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NUMBER 208.

SMOKED OUT OF THEIR STUDY!

(A great scene from "The Sham Schoolmaster," one of the three magnificent long complete stories contained in this issue.)

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THE 1d POPULAR

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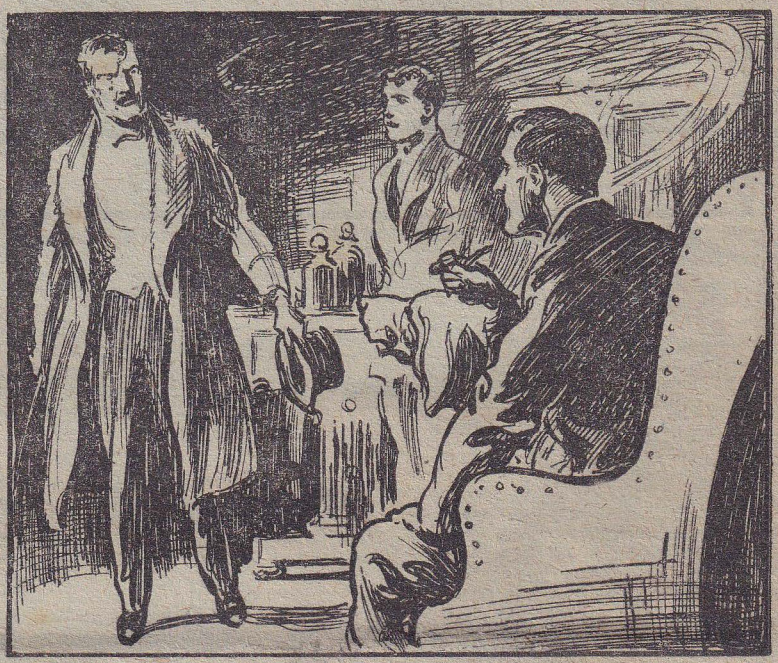
A Magnificent Long, Complete Story Dealing with the Further Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.



"Sexton Blake," said Langley, instantly dropping his affected drawl, "you are making a mistake if you think you can play any tricks with me."

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Strange Commission—The Hon. Charles Langley and Two Half-crowns—The Offer Accepted.

"'AND if you'll let me have an answer by return of post, I shall be very much obliged to you.' And he signs himself David Langley," said Blake, folding up the letter, of which he had just read the concluding sentence; then, unfolding it again, he began to review the facts as stated in Mr. Langley's letter, and was immediately struck with the air of romance surrounding them.

"I wish," the old gentleman wrote, "to find my nephew, the son of my dead sister, whose name is Harvey Manson, and whose age would be about twenty three or four. I imagine he is somewhere in London. My sister made what our family thought was a mesalliance, and to punish her for having, as they considered it, married beneath her, refused ever to see her or speak to her afterwards. I knew nothing about this at the time, for I have lived in the Colonies nearly all my life; and when I did hear about it, I was too busy making my pile to bother about it.

"I returned to England a few weeks ago, because the doctors told me I hadn't long to live, and because I wished my bones to lie at last in the Old Country. Then I heard about my dead sister's marriage. Her husband, who was a civil engineer, in very poor circumstances, survived her only about a year, and their infant son, Harvey, was left to shift for himself. What became of him nobody knows. My relatives don't know, and don't care, and are exceedingly anxious I shouldn't find him. But I want to find him, and if I can, and if he turns out to be a good, honest, bright, and well-conducted young fellow, there'll be half a million of money for him when I'm gone.

"I've got another nephew, who was brought up in the lap of luxury, and who expects to inherit the whole of my hard-won fortune; but he's a lazy, worthless, man-about-town sort of fellow, who has never done an honest stroke of work in his life, and I don't mean him to have it if I can find Harvey, and if Harvey is a decently-behaved young fellow.

"You mustn't come and see me—partly because I'm too ill to see anybody, and partly because I'm watched; and if my relatives discovered I was taking active steps to find Harvey, they are quite capable of hastening my death. Do what you can for me, and please accept the enclosed cheque as payment in advance for your trouble."

"I call that a jolly good letter, and I think the old gentleman is a brick, and I'm sure we ought to help him, even if we get no money for it," announced Tinker, with excitement and decision.

"Langley—Langley!" murmured Blake. "Just bring me that 'Burke's Peerage,' young 'un."

Tinker brought him the book, and after a moment's search Blake said:

"Ah, here we are! Langley is the family name of the Viscounts of Marchford. The tenth viscount had three children—Maurice, David, and Helen. Maurice is the present viscount, and he has one son—the Hon. Charles Wadham Langley, who is the next heir to the title. David is the man whose letter I've been reading, and is a bachelor. Helen is the sister who married Manson, the civil engineer, and it is their son Harvey whom I am asked to find. David Langley's only other nephew is, therefore, the Hon. Charles Wadham, the future viscount, so he must be the man described in the letter as the lazy, worthless, man-about-town sort of fellow, who's never done an honest stroke of work in his life."

"By gum, sir, you can't hesitate after that!"

Blake shook his head.

"You are going too fast," he said. "We have nothing whatever to begin upon. The task is about as hopeless as it can be. All London and all England to search in for an obscure young man, and not a line of description to guide us. We don't know whether he's even alive, whether he's short or tall, or dark or fair, or fat or thin."

"Oh, something will turn up—some clue!"

Tinker's utterance must have been prophetic, for at that very moment Mrs. Bardell came into the room, bearing a card on a tray. Inscribed on the card was:

"The Hon. Charles Wadham Langley, 101, The Albany, Piccadilly, W."

"The blackguard himself!" exclaimed Tinker, in tense amazement.

"No, indeed, Mr. Blake!" said Mrs. Bardell, suddenly flaring up. "He's not a blackguard, or I shouldn't have asked him in. He's come in his motor-car, and he's wearing a beautiful fur coat, and he's got waxed moustaches, and he's altogether a perfect gentleman! Do you think I don't know a gentleman when I see one?"

She turned scornfully to Tinker.

"Show him up at once," Blake intervened hastily, being

anxious to avoid any wordy sparring between the youngster and his landlady.

And Mrs. Bardell, ejaculating "Such impérence!" flounced through the door, and directly afterwards the Hon. Charles Wadham Langley entered the room.

He was a man of thirty, tallish, with sloping shoulders and a prominent stoop. His big fur coat was open, displaying a large expanse of embroidered shirt-front, for he was in evening-dress, and perched at the back of his head, at a rakish angle, was an opera hat, which he did not remove on entering. His face, which had once been passably good-looking, was lined and marked and blotched with the signs of dissipation. He suffered, amongst other things, from a perpetual thirst. It would be difficult to say whether he looked more of a knave or a fool, and probably he was both in about equal proportions. He walked with a kind of crawling swagger, and he was smoking a big cigar.

Without waiting to be asked to sit down, he chose the most comfortable chair in the room; then, screwing an eyeglass into his left eye, he stared first at Blake, then at Tinker, then at Pedro, and then he spoke:

"Haw, are you the feller that other fellers hire to find out things which they can't be bothered to find out for themselves? Haw!" he drawled superciliously.

Blake was sorely tempted to reply that he was the fellow that kicked other fellows downstairs if they came into his room with their hats on; but refrained, and replied briefly that he was a private detective by profession, which he supposed was what the other meant.

"I imagine," added Blake, in sharp tones, "you came here for some definite purpose, and not merely to say 'Haw!' That being so, Mr. Langley, I shall be glad if you'll state your business with as little delay as possible."

"I want to find," drawled Langley, "a young feller of the name of Manson—Harvey Manson. I want you to find him for me. I will pay you for finding him. I want him found to-morrow. I want you to find him and bwing him to my chambers at the Albany some time in the afternoon. Don't come in the morning, because I don't get up till after lunch. Bwing him wound about two or half-past."

"And where is this young man to be found?" inquired Blake, with outward coolness, but with inward seething excitement, for it was pretty obvious why this dissipated lordling wanted to find his obscure and humble cousin.

"Found!" said the other. "How should I know? I thought you were a feller who knew where every other feller was to be found when wanted; if not, what's the use of you?"

"I can't find a man unless I have some particulars about him," answered Blake patiently.

"Weally, you are giving me a lot of twouble, and I wanted to hire you to save me all twouble. The person I'm inquiring about is a common young fellow, with lightish hair, and clean-shaven, and fairly tall, with a howwibly ugly square jaw, prize-fighting-looking feller, grey eyes, and—er—and all that sort of thing. Can be vewy wude to his superiors, as wude as you were to me just now."

"Light hair, grey eyes, clean-shaven, fairly tall, handsome, strong, determined face," said Blake, noting down these particulars. "Anything else?"

"I didn't say strong, handsome, determined face. I said, howwibly ugly square jaw."

"That'll be all right. You meant the other. Go on," said Blake.

"When last seen," continued the Hon. Charles, "he was dwiving a common taxicab, dressed in the kind of uniform those sort of fellers always wear."

"Smart taxicab driver—yes. Anything else?"

"I didn't say he was a smart taxicab driver. I said——"

"Never mind. How long ago was this?"

"About eighteen months ago."

"Good! Anything else?"

"No. I can't think of anything else, and I must say you're a vewy wude——"

"If you have no more information, don't trouble to say anything more. There only remains the question of my fees to settle, and then I won't detain you," said Blake briskly.

"Your fees! I never heard of such a thing. I never pay weady money for anything."

"Very well, good-bye. Show this person out, Tinker!"

"Come on!" said Tinker, chucking his hat at their visitor. "Downstairs! Quick march!"

The Hon. Charles seemed quite nonplussed at these summary proceedings.

"I pwotest! I pwotest! This is iniquitous!" he cried. "I pwotest against having to pay weady money, but if I must, I must. I pwotest against being tweated in this howwibly wude and insolent fashion! I pwotest you're a shockingly low, common feller!" He fumbled with his hand in his trouser-pocket, and produced two half-crowns, and placed them on the mantelpiece. "There's your fees—haw!—five shillings, and, considering how wude you've been, you may consider yourself vewy handsomely paid."

"What's that?" said Blake.

"Haw!—two half-crowns—five shillings."

Tinker burst out laughing.

"What's it for, Mr. Langley?"

"Your fees—haw! It's good money. Don't be insolent!"

"All that? No, Mr. Langley, you're too generous. I couldn't take it from you. Give it to the first beggar you meet. It is too much for me to have all at once."

"Insolent feller! How—how—how much do you want?"

"Seeing it's you," replied Blake, speaking very deliberately and distinctly, "I shall be happy to undertake your commission for a fee of five thousand guineas cash down. You had better go home and think about it."

This was equivalent to a declaration of war, and Langley evidently interpreted it as such.

"Sexton Blake," he said, instantly dropping his affected drawl, "you are making a mistake if you think you can play any tricks with me."

"Charles Wadham Langley," was the instant retort, "you are making a grievous mistake if you think I'm the man to help you in your evil purposes!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That's for you to find out. You've had your warning. Now, go!"

For a moment it seemed as if Blake's visitor would contest this contemptuous dismissal, but a glance at the stern face bent on his, another glance at Pedro, who, when Langley's voice became loud and threatening, had instantly risen from the hearthrug and ranged himself at Blake's side, made him think better of it. With a grim of ineffable malice, he clapped his damaged hat on his head, pocketed the two half-crowns, and swaggered from the room.

When the front door had closed behind him, Blake sat down and there and then wrote to Mr. David Langley an acceptance of his offer.

"We've got all the information we want from the enemy," he said smilingly to Tinker.

A few minutes later Tinker dropped the letter of acceptance into the pillar-box at the corner of Baker Street.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Blake Spends an Afternoon at Norwood and Meets with a Puzzling Enigma.

A LONG line of taxicabs stood one behind the other on the south side of Piccadilly, close to the entrance to the Green Park and a little to the west of the Ritz Hotel. It was the off season, and customers were few and far between. The drivers lounged in knots and groups against the railings, smoking, or reading newspapers, or discussing the affairs of their calling. There were plenty of topics to discuss—the vexed question of "extras," the increased price of petrol, the long hours of work, the penny "station" money, the defective registration of the taximeters or "clocks," remuneration by a fixed percentage of the takings, and the damage to tyres by careless driving and the excessive use of the brake. A period of unrest and dissatisfaction had set in amongst the men, and many of them spoke bitterly of the existing state of affairs and of their prospects in the future.

These grievances were supported or objected to by men from the various groups, the same thing being said over and over again without convincing anybody, until a tall, wiry-looking man, with clear-cut features, intervened in a sudden pause, and said, in quiet tones:

"There is nothing much the matter with taxi-cabbing; the only trouble is that the cabs have ceased to be a novelty, and the public don't give the extravagant tips they used to, and, of course, there are more of us. Once you could reckon taxis by dozens, now you can reckon them by thousands. Perhaps there are too many of us just at present; but if there are, the matter will soon right itself, and it's a fact, still, that the job is better paid than most other jobs I know of. I wonder if any of you chaps ever ran across a driver named Harvey Manson? I'm asking everybody. There's a bit of luck come his way, but I can't find him to tell him of it. He was driving about eighteen months ago, since when he disappeared."

"Harvey Manson—Gentleman Harvey!" cried Shorty, a small, round-faced man who appeared to be glad to change the conversation—"why, I remember him well! Queer business his was. He was driving a swell one day—I forget his name—and at the end of the journey the swell charged him with being drunk and driving to the common danger. Gentleman Harvey was taken to Bow Street, and got seven days and had his licence cancelled. I don't know what happened to him afterwards. I never saw him again. It would be about eighteen months ago," concluded Shorty reminiscently.

"Well, what was there queer about the business?" asked the other man.

"Just this, that Harvey was as steady and sober a man as ever handled a wheel. Drunk? Not him. Drive to the common danger? He simply couldn't do it. I'm pretty slick myself, but I was a child to him in what he could do with a taxi. He could make it talk almost. I never saw such skill. His eye and nerve were amazing. I've seen him go through traffic where you wouldn't have thought there was room for a perambulator, without so much as scratching his paint. A sheer wonder, he was. We all liked him, spite of his being a bit stand-offish. Always friendly, always ready to lend a helping hand, though his motto was keep himself to himself. If anything went wrong with your engine he'd put it right for you in half a jiffy, for he knew more about the mechanism of the jiggers than any fitter at the yard. Yes, his being had up before the beak was a queer business, a lot more in it than met the eye. Gentleman Harvey was always a good deal of a mystery."

"But didn't he deny the charge?" asked Blake, for it was he who was the inquirer.

Blake, unable to hear of Harvey Manson at the garages of any of the cab companies, had procured a licence at Scotland Yard, and joined the ranks of the taxi-drivers, as the best way of accomplishing his quest. He had been at it a week, but the information Shorty was giving him was the first he had gleaned of the missing man, and you may be sure he was keenly interested.

"Deny it!" exclaimed Shorty. "You can bet he denied it, but what was the good of his denying it when there was the oath of two swells against him? They swore he was drunk, and that he was driving harum-scarum, cutting pavement corners, and zigzagging anyhow. It was late at night, and so there were no independent witnesses. I've always said that Harvey had been hocussed by some kind of a drug, or else the swells had a down on him, and committed wilful perjury to rob him of his livelihood. I wish I could remember their names; quite well-known swells they were."

"Not Lord Marchford, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, that was the older bloke's name, and his son, the Hon. Something."

"The Hon. Charles Wadham Langley?"

"You've got it pat!" answered Shorty excitedly. "What's the game? What do you know? What's Gentleman Harvey got to do with Viscount Marchford? What's the mystery about him? What's the bit of luck coming to him? Let's have the yarn."

These questions were exceedingly embarrassing to Blake, who had the best of reasons for not answering them; and a crowd of interested listeners had gathered round him, attracted by Shorty's excitement and fervour, so that it was not easy to get away.

"Oh, there's no yarn!" he said. "There's a small legacy coming to him, and he's got to claim it. There'll be a five-pound note for anybody who can put me in the way of finding him!"

"I'll bet there is a yarn," said Long Tom, the ex-hansom-driver, who had been silent for some time. "You're not the only chap who's looking for him. Why, only yesterday I was asked the same question by a blotchy-faced toff, who drawled and lisped and said 'Haw!' at every second word!"

"Charles Wadham Langley!" thought Blake.

"Of course, I couldn't tell him anything," continued Long Tom. "Gentleman Harvey What's-his-name was before my time!"

"Well, it's no use looking for him amongst the taxi-drivers."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Shorty, with a knowing wink. "A man what's once driven a taxi don't easily take on another job!"

"But if his licence was cancelled?" suggested Blake.

"Yes, my son; but what's to prevent his taking out a fresh licence in another name? Such things are done, you know. The police can't remember the cut of the jib of every chap who applies for a licence. Eighteen months is a long time ago, and there are scores of applicants every day."

"That's a good notion. I'll remember it," said Blake.

"What's he like to look at? How shall we recognise him if we see him?"

"I've never seen him myself," he answered.

"Then what's your interest in him? I thought he was a pal of yours!"

"Why, Lake expects to go shares in the legacy, of course."

Blake, who was disguised, went by the name of Lake amongst the taxi men.

"No, I don't. I sha'n't touch a penny of his legacy," he replied.

"You know a lot more than you're telling us."

"Tell us the amount of the legacy, and who left it to him?"

The embarrassing questions began once more to fall thick and fast.

"We want to know how Gentleman Harvey is connected with the noble viscount?"

"Tell us about Lord Marchford?"

"Tell us why he's got a down on him? Tell us——"

To Blake's intense relief, one of the liveried porters belonging to the Ritz Hotel wanted a taxi, and as his cab was first on the rank, he jumped into the seat.

"Give me a turn, somebody," he said.

Shorty wrenched round the starting-handle, and the engine began to buzz.

"We must have another talk about Gentleman Harvey, Lake."

Blake nodded, and, gliding off, drew up at the hotel portico. He was kept waiting several minutes, and then the two men—an old one and a young one, both dressed in the extreme height of fashion—dawdled languidly down to the taxi.

"Tell the feller," he heard the young one say, "to drive to the Crystal Palace!"

The voice was unmistakable—it was Charles Wadham Langley's—but the face was not his. He had disguised himself with a close-cropped brown beard, and had shaved off his moustache. The man with him was undoubtedly his father the viscount.

"The Crystal Palace," repeated the porter, closing the door of the cab.

"And tell the feller that I see his infernal clock has registered a shilling before we've moved a yard, and that I shall deduct fourpence from his fare, low swindler!"

The porter did not repeat this message, nor did Blake take any notice of it. He was too much interested in the lucky chance which had given him Lord Marchford and his son as customers. They were searching for Harvey Manson, and so was he. Had they got a clue to his whereabouts? Had they found him? Why had Langley gone to the trouble to disguise himself? These questions were of too perplexing an importance to allow Blake to bother or haggle or worry about a disputed fourpence.

