own fingers if I try—horribly afraid. You must forgive me for the use I'm making of you."

He could find the nerve, even in the midst of his excitement, to giggle over my expression. The sound of that cachinnation comforted me amazingly.

"I'm perfectly sane, Fitz," he said. "Only hideously agitated. You'll understand all in a minute; as, even if there was any purpose in delaying the test, my reason wouldn't endure it, now you've come. Something seems singing in my heart that we're going to be successful."

Something seemed to sing in my own brain that, if we were not—whatsoever this strange test or

quest—the man by me would drop dead at my feet.

He led me out of the house and round towards the stables. It was about three o'clock, and a frosty but glowing afternoon. The vane on the turrent stood motionless, its blackened brass shrouds and tackle showing out distinctly against a pearl-cold sky. The fashion of the thing was after the "*Grâce-à-Dieu*," in the queer picture at Greenwich Hospital—a fat-hulled, high-pooed craft, with four masts, and protected tops for archers. Vane stopped me suddenly, pointing to it.

"Do you remember my telling you," he said, "that that was the Rover's work—a copy of his ship the *Lady Hope*? He put it up after his return from the Spanish Main, during those barren years of his disappointment and inaction. It has stood the wear of time, as I believe he meant it should. It is a sort of rebus—a play upon our name. Vanes have we been all—weathercocks freighted with hope, and experts at raising the wind that bore us to beggary. I believe I'm the very first to break the tradition. Plausibility ceased from our house with me. I should have no chance with the Jews. Hope, at the last, is all that has descended to me."

"It is the best possession," I said fatuously.

"So I'm inclined to think," said he, "thanks to dear Fitz. It is centred in that little ball under the rudder. Do you see it?"

“ Yes,” I said. “ The balance of the thing was estimated at two-thirds forward to one astern—obviously faultily. That ball was added to correct it.”

“ Do you think so ? ” he said. “ I have another theory about it. Anyhow, it’s for that I summoned you back.”

“ My dear fellow ! ”

“ My dear Fitz ! You speak—forgive me—the common mind. The Rover was a man of foresight and penetration. He knew the common mind and provided against it. At least that is my theory. Now let’s go and look.”

I followed him, rather pitifully. The conviction that his misfortunes had affected his reason returned upon me with redoubled force. He unlocked a door in the octagonal tower, and motioned to me to enter. A flight of dusty steps led up to a little chamber under the roof. Looking overhead, I saw a narrow trap in the ceiling, to which a fixed iron ladder led from the floor.

“ That’s your way,” said Vane. “ This was the Rover’s conning-tower, so to speak. A later Vandalism has turned it into a harness-room. We’ve had some Goths in our family. But the tradition, or superstition, of the weathercock has always held. It’s figured as a sort of heirloom, the pivot upon which our fortunes turned. To keep it perpetually oiled and twirling has been a sacred trust with us. To what end, I say ? I’m going to

break that tradition too. I want you to go and fetch it down."

"Me? That weathercock?"

"Yes, you. You began it, and you must end it. That's only fair."

"But——"

"To oblige me, Fitz. I can't answer for myself if you refuse."

I ran up the ladder. The trap was secured by a simple bolt. In another moment I was out on the roof, and close by the odd thing where it swung at its brassy moorings. I did not hesitate an instant, but desperately grasped and lifted it. It turned upon a rod which ran straight up through its mizzen-mast, and it was readily detached. If there had ever been a stop or screw at the crown, it had come away. With my heavy plunder in my hands, I descended warily to the floor once more.

Vane was as white as a sheet as he took it from me, eagerly examined it, and handed it back.

"I believe—my God!" he whispered. "Unscrew it—do you hear? Do you understand?—it unscrews."

With shaking fingers he took from his pocket a little hand winch which he had brought with him against emergencies, and pressed it upon me.

"The ball—the ball!" he gasped.

I was near as excited as he was by this time. I saw that the circumference of the little globe was traversed by a scarce perceptible thread. Fitting

the screw winch to the lower half, I bore with all the weight of my wrist upon it. Suddenly it moved with a tiny scream—a thread of bright brass gleamed out—I twisted like a madman—the ball parted midway, and there fell from it, with a sharp thud upon the boards, something wrapped in a screw of suckling-calf vellum, upon which Vane pounced with a sob. And the next instant a glory as of long-imprisoned, long-smouldering light burst from his hand. He looked up at me like one stunned.

“The ‘Dogstar’!” he whispered.

III

“Well, Vane,” I said, “when it’s quite convenient to you.”

He laughed, as he lit his pipe with a spill from the fire. The “Dogstar” had been laid and locked away, fathoms deep, for security.

“It was—your remarking,” he said, aggravatingly, between his puffs, “upon the disproportion—between that canvas and its subject that first started me upon the tack. There you are. That’s where your responsibility comes in. It *was* amazing—so amazing, that I only wonder the suspicion had never occurred to me before.”

“What suspicion?”

“Why, that ancestor Harry, a notorious Goth, had had the effrontery to superimpose his execrable

stuff on one, and a great one, as it proved, of our family portraits—a portrait no less than that of the Rover himself.”

“ Vane ! ”

“ It seems incredible, doesn't it ? But the man, there's no denying it, was a Philistine of the first water. Other instances of his Vandalism are on record, but in this he certainly surpassed himself. There's no guessing what havoc he played with the family possessions ; but this particular work he was always supposed to have parted with to the Jews ; as no doubt he would have done, had he guessed its value. The picture's by Zuccero, and of extraordinary interest. I'll show it you in a minute.”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, I was resolved to put my suspicion to the test, anyhow ; and I had the thing down and began experimenting on it—at first rudely enough, but soon with immense caution. Very little done convinced me that my surmise was correct—that another and an older work lay beneath. I got a local dealer to show me how to remove the surface, and—well, to cut a long story short, I restored Rover Vane to his right possession of the canvas.”

“ But, I don't see——”

“ Of course not. I didn't myself for some days, until an accident opened my eyes. My utmost hope was that here perhaps was a potential treasure of art, sufficient to stave off the day of reckoning. And it was—but in a way the remotest from my

expectations. Come, now, and see it—and read it—if you can.”

He led the way across the hall to a little empty room, the door of which he unlocked, taking the key from his pocket, and threw open.

“ There ! ” he said.

It was bare of everything but a single frameless picture, which was leaned against the opposite wall. The frame itself stood apart in a corner amidst a litter of tattered peelings. A haughty, truculent young face, beruffed, black-bonnetted, seemed to challenge the insolence of my intrusion. It surmounted a figure robust and martial after a stiffly anatomic pattern, upon the embroidery of whose trappings and the steel of whose sword-hilt and cuirass had been lavished the strictest art of the painter. A dyed and gilded scroll in the left-hand top corner contained the arms of the Vanes ; and at the feet of the figure fell transversely across the drugget, on which they stood, the light (a most unusual feature) from an unseen lattice window, whose reflections were scored with a number of unreadable fine scriggles. The Rover stood before me in the painted flesh.

I looked inquiringly at my friend.

“ It conveys nothing to you ? ” he said.

“ Nothing bearing on your secret.”

He laughed, and took my arm, and led me aside to a position from which we could command the picture at an angle.

"Now look attentively," said he; "especially at those marks on the floor."

I was silent a minute or two.

"They have contracted themselves," I said suddenly, "into what looks like a distich—a double line of writing."

"Admirable Fitz!" he cried, exultant. "So they contracted themselves to me, one morning when I turned from opening the shutters. They answer to what used to be called a hagnoscope—an oblique reading. Zuccero never put them there. They were introduced afterwards, no doubt, and for a purpose. They were the Rover's cryptogram—the clue to his secret; and this is what they say."

He had got the lines by heart, and chaunted them out:

" 'See fickle fortune turn in vayne,
What Hope hath lost shall naught regayne.' "

He ended. "I will take your word for it," I said; "but even then——"

"Wait a bit," he protested. "Directly I recognised the hagnoscopic character of the marks, I made a careful tracing of them, and so got them into easy black and white focus. That is what they said; and at the first it conveyed no more to me than it does now to you. Inspiration came in a flash. I——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "'See fickle fortune turn in vayne'——"

“ Ah ! ” he cried, “ you are getting at it, are you ? You had forgotten the rebus, perhaps—the skit upon our name. Turn in vayne ! For three hundred years it’s been turning, Fitz. What could better symbolise the Rover’s estimate of his love’s egregious fortunes than that shifting weathercock—the ship which had borne him on to such a rock of despair ? ‘ What Hope hath lost ’ ? A fine cynical *double entente* there ! I can imagine his savage transports, seeing his false love’s eyes, perhaps, lifted to consult that oracle, and never guessing how her faithlessness had deprived her vanity of the inestimable treasure hidden within. But the barque has sailed into port at last, and discharged her cargo. Hope, after all, has come into her own. What do you think the Rover is saying to it, Fitz ? ”

“ He’s saying,” I answered, turning again to the portrait, “ that Hope has other features than those she bore in his time, and that in making her the *amende honorable* at this late day, he’s really bidding for his own release from a pretty hot place. I shall consider it unhandsome of you, Vane, if you don’t pay for a mass or two for the repose of his soul ! ”

“ A thousand, if it’s any good.”