He was soon out of the traffic, and running fast and smoothly, for if Gentleman Harvey could almost make his cab talk, Blake, an expert motorist, was very nearly, if not quite, his equal.

He had taken the shortest route, and so admirably and deftly had he driven that they hadn't faltered or stopped or slowed up once till they had reached the main entrance of the large glass structure. If all taxicab men knew London and the suburbs as well as Blake knew them, and used their knowledge as honestly and fairly, there would be fewer disputes between them and their fares.

"You are quite a clever johnny to have brought us here so quickly," drawled the Hon. Charles condescendingly; "haw!—what does the clock say? Seven shillings and tenpence. Here is eight shillings for you, and you may keep the change. Haw! you needn't wait. We shall probably return by twain, but if you are hereabouts in an hour's time, we might employ you to take us back—haw! So-long! Be good!" And he and the viscount walked off arm in arm.

What had brought them to Sydenham? There was nothing to attract them at the Crystal Palace, nor did they even make a pretence of entering the building, but strolled away towards the busy shops of Westow Street. At the open space at the top of Anerley Hill they stopped and spoke to a constable on fixed-point duty, evidently asking for an address. He directed them down the hill, and then they sauntered off and passed from Blake's view.

Two minutes afterwards Blake had revealed his identity to the constable, and been told that the two men had asked to be directed to Pleydell Avenue.

"Pleydell Avenue is a quiet street of smallish houses—very respectable street, sir," said the constable. "No, sir; they didn't tell me what number they wanted."

"You can't leave your post and follow them for me?"

"No, I can't, because I'm on fixed-point; but I can get somebody else to do it for you.

"Here, Tommy!" He beckoned to a small urchin who was selling papers. "See those two gentlemen going down the hill? They are going to Pleydell Avenue. Follow them, and find out the number of the house they go in at. There'll be sixpence for you when you come back."

"Thank you, constable," said Blake, as Tommy darted away on his errand.

Five minutes later Tommy came panting up the hill, and gasped breathlessly:

"They've gone into two houses, the old 'un went into No. 166, and the young 'un next door, into No. 167, and where's my tanner?"

Blake gave him a shilling, and there was no more selling of papers that day for Tommy.

But two houses. Why had the viscount and his son separated and gone into different houses? Were they merely making inquiries without possessing definite knowledge? Did they suspect Harvey Manson was living in Pleydell Avenue, and had they come there to pursue a house-to-house investigation in search of him?

But they had gone in. It was that fact, which Tommy had positively asserted, that bothered Blake.

The viscount had gone in at No. 166, and Langley at No. 167. They had gone straight to these two houses. It wasn't as if they had begun at No. 1, and then made inquiries from door to door till they reached Nos. 166 and 167. Had they done that, it would have looked as it they possessed only vague knowledge, but their going direct to the houses named seemed to imply that they were acting on definite knowledge. Then why had they separated?

All Blake could do, as things were, was to wait until the hour was up, the hour which the two men had said they were going to stay in Norwood, and then go himself to Pleydell Avenue, and try to discover what they had been doing there; for he couldn't go before they'd had time to clear out for fear of rousing their suspicions.

It was half-past three when Blake left Piccadilly, and four o'clock when he arrived at the Crystal Palace. On the stroke of five he trundled his cab down Anerley Hill, and a minute later turned in at Pleydell Avenue. At three minutes past five he had pulled up at No. 167. A placard in the window, announcing "Apartments to Let," gave him a plausible pretext for calling and ringing the bell.

"Can I get lodgings here?"

The woman who opened the door to him was pleasant-looking and friendly.

"I am sorry," she said, "but I've just let mine. I ought to have taken the card out of the window. The gentleman who took them is coming in at once, and has gone to fetch his luggage. He hasn't left the house half an hour. I'm sorry you've had the trouble of calling."

"I wonder whether you know anyone of the name of Harvey Manson living in the neighbourhood?"

"Well, now, that is funny," she exclaimed, with smiling emphasis, "for Mr. Jones asked me the very same question."

"Who is Mr. Jones?"

"It is the gentleman who has just taken my rooms."

So Charles Wadham Langley had given her a false name!

"Then you don't know anything of Harvey Manson?"

"No, I never heard the name; but it is funny." And she continued to dilate upon the curious coincidence of two complete strangers asking for the same man within a few minutes of each other, until Blake bade her an abrupt "Good-day!" and went next door.

The house numbered 166 was in all respects identical with its neighbour, save that it had no card of apartments to let in the window; but, instead, a neat brass plate on the door, bearing the inscription, "Miss Mary Fielding, Trained and Certificated Hospital Nurse."

Blake knocked and rang, and rang and knocked, for three or four minutes without getting any response, and then the woman from next door came out again, and told him there was nobody at home at No. 166.

"Miss Fielding has been called away to nurse a case in London," she said. "I don't know whether you want to see her personally; but I can tell you this, she doesn't let her rooms."

"When was she called away?" asked Blake.

"Why, it was within the last half-hour. She rushed in to give me the key of her door, as she always does when she goes away nursing, and then she told me that an old gentleman had come all the way from London to engage her services, and I don't wonder, for she is a splendidly clever nurse. She said she expected to be away a week at least."

"She's gone, then—actually gone?"

"Oh, yes; I saw them pass the window together going towards the station."

Blake thanked her, and, jumping into his cab, at once drove away.

The afternoon had been a singularly disappointing, and at the same time a strangely suggestive and puzzling one. It had been disappointing, because it had failed to afford him any direct information in regard to Harvey Manson; it was suggestive, because Langley wouldn't have come to Norwood to take rooms, nor the viscount to engage the services of a hospital nurse, without very special reasons; and it was puzzling, because he couldn't form the slightest conjecture what those very special reasons could be.

"Rooms!" he kept murmuring. "Charles Langley takes rooms in an assumed name, and Lord Marchford engages a hospital nurse from the house next door. How are those two facts related?"

No; he could make nothing of it. The trivialness of the facts seemed to intensify their baffling character. Lodgings and a hospital nurse! There was no comprehending them.

He gave it up at last, and in his exasperation drove so fast back to London that he had several narrow escapes. He was in London by a quarter to six, and five minutes to the hour found him prowling slowly round Barclay Square. Lord Marchford lived at No. 9, and it was there that Mr. David Langley was lying ill.

Blake hoped he had arrived ahead of the viscount and the nurse, for an idea had suddenly sprung to his brain. Was the nurse a creature of the viscount's, and had she been hired for the purpose of hastening David Langley's death? Nurses make genuine mistakes at times, and mistakes that are not genuine are easily simulated. An overdose of a drug accidentally administered to his sick brother would suit Lord Marchford's book very well.

Was that the reason for this hurried fetching of the nurse all the way from Norwood?

Blake wished to see the woman before formulating any definite theory.

In this matter he was not disappointed.

Lord Marchford and a girl dressed in nursing costume stepped out of a taxicab that presently rattled up to No. 9. As she waited in the porch while the old viscount fumbled for his latchkey, Blake was able to get a good look at her face; and a sweeter and a fairer and a more divinely good and beautiful face he never remembered having seen. The sight of it instantly killed the notion that had sprung to his brain, for it was impossible to associate such a woman with any malpractices of nursing. He knew instinctively that if Lord Marchford had wanted a nurse to aid and abet him in his nefarious schemes, the last woman he would have selected would have been Nurse Mary Fielding.

Then what did he want her for?

Blake was so much absorbed in considering this question, and gazing at the girl, enthralled by the pure loveliness of her beauty, that he continued to watch her until the door closed behind her, without eyes for anything or anybody else.

And herein was exemplified the perverse irony of Fate, for had he spared a glance for the driver of the taxicab, his quest would have been accomplished, for the man who had driven Lord Marchford and Nurse Mary Fielding from Victoria Station to the viscount's mansion in Barclay Square was none other than Gentleman Harvey—Harvey Manson!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Night Adventure.

LATE the same evening the Hon. Charles Langley packed a small suit-case, resumed his disguise, drove to Victoria, and took the train to Norwood. A few minutes after eleven o'clock he was standing on the doorstep of No. 167, Pleydell Avenue.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. Jones!" said the landlady, letting him in. "I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming."

He murmured some excuse about having been unexpectedly detained, and then she said:

"You remember asking me if I knew the name of Harvey Manson in these parts, sir?"

He said he had a vague recollection of it.

"Well," she went on, "another person came and asked for him directly you'd gone. He came to me, and also went next door to Miss Fielding."

"Did he see her?" he queried, with a perfunctory show of interest.

"No; she's away, and the house is locked up."

She was a talkative woman, and told him about the key, pointing to the nail on the wall behind the door on which she kept it, and seemingly would have gone on talking for an indefinite period if he hadn't said he was tired, and anxious to get to bed. Then she left him, and he retired, yawning, to his own room.

But he didn't go to bed, and his show of listless indifference to what she had told him instantly disappeared. He was, in fact, greatly disturbed by it.

Someone else inquiring for Harvey Manson in Pleydell Avenue, and calling at Mary Fielding's house!

Then that someone else was hot on the track. The news was distinctly upsetting, and it behoved him to do what he had come there to do without loss of time—that very night, in fact.

The key of Mary Fielding's front door being within his reach seemed providential. He had expected to have to break in, and had come provided with the necessary implements. It would have astonished his landlady if she could have seen the contents of Mr. Jones' suit-case.

By midnight the house was quiet, but, to be on the safe side, he allowed another hour to pass before venturing out of his room. It was one o'clock when he crept noiselessly downstairs in soft felt slippers, with a dark-lantern under his coat, unhooked the key from the nail, and, cautiously

opening the door, let himself out. There was no one in sight—no late wayfarers returning home, no sign of a constable on his beat. The street was as silent as the grave, and there was no light in any of the houses.

It was but a step to next door; he had merely to lift his leg over a low iron railing, and there he was. By five minutes past one, thanks to his possession of the doorkey, he was safely and comfortably inside Mary Fielding's house.

But he was not comfortable.

The life he had led did not conduce to steadiness of nerve. This was a new kind of job to him, bolder and more reckless than any he had essayed so far. His fingers fumbled as he pushed back the slide from his lantern, and his eyes were alight with dread of what he might see as the lantern's rays illumined the small hall.

But he saw nothing whatever to excite alarm.

He had his landlady's word for it that the house was empty, and he knew that Mary Fielding was away, because his father had decoyed her to Barclay Square, on the pretext of requiring her services as a nurse, solely for the purpose that the coast might be clear for him. What could there be to be afraid of? Nothing—nothing; he told himself so fifty times, with chattering teeth, and cold shivers running up and down his spine, and presently mastered his dread, and stole warily forward.

He entered a room on the right.

It was the sitting-room of the little house, and it was furnished with the simple good taste and neat and dainty charm which were characteristic of its owner. But it was sparsely furnished, for the owner had no money to spend on superfluities, all she could save from her scanty earnings being carefully put away as a nest-egg against the longed-for day when she and Harvey would be able to set up housekeeping together. For Nurse Fielding was engaged to be married to Harvey Manson.

Langley moved to the mantelpiece, and peered at a photo in a silver frame. It was the photo of an upstanding, frank, and fearless young man, dressed in the uniform of a taxi-driver, and underneath it was written, "Yours for ever and always, H. M."

He sneered, chuckling softly. He knew now that the business on which he had come was going to be successful. He felt all at once quite bold and confident, and, without further dallying, set about his task in earnest. But he couldn't resist the temptation of removing the photo from the frame, tearing it in a dozen places, and scattering the fragments in the fireplace—the act of a man with a mean soul.

His movements after this were very prompt and expeditious.

He ransacked the table drawers, prised open a desk, and rummaged in a corner cupboard. Not finding what he was in search of, he was thinking of transferring his operations to another room, when his eyes lit on a blotting-pad, which was lying half concealed by a little heap of embroidery. Sweeping the embroidery on to the floor, and trampling on it with gratuitous malice, he snatched open the blotting-pad, and in a moment he was in possession of what he had come to find.

"Mr. M. Harvey, care of the Sutherland Motor-Cab Company, Argyll Place, Regent Street, W."

This name and address were written on a stamped envelope.

Beside the envelope was an unfinished letter, which ran thus:

"Dearest Harvey,—How long will it be before I shall be able to address a letter to you in your proper name, instead of addressing it as if Harvey were your surname? I hate to think of your having had to take out a fresh licence under a false name, and tremble at what the consequences might be if you were found out. Dearest, I implore you, let us abandon this deception. I know it is a small wrong you are committing, and that you were the victim of a cruel injustice; but, after all, it is a real wrong, and unworthy of you to go on persisting with it. Give it up, Harvey dear. Earn your living honestly under your own name, not under a false name. If that can't be done here, remember that there are other cities than London, and other countries than England. Why shouldn't we try our chance together abroad? I have saved a little money; enough to——"

At this point the writing abruptly ceased.

Charles Langley slammed the blotting-pad to, with a grin of gloating malignity.

"Yes, Mr. Harvey Manson," he muttered; "the girl gives you good advice, but it's rather late. You are found out, and to-morrow I don't think you will be in the employ of the Sutherland Motor-Cab Company. A second conviction should settle your hash, and then good-bye to your chance of inheriting the old fool's half-million!"

He was fingering the letter, in doubt whether to leave it there or take it with him, when he suddenly felt himself gripped from behind; and just as he turned, a smashing blow was aimed at his head by the shadowy figure of a boy gripping the barrel of a revolver. The blow missed by a fraction of an inch, and, whizzing downwards, caught Charles Langley with a dull thud upon the shoulder.

With a muttered oath, Langley caught at the arm holding the weapon, just as it was drawn back to deal another blow. The shrouding darkness prevented the man from seeing his youthful assailant, and he was left no time to speculate as to who he could be. For, with amazing strength, the boy had wrenched free his arm, and, closing with his big opponent, was striving to throw him to the ground by tripping his legs from beneath him.

Backwards and forwards the two swayed, the shuffling of their feet deadened by the well-worn carpet on the floor, and their breath coming in soft gasps.

At length, however, Langley succeeded in getting the butt of his hand under his unknown assailant's chin. Then, exerting all his strength, he pressed slowly back with merciless force.

"Ah, now I've got you, you young whelp!" he chuckled, in a fierce undertone of triumph.

But even as the words left his lips, the boy's hand slipped up and under his guard with lightning speed, and the butt end of the revolver caught the scoundrel with a sickening thud full upon the point of the chin.

Without even a groan, Langley spun round on his heels, then slid to the floor in an inert heap.

For a moment the boy stood looking down upon him, wiping away, with a trembling hand, the beads of perspiration that had gathered on his forehead.

"Thank heavens it was too dark for him to see me!" he hoarsely muttered. "If he'd recognised me, it would have spoilt all the guv'nor's plans, and he'd have never forgiven me!"

For a moment Tinker, for it was he, stood wrapt in thought; then he bent down over the unconscious figure on the floor.

"And now I must get rid of him somehow," he said. "It'll never do to leave the scoundrel here!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Failure of the Sixpenny Bank—How a Lonely Old Man Made His Will—What Followed Afterwards.

VISCOUNT MARCHFORD sat in his library, after breakfast, in no enviable mood. The morning's post had brought him a host of letters from creditors clamouring for payment of their accounts.

The newspapers announced that another of his swindling companies—namely, the Sixpenny Bank—had gone into liquidation, and there was a suggestion that the directors should be criminally prosecuted.

"Whatever are you going to do to get out of this terrible mess?" asked the Hon. Charles, who stood at the side of his father's desk. "The bank failure is the worst that has ever happened to us. Hundreds of poor people ruined! Look what the newspapers will make of it!"

The viscount pushed Charles unceremoniously into a chair, and drew up another beside him.

"Now, listen!" he said. "With the certainty of bagging David's half-million our anxiety is at an end. I shall at once write to the newspapers and announce my intention of taking over the whole of the liabilities of the Sixpenny Bank, and indemnifying the unfortunate shareholders against any loss whatever, which will put an effectual stop to all these nonsensical threats of a criminal prosecution. My creditors—and, if you like, your creditors, too—shall all receive by the same post a promise to settle outstanding accounts within a month from now, the promise being based upon our joint inheritance of David's money, whose state of health is so precarious that his death is only a question of days. Instead of my name being execrated by thousands of people, as I have no doubt it is being at this moment, you will find I shall be one of the most popular men of the day, extolled as a model of magnificent generosity and high-minded disinterestedness."

"That's all very well——" began Charles.

"Wait," said his father, interrupting him curtly. "While I'm doing this, composing my letter to the newspapers and drawing up a form of circular to be sent to our creditors, you will proceed to Scotland Yard, and inform the authorities that the licensed taxi-driver, Manson Harvey, is really the identical Harvey Manson who was imprisoned, and who had his licence cancelled for being drunk while in charge of his cab some time last year. You will explain that you feel it is an imperative duty on your part to expose him, because it constitutes a grave menace to the public safety that persons addicted to alcohol should be permitted to ply for hire in the streets, but you will request them to be good enough to see

that your name does not appear in the ensuing police-court proceedings. And when you've done that, Charles, I think we may congratulate each other on being happily out of the wood."

* * * * *

David Langley sat in an armchair propped up with pillows in a large back room on the second floor of the Barclay Square mansion.

His was a strong, handsome, aristocratic face, but it was pale and worn and furrowed with illness. Like many another strong, robust man, who had lived a full, active, and vigorous life, his strength and health had suddenly broken down; and, being gripped by the exile's natural longing to see his native land once more before he died, he had hurried home to England to lay his bones to rest in the old country.

He had arrived some six weeks ago, and gone straight to his brother's house, where he had been received with open arms; and since his arrival he had not again crossed the threshold. Having never suffered a day's illness in his life, until this sudden collapse, he had conceived a horror of doctors, and had stubbornly vetoed all suggestions that medical aid should be called in. When such suggestions were made, his unvarying answer was that he knew he was at the end of his tether, and the only wish he had was to be allowed to die in peace amongst his own people. Since the very first the viscount had ceased to urge him to see a doctor.

Langley was fingering the letter, in doubt whether to leave it there or take it with him, when he suddenly felt himself gripped from behind, and just as he turned a smashing blow was aimed at his head by the shadowy figure of a boy gripping the barrel of a revolver.

But if David Langley was physically very ill, the shrewd and sharp intelligence which had enabled him to amass a great fortune remained as strong and vigorous as ever; and it had not taken him very long to arrive at an accurate estimate of the depravity and worthlessness of the characters of the viscount and his son Charles, or of the motives which had induced them to accord him so warm and hearty a welcome.

He saw no one but them, and the servant who was deputed to wait on him, and he was quick to realise that all they cared about was how soon they could get hold of his money. His original intention had been to make Charles Langley, the future viscount, his sole heir, but in the circumstances prevailing, he cast about for someone else to leave his fortune to, and his thoughts inevitably recurred to the son of his dead sister, who had made the mesalliance.

But how to find him?

The cautious inquiries he had addressed to the viscount and Charles Langley had instantly apprised him that he must expect no help from them, and that they had guessed his purpose in making them.

As the reader knows, he eventually applied to Blake, stipulating that Blake must not come and see him, well aware that, if his relatives discovered he was taking active steps to find Harvey, they were quite capable of hastening his death. As regards himself, he didn't much care whether they did not, but he was intensely anxious, intensely eager, that his fortune should pass into worthy hands after he was gone, and he wanted to live sufficiently long to ensure its doing so.

"My dear," he said to Mary Fielding—it was late in the evening of the second day after her arrival in Barclay Square—"I am wholly at a loss to understand why my brother has provided me with so pleasant and charming and delightful a nurse as yourself. Do you know you have done me a world of good already?"

"I am very glad," she answered brightly; "I expect you were moping from being left too much alone. You wanted companionship. Invalids if allowed to mope are sure to think they are more ill than they actually are."

He smiled at this.

"Oh, I think I know exactly how ill I am!" he said, and his eyes wandered round the large room, which he had no hope or expectation of leaving alive, a room dreary with sombre hangings and massive furniture, and marvelled at the immense difference in it her mere presence had produced.

"I wish you would see a doctor, Mr. Langley," she remarked impulsively.

He shook his head.

"No, my dear, I am not going to be worried by doctors. Doctors can't give a man a new body, and that's the only thing that would save me. I am worn out. The mechanism has run down. Not all the doctors in the world can help me now. My time has come. But it's very pleasant to have you here, and I am greatly obliged to my brother for bringing you. I must admit that if I had known you were coming I should have expressly forbidden it. He has been very kind—much kinder than I could have imagined."

"Why shouldn't he be kind to you?" she answered.

"Ah, my dear, you don't know!" he murmured. "You are too good and innocent even to imagine the evil that some men can do. Heaven forbid that I should misjudge the viscount, or his son, but I have sound and good cause to distrust them both."

"The viscount!" she said. "Is your brother a viscount?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?" he answered. "My brother is Viscount Marchford."

No, she didn't know.

When the viscount had engaged her services he had merely told her that the patient she was wanted to nurse was his brother, Mr. David Langley, and she had naturally concluded that his name was Langley, too. She knew nothing about the ramifications of the Peerage, where one brother may be a titled nobleman and another a plain "Mr." The sudden knowledge that she was in the viscount's house was vaguely startling, for she remembered that it was he and

his son who had been instrumental in getting Harvey's licence cancelled.

The old man was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to notice her startled expression and gasp of astonishment, and went on:

"I should be sorry to misjudge him, but there are circumstances in his past life which are bound to prejudice my belief in him. But, of course, one can never tell; he may be changing, and certainly I am immensely indebted to him for sending you to me. And now, my dear"—he looked up with one of his grave smiles—"let us talk of something infinitely more pleasant—tell me about yourself. I can't imagine what the young men can be thinking of to have permitted you to remain Miss Fielding so long. Yet, I dare say, it is not the young men's fault, you must have had plenty of offers; it is simply that the right man has not happened to come along. Haven't I guessed correctly?"

Looking up he observed the trouble in her face, and at once added:

"Oh, you must forgive me! I can see I have pained and hurt you!" He thought she had had a lover who had died, and that his carelessly-spoken words had opened afresh the wounds of a life-long grief. "I am sorry!" he said. "Please don't answer if you'd rather not."

"No, you haven't hurt me," she answered; "I am engaged to be married."

"But there is some difficulty, some obstacle in the way of the wedding?"

"Yes, there has been a difficulty."

"But it has been got over?"

"No, not quite; but I hope it is being got over."

"Capital!" he exclaimed delightedly. "I sincerely hope it is. But won't you tell more about the difficulty? I might be able to help you. Don't tell me that your fiance has been worrying you by gallivanting after some other woman. I simply couldn't believe it."

She laughed gaily.

"No," she said; "it is not that."

"Well, my dear, what is it? Is it money?"

His questions were full of eager zest and kindliness.

"No, it is not exactly money," she answered.

"But money has something to do with it? Come, come, you can tell me, my dear, an old man who has only a very short while to live, and would be glad to help one who has already done so much to cheer and brighten his closing days."

"Yes," she said, "money has something to do with it, for there is hardly anything in the world that money hasn't something to do with."

"You're right there! Out with it!" he rejoined.

His interest in her had taken him out of himself and interrupted his brooding over his impending death. He looked all in a moment strangely different from the feeble invalid who had been cowering gloomily over the fire a few minutes previously.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," she answered, with a sudden return of the troubled look to her face.

She felt the secret of Harvey's position was too dangerous to impart to this old man, kindly as he seemed, who was the brother and uncle of the two men who had first wrought Harvey's ruin.

"Come, come, that won't do; you must tell me!" he expostulated energetically. "If you don't, I shall begin to think there is some shame and disgrace which you're afraid to disclose. But it can't be that—it simply can't be that!"

She flushed to the roots of her hair, then suddenly became white to the lips.

"Mr. David Langley," she said, in a tone of proud rebuke, "there are good reasons why I should not tell you, and as they are of a purely private and family nature, I know you will excuse me from discussing them with you."

He was chilled and grievously disappointed, a lonely old man, striving to do one last act of kindness, and being coldly rebuffed. It hurt him unspeakably.

He seemed to dwindle and wither as he sat in his chair, all the vigour and animation gone out of him, and his thin, transparent hands stretched out to the blaze looked those of a man whose span of life might be measured, not by weeks or days, but by hours.

"Oh, very well," he murmured—"very well! I have no wish to force your confidence."

Seeing the change in him, she instantly became the careful, anxious nurse again.

"Mr. Langley, I am most grateful to you for your kindly interest in my affairs, but——"

"It is of no consequence, my dear—no consequence at all," he faltered.

"But I simply can't discuss them with anybody."

"I understand perfectly—perfectly. Don't think I am vexed with you, but—but if you don't mind, my dear, I should like to be alone for a little while."

As he persisted in desiring she should go, she was compelled to humour him, and as she left the room on her way out, she met the viscount and the Hon. Charles coming in. They bowed with florid politeness, and stood aside to let her pass, but did not speak to her. Both of them looked extraordinarily elated and jubilant.

"Well, David, how are you to-day? How are you to-day?" said the viscount heartily.

"I hope you are better, uncle. By Jove, you're looking better!" exclaimed Charles Langley, with exhilarating bonhomie. "We shall have you out and about again before we know where we are!"

Nothing could have exceeded the affectionate devotion of their greeting, as they drew up their chairs beside the invalid and began to talk with pleasant cheerfulness.

"An agreeable young woman, Nurse Fielding appears to be, David. I trust she is attentive and useful, and that you continue to like her? If she is in any way slack or careless in her duties, let me know, and I'll get rid of her at once, and get someone else. There is no lack of good, competent nurses to choose from."

"You are very good, Marchford. I couldn't wish for a better nurse."

"That's excellent!" said the viscount genially. "Charles, you have the evening paper there. It may interest your uncle to hear what they have to say about his old reprobate of a brother. Read the leading article aloud to him. Can you stand the reading of a whole leading article about me, David?" he queried jocularly.

"About you? What have you been doing?"

"Ah, there! You haven't heard about the failure of the Sixpenny Bank? Read my published letter, Charles, before you read the leading article, so as to give your uncle a clear idea of how things stand."

Charles read the viscount's letter, in which the latter stated his determination to take over the whole of the liabilities of the bank, and indemnify everybody concerned against loss. Then he read the editorial comment on this—three-quarters of a column of unstinted praise of the viscount's magnificent generosity and splendid public spirit. The editor wound up by saying that the annals of finance could not furnish a parallel instance of munificent philanthropy on so grand a scale, and that the viscount's high and disinterested action effectually closed the mouths of those cavillers who had been clamouring for a criminal prosecution of the bank's directors.

"It is very nice to have that kind of thing written about one, David, isn't it?" said the viscount, when Charles had concluded the reading. "It will prove to the world I am not such a very bad lot, after all. I hope you approve of my action?"

"I think you have done a very fine thing, Marchford."

"Gad, it's good to hear you say that! However, I don't pretend to think I've done a very fine thing, as you are kind enough to term it. It appears to me that as an honourable man there was nothing else I could have done. Mistakes which I couldn't prevent, and errors of judgment which I couldn't foresee were made, but, as chairman, I feel bound to take responsibility. You would do the same, David."

"I hope I should, Marchford."

"I am sure you would," said the viscount warmly—"I am sure you would."

"How are you going to raise the money?" asked David Langley presently.

"On mortgage of the family estates. It won't matter much to me, because I can't last much longer; but it will be rather hard on Charles when he succeeds to the title. It will bring his income almost down to vanishing point. But Charles agrees with me that the honour of our name demands the sacrifice. If you want my opinion, I say it is Charles who is doing the fine thing, not me. He'll be the one to suffer, I sha'n't."

"I thought, Marchford, that you and Charles had already mortgaged the estates up to the last penny," said David Langley, with slow deliberation.

"My dear fellow, what a strange notion! Not a bit of it! Charles and I have been extravagant—I dare say we have been wickedly extravagant—but we have always left plenty of margin. We have had too much self-respect and too great a regard for the Marchford name to impoverish the estates for our personal pleasures. But this is a different matter. We have to impoverish the estates now, not for ourselves, but for the sake of the poor people who would otherwise be robbed of their savings by this disastrous bank failure. It is very hard on Charles, David, but I am mightily proud of him, all the same."

David Langley nodded, and said:

"May I look at the paper?"

Charles handed it to him, and while he was reading it father and son exchanged significant glances of triumph behind his back. Things were going very well for them. It was just what they wanted, that he should ask for the paper.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated David Langley suddenly. "Have you seen this?"

"Seen what?" replied both men in accents of alarm.

"This paragraph about Harvey Manson?"

"Harvey Manson!" said the viscount. "Do you mean our nephew, the son of poor Helen and that low engineer fellow she married? Gad, I've often wondered what had become of him!"

"Yes; it must be the same."

David Langley's voice quavered and shook, and the paper rustled noisily in his trembling hands.

"Listen—listen!" he cried.

His voice was a genuine, heartbroken cry of anguish, for the paragraph implied the wrecking of the last hope of a lonely old man's life.

Then he read aloud:

"This morning the police received reliable information that a man of worthless character was in possession of a licence to drive a taxicab, which he had obtained by giving a false name. The man's name is Harvey Manson, the same man who was imprisoned and punished by forfeiture of his licence for being drunk while in charge of his cab a year and a half ago. The police, on proceeding to the yard of the motor-cab company in whose employment he is, were resisted, and the man managed to evade arrest. We regret to say he is still at large, but we have no doubt he will be laid by the heels within the next twenty-four hours. We sincerely hope that when this man is caught he will receive exemplary punishment, for the dangers of our streets are quite severe enough without being added to by the wild and reckless driving of taxicab men of drunken habits and notoriously bad characters. This man, Harvey Manson, and men like him, are amongst the most mischievous pests of the metropolis."

The paper fell from the old man's palsied hands, and he turned a face of speechless misery to his brother and nephew.

"My dear David," said the viscount, in mingled tones of gentle reproof and sympathy, "in your precarious state of health you really must not allow yourself to be so profoundly affected by this painful piece of news. I share your distress, but there is nothing to be gained by dwelling on it. It is exactly what one might have expected. The fellow's low antecedents explain everything. Pray—pray, control your grief! The man is obviously a worthless scoundrel on whom you need not waste a single thought. Please—please try to be calm!"

"Poor Helen's boy—poor Helen's boy!" moaned the other again and again. Then, bracing himself to an effort, he suddenly sat up straight and erect, and said, in a firm voice: "That decides me. Will you bring me my will, Charles?"

Charles fetched the will from a drawer of the writing-table. The will was already drawn up, and only required the filling in of the names of the beneficiaries and the signature of the testator.

"You will want witnesses, dear Charles," murmured the viscount.

Mary Fielding and the butler were summoned, and in their presence David Langley wrote the names of his brother and his nephew Charles in the blank space of the document, and then signed it, Mary and the butler subsequently appending their signatures as witnesses.

It was another instance of the grim irony of Fate that Mary should have to witness the document which disinherited her betrothed lover.

"Take it, Marchford! I have left everything in equal shares to you and Charles!"

"Oh, David, how generous of you!"

"Oh, Uncle David, how wonderfully kind of you!"

"I sha'n't keep you out of it very long. I am very near the end!" mumbled the old man.

"Don't say that, dear David. I hope you will live to enjoy your money for many a long day yet," said the viscount, while having the utmost difficulty in dissembling his greedy haste to clutch the document and pocket it.

"There! Now please leave me—all of you except the nurse."

The viscount and Charles hurried from the room, and David Langley, exhausted by the emotions he had been through, fell into a doze. So still and motionless was he, and so faint and imperceptible was his breathing, that Mary bent over him more than once to satisfy herself that he was still alive. She fully expected he would pass away in his sleep.

But in the course of half an hour he roused himself, and said:

"My dear, are you there? We had a little misunderstanding, which I am very sorry for. You see, now, I have done what you asked me to; I have ceased to misjudge my brother, and have made amends to him. Won't you now confide your troubles to me?"

"Would it still interest you to know the name of the man I am engaged to marry?"

"I should be glad to know it, as well as everything else about him, my dear."

"His name is Harvey Manson, Mr. Langley!"

"What name?"

"Harvey Manson," she repeated, very distinctly. "He earns his living by driving a taxicab."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Birthday Party—The Arrest That Didn't Come Off.

SHORTY, Long Tom, and Blake were eating their midday meal at a small restaurant in Panton Street, much frequented by taxi-drivers. Their cabs, and the cabs of half a dozen other men who patronised the same eating-house, stood in a line outside in the care of a watcher. Shorty and Long Tom and Blake were dining at the same table.

Shorty and Long Tom were Blake's guests, and were doing themselves thoroughly well. Blake had invited Shorty, because he wanted him to identify Harvey Manson, whom he expected every moment; and he had asked Long Tom to join the party because he had conceived a great admiration for the old hansom driver, who had had the pluck and grit and energy to adapt himself to the changed circumstances of a cabman's life, and take up what was practically a new calling at an age when many men would have simply drifted into the casual wards and the ranks of unemployed.

Blake's reason for expecting Harvey Manson was that he had called at the yard of the Sutherland Motor-Cab Company earlier in the morning, and been told that Harvey was out with his cab, but that he was generally to be found at this particular restaurant between the hours of half-past twelve and half-past one.

"Who's that? Is that he?" whispered Blake, when the door opened and a fresh taxi-driving customer came in for his midday meal.

"No. Yes, yes; that's the chap! It's Gentleman Harvey!"

Shorty jumped up, and excitedly hailed the new-comer:

"I say, Harvey, come and sit here! I want to speak to you."

Harvey Manson, whose mien was singularly frank and fearless, came striding along, checked at the sound of Shorty's voice, glanced at him in momentary doubt and perplexity, and then came slowly forward to the table.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said, without any particular enthusiasm.

"Yes, it's me all right. No need to look as if you'd like to slaughter me; we're all friends here. You know Lake and Long Tom? No? Well, two of the best! We're having a birthday-party, and would like you to join us."

Harvey nodded to Blake, hesitated, and then sat down. Obviously, the encounter with Shorty was distasteful to him, but he thought it wise not to display his annoyance too openly. Food and drink were ordered for him, and he set to work with an appetite which elicited Long Tom's warmest approval.

As the meal progressed Harvey became more at ease in his company, and his restraint of manner relaxed.

"Whose birthday is it—yours?" he asked Shorty.

"No, Lake's."

"This is something more than a birthday-party," said Blake; "in fact, it was expressly arranged to meet you. I've got something to tell you that you ought to know."

"Is it about what Shorty knows?" asked Harvey, whose brow suddenly clouded.

"Yes, it's about that—it's about your licence," answered Blake, in an undertone.

"Tell me the worst at once, if you will."

"The worst is that there's likely to be trouble for you with Scotland Yard. I can't tell when it'll come, but I know this—that someone who's no friend of yours means to make it as hot as he can for you. There'll be an information laid against you to-day or to-morrow, and then—well, you must look out for squalls. I got the news quite by accident, and went to your yard to warn you, and afterwards came on here. You'll know best what to do about it."

"Aw! Keep your pecker up!" growled Long Tom confidentially, noticing the look of desperation that had crept into Harvey's eyes at Blake's news. "You can count me in on your side if there's going to be trouble, and Lake, too, I reckon; and Shorty, I dessay, at a pinch, though a man of Shorty's stuffin' ain't worth a red cent in a row!"

"Is it a man of the name of Langley—Charles Langley?" asked Harvey, in a strangled voice.

"Yes; I believe it is," Blake nodded.

"Got a down on you, that bloke has, Heaven knows why!" said Long Tom gruffly.

"Yes, he has," answered Harvey. "You see, he started pestering my fiancee, Mary Fielding, so I was forced to give him a thrashing that he will remember to his dying day. His cowardly revenge took the form of the false charge he

swore against me, and through him I had to suffer imprisonment. It'll be the end of me this time. I don't know what's to be done; there's the girl to be thought of. It'll break her heart if I am run in a second time."

"I have a suggestion to make," said Blake. "I think you ought to lie low till this business blows over. I know the very place where the police wouldn't dream of looking for you once in a thousand years. If you'll place yourself in my hands, I'll——"

"No," said Harvey, with fervent emphasis—"no, I won't go and skulk in any thieves' hiding-hole; I haven't got down to that. I'm not going to make matters worse."

"It's not a thieves' hiding-hole," answered Blake mildly.

"Aw! Don't be squeamish," said Long Tom, in coaxing accents. "It don't matter a blessed farthing where you go to so long as the cops don't drop on you. You trust Lake; you'll be all right with him. Don't you venture near the yard. I'll drive your keb home. Lake'll go and see the gel, and tell her all about it. Shorty'll lend you all the cash he's got on him. If he doesn't, I'll——"

Long Tom never finished that sentence.

"They're after him; they'll be here in two minutes. They are two chaps in plain clothes."

"Great Jiminy Cripps! If that ain't Mr. Sexton Blake's boy!" gasped Long Tom. "I've often druv for him." And he stared open-mouthed at the place where Tinker had been, for the youngster, having delivered his warning message, had instantly vanished, in accordance with Blake's previous instructions. He had been detailed to watch the police movements, and bring early notice of them to the restaurant.