“ What do you estimate the value of the stone at ? ”

“ Lady Lettice’s happiness.”

“ Yes, that’s very poetical ; but I’m talking prose.”

“ We can only make a relative calculation, Fitz. I’ve been looking up the prices paid for some famous stones. The great diamond in the Russian sceptre, for instance, which weighs over a hundred and ninety-three carats, was originally bought at a price which at the present day would represent a sum amounting to at least two hundred thousand pounds. The Pitt diamond, of a hundred and thirty-six carats, but reduced by cutting some twenty per cent, yet fetched a hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds a hundred and eighty years ago. The Kohinoor, cut and cut again, and reduced to scarcely more than an eighth of its original dimensions, is still considered of almost incalculable value, though a million sterling may be said to represent the computation of the trade. But there is really no standard of price for these exceptional stones. You may ask for them up to the very limit of what cupidity can afford to give. The ‘Dogstar,’ on the scales’ showing, exceeds the best of those I have mentioned by twenty carats or more. It is cut, and brilliantly cut, moreover, and of magnificent water. I think—I am sure—O Fitz, old Fitz! what happy new generation is going to owe its existence to you ! ”

ONCE TOO OFTEN

"The Goose that goes too often to the kitchen ends on the spit."—DANISH PROVERB.

I

Raven Speaks.

Two men, one middle-aged, the other scarce more than a shrewdly precocious boy, sat breakfasting late together in the coffee-room of a second-rate hotel at Southampton. Of dingy reputation, the hotel in question happened to be convenient for afflicted passengers landing from the Channel boats; hence, no doubt, its chance selection by the elder gentleman, whose sojourn there had already run into a second day.

This person was large both in body and in presumptive benevolence. His formal dress was that of an English clergyman, serene and orthodox; his face, with its minute-pupilled and somewhat blind-looking oyster-grey eyes, was massively blunt-featured, his smile was perpetual and his manner smooth. His companion, who had only joined him that morning, and whom he addressed, and pretty constantly and ostentatiously, as Lord Burnside,

was suggested, rather than built, on a small cockney plan. He looked as if he knew most things, including a capacity for taking care of himself. The table at which the two sat in the dark eating-room was chosen as being remote from other feeding company; the iterated title was exploited for the benefit of the dirty waiter alone, who, being sufficiently impressed by it, communicated, as expected, his knowledge to the management, and thereby evoked some hovering curiosity in the background.

"Take or leave, Barry, my boy," said the clergyman, the Reverend William Wardroper by name. He was leaning easily across the table; he could impart to the deadliest matter the most casual manner possible, smiling and taking abstracted note of his surroundings while his lips were calculating their every damning phrase. He beamed now at a casual breakfaster, while his fingers trifled with a spoon. "It is just the opportunity of our lives, that is all," he said. "Substitute self-confidence for indecision, and the risk is really not worth the counting. There is positively a providence in it all. *Encore l'Audace*: remember Danton's phrase."

"He was scragged, nevertheless, wasn't he?" said the young man coolly, and he drained his cup. Mr. Barry Smith had been quite reasonably educated. It was not the fault of his training that he lived most of his life in the local booking-office of a London terminus, a machine rather than a man, clipping and flinging out vouchers, himself no more

than a voice and an indistinct presence. But he was fond of reading in his midnight hours.

"The knife, my boy," answered the clergyman; "not the rope. A distinction with all the difference in the world. But you must make up your mind."

"Give me the objections again, governor."

"There are none."

"The points, then."

"Listen now. Roger——"

"Ugh! That gives one a nasty turn. There was another Roger I've heard of mixed up in a like business."

"Your risk is next to nothing. I take the bulk of it, you understand. Roger Beck, I say, was a complete nonentity. For years he and his mother had been mere continental wastrels, known to nobody—least of all in their potential connections—poor, unattached, spending their lives in wandering from place to place, and never settling anywhere. It was in Switzerland that I came across them, and, worming myself into their confidence——"

"Trust you for a proper serpent, old man."

"Don't interrupt me again, please. Easily, I say, I acquired with them a sort of confidential position—adviser and travelling tutor in one. The boy was ill-educated; the mother a fond dotard. She never supposed but that impassable barriers separated her lot from the title. It was the realisation of her mistake, I conclude, that killed her."

"That was at Chamonix?"

“ Above Chamonix, on the Montenvert. It was late autumn, and the little deserted hotel was preparing to close. I found her sitting dead, with the English newspaper which had informed her of her mistake slipping off her lap. I spotted the tell-tale paragraph, and I kept it to myself.”

“ Well ? ”

“ The boy—now, unknown to himself, you understand, Lord Burnside—was completely in my hands ; ready to do anything I advised. I counselled England ; the woman was buried in Chamonix ; and then, in order to the restoration of his health and nerves, I despatched my pupil on foot, by way of the Glacier des Bois, to Martigny and the Rhone valley, thence to go on home by rail. I myself was just to settle up our affairs and follow, which I have done.”

“ A guide went with him.”

“ To be sure. That Mer de Glace, or Glacier des Bois, is a ticklish place, full of deadly crevasses, four or five hundred feet deep some of them, and very lonely at this time of the year. I trust they got safely over it. But I shall know soon. Terray was to telephone me within a day or so of my arrival here. He knows my address.”

“ Terray—the guide ? ”

“ A rogue of a fellow,” said the clergyman ; “ a loafer in Chamonix and a half-English alien. I found out something about him that made him fear me more than a little.”

The young man was rolling a cigarette, which crackled stickily in his fingers. His face was almost as white as the paper.

"He was to come on to England, too, was he?" he muttered. "A dangerous witness."

"Of what?" said his companion blankly. "If you said a possible murderer, now, I could understand. But he would think twice, wouldn't he, before double-knotting the noose about his own neck?"

Mr. Barry Smith put his cigarette to his lips with a sickly air of bravado; but his fingers shook.

"What next?" he said, in a difficult voice.

The clergyman smiled ineffably. With his elbow leaned on the table, he examined his finger-nails with critical nicety.

"I ascertained the name of the lawyers," he said, "and wrote to them before crossing, informing them of my position, of the facts, and stating that I proposed to convey the heir to his inheritance in the course of a few days. Their reply was formal and satisfactory, and I now await no more than Terray's communication to respond to it. That given, and given reassuringly, the rest lies with you."

"I know it does," said the young man, with some desperate sullenness in his tone.

The clergyman lowered his arm, and caressed the other's sleeve lightly with his finger-tips.

"My dear child," he said, in the softest, most ingratiatory voice; "it is for you to choose.

Observe, I put no pressure upon you whatever. I might have selected a more competent agent, only that the natural affections prevailed with me. Consider well, however, before you decide, your equipment for the task before you. You have a retentive memory, I know, a fund of cool assurance, and sufficient manners and education to play the part. That you have not more you must attribute not to any parental neglect, but to the chequered nature of a career whose designs for your good have always been greater than its capacities. There, however, you come certainly into line with the character you are proposed to represent. He was no more refined, no better informed than yourself." (It was significant how naturally he fell into the past tense.) "For the rest, circumstances have prepared the ground for us in a way, provided we move with merely reasonable caution, to make a slip impossible. Trust in me. Have you ever known your friend to fail? You, of all people, should have faith, I think, in my methods. I have given you proof often enough of their efficacy."

"Often enough is the father to once too often," said Mr. Barry Smith, with sententious bitterness.

"Let us suggest rather the *grandfather*," said the clergyman smoothly. "You never knew your grandfather, I think, Lord Burnside. Ah, waiter! What is it?"

"You're wanted at the telephone, sir," said the man.

Mr. Wardroper rose and, smiling genially, followed his conductor, at dignified pace, out of the room to the secluded instrument. Once secure there in isolation, he put the receiver to his ear.

"Yes; my name is Wardroper," he said. "Who is it?"

"Are you alone?" came the answer.