"Now then, Manson, come along," said Blake firmly. "It's most important that you should not be taken; you may take my word for it." And then he whispered, so softly that no one else heard it: "I am Sexton Blake; I'm acting in your best interests."

Blake put his arm through his, and led him out into the open space between the tables.

"Is there any other way out of this except through the front?" he asked.

"This is too swagger a place for me. I don't know it; never bin here before," replied Long Tom, who was rolling up his sleeves in the most workmanlike way.

"Come on, Shorty," he said to Shorty, who was distinctly pale. "Show your stuffin'!"

These proceedings had not passed unnoticed by the other customers present, most of whom were taxi-men, and a general air of excitement and expectancy prevailed in the restaurant.

"Boys," cried old Long Tom, "all who's on the side of justice agen the law, step to the front. There's trouble for one of our mates."

Blake bit his lip with vexation, for this was exactly what he did not want, though he found it impossible to feel angry with the loyal and courageous old cabman. The floor of the restaurant was instantly crowded with a seething crush of excited men, all clamouring to be told what the matter was.

"It's Gentleman Harvey, and he's not to be took by the police!" sang out Long Tom lustily.

"Gentleman Harvey! Gentleman Harvey!"

The name rang through the restaurant like a battle-cry.

"Gentleman Harvey! Gentleman Harvey!"

It was a veritable ovation.

They surged and swarmed round him, so that the object of their admiration was in danger of being stifled, and Blake had hard work to keep his legs.

"Room," he cried—"room! We want to get out, and you are keeping us in!"

A space was cleared, and then another cry arose, and this time it was:

"How can we help? Tell us how we can help!"

"Hush—hush! Help us to a clear start, that's all we want," said Blake. And it was well that he lowered his voice, for at that moment the two plain-clothes men came unobtrusively in at the door.

The sight of so many men, all jammed together, and all wearing similar uniforms, was bewildering; and while they were peering about, trying to pick out their man, there was a sudden heave and rush of the crowd, led by Long Tom, and they were helplessly swept away from the door to the remote end of the restaurant, while Blake and Harvey were carried bodily into the street. Blake jumped into the driving-seat of his cab, Harvey was put inside, someone gave a turn to the starting-handle, and Blake had got what he desired—a clear start.

"That's our man—we're policemen!" shouted the two plain-clothes men, struggling through the press in the direction of the door, which they were not allowed to reach till Blake had got well away.

But when that had taken place everybody was willing to help them.

"If you're police, and you're after that chap, take my cab," cried Long Tom, who was loudest of all in his proffers of assistance.

"Which way did they go—didn't anybody see?"

"Why, yes," answered a score of voices, while the same number of hands were carefully pointed in the wrong direction. "They went that way—that way!"

Meanwhile, Blake had swiftly conveyed the astounded Harvey to Baker Street and got him safely indoors. Some sort of explanation was bound to follow, and Blake's difficulty was to tell him enough to induce him to remain in hiding without telling him too much; that is, without inspiring him with hopes that might never be fulfilled.

"Now, Manson," he said, "I fully understand your astonishment at finding yourself in my house, and completely sympathise with your natural wish to be told everything, but I want you to try to trust me, and ask as few questions as possible. If you can repress your curiosity in regard to the business I am engaged upon, it will do you no harm, and it may do you a great deal of good. I would rather not tell you any more unless you force me to. For the present I wish you to consider yourself my guest, and this house as your home."

Harvey shrugged his shoulders in dreary acquiescence.

"Please don't consider me ungrateful or discourteous, Mr. Blake," he said. "I am really very much obliged to you, but you are imposing on me a very great strain which I may not be able to bear. My life has gone so horribly wrong that it doesn't seem to matter much what I do."

"Then trust me, and see what comes of it," was the immediate rejoinder; and Harvey said he would try. And Blake very wisely left it at that.

The afternoon was mainly spent in Blake getting from him an account of his past life, from his earliest infancy as far as he could remember it; but his recollections were very dim, and of his father and mother he could remember next to nothing. For the rest, it was a narrative of hardship and struggle bravely borne, with a few bright episodes at rare intervals, the chief of all being his meeting with and winning the love of Mary Fielding.

But Blake was more than content with what he got. Harvey Manson, like other young men, had made mistakes, but his career on the whole had been exceptionally blameless, and Blake was satisfied that he was a man of sterling character, high courage, and noble aims.

When Harvey had gone to bed, Blake sat down to write a letter to Mr. David Langley, explaining these views, and asking for a personal interview.

He was actually engaged in writing this when a note, delivered by hand, arrived from Barclay Square. It ran as follows:

Dear Sir,—I have discovered all I want to know in regard to my missing nephew, Harvey Manson. Please take no further trouble in the matter, and believe me, yours faithfully,

"DAVID LANGLEY."

THE END.

(It is a well-known fact that Blake always helps those in trouble. That he will ignore this letter, and do his best to right the wrongs committed against Harvey, it is obvious. What he does to reach this end you will find in next week's story, entitled "The Avaricious Aristocrat!" To make quite certain of obtaining your copy, order next Friday's PENNY POPULAR *now.)*

THE SHAM SCHOOLMASTER!

A Magnificent Long Complete School Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of TOM MERRY & CO. of St. Jim's.

- BY -

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The new master waved his hand majestically. "Thanks, and thanks again, my faithful retainers!" he exclaimed. "But hence; I am hungered. Let us to dinner!"

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The New Master of the New House.

FIGGINS & CO., of the New House at St. Jim's, wore expectant looks.

They were waiting in the doorway of the New House for their new master.

Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House, and Form-master of the Fifth, had left quite suddenly on a holiday, for the benefit of his health. There had been trouble in Mr. Ratcliff's House, and the Head had thought of that holiday for him, and it was known that he would be away some weeks at least.

There was to be a temporary new Housemaster, who might become a permanent one if Mr. Ratcliff did not return, as the fellows sincerely hoped.

It was a question of great interest to the New House fellows what their new Housemaster would be like. A good Housemaster and a bad Housemaster meant all the difference between comfort and discomfort. Mr. Ratcliff had succeeded in making the New House fellows, seniors as well as juniors, decidedly uncomfortable at times. They hoped for better luck under the new ruler.

Figgins had caught a glimpse of the new Housemaster as he went in to see the Head.

Figgins liked his looks.

"He's quite a young chap," Figgins said to the other fellows, as they waited in the doorway of the New House. "I like his chivvy. I think we shall get on with him!"

"I wonder if he knows about our trouble with Ratty?" Redfern remarked.

"Most likely."

"Yes, the Head will tell him," said Kerr. "It's unfortunate, as it may start him with a prejudice against us."

"That would be rotten!"

"Where is he now?" asked Lawrence.

"With the Head."

"Getting the story of the barring-out, I suppose!" growled Owen. "He will very likely have his back up against us at the start!"

"That's why I've brought you chaps here," said Figgins. "We'll give him a cheer when he comes in, just to show that there's no ill-feeling!"

"Good egg!"

"What about inviting him to tea?" suggested Fatty Wynn thoughtfully. "Housemasters have tea with the seniors sometimes. Why not with the juniors? There's nothing like a good feed to make a man feel nice towards you!"

"He wouldn't come!" said Pratt.

"Well, we could try," said Fatty Wynn, evidently much taken up with his idea. "Two or three of us could go to his study and ask him."

"Here he comes!" called out Kerr from the doorway.

There was a general movement of interest.

A somewhat slim young man, with handsome features, was walking across the quadrangle, in company with Monteith, the head prefect of the New House.

The juniors, crowded in the doorway, gazed out at him with great interest.

"Looks very young to take charge of a House like this!" said Kerr.

"Yes, rather!"

"Well, if we get on with him we'll overlook that," said Lawrence magnanimously. "He looks good-tempered, that's something!"

"Monteith's jawing very seriously to him."

"And he's standing it patiently."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give him a cheer as he comes in," said Figgins impressively. "We want to show him that there's no ill-feeling, and that we are glad to welcome a new master!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Let it go when I raise my hand," said Figgins.

"Right-ho!"

"We ought to have had an address of welcome, or something of the sort," said Redfern. "We want to show him there's no ill-feeling, especially if he's just had the story of the trouble with Ratty from the Head!"

"Yes; but here he is!"

Mr. Wodyer, the new master, ascended the steps in the porch of the New House. His face was very calm and cheerful. Monteith was looking a little perplexed, as if he could not quite make out the new Housemaster.

Mr. Wodyer stepped into the hall, and gazed in some surprise at the crowd of juniors.

Figgins raised his hands.

"Hurrah!" roared the juniors.

"Dear me!" said the new master.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Go it!" roared Figgins.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The New House rang with it.

Monteith frowned.

"Shut up, you young asses!" he exclaimed.

"Hurrah!"

"Will you shut up?"

"Hurrah!"

Mr. Wodyer burst into a laugh.

"I suppose this is something in the way of a welcome," he said. "Gentlemen——"

"Hurrah!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I beg to thank you for this most enthusiastic reception," said Mr. Wodyer. "Our visit to your town, though necessarily brief, will ever remain a cherished memory. Ahem!" Mr. Wodyer coughed, and then altered his tone. "My dear boys, I thank you for this kind reception!"

"Hurrah!"

"Speech, Figgy!"

"Go it, Figgins!"

Figgins, colouring very much, stepped out before the crowd of juniors.

"If you please, Mr. Wodyer—sir——"

"Certainly!" said Mr. Wodyer cheerfully. "Pile in!"

Figgins gasped. He had hoped for a cordial reception from the new Housemaster, but he had never expected to be told to "pile in." That was hardly an expression he would have expected to hear from the lips of a Housemaster.

"Ahem!" said Figgins. "I—I want to say a few words, sir."

"As many as you like," said Mr. Wodyer genially, "only buck up!"

"Ahem! In the name of the juniors of this House, sir, we want to—I mean, I want to welcome you to St. Jim's, sir!"

"Oh, good!"

"We had some trouble with our late Housemaster, sir——"

"Yes, I've heard all about your giddy racket, you young bounders!"

Figgins stopped. His breath was taken away for a moment. The crowd looked amazed, and Monteith stared perplexedly at the Housemaster. What language was this?

"I—I—I——" stammered Figgins, quite taken aback. "We—we—we want to assure you, sir, that nothing of the kind is likely to occur again, and that we are going to put in a record of really good behaviour, sir!"

"Oh, ripping!"

"Ahem!"

"Stick to that, and we shall pull together all right," said Mr. Wodyer. "You will find that I'm not the man to pick faults in my company—I mean, my class."

"Oh!"

"You must look upon me as a conductor, and you are to keep in tune," said Mr. Wodyer affably. "Keep to that, and we shall simply bring down the house. What?"

The juniors gasped.

"My only hat!" murmured Kerr. "Where does he come from?"

"Bedlam!" grinned Redfern.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Wodyer waved his hand majestically.

"Thanks, and thanks again, my faithful retainers!" he exclaimed "But hence; I am hungered. Let us to dinner!"

And he walked on with the amazed Monteith.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Very Strange!

FIGGINS & CO. were specially well behaved when they went in to dinner that day.

After the recent trouble with their Housemaster, the respected Mr. Ratcliff, Figgins & Co. had a pardonable desire to show to the new Housemaster, and to St. Jim's generally, that they were not a rough old lot, as Figgins described it, and that they had manners and customs which possessed the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

They wanted very particularly to make a good impression upon Mr. Wodyer. Thus they would be able to justify their revolt against Mr. Ratcliff's autocratic rule.

When Mr. Wodyer entered the dining-room of the New House, therefore, nothing could have exceeded the decorum of the Fourth Form as they sat at their table.

Mr. Wodyer looked round for his place, and found it at the head of the Sixth Form table, Monteith kindly pointing it out to him.

It was the custom of the Housemaster to have his meals at the head of the Sixth table, and the junior tables were taken by prefects.

The seniors of the New House were all exceedingly serious and sedate at dinner, setting a good example to the juniors. Mr. Wodyer entered into conversation with Monteith, who sat next to him. It had not been Mr. Ratcliff's custom to talk much at meal-times, or indeed at any time; but Mr. Wodyer was evidently a chatty gentleman.

Monteith was more than a little puzzled by his conversation.

Mr. Wodyer's mind did not seem to run upon matters scholastic, and he introduced the theatre as a topic, much to the prefects' surprise. He seemed to be continually catching himself up, as it were, and keeping back things he wanted to say; but when he succeeded in becoming prim and sedate, his conversation fell off woefully, and he would drop into silence.

Altogether he was, as Monteith had told Baker, a very queer beggar indeed.

Mr. Wodyer drew a deep breath of relief as he left the dining-room after dinner.

He walked into the quadrangle. A group of Shell fellows belonging to the School House were standing talking there, and they all glanced towards the new master. They raised their caps, and Mr. Wodyer nodded very genially.

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther, Manners and Kangaroo, Clifton Dane and Gore, all of the Shell Form and the School House, formed the group of juniors who were so specially interested in the new master. Bernard Glyn especially was staring at him with a keenness that was almost outside the bounds of politeness.

"My hat!" Glyn exclaimed at last. "It's the same chap. I'm sure of it!"

Mr. Wodyer halted.

"Are you referring to me, my boy?" he asked, with a great deal of dignity. "You must not speak of a Housemaster as a chap."

"Sorry, sir!" stammered Glyn. "But——"

Mr. Wodyer waved his hand.

"All serene!" he said.

"My hat!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Glyn thinks he knows you, sir," said Tom Merry.

Mr. Wodyer started.

"Knows me?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir," said Glyn. "I hope you don't mind my speaking, sir, but it struck me at once that I knew your name, and I thought it might be the same—er—gentleman. You are Mr. Arthur Wodyer, sir?"

"And what is your name?" asked Mr. Wodyer, deftly parrying the question.

"Bernard Glyn, sir."

The Shell fellow uttered the name with the evident expectation that Mr. Wodyer would recognise it immediately.

"Glyn?" repeated Mr. Wodyer, as though he had never heard the name before. "Glyn or Wynn, did you say?"

"Glyn, sir."

"Ah, Glyn!" repeated Mr. Wodyer.

"Yes, sir; Bernard Glyn, of Liverpool."

"Liverpool?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not—not Manchester?" murmured Mr. Wodyer.

Glyn of the Shell looked surprised.

"No, sir—Liverpool."

"Yes, I—I seem to remember the name," murmured Mr. Wodyer awkwardly. "I have heard of Liverpool before — I — I mean I have heard the name of Glyn before. Certainly!"

"The pater will be glad to see you, sir."

"Will he, really—I—I mean that's very kind of him."

"And so will Edith, sir."

"Oh, yes!" muttered Mr. Wodyer, wondering whom on earth Edith might be.

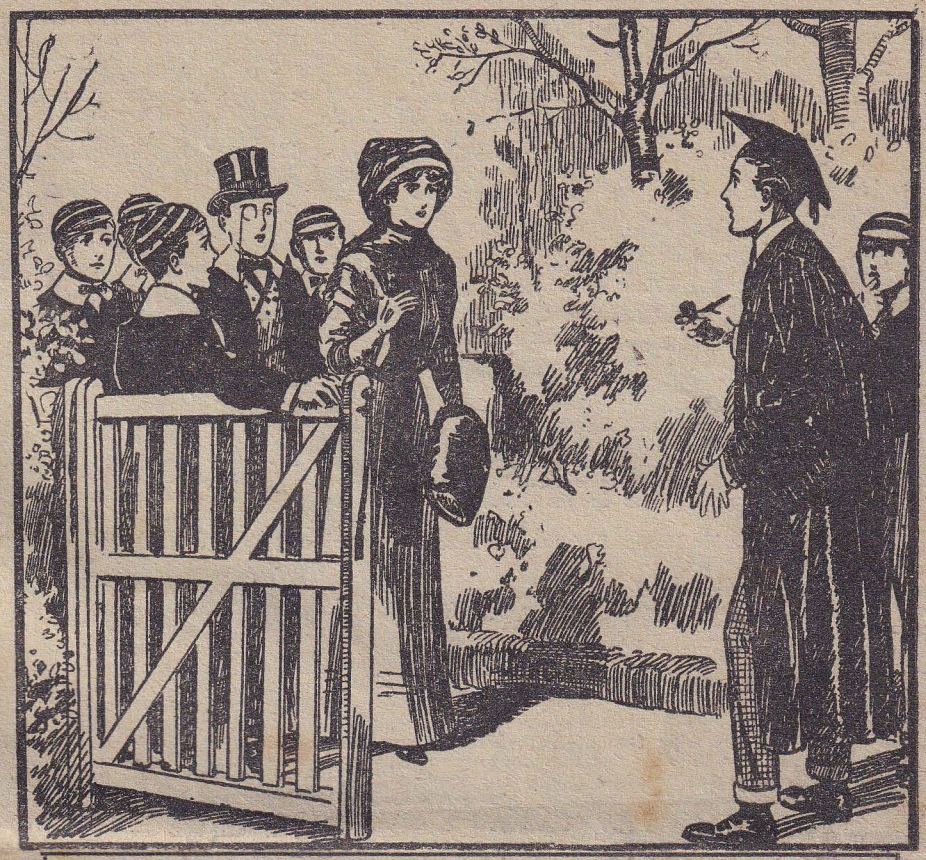
"They are coming over to-morrow afternoon to see me, sir," said Glyn. "They will be delighted to see you."

"Oh, my hat!"

Mr. Wodyer strode away.

It was a most injudicious thing to do; the juniors could not but think it strange. Mr. Wodyer, with burning cheeks, walked away, and found refuge in the Head's garden. There he paused to breathe.

"My only respected aunt!" he muttered. "Who is Bernard Glyn, of Manchester—I mean Liverpool? Who is his pater? And who the dickens is Edith? My only hat! My hat!"



The new master looked at Miss Glyn's charming face with a startled gaze, and their eyes met. The next moment Edith gave a start, and Mr. Wodyer turned pale. For one instant he stood staring blankly at the girl, and then, with a sudden bound, he fled.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Great Preparations.

MR. WODYER sat in Mr. Ratcliff's study in the New House. He stirred the fire, for the weather was chilly, and he frowned thoughtfully into the dancing, ruddy flames.

Suddenly there came a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said the new Housemaster.

Toby, the page of the School House, entered, with a letter in his hand.

"Please I'm to wait for an answer, sir," he said.

"Thank you!"

Mr. Wodyer took the note in some uneasiness. He opened the envelope with nervous fingers. He started as he saw the card inside, and stared at it blankly.

"The juniors of St. Jim's request the honour of Mr. Wodyer's company to tea, at six o'clock, in the Hobby Club-room.

"N.B.—Steak-and-kidney pies."

"My only Aunt Matilda!" ejaculated Mr. Wodyer, in surprise, and much to the surprise of Toby, who had never heard a Housemaster invoke his Aunt Matilda before. "Well, this is—— Ha, ha, ha! You want an answer, young shaver?"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Toby.

"Tell 'em I'll be on hand."

"Ye-es, sir!"

Toby departed. Mr. Wodyer read the note over again, and grinned, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Jolly good!" he murmured. "I never did like having meals alone in solitary state—— Ugh! I don't know whether it's infra dig. for a Housemaster to accept an invitation to tea from juniors, but—but I'm jolly well going!"

And he did.

Toby returned to the School House, still gasping with astonishment. He was grasped by Tom Merry and Blake as he presented himself at Study No. 6, and jerked into the study.

"Well?" demanded the juniors, in a breath.

"He's coming!" gasped Toby.

"Oh, good! What did he say?"

"He said 'Tell 'em I'll be on 'and!" gasped Toby. "And I never 'eard a master speak in sich a way before!"

"Bai Jove!"

And Toby departed, still astonished.

"Well, our giddy Form-master has a flow of language quite his own, I must admit."

Blake grinned.

"But he's coming—that's the main point!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now to prepare the giddy spread!" said Tom Merry.

And the juniors were soon very busy.

Their scheme of making a good impression upon the new master seemed to be working well. And they were not insensible to the honour of having a Housemaster to tea. They meant to "do" Mr. Wodyer well—very well indeed.

The Hobby Club-room—a rather large apartment on the ground floor—was soon the scene of busy preparations. The table was covered with a succession of spotless tablecloths, borrowed from the various studies, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy even borrowed a large jug for flowers, to give the tea-table a tone, as he explained to his friends.

Fatty Wynn & Co. came in laden with good things, and the steak-and-kidney pies figured prominently among them. Dame Taggles was certainly an artiste when it came to making steak-and-kidney pies, and these triumphs of her culinary skill graced the festive board in great profusion. It was, as Figgins said, a feast fit for the gods.

By the time six o'clock rang out from the old clock-tower of St. Jim's all was ready. Chairs were ranged along the table, and knives and forks and spoons were almost as numerous as the guests, having been begged and borrowed on all sides.

Tap!

Mr. Wodyer looked in at the door, with a smiling countenance.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Please walk in, sir."

"All ready, sir."

"So kind of you to come, Mr. Wodyer!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

Mr. Wodyer walked in cheerfully.

"Here's your chair, sir, please!" said Tom Merry.

"Thank you!" said Mr. Wodyer, as he sat down.

"Glyn's next to you, sir. You like having an old friend next to you, sir?"

Mr. Wodyer breathed hard through his nose for a moment.

"Ye-es, certainly!" he said. "How do you do, Glyn, my boy? I—I hope all your people are well in—in Manchester."

"Liverpool, sir," said Glyn.

"Yes; I—I mean Liverpool."

"My people don't live in Liverpool now, sir," said Bernard Glyn. "My father moved down South when I came to St. Jim's, sir, and he has a house not far from the school."

"Indeed! I'm glad to hear it! I hope your father is quite well, Glyn?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir!"

Glyn winked at his chums with the eye that was away from Mr. Wodyer. He expected the next query to be about his sister. But Mr. Wodyer had apparently forgotten that Bernard Glyn, of Liverpool, had a sister. He did not mention her, and the juniors attributed it to the shyness natural to a man who was in the lamentable state of "spoons."

"All ready," said Monty Lowther. "Pass the rosy wine."

Mr. Wodyer started a little.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "You don't mean to say that you fellows give wine-parties here, do you?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Figure of speech, sir!"

"Oh, I see!"

"The ass means make the tea, sir," Tom Merry explained. "Do you prefer tea or coffee, sir?"

"All one to me, kid!"

Figgins made a terrific face at Tom Merry across the table. It was meant to imply that the hero of the Shell must be careful, as there was no coffee among the supplies. Tom Merry did not understand, however, and he looked at Figgins in some alarm.

"Anything wrong, Figgy?" he asked.

"N-n-no!" muttered Figgins, turning the colour of a beetroot.

"Your face went quite queer."

"You ass—I mean—never mind! Hurry up and make the tea!"

"All serene!"

And the tea was made, and the juniors took their places round the hospitable board.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Honoured Guest.

TOM MERRY poured out Mr. Wodyer's tea very carefully. Figgins passed him a liberal helping of steak-and-kidney pie. Redfern handed up the bread-and-butter. Kerr passed the salt, and Fatty Wynn the pepper, and Lawrence the mustard. Manners looked round for something to pass up, and handed up the jam-tarts. Mr. Wodyer smiled, and started operations on the pie.

"It was awf'ly jollay of you to come, sir!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, by way of starting the ball of conversation rolling.

"Not at all!" said Mr. Wodyer, with his mouth full.

"You like St. Jim's, sir?" said Bernard Glyn.

"Oh, top-notch!" said the master.

The juniors grinned; but they were getting used to Mr. Wodyer's peculiar vocabulary by now. Mr. Ratcliff or Mr. Railton would not have said that anything was top-notch; but the fellows were learning to expect remarks of that sort from the new master of the New House.

"It was quite a surprise to see you here, sir," said Bernard Glyn. "I had no idea that you were an old acquaintance, sir, till I heard your name. You didn't know that I was at St. Jim's, sir, did you?"

"Not a bit of it."

"It will be a surprise for Edith to see you, sir."

"It's bound to be!" agreed Mr. Wodyer.

"You haven't forgotten meeting me in Liverpool, have you, sir?"

"I never forget meeting people," said Mr. Wodyer. "Lemme see—you were quite a little fellow then, weren't you?"

Glyn stared.

"It was only a year ago!" he said.

Mr. Wodyer coughed.

"Yes; that's what I meant to say," he remarked. "It's wonderful how time passes, isn't it? You haven't changed bit!"

"He doesn't remember Glyn at all, only he's too polite to say so!" Manners murmured to Tom Merry.

And Tom Merry nodded assent.

"You've been living in London since, sir?" Glyn went on. He was somewhat puzzled by Mr. Wodyer, and rather curious about him.

"London and the provinces," said Mr. Wodyer absently. "Of course, a man would rather play in London all the time, but needs must, you know, when the old gentleman drives, and on the whole it's pretty good luck to get bookings for a tour of the provs. I——"

The amazement in the faces of the juniors stopped him.

"Oh, I see! Travelling tutor, I suppose, sir?" said Glyn, in bewilderment.

"Travelling grandmother!" said Mr. Wodyer. "I mean—yes, exactly! You are a sharp kid; you've guessed it first shot. Pass the pickles."

"Here you are, sir!"

"Jolly good spread, if I may say so," remarked Mr. Wodyer. "I've seldom sat down to a better, even when the ghost was walking."

"The—the ghost, sir?"

"Yes," explained Mr. Wodyer. "When they pay up on a tour, you know, we say the ghost walks. One of our expressions in the profession, you know."

"Oh!"

"Ghost didn't always walk," said Mr. Wodyer reminiscently. "I remember being down to my last waistcoat! Ahem! Pass the—the mustard."

"It's at your elbow, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, yes, of course! Indeed? Thank you!"

In spite of Mr. Wodyer's peculiar little slips of the tongue, which caused the juniors constantly renewed surprise, the tea was a great success.

Mr. Wodyer was in high good-humour, and he talked almost incessantly, and he allowed views on life to escape him which surprised the juniors very much. It was pretty evident from his talk that he knew the theatre inside and out, and Tom Merry ventured the remark that he seemed to be a great theatre-goer.

"What-ho!" said Mr. Wodyer. "I've done the legit many a time, of course, though the halls are where the money comes from."

"The legit?" repeated Tom Merry, in wonder.

"The legitimate stage," explained Mr. Wodyer. "The halls are knocking it right and left now, and for a jolly good reason—the theatre charges a high price for poor stuff, and the halls give you good stuff at a low price."

"Bai Jove!"

"You should have seen me at the Friv! I tell you, I was a shriek!" said Mr. Wodyer impressively.

"A—a—a what?"

"A shriek," said Mr. Wodyer. "You should have heard the house—I was simply a scream! I—I mean—— P-p-pass the walnuts!"

And Mr. Wodyer changed the subject hurriedly.

After tea was over, Mr. Wodyer drew out a briar pipe, and proceeded to cram it with a very thick and strong tobacco. He glanced at the juniors, who were watching this proceeding with great interest. Masters at St. Jim's smoked, as a rule, but it was severely and very properly forbidden for growing boys.

"I hope you young fellows don't smoke cigarettes," said Mr. Wodyer.

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Never do!" said Mr. Wodyer. "When you smoke, smoke a pipe, as I do—it's better in every way, and isn't so rough on the voice. Chap who smokes cigarettes can never expect to sing, but a pipe goes easier on the vocal chords."

Tom Merry laughed.

"We don't smoke pipes either, sir," he said.

"Ha, ha! No—I suppose you don't," said Mr. Wodyer, laughing. "I suppose you've no objection to my lighting up—eh?"

"Oh, no, sir; please do!"

And Mr. Wodyer did.

He lighted his pipe, and was soon blowing out thick clouds of tobacco-smoke, that floated in the air and drenched every corner of the room with the smell of strong tobacco.

All the juniors coughed, but they restrained it as much as possible, out of courtesy to their guest.

Mr. Wodyer refilled his pipe three times, and the smoke floated in a blue haze in the room. He had smoked his third pipe by the time he rose to go, and the juniors felt almost suffocated. The new master knocked out his ashes absently into a plate of figs.

"Well, I will be getting along," he said. "Thank you very much—it's been simply a ripping time! If you come up to London, and find yourselves near the Friv at any time—ahem! I—I mean—— Good-bye!"

And Mr. Wodyer departed rather hastily.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Knox Knows.

TOM MERRY & CO. looked at one another.

Figgins stepped to the window and opened it, to allow some of the smoke to escape. He had been too polite to do so while the honoured guest was present.

"My hat!" said Blake.

"My word!" ejaculated Digby.

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, I like him," said Tom Merry; "he's a jolly pleasant chap, but he's the queerest customer for a Form-master at a school that I ever heard of!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Smokes like a giddy furnace, doesn't he?" Monty Lowther remarked. "If some giddy prefect shoved his nose into here now he would get the idea that we'd been smoking."

"Bai Jove, that would be wotten!"

"Wave some of the serviettes about, and clear it off," said Manners.

"Good egg!"

The door of the Hobby Club-room opened, and an unpleasant face looked in. The unpleasant face belonged to an unpleasant person—Knox of the Sixth. The prefect was sniffing suspiciously. The whiff of strong tobacco had reached him in the passage as he passed, and as he knew that the room was used by the juniors for their meetings, he had looked in—perhaps merely to do his duty as a prefect, and perhaps in the secret hope of catching Tom Merry and his friends breaking the rules. Knox had just been in his study smoking himself, as a matter of fact, and he knew nothing about Mr. Wodyer having had tea with the juniors in the Hobby Club-room.

The prefect started in surprise as he saw the clouds of smoke still curling in the air, and the efforts of the juniors ceased at once. They stood transfixed, as it were, with the table-napkins in their hands, with the basilisk eyes of the prefect upon them.

Knox's eyes gleamed with a malicious triumph.

"You young scoundrels! So I've caught you!"

"Weally, Knox——"

"Caught in the act, you disreputable young rascals!"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a wascal, Knox! I considah——"

Knox advanced into the room.

"I always knew that your goody-goody show was all humbug," he said in biting accents. "I knew that you young scoundrels were the worst fellows in the school, with all the appearances you were cunning enough to keep up. I've found you out at last, quite by accident, and I'll make you smart for it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

It struck him as funny. Knowing nothing about the visit of Mr. Wodyer, the prefect had jumped to the conclusion that the juniors had been smoking, and certainly a great number of cigarettes would have been required to make such an amount of smoke. It really looked as if he had happened upon a regular orgie.

If Knox had not been so suspicious, he might have paused to reflect, and he might have saved himself from a blunder. But he was too satisfied with the correctness of his suspicions to have a moment's doubt.

"I've caught you!"

"Weally, Knox——"

"Caught in the very act, you disgraceful young rascals!" went on the prefect, with much satisfaction. "I don't think that even Mr. Railton can have any doubt on the subject now. But I shall take you to the Head. A flagrant case like this is only suitable for the Head to deal with."

"Look here, Knox——"

"Follow me to the Head!"

"But——"

"Weally, Knox, you know——"

"Follow me!" thundered Knox.

The juniors looked at one another.

Knox's mistake was so utterly ludicrous that they could not help grinning, and there was not the slightest danger in following Knox to the Head, because it was quite easy to explain that Mr. Wodyer had been smoking his pipe in the room—an explanation that would, of course, be immediately borne out by Mr. Wodyer when he was appealed to.

The spirit of mischief entered into the juniors. Since Knox would not listen to reason, he could go ahead and report them to Dr. Holmes.

"You'd better let the matter drop, Knox——" began Tom Merry.

The prefect sneered.

"Yes, I'm likely to do that! You might have kept up your rotten hypocrisy for any length of time if I hadn't caught you in the act."

"Knox, you uttah ass——"

"Follow me at once, or I'll lock you in the room and bring the Head here!" shouted Knox.

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, we'll follow you!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "I haven't any objection, for one."

"Wathah not!"

"Come instantly!"

"We're coming, old son!" said Figgins.

And the crowd of juniors marched out of the Hobby Club-room and followed Knox down the passage.

They arrived outside Dr. Holmes' study, and Knox tapped at the door.

"Come in!" said the clear voice of Dr. Holmes.

Knox opened the door, and marched the delinquents in. The crowd of them seemed almost to fill the Head's study. Mr. Railton was in the room, talking to the Head, and he looked in surprise at the crowd of juniors. The Head sat bolt upright, and put on his glasses, and stared at his swarm of visitors.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Dear me! What have you brought all these juniors to my study for, Knox?"

"It is my duty to report them, sir."

"Dear me! For what?"

"Smoking, sir."

"Smoking! You have caught them smoking?"

"Yes, sir."

"This—this is very distressing!" said the Head. "I am very sorry to hear this, my boys! Surely you know better than to break an important rule of the school in this way!"

"Weally, sir——"

"Excuse me, sir," said Tom Merry, gently but firmly. "We haven't been smoking, sir."

"What!"

"We don't smoke, sir," said Blake. "We think it's rotten, sir. We shouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"But—but——" The Head cast a puzzled glance from the juniors to the prefect, and back again to the juniors. "But—but Knox states——"

"It's a mistake, sir."

"Yaas, wathah, sir! Knox is labawin' undah a most widiculous ewwah, sir," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity.

Knox gritted his teeth.

"I have told you the exact facts, sir. I caught them smoking in the room which is used for the meetings of the Junior Hobby Club. I have often had my suspicions that the room was used for secret smoking, but I have never been able to catch them at it before."

"You state that you caught them smoking, Knox?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And you boys deny that you were smoking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yaas, wathah, sir."

Dr. Holmes wrinkled his brows in amazed distress.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "This is very extraordinary!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
A Knock for Knox.

MR. RAILTON was watching the juniors with a keen gaze. He saw the suppressed grins and chuckles, and it dawned upon him that this was in some way a jape upon the unpopular prefect. He came a step nearer.

"May I speak, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly," said the Head.

"You state, Knox, that you caught these juniors smoking?" said Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir, I do!" said Knox, with vicious emphasis.

"Did you actually see the cigars or cigarettes?"

"They had hidden them before I opened the door."

"Ah, then you did not see them?"

"The room was full of tobacco smoke, sir," said Knox savagely. "They had the window open, and were waving cloths about to disperse the smoke."

"That is true, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He admits it!" exclaimed Knox triumphantly.

"Do you admit smoking, Tom Merry?"

"No, sir. Nothing of the sort."

"We should all wegard it as wotten bad form, sir."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"But you admit that the room was full of tobacco smoke, and that you were trying to clear it away when Knox came in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then whence did the tobacco smoke proceed?"

"From a pipe, sir."

"Whose pipe?"

"Mr. Wodyer's, sir. You see, Mr. Wodyer had had tea with us in the Hobby Club-room, and he smoked a pipe after tea, sir," Tom Merry explained.

"Pwecisely, sir."

Knox started. He was taken by surprise; but he did not believe the explanation for a moment. Had he understood Tom Merry's nature better, he would have known that the hero of the Shell was incapable of a lie. But Knox was capable of many lies himself, and he was not likely to believe that the junior was a better fellow than himself.

"He is lying, sir!" he exclaimed hotly.

"Mr. Wodyer was not in the room?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Certainly not."

"Will Mr. Wodyer bear out your statement, Merry?" asked the Head.

"I suppose so, sir. There is no reason why he shouldn't."

"It's a lie!" howled Knox. "If the smoke was made by a master smoking his pipe, why should they be trying to clear it out of the room? Let him answer that!"

"Answer that, Merry," said the Head quietly.

"Certainly, sir. We were afraid that some ass might come in, sir, and think that we had been smoking," said Tom Merry meekly.

There was a suppressed chuckle among the juniors. The Head smiled; he could not help it; and Mr. Railton turned his face away. Knox was crimson with rage.

"Mr. Wodyer must be referred to," said the Head. "As you did not actually see the boys smoking, Knox, it appears to me that you have jumped to a very hasty conclusion. But we shall see."

The Head rang the bell, and Toby, when he appeared, was despatched to the New House to request Mr. Wodyer to step over for a few minutes.

The juniors waited patiently while he was gone.

"You are quite willing to leave it to Mr. Wodyer's evidence, Merry?" the School House master asked.

"Quite, sir."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Why did you not explain to Knox that the smoke was made by Mr. Wodyer smoking his pipe?" asked Mr. Railton.

"He wouldn't give us a chance to explain, sir. The moment he found there was tobacco smoke in the room he started calling us names and marched us off here."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Knox as havin' tweated us with gwoss diswespect, sir."

"Well, we shall see in a few moments," said the Head pacifically.

Knox began to grow a little uneasy. The juniors were evidently brimming with confidence, and did not fear the test. That could only have one meaning—that they had stated the plain truth; for, of course, it was inconceivable that Mr. Wodyer would back up their story unless it was true.

There was a tap on the study door at last, and Mr. Wodyer entered.

He was looking very disquieted.

The new master of the New House had reasons of his own for being alarmed at a sudden summons to the presence of Dr. Holmes—reasons that the others there knew nothing of.

He glanced uneasily at the Head, then at Mr. Railton, and then at the prefect and the juniors. He betrayed a curious desire to keep near the door.

"You sent for me, sir," he said, a little huskily.