"Yes, alone. Are you?"

"Yes. I am Terray."

"What Terray?"

"The guide, sir."

"Where do you speak from?"

"London, sir."

"You have something to tell me?"

"It is this. You are safe to go ahead."

The clergyman returned to the coffee-room and to his company. If his glassy eyes shut in any terrific secret, there was only one there capable of interpreting the dim shadow that moved behind them.

"*L'audace, encore de l'audace, toujours de l'audace,*" he said softly as he reseated himself.

"Have you decided, Barry, my boy?"

"Well, if we're to be broke, we must be broke, I suppose," answered the young man, with dogged resignation. "Curse the moral of it all. It's a prize worth risking something to get, anyhow. Let's hear my instructions."

"I shall want you to be an attentive pupil, Barry. You have got to cram, you understand. I

think I mastered most of the essential facts during the time I tutored Master Roger. Now, turn your mind's ear this way, if you please."

For an hour they conversed low together. It was like the prolonged murmur from a confessional, discussing what inaudible infamy, in a Catholic church. At the end the clergyman rose.

"We can be in London by two o'clock," he said; then added softly, as the other got to his feet: "*L'audace, my boy, l'audace, l'audace.* Every move has been calculated; every surprise foreseen and provided against. Provisioned as you are, the ordeal of the lawyers will prove a mere bagatelle; and, once accepted, self-confidence will carry us on triumphantly. Only—audacity. Remember it is neck or nothing with us."

"A beastly way of putting it," said Mr. Smith. He felt instinctively at his collar, as if his neck-stud worried him, and cleared his throat. "Well, come on," he said.

II

Let it be confessed at once, without any misleading of the truth, that William Wardoper was a congenitally wicked man. He did not lead the double life, he would have told you; he merely frankly and cynically exploited his profession, a paid and profitable profession like any other, for purposes of

self-interest and self-indulgence. If that were wrong, the fault lay in the system, not in its adherents. The Church never pretended to be anything but an exclusive way to office and the coveted emoluments of office ; its morality was exactly on a par with that of "dirty" politics, with which, after all, it was closely associated.

Wardroper was one of those intellectual human abnormalities by whom all knowledge—because, it seems, of its easy acquirement—is applied contemptuously to worthless ends. He had been a double first class at Oxford ; a shrewd debater ; a deadly controversialist. Yet from the first there had always seemed something wrong about him, indefinable, yet surely communicated to the seismograph of the normal conscience. He had no soul, in the spiritual acceptance of the term ; he was not so much immoral as moral-less. And that *atmosphere*, rather than any definite suspicion of heterodoxy, had kept him persistently unattached and poor. So handicapped, the natural evil in him had not hesitated to turn his "profession" to whatever material profit it could command, and he had descended by inevitable gradations to the mere clerical adventurer, using his pseudo-sacred calling for a cloak to cover his depravities. He was a profligate by temperament ; his appetites made him a criminal ; chance, in the matter of the Burnside succession, put into his hands the opportunity to become a gigantic criminal. The

magnitude of the stakes involved appealed to the most daring in him.

Such men have, as a rule, a much greater fondness for the fruits of their vices than of their rare virtues. Mr. Barry Smith had had reasonable cause until now to congratulate himself on the fact. His cockney career had consistently owed as much as it was worth to the influences of a parent, who disdained ever to make a secret from his offspring of their relationship, or to withhold from that offspring's ears a narration of the principles which, in practice, served to keep them both going. Only it was a different thing to Master Barry when he found himself called upon to take an active personal share in the exploiting of those principles in one very tremendous direction. However, being the true son of his father, he ended, as we have seen, by consenting. In a question of "neck or nothing," as it had been disagreeably expressed to him, any informal cutting of his duties had appeared a matter of the smallest moment, and he had left the booking-office, as he knew, never to return to it.

At the hour named the two men entered Messrs. Sherrard and Stormont's offices in Norfolk Street, Strand. Mr. Smith, for all his vamped-up assurance, was looking peaked and glum; Mr. Wardroper was humming a blithe little air as they entered the glazed partition occupied by the commissionaire whose business it was to take down the names of visiting clients on little slips of paper, and convey the same

into this or the other of the inner sanctums. The man came back almost at once, and ushered the gentlemen into a hushed apartment, lofty, gloomy, and severely legal in its appointments. A tall, calm-looking gentleman, of virile middle-age, just raised his body an inch or two from the chair in which he sat before a substantial desk and, with that apology for a salutation, sank down again and immovably conked his visitors.

“Mr.—?” ventured the clergyman, with a smile;

“Stormont,” answered the gentleman. He just bent to glance officially at the slip of paper and looked up again. “And you?”

“Wardroper,” said the clergyman; “and”—he signified his companion—“my pupil, Lord Burnside.”

“Exactly,” said the gentleman. He seemed quite to brisk up. “We received and answered your communication, I think, Mr. Wardroper. Pray be seated.”

“That is so, Mr. Stormont.”

“There are one or two formalities to be gone through with—certificates, identification, and so forth. You will understand that?”

“Assuredly. I am prepared, for my part, to satisfy all inquiries.”

“Just so. As for instance, how there come to be two claimants for the title at one time?”

It all happened in a moment. The shock was proportionate to the occasion. Mr. Wardroper, risen in an instant to his feet, was conscious of the snap

of cold steel about his wrists, and turned to find himself in the custody of a burly inspector of police. A supplementary constable had timely performed the same neat and rapid office for his offspring.

The inspector spoke : " Charge of conspiracy and attempting to procure murder," and shut his mouth.

" Attempting ! " The comment was out before the astounded criminal could stay it, or realise its significance.

" It's my duty to warn you," began the inspector.

" O, I know, I know ! " said the clergyman, with a little genial impatience. He had quite recovered himself. " Mr. Sherrard, I presume ? " he said, addressing a stout and satisfied gentleman, who stood in the background, beaming through a pair of spectacles. " This is amazing treatment, my good sirs, for one of my cloth. I trust you will not live to repent it."

" Done with the neatest privacy and despatch, Sherrard," said his partner. " I congratulate you. And now we need not delay bringing in our witness."

At a sign from him a pale, skimp young man came into the room. Wardroper gasped.

" Let me re-introduce to you," said Stormont, " *our* Lord Burnside—formerly your pupil, Mr. Roger Beck."

The clergyman's lips, the clergyman's staring eyes, shaped their own inarticulate message. But still the mechanical smile never left his face.

“Hullo, Roger, my boy!” he shook out at length. It sounded somehow like an appalling blasphemy.

“Tell him, if you please,” said Mr. Stormont, “and get it done with.”

The young man came forward. One could understand from his physical meanness, from his common tone, tainted with a queer little foreign accent, how it had ever occurred to that other to replace him by so vulgar a substitute.

“We were crossing the glacier,” he said; “we were skirting a narrow, deep crevasse, when he, that Terray, lifted and threw me in. At least he tried to; but my alpenstock caught across, and there I hung by my hands. And as I hung, he told me all about it—the lord I had become, the plot to do me out of my title and my life. He enjoyed telling it me, the devil; he laughed at my tears and entreaties. ‘When you have relished it to the dregs,’ he said, ‘I shall just kick this, so, and down you will drop to eternity. And for me, I shall go on to England and be paid my price—the first price, that is, which is to be.’ He was leaning over and gloating at me, when there came a sudden wind up from the abyss, cold as death and blinding with ice, and he staggered and fell in.”

“The glacier-blast,” put in Stormont, nodding his head like one who had climbed mountains, and knew.

“I heard him scream as he fell,” continued the young man. “It was like an express engine, faint and fainter. Then I was mad, all alone there. I don’t

know how I got out. I got my knee somehow upon the alpenstock, and then my foot. My nails burst, and only I knew I was lying safe above, and presently the cold revived me. Then, saying no word to anybody, sick only that *he* might still follow and kill me, I came on to England, and sought out the late lord's solicitors."

He ceased. "There is little essential to add," said Stormont. "The clue once in our hands, with your letter"—he addressed the clergyman—"to confirm it, we had simply to await your arrival and thereafter shadow your movements. You have been watched, sir, at every point, since you landed. The telephone message from the supposed guide was spoken by the inspector here. Do you wish any more information?"

Still the same ghastly smile and mute lips.

"It was, to do you full credit," continued the lawyer, "infamously well planned. The utter obscurity attaching to the life of our client; his own ignorance of his succession; the absence of any witnesses capable of testifying to the truth. I won't say, had it not been for that strange providence, but that one of the cunningest frauds of our time might have been successfully perpetrated. You can take that negative comfort to your doom."