"Yes, Mr. Wodyer; thank you for coming. A somewhat peculiar matter has been laid before me, and I want you to give me the exact facts," said the Head. "Knox accuses these juniors of smoking, on the grounds that he found them in the room with the air thick with smoke."

Mr. Wodyer smiled.

"They declare that you had tea with them, Mr. Wodyer, and smoked your pipe afterwards," said the Head. "Do you substantiate the statement?"

"Most decidedly, sir! It is correct," said Mr. Wodyer.

"Thank you very much!"

"Is that all, sir?"

"That is all."

Mr. Wodyer quitted the study. Dr. Holmes turned to the juniors.

"You are completely exonerated, my boys," he said. "You may go."

"Thank you, sir!"

And Tom Merry & Co. marched out into the passage in triumph. Knox the prefect would have followed quickly, his cheeks burning; but the Head made a sign to him to stop. The prefect realised very clearly how egregious a fool he had made himself look, and he would have been glad to escape; but he was not to escape so soon.

"Knox!" rapped out the Head.

"Ye-es, sir!"

"You have done these boys wrong with your hasty suspicions," said the Head severely. "On the flimsiest possible evidence, you found them guilty of a breach of the college rules, and then stigmatised their explanation as falsehood. This points to a very strong prejudice on your part, Knox, against these boys, who have some of the best records, I think, of any boys at St. Jim's. I am no longer surprised that there was trouble when you were placed in charge of the Fourth Form if these are your tactics."

"I—I—sir——"

"I had been undecided how to apportion the blame for the disturbances in the Fourth Form-room, Knox," went on the Head severely. "But it seems to me much clearer now how it should be apportioned. You have been hasty and unjust, Knox. If anything of this sort occurs again I shall have to consider very seriously whether to deprive you of your post as a prefect. That is all. You may go."

And Knox went without a word. He could not trust himself to speak. If he had uttered the words that were upon his lips, he would not only have lost his post as a prefect, but would probably have been expelled from St. Jim's as well.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Astonishing Conduct of Mr. Wodyer.

THE next afternoon was a half-holiday at St. Jim's. Tom Merry & Co. would have been playing football, but, as it happened, on this particular afternoon Edith Glyn was due to pay a visit to the school.

A crowd of juniors were gathered at the gates, waiting expectantly for Glyn's sister to appear.

Bernard Glyn looked at his watch.

"Edith will be here at three," he said. "Five minutes."

Arthur Augustus adjusted his glistening white cuffs.

"I wish she'd come to tea in the study," said Glyn. "But she's going to have tea with Mrs. Holmes—only she's going to walk round the school first. She wants to see my study. But it won't be such a bother as I expected now Wodyer's here."

The Terrible Three grinned; but a severe expression came over the aristocratic features of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

He turned his glimmering eyeglass reprovingly upon the Liverpool lad.

"Weally, Glyn, I twust you would nevah wegard the visit of any lady as a bothah," he said.

"Well, it generally is a bother, isn't it?" asked Glyn, with a stare.

"Weally, Glyn——"

"The pater is coming later, I believe, and so I'm in for it," said Glyn. "It's jolly good of you fellows to stand by me in this way!"

"Not at all," said Tom Merry. "You'd do the same for us, I'm sure."

"Oh, yes; what-ho!"

"But it will be fun, as Wodyer's here!" grinned the Liverpool junior. "Edith doesn't know anything about his being here, you know, and it will be fun to see them meet unexpectedly. I won't say a word till she sees him. I wonder what she will call him?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here she comes!" exclaimed Glyn.

"Bai Jove!"

"You buzz off, and get Wodyer here somehow," said Glyn. "I'll keep Edith talking till you fetch him up. We'll be under the elms."

"Right you are!"

Monty Lowther hurried away towards the Head's garden, where Mr. Wodyer had been seen to stroll. Bernard Glyn and Tom Merry and Manners and D'Arcy went to meet Miss Glyn. Edith Glyn was a very charming girl, a good many years older than her brother, the junior of St. Jim's.

Bernard gave her a careless, brotherly kiss on the cheek, and Edith shook hands with the other juniors. All the fellows liked Miss Glyn very much, and they had a grateful remembrance of the way she looked after their comfort whenever Glyn took them home to tea.

"Friend of yours here, Edie," Bernard Glyn remarked, as they walked into the old quad together.

"A friend of mine!" repeated Miss Glyn.

The juniors exchanged grins.

"Yes. Guess who it is?"

"Miss Cleveland."

"Oh, no, Cousin Ethel isn't here! It's a chap."

Edith Glyn looked puzzled.

"I really don't know whom you can be alluding to, Bernard," she said.

"Chap you knew in Liverpool," said Glyn.

The girl wrinkled her pretty brows in an effort to remember.

"Tutor chap," said Glyn.

Edith started.

"You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do!"

"Bernard!"

"He's here!" grinned Bernard Glyn, forgetting all about his intention to say nothing. "He's the New House master here!"

Edith's cheeks burned red for a moment.

"Is it possible, Bernard!"

"Yes, isn't it, Tommy?"

"Mr. Wodyer is the new master here, certainly," said Tom Merry.

"Arthur Wodyer?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Oh!" said Edith.

Bernard Glyn looked round anxiously.

"I thought you'd like to meet him," he remarked. "Lowther's gone to fetch him, Edie. You'd like to see an—an old friend, wouldn't you?"

"Very much, Bernard," said the girl quietly.

"Buzz off and see where he is, Tom Merry!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry ran off to the Head's garden. He had seen in Edith's face, quiet as it was, the pleasure she felt at the thought of meeting Arthur Wodyer. Tom Merry ran into the Head's garden, and found Monty Lowther talking to Mr. Wodyer. The latter gentleman was looking somewhat disturbed. He had his pipe in his hand, and he had allowed it to go out.

"An old friend of yours, sir," Lowther was saying.

"Ahem! Lowther!"

"I told Glyn I would tell you, sir."

"Ahem!"

"Miss Glyn has arrived," said Tom Merry.

Mr. Wodyer turned pale.

"Oh!" he said. "Ahem! Exactly!"

The two juniors felt surprised. They looked at Mr. Wodyer, and they looked at one another. But the awkward situation was interrupted by the opening of the garden gate. As the mountain did not come to Mahomet, it was necessary for Mahomet to go to the mountain, so to speak; and Bernard Glyn and his friends had walked Miss Glyn to the Head's garden.

Miss Glyn's charming face came into view over the gate as Manners opened it. Mr. Wodyer looked at her with a startled gaze.

Their eyes met.

Miss Glyn looked startled—Mr. Wodyer turned quite pale. For one instant he remained staring blankly at the girl; then, with a sudden bound, he fled, and disappeared into the shrubberies.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
Light at Last.

"BAI Jove!"

"My hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"Phew!"

The crash in the shrubbery died away, and the juniors were left looking at one another in blank amazement. Miss Glyn still looked startled, and she was holding the top of the gate somewhat tightly.

"He's dotty!" muttered Monty Lowther.

"Mad as a hattah, bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

"Was that—was that Mr. Wodyer?" asked Edith haltingly.

"Yes, Miss Glyn."

"He has changed, then, since I saw him last," said Miss Glyn. "Are you quite sure that it was Mr. Arthur Wodyer?"

"Oh, yes!" said Tom Merry. "Arthur Wodyer, M.A. There's no doubt about it, you see, as he's a master here."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It is very curious. He is very like Mr. Wodyer, as I knew him, yet——" The girl paused. "Do you know why he has acted in this extraordinary manner?"

"Haven't the faintest idea."

"Wathah not."

"It's extraordinary."

Miss Glyn nodded, and walked away towards the Head's house. There was a very thoughtful expression upon her face. Her brother went with her, looking blankly amazed; the meeting between his sister and Mr. Wodyer had been more surprising than he had anticipated.

The Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remained staring at one another.

They were too amazed to speak.

"Hallo, what's the trouble?" asked Figgins, as he strolled up with Kerr and Fatty Wynn. "Has Glyn's sister come?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Met Woddy?" asked Fatty Wynn, with a grin.

"Yes."

"Called him 'Owney-owney'?" grinned Kerr.

"Ha, ha! No! He bolted!"

"Eh?"

"He bolted the moment he saw her, as if he thought she was going to bite," said Tom Merry. "Blessed if I can understand it!"

"My hat!"

"There's something fishy about it, somehow," said Monty Lowther. "Miss Glyn didn't seem to think that he was Arthur Wodyer at all. It's queer!"

"Jollay queeah!"

"Let's go and see him. He may be ill, or something," said Figgins. "Where is he?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Gone into the House, very likely," said Kerr. "Let's look."

The conduct of the new master had been so very extraordinary that the juniors were really a little alarmed about him, and they could be pardoned for being curious, too. Mr. Wodyer had been very mysterious from the first; but it was now, as Monty Lowther said, growing a little too thick.

The juniors walked over to the New House, and they stopped outside Mr. Wodyer's study door.

There was a sound within, as of articles being dragged about, and it alarmed them still more.

"Quite dotty!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Better go in and see him."

Tom Merry knocked at the door, and opened it without waiting for a reply. Mr. Wodyer was in the study. He was looking very red and disturbed; but the sound of hurried movements in the room was explained by the fact that he was hastily packing a bag, cramming articles into it in the most reckless manner.

He started as the juniors came in.

"Oh, buzz off!" he exclaimed.

"Really, sir——"

"Don't bother! Keep off the grass!" Mr. Wodyer exclaimed irritably.

"Are you leaving, sir?" asked Figgins, staring at the bag and the untidy articles scattered about the room.

"Yes."

"Leaving St. Jim's?" echoed the juniors.

"Yes, yes!"

"We're sowwy, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Thank you! Don't bother any more. Do you know when the next up train is?"

"Four-thirty, sir," said Tom Merry. "You've lots of time. If you start now you'll have to wait an hour at the station."

"Oh, crikey!"

The juniors gasped. Mr. Wodyer seemed in a state of uncontrollable excitement, but they never expected to hear him say "Oh, crikey!" The unhappy master of the New House bestowed a sudden kick upon the half-packed bag, which sent it flying across the study and scattered its contents on the floor. The juniors crowded back towards the door in alarm.

"Are you—are you ill, sir?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

Mr. Wodyer seemed to catch at the word.

"Ill? Ye-e-es, ill! Of course I am!" he exclaimed. "Why on earth didn't I think of that before? I—I mean, yes, I'm ill! I can't see anybody! Will you explain to them that I can't see anybody, Figgins? You might ask the House-dame to make me some—some gruel. I'm frightfully ill!"

And Mr. Wodyer stretched himself upon the sofa.

"Bai Jove!"

"Run away!" said Mr. Wodyer faintly. "I'm very ill! I can't bear a noise. Tell everybody that I'm not to be bothered. Nobody is to come to my study—no message is to be delivered."

"Shall I buzz off for a doctor, sir?" asked Figgins.

Mr. Wodyer started up.

"No!" he roared. "You young ass—I—I mean, no, I don't want a doctor! It is not so bad as that. All I want is complete quiet and rest. Get out—I mean, run away!"

The juniors withdrew from the study and closed the door. They stood in the passage, staring blankly at one another.

"There's something jolly wrong about all this!" Tom Merry muttered.

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was the sound of a scratching match from the study. It was followed by a smell of tobacco.

Tom Merry grinned.

"He is not too ill to smoke!" he remarked.

"He isn't ill at all," said Kerr. "Either he's a lunatic, or there's something very fishy going on. It can't be a case of an imposture, surely? Miss Glyn didn't think he was Arthur Wodyer. But if he isn't, where is the real man?"

"That's rather thick, Kerr."

"But it is vewy extwaordinawy, deah boys!"

Toby, the page of the School House, came down the passage.

"Mr. Wodyer here?" he asked.

"He's in the study."

"Dr. Holmes wants to see him at once!"

"Phew!"

"What for, Toby?"

"I dunno, Master Tom; but I think it's somethin' the matter," said Toby. "Miss Glyn was with the 'Ead, and they was both looking very solemn. Miss Glyn 'ad been cryin', I think."

Toby tapped at the study door.

"Who's there?" roared a voice.

"Me, sir!" said Toby. "The 'Ead wants to see you in 'is study, sir."

"Tell the Head I'm sorry I can't come. I'm ill—confined to my room. I'm afraid it's going to turn to smallpox—I—I mean, influenza."

"Shall I say smallpox or influenza, sir?" asked the amazed Toby.

"Influenza, you idiot!"

"Yessir!"

Toby departed. Bernard Glyn passed him in the passage and joined the juniors. The Liverpool junior was looking very much disturbed.

"Wodyer in there?" he asked.

"Yes. He says he's ill, and can't see anybody."

Bernard Glyn whistled softly.

"I fancy he'll have to see the Head," he remarked. "There was something queer about him from the start, and it's come out now. My sister declares positively that he isn't Arthur Wodyer. He's like him; but he isn't the man. She's certain about it, she says; and she's very much upset. She thinks something must have happened to the real man, as there is an impostor here in his name."

"My hat!"

"Look out! Here comes the Head!"

The stately figure of the Head was advancing. Dr. Holmes was looking very serious and stern. The new master had refused to go to him, and the Head had come to see the new master. His lips were set hard, and he looked more grim than the juniors had ever seen him look before.

The boys fell back as he came up, and Dr. Holmes knocked at the study door.

"Who's that?" howled Mr. Wodyer from within.

"It is I—Dr. Holmes."

"Oh!"

"Kindly open the door! It appears to be locked," said the Head, having turned the handle in vain.

"You can't come in!" said Mr. Wodyer hurriedly. "It's influenza, and it's catching. Please go away!"

"If you do not immediately open the door," said the Head, in his deep voice, "I shall have it broken in, Mr. Wodyer!"

"Sir!"

"I command you to unlock this door at once!"

The key was heard to turn in the lock. Dr. Holmes swung the door open and entered the study. Mr. Wodyer, looking very crimson and confused, stood facing him, but he looked very uneasy beneath the grim, steady gaze of the Head of St. Jim's.

"I must have an explanation from you, Mr. Wodyer," said Dr. Holmes icily. "Miss Glyn, who knows Arthur Wodyer well, declares that you are not he. She is positive upon this point. In the light of this information, I cannot help recalling several peculiar circumstances in connection with you. What have you to say?"

"I—I—I——"

"I am waiting for your answer."

Mr. Wodyer sank upon the sofa.

"It's all serene!" he gasped. "The game's up, I suppose."

Dr. Holmes' brow grew sterner, harder.

"You confess that you are not Arthur Wodyer?"

"Not much good sticking it out any longer. And Arthur would be pretty ratty if he knew that charming young lady was being troubled about it, I suppose," said Mr. Wodyer philosophically.

"Your name is not Wodyer?"

"Oh, yes, it is!" said the comedian, with a grin. He seemed relieved that it was all over now, and his confidence was returning. He relighted his pipe. "You see," he explained, looking at the Head through a growing cloud of smoke, "I happen to be Arthur Wodyer's brother."

"His brother!" ejaculated the Head.

"Exactly! Austin Wodyer, of the Frivolity Music Hall and the Boss Circuit," said the comedian, with a bow. "Please don't run away with the idea that there is any fraud in the case, sir. I came here to do poor Arthur a favour; though I suppose I've only messed the thing up for him, as a matter of fact. But the best laid schemes of mice and men—— You know the rest."

"Will you kindly explain why you have played this extraordinary trick?" exclaimed the Head, his stern look changing to one of perplexity. "I cannot think that you are a common swindler and impostor."

"That would be rather rough on me," said Mr. Wodyer. "I am nothing of the kind. I am an actor, and I happened to be out of a shop just now; and Arthur is laid up with influenza. He had accepted the offer of a post here, hoping to be well in time to come. Then you sent a telegram, requiring him to turn up at once. He couldn't; the doctor won't let him leave his bed yet. What was to be done? This shop—excuse me, this post—was the chance of a lifetime for Arthur, and he had to let it slide. I hit on the idea of coming here as Arthur, filling the place till he was well and keeping it open for him. See?"

"Oh!" said the Head.

"We are very much alike; and we thought he would be able to change into my place, and nothing said about the matter," said Austin Wodyer. "You see, there was no harm intended. But I suppose I've done for Arthur, instead of helping him. It's beastly rough!"

The Head's face softened. He smiled a little.

"It was a very reckless proceeding on your part," he said. "It has alarmed Miss Glyn very much. She is a great friend of your brother's; and, finding another man passing under his name, she was very much alarmed, fearing that some misfortune had happened to Arthur Wodyer. It was a very reckless thing. But I am glad to find that matters are no worse. You had better come with me and explain to Miss Glyn, and relieve her of her fears. As for your brother, I am sorry he is ill; and I shall certainly not allow this curious affair to interfere with his prospects here. You had certainly better leave St. Jim's. But the post is open for your brother as soon as he is able to take it."

"My only hat!" ejaculated Mr. Wodyer. "I must say you are a brick, sir!"

The Head smiled.

"Come with me to Miss Glyn," he said.

. . . . . .

Tom Merry & Co. learned the curious facts a little later—in time to give Mr. Wodyer a cheer when he departed. The comedian-Form-master was gone, and Figgins & Co. were again without a Housemaster; but the kind old Head had taken a generous view of the matter, and the post was open, waiting for Arthur Wodyer to come and fill it.

"He was a jollay decent chap, whatevah he was, and I'm sowwy he's gone," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "I wust his bwothah will be as decent as he is."

To which Figgins replied heartily:

"Hear, hear!"

And D'Arcy's wish was fulfilled—as all the juniors of St. Jim's admitted when they saw Figgins & Co.'s new master.

THE END.

THE SPECTRE OF THE FOREST!

A Magnificent Long, Complete Story dealing with the Great Adventures of

JACK, SAM, & PETE.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Fight in the Hut—Tom and the Ghosts—The Ghost Appears.

THE tropical sun was blazing down upon the African forest with all its full fury, for it was noon. Even the dense foliage of the giant trees failed to keep out the burning heat, and here and there rays of sunlight fell upon the earth, where it found its way through the trees.