Mr. Wardroper, rallying ineffably from his stupor, waved his large hand.

"Surely it is not spoken yet, sir," he said. "I see nothing in all this but the inadmissible evidence

of hearsay to associate me with any conspiracy or evil design whatever."

He was interrupted by Mr. Barry Smith, who had sat collapsed hitherto in the chair into which he had sunk.

"Conspiracy," he snarled, lifting his head. "I wish I'd never answered to your summons; I wish I'd never agreed to play my lord to your bloody-handed piping. Trust in you, indeed, you old devil and dotard! You may get out of it as you can. I've had enough of your infallible methods, and I'm going to tell the truth!"

Mr. Wardroper appeared to stagger a little. He closed his eyes and re-opened them, and wonderful to relate they were wet.

"You to turn King's evidence, Barry, my boy!" he said.

"There," said the lawyer, "that will do. Take them away, inspector."

THE VAN ON THE ROAD

Scarrott Speaks.

CONCANON had taken the train to Farnborough, on the South-Western main line, and thence walked to view the "House to Let." The house, according to the agents, had appeared the very thing to suit him. It was small, isolated, the rent was low, and there was a garden. Its reported solitude was what had most appealed to him. He had just completed a labour involving perpetual research and application, and his brain-exhaustion coveted an utter pastoral vacancy—for months, for years, for a lifetime if need be. As yet freedom and idleness filled him with only a dim rapture.

His direction soon took him off the highways into remote quietudes. Trees and fields were all about him; and then came a little village. It was a grave, sunless day, with only the tiniest breeze that blew in ghostly spasms, and danced in little eddies of dust before his feet, and in a moment was gone. Suddenly, at a half mile beyond the village in a flat country, he came upon a horseless furniture van standing in the middle of the road.

It struck him as odd, and no more. As he passed,

he observed that the back doors were open, and that an oak chest of an antique pattern was slightly protruded through them. But no sign of men or cattle was visible anywhere.

He went on, assuming that, according to his directions, he must be very near his destination. Somehow his thoughts reverted to a story recently told him. It was of a deserted house, into which nobody could penetrate. So surely as one tried, some force, invisible, unaccountable, ejected him. Then once a scandalised and indignant mob had essayed to storm the place. They threw stones, they were prepared to fire on it; when suddenly there had appeared at a window a presence so hideous that the boldest screamed and fled. And thenceforth the house was accursed and abandoned.

Concanon was wondering what had recalled the weird thing to his mind, when he came upon a little lane leading off the road; and at the end was the House to Let. He would have known it at once from the particulars given him, without the advertising board to confirm. Alert on the instant, he turned down the lane, and, approaching, saw at once the explanation of the van. The tenants were in actual process of leaving.

He was surprised, as he had certainly understood from the agent that the house was empty; yet here were evidences enough of active removal. Straw strewed the short drive; articles of furniture, placed ready for portorage, stood about the steps.

Yet still not a living soul appeared to attest the fact.

Lonely of the loneliest the house undoubtedly appeared ; yet, in its position, its embowered quiet, its rusted antiquity, restfully potential of promise. Concanon went on and entered the hall, assuring himself, he knew not why, that here anyhow was no repelling malignity. Rather some emotion, vaguely sympathetic, seemed to lure him on from room to room. They were all littered with unremoved furniture. Obviously the British workman, claiming his prescriptive right to thirst, had adjourned to the neighbouring village for beer, leaving his task unfinished.

Now it seemed to Concanon all of a sudden that the thing he had considered and repudiated was actually happening to him—he was being softly, invisibly, propelled towards the door. The conviction was so strong that, to test it, he leaned slightly backwards, enough to throw him normally off his balance. The next moment he was out in the garden and walking rapidly away from the house, his heart thumping and his brain in a fume. He went up the lane, and coming out into the road, saw the deserted van still in its place. The oak chest appeared, if anything, a thought more protruded.

An hour later he walked into the agent's office in Farnborough.

“ You never told me,” he said, “ that the house was occupied.”

The agent stared at him.

"It isn't occupied, sir."

"Was, then, until recently. I found the removal going on."

"It hasn't been let, I assure you, for over a year."

It was Concanon's turn to stare.

"Will you come back there with me?" he said.

"We'll get a trap and drive over."

There was something wrong here, it appeared. Could it be possible that tenants unbid had taken advantage of the remoteness of the place to put in a year's occupation rent-free? Yes, the agent would come with him.

They drove over. Nearing the lane, Concanon observed that the furniture-van was no longer in evidence. It had been removed during the interval. That was a plausible hypothesis, but no hypothesis could account for the utter desertion and emptiness of the house when they reached it. The men on their return must have worked with a superhuman activity. There was no trace anywhere of straw, of furniture, of human occupation. It was all dust and echoing loneliness.

The agent, taking his client for the second time over the premises, was a little curt in his manner. Probably he thought Concanon drunk or possessed. He looked at him covertly from time to time, but hardly alluded to the mare's nest which had brought him afield to the utter waste of his afternoon.

Back in his office, he could scarcely command the

professional blandishment meet for the netting of a customer. He spoke with a minute show of impatience, barely troubling to suggest alternatives.

"Well, sir," he said, "are you satisfied with the place or not?"

"Who were the last tenants?" said Concanon, answering the question with a question.

The agent shrugged his shoulders.

"A family, name of Darrel," he said shortly.

"An ordinary family; I mean there was nothing unusual about them?" asked the customer, he himself hardly know why.

"They paid their rent," said the agent. "That was all I needed to know about them."

"Of whom did they consist?"

"Father, mother, and a daughter of the mother, who had been married before. The mother died during their tenancy. Well, sir, about the house?"

Concanon rose, and stood with his back to the empty fireplace.

"I wish you'd tell me," he said, "what sort of people they were."

His nervous insistence impressed the agent despite his commonplace self.

"Really, sir," he said, "I knew nothing definite against them."

"Definite?"

"The man hadn't, perhaps, a first-class reputation. He was, in fact, rather a domestic tyrant, and unpopular with his neighbours."

“ There was no suggestion of——”

“ Foul play? Good heavens, no! What are you hinting at? The poor woman died of some internal complaint. Though certainly——”

“ Well, what? ”

“ Why, it simply occurred to me that the money *was* hers. But you mustn't accept that for any suggestive admission. Everything was perfectly straight and above-board.”

“ And they left a year ago, you say? ”

“ Rather more.”

“ Do you know where they went? ”

“ No, I don't. I know only that the furniture was stored.”

“ Where? ”

“ That I can't recall. Now, sir, I must really trouble you for an answer.”

“ Leave that open,” said Concanon. “ The place suits me and it doesn't. If I decide to take, I'll let you know.”

He left the office in an odd mood. He seemed to himself to have been impelled to these questions. He returned to town in a state of queer mental perturbation, which did nothing but increase during the next day or two. Clearly, unless he could devise some means to quiet it, his search for repose had exchanged him merely Scylla for Charybdis.

One night he saw in a dream once more the deserted furniture van. It stood on the empty road,

as it had stood to his waking vision ; only there was a difference—the oak chest was so protruded that it seemed to *shoot* towards him. He woke trembling and in a violent sweat ; and by the morning he had made up his mind. He must do his utmost to trace the thing.

Now, at the time of his first experience, he had noted plainly enough, with no ulterior purpose, yet somehow compelled to the observation, the inscription on the van. It was that of a well-known Pantehnicon at Southampton ; and his one obvious recourse was to visit the place. Necessarily his mission must be a blind one ; nor could he conceive what was to be its upshot. But go he must, if only as a first step towards resolving a very haunting psychical problem. He took an early opportunity to run down.

As he approached the place, he saw that a quantity of furniture and household effects was in process of being removed from it at the moment. A couple of tilted vans, heavily laden, issued from the yard as he approached, *and prominent on the tail board of the second lay the oak chest*. He believed he recognised it with certainty, and his heart gave an odd twist. Then, turning, he followed the van through the streets. It led him to the rear quarters of some auction rooms, where it stopped to unload. He waited to see the chest carried in, then walked round to the front offices and inquired as to forthcoming furniture sales. The one they were about

to catalogue, he learned, was to take place in a week.

He would wait for it, he told himself. He was, happily, an idle man, and weather and water were attractive. Calling at the auction rooms in due course, he procured a catalogue and, having ascertained from it that the goods were to be sold by the direction of a Mr. Darrel, their owner, he passed in to view the lots. The chest, on examination, proved to be a sound antique piece; but it was completely, and naturally, empty. On the day of the sale he attended, and, having bought the thing at a fair price, had it carried home to his lodgings.

At night he examined his purchase. It was to reveal to him for once and for all the actuality of the ghostly influence which had mastered him, or his own unfounded superstition. It was with a thrill, quite momentarily sickening in its intensity, that he found his minute investigation rewarded at last by the discovery of a secret panel which, sliding apart, betrayed the fact of a document hidden behind it. Concanon disinterred his prize with shaking fingers, and spread it open.

It was a Will, duly attested, and signed by one Kathleen Darrel (*née* Brewer) making her only surviving daughter, Lucy Allingham, her sole residuary legatee, after the payment of a certain bequest to John Darrell, the testator's husband.

The next day Concanon returned to town, where he made it his first business to visit the probate

office at Somerset House. The will in his possession, he discovered, post-dated another, proved by John Darrell, in which the whole of Kathleen Darrel's property and effects were left unconditionally to her husband.

Concanon promptly transferred the further conduct of the matter to the hands of his lawyers, who, discarding all evidences of supernatural agency, proceeded to work, like plain business men, to find the girl, Lucy Allingham. A series of advertisements was successful at length in producing her, and then the story, such as it was, came out. Darrel had been a brute, both to his wife, whose fortune he had married, and to his step-daughter. The complete control he had effected over the former had resulted in the will by which he alone profited ; but remorse of conscience, it seemed, had driven the mother, when stricken to her death, to remedy the injustice done her child by executing a later will—that hidden away in the oak chest. It was duly witnessed by a couple of ignorant and illiterate laundry hands, who had been sworn to secrecy, and the girl supposed that some frantic, inarticulate efforts made by her mother, when actually dying, to explain something to her, had related to the secret deposit. The two had lived in mortal terror of Darrel ; the mother had postponed her revelation, with fatal results, to the very last. The moment she was dead and buried, the miscreant had driven the girl from home, with an intimation that she was

to expect nothing more from him. She, delicately reared and educated, had been eking out a miserable existence as a skirt hand, when the solicitors' advertisement at length reached her.

The law did the rest, and effectively ; and a scoundrel was duly checkmated. But there was a postscript, proper to the singularity of the occasion. The emotional experience, operating on a somewhat debilitated constitution ; the impulse to a certain intimacy, supernaturally encouraged ; the communion in a secret very sweet and pitiful in its essence—how could these result but in a craving for closer relations ? The girl was desirable, the man, in his then condition, wholly susceptible. When at length Concanon moved into a country cottage—not that one in question, but another and a fairer, far away—he took a wife with him for love's sake.

THE MASK

“ *Le masque tombe, l'homme reste.* ”

Duxbury Speaks.

THERE are mental modes as there are sartorial, and, commercially, the successful publisher is like the successful tailor, a man who knows how timely to exploit the fashion. Is it for the moment realism, romance, the psychic, the analytic, the homely—he makes, with Rabelais, his soup according to his bread, and feeds the multitude, as it asks, either on turtle or pease-porridge.

It was on the crest of a big psychic wave that Hands and Cumberbatch launched their “*Haunted Houses*”—a commonplace but quite effective title. It was all projected and floated within the compass of a few months, and it proved a first success. The idea was, of course, authentic possessions, or manifestations, and the thing was to be done in convincing style, with photogravure illustrations. The letter-press was entrusted to Penn-Howard, and the camera business to an old college-friend of his selection, J. B. Lamont. The two worked in double harness, and collected between them more material than could be used. But the cream of it was in the

book, though not that particular skimming I am here to present, and for whose suppression at the time there were reasons.

I knew Penn-Howard pretty intimately, and should not have thought him an ideal hand for the task. He was a younger son of Lord Staveley, and carried an Honourable to his name. A brilliant fellow, cool, practical, modern, with infinite humour and aplomb, he would yet to my mind have lacked the first essential of an evangelist, a faith in the gospel he preached. He did not, in short, believe in spooks, and his dealings with the supernatural must all have been in the nature of an urbane pyrrhonism. But he was a fine, imaginative writer, who could raise terrors he did not feel; and that, no doubt, explained in part his publishers' choice. What chiefly influenced them, however, was unquestionably his social popularity; he was known and liked everywhere, and could count most countable people among his friends, actual or potential. Where he wanted to go he went, and where he went he was welcome—an invaluable factor in this somewhat delicate business of ghost-hunting. But fashion affects even spirits, and, when the supernatural is *en vogue*, doors long jealously shut upon family secrets will be found to open themselves in a quite wonderful way. Hence, the time and the man agreeing, the success of the book.

I met Penn-Howard at Lady Caroon's during the time he was collecting his material. There were a

few other guests at *Hawkesbury*, among them, just arrived, a tall, serious young fellow called Howick. Mr. Howick, I understood, had lately succeeded, from a collateral branch, to the Howick estates in Hampshire. His sister was to have come with him, but had excused herself at the last moment—or rather, had been excused by him. She was indefinitely “ailing,” it appeared, and unfit for society. He used the word, in my hearing, with a certain hard decisiveness, in which there seemed a hint of something painful. Others may have felt it too, for the subject of the absentee was at once and discreetly waived.

Hawkesbury has its ghost—a nebulous radiance with a face that floats before one in the gloom of corridors—and naturally at some time during the evening the talk turned upon visitations. Penn-Howard was very picturesque, but, to me, unconvincing on the subject. There was no feeling behind his imagination; and, when put to it, he admitted as much. Some one had complimented him on the gruesome originality of a story of his which had recently appeared in one of the sixpenny magazines, and, quite good-humouredly, he had repudiated the term.

“No mortal being,” he said, “may claim originality for his productions. There are the three primary colours, blue, red and yellow, and the three dimensions, length, breadth and thickness. They are original; it would be original to make a fourth;

only *we* can't do it. We can only exploit creation ready-made as we find it. Everything for us is comprised within those limits—even Lady Caroon's ghost. It is a question of selection and chemical affinities, that is all. There is no such thing here as a supernature."

He was cried out on for his heresy to his own art—for his confession of its soullessness.

"Soul," he contended at that, "is not wanted in art, nor is religion; but only the five unperturbed and explorative senses. Pan, I think, would have made the ideal artist."

I saw Howick, who was sitting silently apart, suddenly hug himself at these words, bending forward and stiffening his lips, as a man does who mutely traverses a sentiment he is too shy or too superior to discuss. I did not know which it was with him; but inclined to the latter. There was something bonily professorial in his aspect.

While we were talking Lamont came in. He had not appeared at dinner, and I had not yet seen him. He was a compact, stubby man, in astigmatic glasses, and very dark, with a cleft chin, and a resolute mouth under a moustache in keeping with his strong, thick eyebrows. He gave me somehow in the connection a feeling of much greater fitness than did Penn-Howard. There was no suggestion of the *esprit-fort* about *him*, and I got an idea that, though only the technical collaborator, the right atmosphere of the book, if and when it appeared,

would be due more to him than to the other. He spoke little, but authoritatively; and I remember he told us that night some queer things about photography—such, for instance, as its mysterious relation to *something* in light-rays, which was not heat and was not light, and yet like light could reveal the hidden, as a mirror reveals to one the objects out of sight behind one's back. Thence, touching upon astral charts and composite portraits by the way, he came to his illustration, which was creepy enough. He had once for some reason, it appeared, taken a post-mortem photograph. The man, the subject, had cut in life a considerable figure in the parliamentary world as an advanced advocate of social and moral reform, and had died in the odour of political sanctity. In securing the negative, circumstances had necessitated a long exposure; but accident had contrived a longer and a deadlier, in the double sense. The searchlight of the lens, being left concentrated an undue time on the lifeless face, had discovered things hitherto impenetrable and unguessed-at. The nature of the real horror had been drawn through the super-imposing veil, and the revelation of what had been existing all the time under the surface was not pleasant. The photograph had not appeared in the illustrated paper for which it was intended, and Lamont had destroyed the negative.

So he told us, in a forcible, economic way which was more effective than much verbal adornment;

and again my attention was caught by Howick, who seemed dwelling upon the speaker's words with an expression quite arresting in its ungainly intensity. Later on I saw the two in earnest conversation together.

That was in October, and I left *Hawkesbury* on the following day. Full ten months passed before I saw Penn-Howard again ; and then one hot evening towards dusk he walked into my chambers in Brick Court and asked for a cigarette.