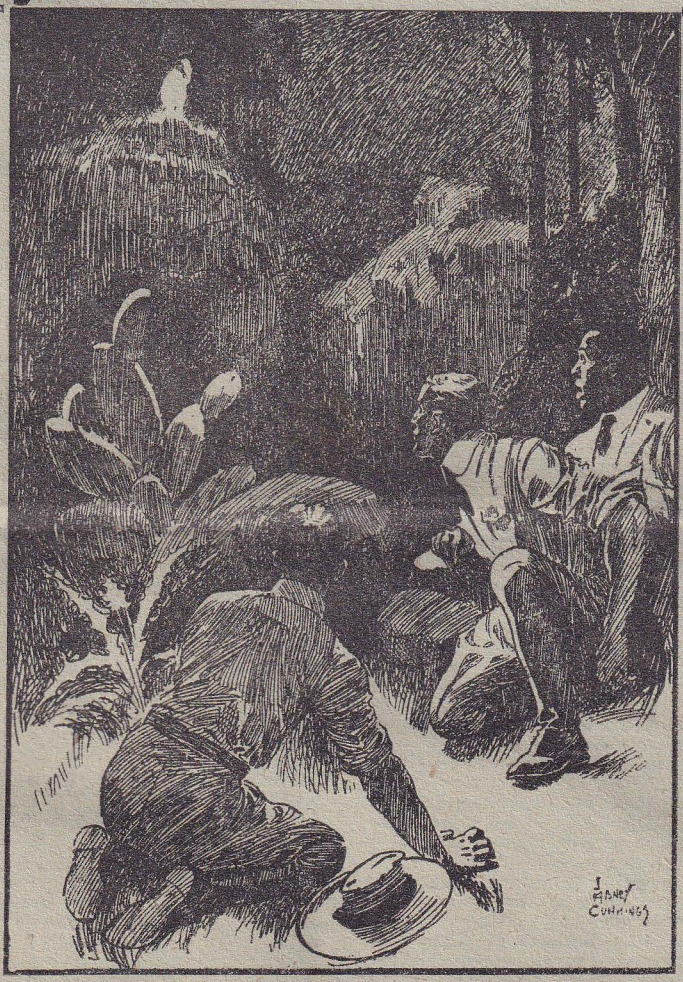
All was very silent, for the beasts of prey were in their lairs, sleeping through the heat of the day, and the voices of the birds were hushed.

Occasionally the chattering of a monkey arose, but even this noise was seldom heard. It seemed as though the awful heat was causing all living things to sleep, or, better said, to lie dormant till the cool of night.

Through the dense forest strode a huge form, tearing down the bushes and tangled creepers. Clouds of steam came from its head, other clouds from its nostrils.

It was Pete's steam man.

Behind it strode Pete steering the strange form round the trees; and it would be hard to say who looked the hotter, Pete or his steam man. Jack and Sam, his comrades, were following him; then came Rory—Pete's dog—with his tongue hanging out, and looking as disgusted as a dog could look.



"Golly! Dat's mighty strange!" growled Pete, gazing in blank amazement at the apparition. "What do you make ob it, Jack?"

Occasionally Rory would give a vicious snap at the swarms of flies that hovered round him, but it was doubtful even if a rabbit had darted through the bushes, whether Rory would have taken the trouble to follow it.

"Do you think we are coming to the cool shade of the forest about which you spoke, Pete?" gasped Jack.

"Jack, I wish you wouldn't talk 'bout coolness!" growled Pete. "It makes me tink ob a hammock hung under de shade ob leafy trees, and ice drinks all round me, and dat ain't a bit like de reality ob dis steam man. I dunno dat I had eber come across such a perfect beast in all my life. He gibs off enough heat to cook steak-puddings by, and his petrolly perfume is such dat he is de only one de gnats don't bite. If I was de king ob dis country I would transport ebery gnat dat libs here. It's disgusting to tink dat dey can get as much as dey want to drink while we can't get as much as a drop ob water. 'Spect I'll hab to stop my steam man just directly, and drink his petroleum."

"I don't think you need trouble," said Sam. "For isn't that a river over there to the right?"

"Golly!" gasped Pete. "I beliebe it is. And ain't I mighty tankful! I guess dere won't be much ob dat riber left by de time I hab finished drinking. Dis way to London, boys!"

The comrades quickened their pace at the thought of getting some water to drink. They reached the river at last, and drunk their full of the clear water. They felt considerably refreshed afterwards, and continued their march.

At length they caught sight of a hut in the distance, and made towards it. Having hidden his steam man, Pete pushed the door open, and an extraordinary sight met his gaze.

There had evidently been a scuffle going on inside the place, for two men were seated on the floor, and both of them looked the worse for wear. One had got a black eye, and the other had got a big lump on his forehead, and a nasty-looking bruise on his right cheek.

"Golly! What are you two trying to do?" exclaimed Pete, gazing from one to the other.

"You seem to be enjoying yourselves, but at de same time I don't tink you ought to keep all de fun to yourselves."

"You can say what you like, Tom," said one of the men on the floor, whose name was Bill. "But I maintain as there's no such things—bust it!—as ghosts!"

"I've met over five hundred, Bill!" groaned Tom.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete.

"He's never seen one," growled Bill, "'cos there ain't such things."

"Well, dat seems sort ob conclusive," observed Pete. "I dunno weder Bill or Tom is right, but it seems to me dat a man who has seen five hundred ghosts ought to know dat dere are such tings; and dat de man who ain't seen one ain't sort ob competent to judge. But de point is dis—how am you two going to settle de question? If you keep on fighting ober ghosts or no ghosts—dat's de question—seems to me dat you will hurt each oder, and not prove de point."

"I won't allow no man to say there's no such things as ghosts when I've seen thousands!" howled Tom.

"Look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "at de rate you'm going on, you will see two-free million! You'm getting from hundreds to thousands."

"Well, I don't care!" hooted Tom, who was most frightfully excited. "I've seen a ghost!"

"Yah, yah, yah! You remind me ob de little boy and de tom-cats. He told his moder dat dere were thousands ob cats in de garden, and she said, 'How dare you exaggerate in dat manner, Tommy?' So he said, 'Well, if dere ain't thousands, dere are hundreds.' 'Nonsense!' said de moder. 'Well, I don't care,' said Tommy. 'Dere's our old tom-cat and anoder.' You see, dat boy came down wid his reckoning, and you'm gone up, and bof your names were Tom."

"There is ghosts!" declared Tom, with conviction.

"There ain't!" howled Bill.

"You're a lying thief!" hooted Tom.

Bill seized the leg of a stool on which a man named Bob was seated, jerked him to the floor, and hurled the stool at Tom's head.

Fortunately for Tom, it missed its mark, and unfortunately for Pete it caught him on the shins, and caused him to utter a yell of pain.

"Golly!" he exclaimed. "I wish you two would send your arguments in anoder direction!"

"I'm sorry, mate!" growled Bill.

"So am I, old hoss," said Pete. "I dunno when I felt much sorrier dan when dat stool caught me on de shins. Still, what I want to point out is dat you can't prove your point by fighting."

"Haw, haw!" howled Bob. "I'm inclined to think there ain't such things as ghosts, only don't dare to say so, 'cos Tom is so strong on the point—so's Bill. Personally, I don't care whether there's ghosts or not; but they seem to, so we are letting 'em fight it out. Tom says as Bill saved his life, but Bill says as he didn't. At any rate, it doesn't seem to matter, 'cos if they go on fighting much longer over ghosts both of 'em will be corpses!"

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "I neber heard anyting like it! But look here, old hosses, you ain't going to fight any more to-day. I dunno weder dere's ghosts or not, but I'm mighty certain dat dere's no more fighting to-night."

"You can't stop us!" roared Bill.

"No, more he can't, mate!" declared Tom. "We will fight it out like men. Come on!"

"Are you two going to fight any more?" inquired Pete, stepping between them.

It was rather a silly question, because there could not be a doubt about the matter. They were squaring up to each other.

"We are!" growled Bill. "And if you don't stand out of the road, I'll——"

Pete picked him up, and tucked him under his right arm, and then he seized Tom, and got him under the left arm, and thus he bore them from the shanty, while the rest of the men followed to see the fun.

Pete carried the struggling pair to the river, and, dropping Bill, placed his foot on him, while he flung Tom into the water, and, a few minutes later, Bill followed him.

It was an object lesson that had its effect, because when the pair struggled out, and clambered up the bank, they walked to the shanty without uttering a word, and without attempting to renew the contest, except by words.

"Now, look here, boys," exclaimed Pete, "I would advise you not to continue de argument! I'm inclined to tink dat Bill is right, and dat dere ain't ghosts, 'specially as Jack says he is right in dat respect. Now, Tom says dere are, and he ought to know, as he has seen a few million or so."

"I said one."

"Tought you mentioned more dan dat. Still, one is enough for our purpose. Now, Bill don't seem to be quite satisfied on de point, so dat dere ain't any particular weight ob evidence one way or anoder. I tink if you leabe it dere it will be much more satisfactory dan punching each oder's heads, and it's most bound to be far less painful."

Bill and Tom took this sage advice, and became quite friendly again; but perhaps it was because their damages were pretty equally divided.

When Pete suggested getting in a supply of game for the men, his comrades were quite agreeable. They felt they required a rest from the steam man, and Pete left him in the forest under a sheltering tree.

Pat and Bob went up the river in a boat, and arranged to bring a fresh supply of ammunition as soon as they could get back from the township. But a week passed by before they returned, and during this time the comrades got in a good supply of game.

The whole party had just finished a very substantial supper one night, and everything promised to be comfortable for the night, when Tom, whom Pete had rather vexed, made the remark that Pete was a more obstinate brute than Bill.

"Obstinate, be hung!" growled Bill. "It's you that's obstinate, you bumble-headed idiot! Haw, haw, haw! A man of your time of life to believe in ghosts! Why, you are like a little timid child, only you ain't got a child's sense! I'll admit the nigger is an obstinate brute, and it follows that he's a lot more obstinate than me, 'cos I ain't obstinate at all!"

"Why, you are the most obstinate, contradictory brute on the face of the earth!"

"You are a liar! I ain't contradictory at all! I never contradict a man, unless he's wrong!"

"You sha'n't call me a liar, though you did save my life once!" roared Tom, springing to his feet.

"I didn't save your life, and you are a liar!"

"I don't care a bit about whether I'm a liar or not, but I ain't going to be called one by you, or——"

"There ain't sech things as ghosts, and—— Woohooh! I—— There—— Take it away! I ain't well!"

Both Bill and Tom were gazing from the window, and there they saw a mystic form moving onwards, and as it passed from their point of view they went outside.

"Golly! Dat's mighty strange, too!" groaned Pete, gazing in blank amazement at the apparition. "What do you make ob it, Jack?"

"I really don't know!" exclaimed Jack. "It looks like a glowing form."

"M'yes! I can see as much as dat for myself."

"It's the ghost!" gasped Tom. "The ghost I saw years and years ago!"

"What's your opinion, Bill?" inquired Pete.

"There ain't no sech——"

"Bill," gasped Tom, "don't say it! It's sinful, and I wouldn't like that ghost to bring you death."

"I don't see how a ghost could harm a chap!" growled Bill.

"Don't talk like that, mate!" exclaimed Tom. "You saved my life, and——"

"No, I didn't!"

"Bust! This ain't a time to lie! Just look at the awful thing moving towards us! I believe our time has come!"

"Did that other ghost you was talking of harm you?" inquired Bill, gazing with dilated eyes at the strange apparition.

"Don't talk of it!" groaned Tom.

"Then I'm off!" howled Bill, bolting into the shanty as hard as he could tear.

"Golly, golly!" groaned Pete. "I'm going to see dat de man comes to no harm!" But he had scarcely entered the shanty when Bill, who had got a revolver in either hand, commenced to blaze away at him, under the impression that he was the ghost come for summary vengeance.

Fortunately, Bill was in such a state of terror that his aim was very wild—in fact, he appeared to be firing with his eyes shut, otherwise he could scarcely have mistaken Pete for a ghost, because Pete was not luminous, and one usually expects a ghost to be white.

"Here, old hoss," growled Pete, "what are you trying to do?"

"Ain't you the ghost, mate?"

"Nunno!"

"Well, where is the ghost?"

"Dere ain't any such tings, Bill. You know you said so, and I was ob your opinion, and it won't do to let Tom crow ober you."

"But what is that 'ere thing walking along all aglow?" groaned Bill.

"Dere ain't such tings as ghosts, Bill. Jack says so."

"What's he know about ghosts?"

"I dunno, 'cos he ain't told me; but I should say he couldn't know so mighty much if dere ain't such tings. It's mighty awful, ain't it? Still, we'm got de consolation ob knowing dere ain't such tings as ghosts, so——"

"How do you know that?"

"Eh?"

"I say, how do you know there ain't such things as ghosts?"

"Well, I 'spect it is 'cos you told me—you and Jack togeder."

"I suppose you have got eyes, and saw that 'ere ghost?"

"Must say it looked rader as dough I saw it. Still, if dere ain't such things—why, I couldn't hab seen it. Dat stands to reason."

"Well, of all the stupid niggers I ever came across, you are the worst! I saw that 'ere ghost, and do you think as I'm a man not to believe his own eyes?"

"Nunno, Bill. But you'm got to recollect dat you said dere weren't such tings, and you can't go back on dat, can he, Tom?" added Pete, as the rest of the astonished men entered the place.

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Tom. "I told him again and again that I'd seen ghosts, and he started calling me a liar and punching my head."

"I'll stick to what I said!" declared Bill. "There ain't no such things as ghosts."

"You have seen one."

"Ay, mate, I'll admit that! There ain't no such things as ghosts."

"Then how is it that you saw one?"

"Now, see here, Tom; we all know that you are a bad-tempered, obstinate brute, as won't be convinced—but you can't help that! What I said was that there's no such things as ghosts. I didn't say there wasn't one solitary ghost; and that's very different to there being a lot! You was talking of a lot of 'em, and I said there worn't no such things as ghosts! I said ghosts particular, 'cos I knew there might be one; but what I maintain is, that there ain't two, or more. If I was to put that pipe on the table, and say to you, 'Tom, there's pipes,' you would natural say, 'You are a liar, Bill'; and you'd be right—the same as I'm right in telling you that you are a liar when you say there's ghosts. One ghost ain't ghosts! You can't get over that, Tom; and it ain't no good you trying to shift out of it, 'cos you are wrong!"

"Well, it ain't no good talking any more to you," said Tom. "I know you are wrong, and so do all these chaps here. What's more, you know you are wrong yourself; only you are too thundering mean to own it, like a man! You ought to have been a lawyer, or some of those chaps as gets their living by lying, and trying to deceive other people!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Dat's one for de lawyers!" cried Pete. "But has de ghost disappeared, Jack?"

"Yes; it disappeared behind the trees, and——"

Jack's words were interrupted by a frightful yell, and Pat leapt into the shanty, banging and bolting the door after him.

"Take it away!" howled Bill, levelling his revolver at the door, and blazing away the few remaining shots he had left. "Don't you get bringing your ghosts here!"

"Bedad, I've seen one!" cried Pat, gazing round the shanty, with an expression of dread on his face. "Faith, I was in the forest, hunting game, and a ghost came on the scene!"

"There you are!" exclaimed Bill. "It jest shows you how correct I am! A ghost—not two or three ghosts! One ghost I will admit, but I ain't admitting more!"

"I tink you'm quite right not to admit too many ob dem; 'specially when I'm in your neighbourhood, 'cos I don't like ghosts," said Pete. "I ain't at all accustomed to dem, and my only consolation 'bout dem is your nasturtium dat dey don't exist—'scept de one. I was only just wondering; suppose we saw anoder ghost, ob a different shape and size—a sort ob full-sized ghost. I wonder if dere would be ghosts den?"

"Two ghosts is ghosts—one ain't!"

"I see! Well, I'm going to lay dat ghost!" declared Pete. "I ain't allowing ghosts to come here frightening me in dis manner!"

"You had best leave him alone, mate," said Tom, shaking his head. "I've had experience of ghosts, and know their horrid natures. They ain't safe!"

"Did dey eber hurt you, Tom?"

"I should think they did!"

"Sort ob wounded you?"

"Yes; scarred me for life!"

"Let's look at de scar."

"What?"

"Let me see de scar."

Tom hesitated for a moment, and then he bared his breast and revealed a large scar.

"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped Bill. "If that don't take the cake! And he calls himself a truthful man! Why, I saw a savage give him that scar, and it was the time as I saved his life!"

"Why, you said you never saved my life!" cried Tom.

"I said I wasn't in the habit of saving your life, or words to that effect. How could I save your life, when you don't know as it is saved? You might be struck down by ghosts, or——"

"You said there wasn't ghosts!"

"I said there was one, and not two; and what I meant——"

"Never mind what you meant. I ain't going to believe that. And I ain't such a fool as to believe what you say, 'cos of all the liars as I ever come across you are the worst. There is ghosts, and you know it!"

"Yah, yah, yah! It ain't no good getting into dat argument again! Bill has seen one ghost, and it stands to reason dat if he sees a few more he will hab to admit dere are ghosts!"

"I ain't going to see no more."

"Well, dat all depends on weder dey come to you or not," said Pete. "Should say anoder ghost anyting like de one we saw would be 'most bound to make himself seen! Now, do you tink it is safe to go to sleep, Bill?"

"Haw, haw, haw! You ain't surely frightened of a ghost?"

"Eh?"

"I say you ain't frightened of them."

"Nunno! I ain't frightened ob dem—'cos dere ain't dem; dere's only it! Now, I must say I feel a bit nervous 'bout it. I don't like it at all. I dunno dat it has got de right to roam dese forests just as if dey belonged to it. I suppose it ain't de ghost ob dat savage dat gabe you de wound, Tom?"

"I believe it was," said Tom. "You see, the brute was jest going to spear me a second time, when Bill clumped him on the head in a manner that was bound to stop his future spearing. Now, I shouldn't wonder, Bill, if that wasn't his ghost come back to haunt you, and make your life a misery till it gets its revenge!"

"Ghosts ain't revengeful," said Bill.

"You don't know nothing about 'em! First of all you say there ain't such things, and then you talk of 'em as if you knew all about their ways! I'm inclined to think that you will find that ghost revengeful enough if he ever comes across you; and if you take my tip, you won't go out of this place unless you are well protected, though it ain't no good getting protected against ghosts, 'cos they can do whatever they like with you, and you can't possibly hurt them. They are the most dangerous things on the face of this earth, and you will find that out to your cost when that one starts chawing you up!"

"They ain't got no teeth; they are only a sort of—vapour!"

"How was it you were frightened of that one, then?"

"Me! What, me frightened of a ghost! Haw, haw, haw! That's pretty good, too!"

"Worn't you frightened?"

"Of course I wasn't!"

"Oh, I thought you was, the way you started howling and blazing away at random! Still, it don't matter to me! I'll believe you weren't frightened if you will walk up the height to the spot where we saw that ghost, and stop there for half an hour all by yourself!"

"So I will, any day!"

"I don't want you to do it in the day; I want you to do it in the night. I'll bet you a sovereign you don't start off now!"

"I ain't got a sovereign."

"Well, I'll trust you."

"I'm too tired to do it to-night, but I will some other night!"

"Well, will you to-morrow night?"

"Of course I would do it. I would do it any night, or any day! But what's the good of throwing temptation in the way of a ghost? Temptation is always a thing as I set my face against! It's downright wrong to tempt a man, and in the case of a ghost it's even worse!"