He seemed distraught, withdrawn, like a man who, having something on his mind, was pondering an uncompromising way of relief from it. Quite undesignedly and inevitably I gave him his cue by asking how the book progressed. He heaved out a great, smoke-laden sigh at once, stirred, drew up and dropped his shoulders, and looked at the fiery point of his cigarette before replacing the butt between his lips.

"O, the book!" he said. "It's ready for the press, so far as I'm concerned."

"And Lamont?"

"Yes, and J. B."

He got up, paced the width of the room and back, and stood before me, alternately drawing at and withdrawing his cigarette.

"There's one thing that won't go into it," he said, his eyes suggesting a rather forced evasion of mine.

"O! What's that?"

Again, as if doubtful of himself, he turned to

tramp out his restlessness or agitation ; thought better of it, and sat resolutely down in a chair against the dark end of the bookcase.

“ Would you care to know ? ” he said. “ Truth is, I came to tell you—if I could ; to ask your opinion on the thing. There’s the comfort of the judicial brain about you : I can imagine, like a client, that simply to confide one’s case to such is to feel relieved of a load of responsibility. It won’t go into the book, I say ; but I want it to go out of me. I’m too full of it for comfort.”

“ Of *it* ? Of what ? ”

“ What ? ” he said, as if in a sudden spasm of violence. “ I wish to God you’d tell me.”

He sat moodily silent for some minutes, and I did nothing to help him out. A hot, sour air came in by the open window, and the heavy red curtains shrank and dilated languidly in it, as if they were the lungs of the stifling room. Outside the dusty roar of the traffic went on unceasingly, with a noise like that of overhead machinery. I was feeling stale and tired, and wished, in the Rooseveltian phrase, that Penn-Howard would either get on or get out.

“ It’s a queer thing, isn’t it,” he said suddenly, with an obvious effort, “ that of all the stuff collected for that book you were speaking of, the only authentic instance for which I can personally vouch is the only instance to be excluded ? All the rest was on hearsay.”

“Well, you surprise me,” I said, quietly, after a pause. “Not because any authentic instance, about which I know nothing, is excluded, but because, by your own confession, there is one to exclude.”

“I know what you mean, of course,” he answered; and quoted: “‘But, spite of all the criticising elves, those who would make us feel must feel themselves.’ Quite right. I never really believed in supernatural influences. Do I now? That is what I want you to decide for me.”

He laughed slightly; sighed again, and seemed rather to shrink into his dusky corner.

“I’m going to tell you at a run,” he said. “Bear with me, like an angelic fellow. You remember that man Howick at Lady Caroon’s?”

“Yes, quite well.”

“It seemed, when he learnt our business, Lamont’s and mine, that there was something he wished to tell us. He pitched upon J. B. as the more responsible partner; and I’m not sure he wasn’t right.”

“Nor am I.”

“O! you aren’t, are you? Well, Jemmy was my choice, anyhow, and for the sake of the qualities you think I lack. He has a way of getting behind things—always had, even at Oxford. Some men seem to know the trick by instinct. He is a very queer sort, and the featest with the camera of any one I’ve ever seen or heard of. It was for that reason I asked him to come—to get the ghostliest

possible out of ghostly buildings and haunted rooms. You remember what he told us that night? I've seen some of his spirit photographs, though without feeling convinced. But his description of that dead face! My God! I thought at the time he was just improvising to suit the occasion; but——"

He stopped abruptly. There was something odd here. It was evident that, for an unknown reason, the thought of *that* time was not the thought of this. I detected an obvious emotion, quite strange to it, in Penn-Howard's voice. His face, from our positions and the dusk, was almost hidden from me. I made no comment; and thenceforth he spoke on uninterruptedly, while the room slowly darkened about us as we sat.

"Howick wanted us, at the end of our visit, to go with him to his house. Something was happening there, he said, for which he was unable to account. We could not, however, consent, owing to our engagements; but we undertook to include him sooner or later in our ghostly itinerary. He was obliged; but, being so put off, would give us no clue to the nature of the mystery which was disturbing him. As it turned out, we had no choice but to take *Haggarts* the very last on our list."

"That is the name of his place?"

"Yes. It sounds a bit thin and eerie, doesn't it? but in point of fact, I believe, Haggart is a local word for hawthorn. We went there last of all, and we went there intending to stay a night, and

we stayed seven. It was a queer business ; and I come to you fresh from it.

“ The estate lies slap in the middle of Hampshire. To reach it you alight at a country station which might serve roughly on the map for the hub of the county wheel. The train slides from a tunnel into a ravine of chalk, deep and dazzling, and you have to get on a level with the top of that ravine ; and there at once you find immeasurable silence and loneliness. Nothing in my home peregrinations has struck me more forcibly than the real insignificance of urban expansion in its relation to the country as a whole. Towns, however they grow and multiply, remain but inconsiderable freckles on that vast open countenance. Outside the City man’s possible radius, and excepting the great manufacturing centres, two miles, one mile beyond the boundary of ninety-nine towns out of a hundred will find you in pastoral solitudes apparently limitless. Here, with Winchester lying but eight miles southward, it was so. From the top of the tunnel we had just penetrated came into view, first a wilderness of thorn-scattered downs, dipping steeply and ruggedly into the railway-cutting, then an endlessly extended panorama of wood and waste and field, seemingly houseless and hamletless, and broken only by the white scars of roads, mounting few and far like the crests of waves on a desert sea. Howick had sent a car to meet us, and we switch-backed on monotonously, by unrailed pastures, by

woody bottoms, by old hedges grey with dust and dragged with straw. We saw the house long before we headed for it—a strange, ill-designed structure standing out by itself in the fields. It was an antique moat-house, disproportionately tall for its area, and its front flanked by a couple of brick towers, one squat, one lofty. One wound about the lanes to reach it, having it now at this side, now at that, now fairly at one's back, until suddenly it came into close view, a building far more grandiose and imposing than one had surmised. There was the ancient moat surrounding it, and much water channelling the flats about. But there was evidence too, at close quarters, of what one had not guessed—rich, quiet gardens, substantial outbuildings, and a general atmosphere of prosperity.

“An odd, remote place, but in itself distinctly attractive. And Howick did us well. You remember him? A tall stick of a fellow, without a laugh to his whole anatomy, and the hair gone from his temples at thirty; but with the grand manner in entertaining. We had some '47 port that night—a treat—one of a few remaining bottles laid down by his grand-uncle, Roger Howick, of whom more in a little. And everything was in mellow keeping—pictures, furniture, old crusted anecdote. Only our host was, for all his gracious unbending, somehow out of tone with his environments—in that connection of fruitiness, like the dry nodule on a juicy apple. Constitutionally reserved, I should

think, circumstance at that time had drained him of the last capacity for spontaneity. The little fits of abstraction and the wincing starts from them; the forced conversation; the atmosphere of brooding trouble felt through his most hospitable efforts—all pointed to a state of mind which he could neither conceal nor as yet indulge. Often I detected him looking furtively at J. B., often, still more secretively, at his sister, who was the only other one present at the dinner-table."

For a moment Penn-Howard ceased speaking; and I heard him shift his position, as if suddenly cramped, and slightly clear his throat.

"I mention her now for the first time," he went on presently. "She came in after we were seated, and there was the briefest formal introduction, of which she took no notice. She was a slender, unprepossessing woman—her brother's senior by some ten years, I judged—with a strange, unnatural complexion, rather long, pale eyes in red rims, and a sullen manner. Responding only after the curtest fashion to any commonplaces addressed to her, she left us, much to my relief, before dessert, and we saw her no more that evening.

"'Unfit for society'? Most assuredly she was. I remembered her brother's words spoken ten months before, and concluded that nothing had occurred since then to qualify his verdict. A most disagreeable person; unless, perhaps——

"It came to me all at once: was she connected

with the mystery, or the mystery with her? A ghost seer, perhaps—neurotic—a victim to hallucinations? Well, Howick had not spoken so far, and it was no good speculating. I turned to the pious discussion of the '47.

“After dinner we went into the gardens where, the night being hot and still, we lingered until the stars came out. During the whole time Howick spoke no word of our mission; but, about the hour the household turned in, he took us back to the hall—a spacious, panelled lounge between the towers—where we settled for a pipe and nightcap. And there silence, like a ghostly overture to the impending, entered our brains and we sat, as it were, listening to it.

“Presently Howick got up. The strained look on his face was succeeded all at once by a sort of sombre light, odd and revealing. All sound in the house had long since ceased.

“‘I want you to come with me,’” he said quietly.

“We rose at once; and he went before, but a few paces, and opened a door.

“‘Yes, here,’ he said, in answer to a look of J. B.’s, ‘quite close, quite domestic; no bogey of rat-infested corridors or tumble-down attics—no bogey at all, perhaps. It lies under the east tower, this room. When we first came here I *thought* to make it my study.’

“He seemed to me then, and always, like a man whose strait concepts of decency had suffered some

startling offence, as it might be with one into whose perfectly-planned tenement had crept the insidious poison of sewer-gas. Sliding his hand along the wall, he switched on the electric light ('Haggarts' had its own power station), and the room leapt into being. We entered, I leading a little. You must remember I was by then a hardened witch-finder, and inured to atmospheres concocted of the imagination.

"It was not a large room, and it was quite comfortable. There was a heavily-clothed table in the middle, a few brass-nailed, leather-backed and seated Jacobean chairs, a high white Adams mantelpiece surmounted by a portrait, a full chippendale bookcase to either side of it, and on the walls three or four pictures, including a second portrait, of a woman, half-length in an oval frame, which hung opposite the other.

" 'Miss Howick, I see,' I murmured, turning with a nod to our host. He heard me, as his eyes denoted: but he gave no answer. And then the portrait over the mantelpiece drew my attention. It was in a very poor style of art; yet somehow, one felt, crudely truthful in an amateurish way. There is a class of peripatetic painters, a sort of pedlars in portraiture among country folk, which, having a gift for likenesses, often succeeds photographically in delineating what a higher art inclines to idealise—the obvious in character. Such an one, I concluded, had worked here, painting just

what he saw, and only too faithfully. For the obvious was not pleasant—a dark, pitiless face, with a brutal underlip and challenging green eyes, that seemed for ever fixed on the face on the wall opposite. It was that of a middle-aged man, lean and thin-haired, and must have dated, by the cut of its black, brass-buttoned coat, from the late Georgian era.

“ I turned again questioningly to Howick. This time he enlightened me. ‘ Roger Howick,’ he said, ‘ my great-uncle. It is said he painted that himself, looking in the glass. He had a small gift. Most of the pictures in this room are by him.’

“ Instinctively I glanced once more towards the oval frame, and thought: ‘ Most—but not that one.’ Unmistakably it was a portrait of our host’s sister—the odd complexion, the sullen, fixed expression, the very dress and coiffure, they were all the same. I wondered how the living subject could endure the thought of that day-long, night-long stare focused for ever on her painted presentment.

“ And then silence ensued. We were all in the room, and not a word was spoken. I don’t know how long it lasted; but suddenly Lamont addressed me, in a quick, sharp voice:

“ ‘ What’s the matter, Penn-Howard?’

“ The shock of the question took me like a blow out of sleep. I answered at once: ‘ Something’s shut up here. Why don’t you let it out?’

“ Howick pushed us from the room, and closed

the door. 'That's it,' he said, and that was all. I felt dazed and amazed. I wanted to explain, to protest. A most extraordinary sensation like suppressed tears kept me dumb. I felt humiliated to a degree, and inclined to ease all my conflict of emotions in hysterical laughter. Curse the thing now! It makes me go hot to think of it.

"Howick showed me up to my bedroom. 'We'll talk of it to-morrow,' he said, and he left me. I was glad to be alone, to get, after a few moments, resolute command of myself. I had a good night after all, and awoke, refreshed and sane, in the clear morning.

"I learned, when I came downstairs, that J. B. and our host were gone out together for an early stroll in the cool. Pending their return, I came to a resolution. I would go and face the room alone, in the bright daylight. Both my pride and my principles were at stake, and I owed the effort to myself. There was nothing to prevent me. I found the door unlocked, and I went in.

"There was some sunlight in the room, penetrating through a thickish shrubbery outside the two windows. I thought the place peculiarly quiet, with an atmosphere of suspense in it, which suggested the inaudible whisperings of some infernal inquisition. Nothing was watching me: the green eyes of the man were fixed eternally on the face opposite; and yet I was being watched by everything. It was indescribable, maddening. Deter-

mined not to succumb to what I still insisted to myself was a mere trick of the nerves, I walked manfully up to the oval portrait to examine it at close hand. A name and date near the lower margin caught my eye—*T. Lawrence, 1828*. I fairly gasped, reading it. A 'Lawrence,' and of that remoteness? Then it was not our host's sister! I turned sharply, hearing light breathing—and there she was behind me.

" 'What are you doing here?' she said, in a small, cold voice. 'Don't you know it is my room?'

"How can I convey the impression she made upon me by daylight? I can think only of one fantastic image to describe her complexion—the hands of a young laundress, puffed and mottled and mealy wrinkled after many hours' work at the tub. So in this face was somehow spoilt and slandered youth, subdued, like the dyer's hand, to 'what it worked in.' And yet it was the face of the portrait, even to the dusty gold of the hair.

"I made some lame apology. She stamped her foot to end it and dismiss me. But as I passed her to go, she spoke again: '*You* will never find it. It is only faith that can move such mountains.'

"I encountered J. B. in the morning-room, and we breakfasted alone together. Howick did not appear—purposely, I think. I felt somehow depressed and uneasy, but resolved to hold fast to myself without too many words. Once I enlightened Lamont: 'That portrait,' I said, 'is not of Howick's

sister.' J. B. lifted his eyebrows. 'O!' said he, 'you have been paying it a morning visit, have you? No, it is a portrait of Maud Howick, daughter to Roger, the man who hangs opposite her.' It was my turn to stare. 'Howick has been giving you his family history?' I asked. J. B. did not answer for a minute; then he said: 'I hope you won't take it in bad part, Penn-Howard; but—yes, he has been talking to me. I know, I think, all there is to know.' I had some right to be offended; and he admitted it. 'Howick *would* put it to me,' he said. 'He was struck, it seemed, by something I said that night at Lady Caroon's; and he thinks you at heart a polite sceptic.' 'Well,' I said, 'have *you* solved the mystery, whatever it is?' He answered no, but that he had a theory; and asked me if I had formed any. 'Not a ghost of one,' I replied; 'and so Howick was certainly right in confiding first in you—first and last, indeed, if I am to be kept in the dark.' 'On the contrary,' said J. B.; 'I am going to repeat every word of Howick's story to you—only in a quiet place.'

"We found one presently, out in the fields in the shadow of a ruined byre. It stood up bare and lonely, like a tattered baldachin, and far away under the stoop of its roof we could see the walls of the moat-house rising lean and brown into a cloudless sky. Lamont began his narration with a question: 'How old would you suppose this Miss Ruth Howick, the sister, to be?' I was about to answer

promptly, recalled my perplexity, and hesitated. 'Tell me, without more ado,' I responded. 'Nineteen,' he said, and shut his lips like a trap. Something caught at me, and I at myself. 'Go on,' I said; 'anything after that.' And J. B. responded, speaking in his abrupt, incisive way:

" 'This James Howick came into his own here some year and a-half ago. There were only himself and his sister—to whom he was and is devoted—the sole survivors of a once considerable family. Their father, Gilbert Howick,—son of Paul, who was younger brother to the Roger of the portrait—married one Margaret (a beautiful ward of Paul's, and brought up by him as a member of his own family) about whose origin attached some mystery, which was only made clear to her husband on the occasion of their marriage. Margaret, in brief, was then revealed to Gilbert for his own first-cousin once removed, being the natural daughter of his cousin Maud, one of the two children of Roger. I know nothing about the liaison which necessitated this explanation, nor do we need to know. Its results are what concern us. Roger, it is certain, took his daughter's dereliction in a truly devilish spirit. He was an evil, dark man, it was said, pledged to the world and its pride, and once a notorious liver. There is none so extreme in fanaticism as a convert from irreligion; none so damnably righteous as a rake reformed. Having committed the fruits of her sin to the merci-

ful custody of his younger brother—a very different soul, of a humane and pious disposition—Roger turned his attention to the moral and physical ruin of the sinner. He swore that she should forfeit the youth she had abused; and he was as good as his word. No one knows how it happened; no one knows what passed in that dark and haunted house. But Maud grew old in youth. She had been spoiled and petted for her beauty; now the spirit broke in her, and she seemed to shrink and disappear behind the wrinkled, crumbling veil of what had been—like a snake, Penn-Howard, that struggles and cannot cast its dead skin. She grew old in youth. That portrait of her was painted when she was nineteen.’

“I cried out. ‘It was impossible!’ ‘It would seem so,’ said Lamont. ‘By what infernal arts he held her to his will—holds her now—it is sickening to conjecture.’ I turned to look at him. ‘Holds her now!’ I repeated. ‘Then you mean——’ ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘it is her imprisoned youth that is for ever trying to escape, to emerge, like the snake, from its dead self. That is the secret of the room. At least, such is my theory.’

“I sat as in a dream, awed by, yet struggling to reject, a conclusion so fantastic. ‘Well, grant your theory,’ I said at length, with a deep breath; ‘how does it affect this woman—or girl—this Ruth?’

“‘Think,’ said Lamont. ‘She is actually that

erring child's grand-daughter. It seems wonderfully pitiful to me. Her own mother died in that house, during a visit, in giving birth to her. At the time, the son, Roger's son, was master of *Haggarts*. He was a poor-witted creature, Howick tells me; but he lived, as the imbecile often will, to a ripe old age. Ruth was born prematurely. Her mother, it was said, fell under the cursed influence of the place, and withered in her prime. Maud herself, according to the story, had already died in that very room—was found dead there, little more than a child still in years, a poor, worn ghost of womanhood in seeming. Since then, the room has always had an evil reputation—with what justice Howick never knew or regarded, until the death of his uncle put him, a year and a-half ago, in possession of the place.'

“ ‘ But this Ruth——’

“ ‘ It came upon her, it seems, gradually at first, then more rapidly. She lost her health and vivacity; she was for ever haunting the room. When we first met Howick, she was already horribly changed. Ten months have passed since then. He has tried to hide it from the world; has made practically a hermit of himself. The servants of that date have been changed for others, and changed again. She feels, it must be supposed, what we felt—a ceaseless anguish to release something—nothing—a mere pent shadow of horror. And more than that: the sin of the mother is being visited on the child of the child—and through the same diabolical agency.

Lamont paused a moment, staring before him, and knotting his fingers together till they cracked. 'Penn-Howard,' he said, 'I believe—I do believe, on my soul, that the secret, whatever it is, lies at the hands of that devil portrait.'

" 'Then why, in God's name, not remove and burn the thing?'

" 'He has offered to. It had a dreadful effect upon her. She cried that so the clue would be lost for ever. And so it affects her to be excluded from the room. He has had to give it all up as hopeless.'

" He rose, and I rose with him, not in truth convinced, but oddly agitated.

" 'Well,' I said, 'what do you propose doing?'

" He seemed deep in thought, and did not answer me. At the house door we parted. Entering alone, I met Howick in the hall. He looked at me searchingly in his lank, haggard way, then suddenly took my hand. 'You know?' he said. 'He has told you? Mr. Penn-Howard, she was such a bright and pretty child.' I saw tears in his eyes, and understood him better from that moment.

" Lamont was absent all day, and returned late from a prolonged tramp over the hills. The poignant subject was tacitly shelved that night, and we went to bed early.

" The next morning, after breakfast, J. B. turned upon our host. 'I want,' he said, 'that room to myself, possibly for the whole morning, possibly for longer. Can you secure it to me?' Howick

nodded. I could detect in his eyes some faint reflection of the strong spirit which faced him. Somehow one never despairs in J. B.'s presence. 'I will say you are looking for it,' he said. 'She will not disturb you then.' 'There is a closet,' said Lamont, 'in my bedroom which will do very well for a dark room.'

"He disappeared soon after with his camera. It was his business, and I seldom disturbed him at it. We left him alone, and tried to forget him, though I could see all the morning that Howick was in a state of painful nervous tension. Not till after lunch did we hear or see anything of my colleague, and then he came in, descending from his improvised dark room. He held a negative in his hand, and he shut the door behind him like a man who had something of moment to reveal. 'Mr. Howick,' he said, straight out and at once, 'I am going to ask you to let me destroy that portrait of your great-uncle.'

"The words took us like a smack; and, as we stood gaping, J. B. held out his negative. 'Look at this,' he said, and beckoning us to the window, let the light slant upon the thing so as to disclose its subject. 'The secret stands revealed, does it not?' said he, quiet and low. 'A long, a very long exposure, and the devil is betrayed. O, a wonderful detective is the camera.'

"I heard Howick breathing fast over my shoulder. For myself, I was as much perplexed as astonished.

'It is the portrait,' I muttered, 'and yet it is not. There is the ghost of something revealing itself through it.' 'Exactly,' said J. B. drily—and went and put the negative behind the clock on the mantel-piece. 'Well, shall we do it?' he asked, turning to our host. Howick's face was ghastly. He could hardly get out the words, 'In God's name, do what you will! Better to dare and end it all than live on like this.' J. B. stood looking at him earnestly. 'No,' he said. 'You go to *her*. Penn-Howard and I will manage the business.'

"We left him, and went to the room and locked ourselves in. I confess my blood was tingling. So shut in with it, the unspeakable atmosphere of that place seemed to intensify to a degree quite infernal. I seemed to realise in it a battle of two wills, Lamont's and another's. My friend's face was a little pale; but the set of its every feature spoke of an inexorable purpose. As we handled the portrait to lower it, it fell heavily and unaccountably forward, an edge of the massive frame just missing J. B.'s skull by an inch. 'That miscarriage does for *you*, my friend,' he said, showing his teeth a little, like a dog. Portrait and frame lay apart on the floor; the shock had disunited them. Lamont knelt, and went over the former unflinchingly. The green eyes, caught from their age-long inquisition of the face on the wall opposite, seemed to glare up into his in hate and fury. 'Get out your knife,' I cried irresistibly, 'and slash the cursed thing to

pieces.' 'No,' he answered; 'that is not at all my purpose.'

"What was his purpose? I knew in a moment. He fetched out his knife indeed, and, hunting over the surface of the thing, found a blister in the paint, cut into it, seized an edge between thumb and finger, and, flaying away a long strip, uttered a loud, jubilant exclamation. 'Look at this, Penn-Howard.' I bent over—and then I understood in a flash. It was but a strip exposed; but it was like a chink of dazzling daylight let through. There was another portrait painted underneath.

"Artists tell me that when one oil-painting is superimposed on another within a few years of the production of the first, only exceptional circumstances can render their successful separation possible. I know nothing about the technical difficulties; I know only that in this case we were able to remove the over-lying skin, strip by strip, almost without a hitch, until the whole of the upper portrait lay in flakes of rubbish upon the floor—to be delivered within a few minutes to consuming fire. And the thing revealed! I cannot describe the beauty of that vision, bursting into flower out of its age-long cimmerician darkness. It was the personification of youth—a young girl (she might have been sixteen), laughing and lovely, the most wilful, bewitching face you could imagine—Maud Howick."

Once more Penn-Howard fell silent. The room

by now was dark ; his figure was indistinguishable, and his voice, when he spoke again, seemed a shadow borne out of the shadows :

“ While we gazed, fascinated, there came a knock on the door. It was Howick. His face was transfigured—his eyes glowed. ‘ She has fallen asleep,’ he said ; ‘ and that is not all. My God, what has happened ? ’ We took him in and showed him the portrait. He broke down before it. ‘ The little grandmother ! ’ he said, ‘ the poor, erring child ! And it was of that, and by that damnable method, that that fiend incarnate robbed her ! To imprison her youth within his wicked soul, drawn by him out of the mirror to stand for ever at sentry over her lest she escape. And she pined and withered in that hideous bondage, until he could show her, in that other, what his hate had wrought of her. But she is free at last—her soul is free to fly for ever this dark house of its captivity.’

“ J. B. looked at him searchingly. ‘ And your sister ? ’ he said. Howick did not answer ; but he beckoned us to follow him, and he led us into the drawing-room where she lay. Fast in dreamless slumber as the sleeping beauty. But the change ! God in heaven ; she was already a child again ! ”

The speaker halted for the last time. It was minutes before he took up the tale, in a constrained and hesitating way :

“ I saw all this, I tell you—saw it with these eyes. We stayed there yet a week longer ; and I left her

in the end a radiant, laughing child, a joyous, captivating little soul, who remembered, or seemed to remember, nothing of the fearful months preceding. And yet, now I am away, I doubt. It is the curse of my disposition. What, for instance, if one were to yield her one's soul and discover, too late, that one had succumbed to some unreal glamour, to the arts of a veritable and most feminine Lamia. I believe it is not so; I know it is not so—and yet, the incredible——”

His voice died out. I saw how it was, and answered, I am afraid, brutally :

“ You aren't really in love with her, of course. That is as clear as print.”

He rose at once. “ That decides it,” he said. “ I shall go back and ask her to be my wife.”

But he did not do so. Two days later I met him in the street. His manner was quite breezy and *insouciant*. “ O, by the by!” he said, in a break of our conversation, “ did I tell you that I had heard from J. B.? He and Miss Howick are engaged.”

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