"That means that you are frightened to go?"

"No, it don't."

"Well, it must mean something."

"No, it don't. I'm not the sort to harm a man, and it's just the same with a ghost. If you tempt a ghost you harm it, and I wouldn't do that for anything."

"Yah, yah, yah! You'm frightened, Bill!" said Pete.

"No, I ain't."

"Den why don't you go, and get de sovereign?"

"'Cos I'm tired. Why don't you go and lay the ghost, the same as you say you are going to do?"

"Eh?"

"Why don't you go to-night?"

"'Spect I must be sort ob tired, too. You see, ghosts—at least, de one we hab seen; dere ain't any more—are rader tiring tings. Did I eber tell you how tired dat ghost a friend ob mine saw——"

"No, and I don't want to know, 'cos he never saw one. I've said there ain't such things as ghosts, and I'll stick to that."

"'Spect he must hab seen dis particular ghost, den. Still, we ain't got de right to make ourselves tired talking 'bout ghosts. I don't want to dream ob dem. So good-night, boys! I'm going to sleep."

Pete lay down on the floor, and Rory followed his example; only he lay at the further side of the shanty, because he knew what his master's snoring was like, and did not care to get too close to it.

Bill and Tom continued their everlasting argument, and they were almost coming to blows again, when Pete's snoring burst forth.

"Ain't it mighty awful?" growled Bill. "I tell you what it is, mate; that nigger must be thinking of that ghost, and thinking as it is throttling of him! He couldn't possibly be making that row if he wasn't dreaming of something of the sort!"

"I don't know, Bill," laughed Jack. "You see, you haven't heard Pete sleeping as often as I have."

"I'm a-going to wake him up!"

"I wouldn't advise you to do so. He might take you for the ghost, and start punching you; and Pete hits very hard. You will find that out to your cost if you attempt to wake him."

"But what am I to do?" growled Bill. "I can't possibly sleep through that row!"

"You will get used to it in time."

"I ain't so sure. Seems to me it would take me about ten years to get used to that horrid row!"

Whether Bill got any sleep or not, Jack and Sam did not know, for they fell asleep themselves; and when they awoke the following morning, they found Bill and Tom still discussing ghosts.

Bill was far more courageous now that it was light, and he was trying to explain away the mysterious form they had seen; but it was evident that he believed in it, although he did his best to prove to Tom that it wasn't there. And at last he declared that he would win that sovereign, and, however tired he was that night, ascend the height and stop there for half an hour.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Gigantic Ghost—Bill Changes His Mind—A Bad Accident—Pete Gets into Hot Water—Unproven.

THAT day there was a heavy thunderstorm, accompanied by such torrents of rain that none of the men went out; but it passed away in the afternoon, and then some of them went out for a little hunting.

Pete declared that he was too tired to accompany the rest; but later on he followed one of the men, whose name was Pat, and they both made their way up the height.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "Makes me laugh when I tink ob dat ghost, Pat!"

"Faith, we haven't convinced him yet! How did the spalpeen look from the distance?"

"Yah, yah, yah! Someting mighty awful! Dere was a sort ob gloviness 'bout de ghost dat looked most natural!"

"Just like a real ghost?"

"Neber saw anyting more like!"

"Have you ever seen a real ghost?"

"Nunno."

"Then how do you know it was like one?"

"Eh?"

"How do you know it was like a real ghost if you have never seen one?"

"Well, I should say dat was just like a ghost ought to look. Dere was someting specially striking 'bout his glow. You tink we hab got enough ob de phosphorus mixture?"

"Faith, there's enough for twenty ghosts!"

"Well, we don't want as many as dat," observed Pete. "What I want to do is to convince Bill dat dere are ghosts; and if we make a second ghost, much larger dan de first, he will hab to admit dat dere are two. I had got dat idea in mind when you brought de sheets and de phosphorus from de settlement; dat's why I got you to buy it for me. Now, seeing dat you managed de steam man all right last night, do you tink dat you will be able to do it again to-night?"

"If it is all the same to you, I would rather you managed the spalpeen the next time; for he burnt me in several places, and I must confess that he's the most unruly brute that ever I set eyes on."

"Well, I don't want you to manage him dat way," said Pete. "What I want is a full-sized ghost."

"If that steam man isn't full-sized, I should say ghosts must be very large."

"They are," declared Pete, with conviction. "De bigger de ghost, de more natural it is. Now, what I tought was dat we should smear de sheets all ober wid de stuff, fasten dem togeder, and wrap dem round you."

"But I'm not as big as the steam man."

"You will be if you stand on his shoulders."

"By the powers, I'm not going to do that!" gasped Pat.

"You see, Pat, I want to make de man taller."

"Maybe; but if you want to do that you will have to let him stand on your shoulders, or else stand on his!"

"I'm much heavier dan you are, old hoss."

"I know you are; but the spalpeen will never be feeling your weight."

"I wasn't tinking ob dat; but if I was to fall, I should feel it more dan you would, and dat's what I don't want."

"True for you, my boy; but don't you see, if I was to fall I should feel it more than you would, and that's what I don't want."

"I tink I could balance myself on his shoulders widout falling," mused Pete, gazing at the steam man, who was standing by a clump of bushes which they had just reached. "I am going to chance it; but it would gib de show away, Pat, if de ghost was to come in half. You see, we might say dat steam man stands 'bout eight feet high, and if I add my six feet to his height, dat makes—how much would you say dat would make?"

"Faith, it sounds to me fourteen feet!"

"Bery well. I ain't got time to check you to see if you are correct, but a fourteen-foot ghost would be quite respectable, and it would be sort ob impressive. We can knot de sheets togeder so as to gib him de proper robes, and you can keep behind him to steer him direct to de shanty."

"Suppose they start firing at him?"

"I don't mind so long as dey fire at his lower regions."

"But suppose they fire at his top storey?"

"Eh?"

"Suppose they hit you?"

"I'm most afraid it would hurt, 'specially if Sammy did de firing, 'cos he aims mighty straight; but den Sammy wouldn't be at all likely to start blazing away. Dat man neber fires unless he's quite sure he ain't going to hit de wrong party; and when Jack and Sammy see dat ghost walking towards de shanty, dey will guess I hab got someting to do wid it, especially as I shall be missing. Nunno, dey won't fire; and dey won't let de oder men fire if dey can help it. I don't mind chancing dat, but it's standing on de steam man's shoulders dat I'm tinking about. Yah, yah, yah! I want to gib Bill a big surprise, and I feel sure de steam man will be able to do dat wid my assistance. I shall run all risks for de purpose."

Pat merely grinned. He had not the slightest doubt that Pete would succeed in surprising all the men at the shanty, let alone Bill. Pat had been most handsomely tipped by Pete, and was not disposed to place any obstacles in his way.

They smeared the stuff Pete had instructed Pat to purchase

for him at the settlement on the sheets. It had cost a considerable amount, and the steam man was likely to prove an expensive ghost; but Pete did not mind that at all so long as he proved an effective one.

"I'm thinking you will never be able to balance yourself on his shoulders," observed Pat, when their preparations were almost completed.

"I dunno 'bout dat," said Pete. "I can walk on a loose tight-rope."

"Bedad! A man who could do that ought to be able to do almost anything. I should say a loose tight-rope would be a thing you don't often see."

"Nunno! Dey do sound rader Irish, don't dey? Still, dat ain't got anyting to do wid ghosts. Wait till I climb dis tree, 'cos it will be cooler dan climbing up de steam man, and I shall be able to get on his shoulders dat road. Yah, yah, yah! What could be nicer dan dat?"

The ease with which Pete balanced himself greatly surprised Pat, but then he did not know that he had spent some years of his life in a circus.

"Now, how do you tink de ghost looks?" inquired Pete, when he had drawn the luminous sheets around himself and the steam man.

"Ha, ha, ha! Faith, I never saw a more perfect ghost in all my life! I'd say you would be enough to frighten any man, woman, or child!"

"Den you can depend on it dat I shall be enough to frighten Bill, 'cos my private opinion ob dat man is dat it doesn't take such a mighty lot to frighten him. Now, listen to dese instructions, Pat, and mind you follow dem exactly, 'cos I don't want any accident wid de upper portion ob dis ghost. You just start him slowly, like you did last night, and mind you get hold ob de right lever. Den you steer him direct for de shanty, and when I gib de word you stop him. After dat I will tell you what to do, but I want to get him away again widout his component parts being discovered!"

"Sure, I'm inclined to think that you are wise there!" exclaimed Pat. "You see, if you get frightening those men, the spalpeens won't be best pleased with you; and as they are rough in their manners when they are angry, they may set on to you!"

"I don't mind dat at all, Pat, 'cos wid de aid ob Jack and Sammy we could sort ob knock chips off dem. Still, I 'spect I shall get away all right. You must bring de steam man round in a sort ob swoop, and if you keep at some little distance from his glow, why, dey ain't likely to see you in de darkness!"

Now, whether a man believes in ghosts or not, it is apt to be trying to the strongest nerves to see a gigantic form, all luminous, moving silently through the darkness, especially if the form is moving in the direction of the man.

Bill's nerves were not remarkable for their strength. Although he declared he did not believe in ghosts, like a good many other men, who tell you about their bravery, he would not have cared to meet a genuine ghost on a dark night in, say, a lonely churchyard, which is, of course, the proper place for spectres to frequent.

It so happened that Bill gazed out of the window at the very moment that the gigantic ghost hove in sight, and the howl of terror he uttered caused everyone else to look out.

There were only two men in that shanty who were anything like calm, and they were Jack and Sam; but perhaps that was because Pete knew rather more concerning that ghost than anyone else.

It was certainly a most weird-looking object, and its enormous height was very puzzling to Jack and Sam. To the others it appeared to be superhuman, and there was not a man among them who did not believe that it was a genuine ghost.

"This is all your doing, Bill!" gasped Tom. "It's come to have vengeance on you 'cos you said there wasn't such things as ghosts. You ought to go out and let it take you off!"

"Woohooh! It ain't coming this way! It ain't coming anywhere near the shanty!"

"Howling out lies at it won't make matters better, mate. You know it's a-coming this way, and, what's more, it's coming for you!"

"I'm going to give up beer and 'bacca!" groaned Bill. "I've never liked it!"

"Well, you ain't put a bad quantity down for a man as don't like beer," observed Bob, who was far calmer either than Bill or Tom, though he was not anything like calm. "Personally, I don't see how it could interest a ghost whether you used a gallon or so of beer a day or not, when you get the chance. It's a-coming straight for us!"

"Let's bolt, mates!" exclaimed Bill.

"I'm stopping where I am," declared Tom. "But I'd like to know your opinion about ghosts afore you die!"

"I said there was one of 'em!"

"How is it this one is three times as large as the one you saw last night?"

"It has growed. A ghost will grow, the same as a man."

"Bust me! It has growed a sight quicker than any man ever did!"

"It will disappear all of a sudden," declared Bill, who only hoped that what he said was true. "A ghost will disappear sort of sudden-like!"

Bill may have been perfectly correct with the generality of ghosts. No doubt they do disappear suddenly, but this particular ghost did not show the slightest sign of disappearing. It came straight on, and the manner in which its upper portion balanced itself was really creditable. Pete could run a large globe up a narrow, winding plank while he stood on that globe, but to stand on the shoulders of his steam man while he went marching along was quite another matter, and one that should have had a lot of practice.

Pete swayed from side to side, and backwards and forwards.

"By the powers, you are doing it splendidly!" exclaimed Pat, gazing upwards with admiration. "You are giving the spalpeen a most ghostly swaying motion."

"I know I am, old hoss!" growled Pete. "But don't you see, I'm trying to cultivate a little less ob de swaying motion. I wouldn't like to fall off de steam man's shoulders, specially if I fell forwards, and he walked ober me afterwards, 'cos he's heavy, and has got spikes in his trilbies."

"Faith, there's not the slightest chance of your falling!" declared Pat.

"You may be right, Pat, and I'm too busy to argue de point at dis moment, only do be careful 'bout de steering, else I'm mighty certain dis ghost will come in half, and I wouldn't like anyting like dat. When I murmur 'Swoop!' mind you do it, and bring de steam man round as gradually as you can widout upsetting me."

"Faith, I can do that as easily as I could steer a ship in a seaway!"

"'Nuff said!" murmured Pete.

The ghost moved onwards, and Pete, between his luminous sheets, could see the surprised faces at the window of the little shanty now.

Pat kept well under cover of the ghost's flowing and luminous robes, and he could hear the commotion in the shanty.

Straight for the shanty the ghost marched, until but a few yards separated them, and in the darkness of the night it looked really horrid.

"Swoop!" murmured Pete. And this is exactly what Pat did; so did the ghost.

It had been moving onwards at a slow pace, and as Pat fumbled with the levers beneath the sheet, instead of getting hold of the steering one to bring the ghost round to starboard, he turned the one that sent it on at full speed.

The effect was truly disastrous. With one fell swoop the ghost dashed into the side of the shanty, and Pete dived head-first on the roof.

Perhaps this would not have mattered much, because his head is hard and thick, but though the boards of the roof might have been hard enough for his liking, they were not thick enough to bear his weight and the impact.

He went through them with a tearing crash, dropped on the top of Bill, and hurled Tom to the floor by striking him in the mouth with his feet.

One howl of terror rang out. All the men joined in it, but it sounded like one howl because they kept time. After that there were roars of laughter. Jack and Sam caused those, for they saw Pete sitting up and gazing round the shanty with a surprised look on his black face.

"Do stop your laughter, Jack!" exclaimed Pete, groping about for his pipe. "I dunno when I had such a bad turn as dat. Where did I come from? I can't hear what you say when you guffaw in dat manner. It's all right, Rory, I ain't killed."

"But I am!" howled Bill.

"Well, I'm sorry for dat, Bill," exclaimed Pete, winking

at Jack. "But you must know dat little accidents are bound to come in dis life, and what you ought to do is to face dem boldly. Did I eber tell you 'bout dat man who met wid an accident——"

"Bust your man and his accident!" howled Bill, leaping to his feet and clenching his fists. "I'll break your head for this work, just you see if I don't!"

"Well, I dunno dat my head will stand much more knocking about. You see, I hab been using it for boring holes frough de roof ob your shanty, and it ain't done eider de head or de roof any good."

"You raving maniac, you!"

"I dunno 'bout being a maniac, but it seems to me dat you are doing de raving part ob de business. Now you sit down, Bill, and I will tell you 'bout a little girl who——"

"If you don't get up I'll knock you down!"

"How do you tink he will manage dat, Jack?" inquired Pete, shaking his head gravely as he gazed at his broken pipe, the bowl of which he had now found. The stem was in another place. "I shall certainly hab to get up before he can knock me down, and I ain't at all sure dat I ain't broken bof my legs, my spinal pillar, and de vetebra ob my neck."

"Ha, ha, ha! It's lucky that you have not damaged yourself more severely," said Jack. "What were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to make a convincing sort ob ghost."

"I must say that I consider you have succeeded. If that ghost was not convincing, I don't see how you are going to get one that is."

"Well, I don't care," growled Bill; "I said there was no such things as ghosts, and this proves that I was perfectly right. I can't understand people being frightened of ghosts, when there's no such things."

"I suppose you wasn't frightened?" exclaimed Tom, getting up and gazing at Bill.

"Of course I wasn't frightened!"

"Then what did you start howling for?"

"You ain't near so truthful as you ought to be, Tom."

"You said there was no such things as ghosts, and——"

"Nor there ain't. Do you call that stupid brute of a nigger anything like a ghost? The fust one we saw wasn't a ghost, and he will tell you so if you ask him."

"Dat was a misrepresentation ob a ghost, my dear old hoss!" admitted Pete. "You see, I wanted to convince you dat dere were ghosts, and so I made a couple ob dem. De first one, worked by my steam man, was most successful, and when you tried to shift out ob de matter, I tought I would make a second ghost, quite different to de first, and one on a larger scale. Well, he was not what I would call an unsuccessful ghost, only de steering arrangement was a little faulty."

"You have nearly broke my neck," growled Bill, "and I think as you ought to pay for it."

"But it ain't quite broken, Bill."

"No matter. There's the shock to my system, and the mental suffering as I've endured."

"Well, what would you consider a neck like yours would be worf, Bill?"

"I'd say half-a-dollar ain't out of the way."

"Nunno! I don't consider dat dear for a neck like yours, and I'm inclined to make de damage good to dat extent. Now we come to de mental part ob de business. You tink it will affect de brain?"

"I think as it won't do my brain no good."

"I'm inclined to tink wid you dere, 'cos I don't see how you could do any good to a brain like yours. But what would you consider a fair recompense for de loss ob a brain like your little lot?"

"I think you ought to stand another half-dollar; but if you like to make it four-and-sixpence, I will agree, and——"

"Nunno!"

"Well, four bob!"

"I don't mean dat, Bill. What I mean is dat you ain't putting a sufficient market value on your brain. It mayn't be ob much good to you. At de same time, I tink a brain is worf more dan half-a-dollar. I tell you what I will do wid you. I will gib you a sovereign for de shock to your cistern, and I will gib you five shillings extra for mending de roof."

"I'm on to that, mate!" cried Bill. "And I will say that you ain't a bad sort, though you are a mighty lot too fond of nigger's tricks."

"What about me?" exclaimed Tom. "You kicked me in the mouth, and I got a shock to the system, too."

Pete sighed. He began to think that he had been too liberal in the first place, and that his ghost was going to be rather a costly affair.

"What sort ob compensation do you feel dat you would like, Tom?" inquired Pete.

"Well, I think I'm entitled to the same as Bill. I was hurt just as bad as him."

"Well, it's a bad job!" growled Pete, pulling out another sovereign and handing it to Tom.

"You've forgot the five shillings, mate."

"You ain't going to get any five shillings, old hoss! Just you be satisfied wid what you hab got now. De five shillings was for mending de roof, and you ain't going to do dat work."

"Well, it ain't exactly fair, but——"

"Yes it is," said Bill. "It's perfectly fair, and I'm quite satisfied."

"Of course you are, 'cos you've got five bob more than me. Still, that don't matter. The nigger can play the ghost every night of his life at the same price."

"There's no such things as ghosts," said Bill. "I've proved that 'ere to you all, and if you ain't satisfied, I am, and that's all I care about."

"Well, see here, boys!" exclaimed Pete. "We are going to continue our journey, and so we shall be taking leave ob you some time to-morrow. Now, we will arrange to gib you de best feed dat can be cooked here, and den we will say good-bye."

So good was that dinner that Pete felt too lazy to make a start in the afternoon, and when Jack suggested that they should do so in the evening, Pete declared that it was far too late, and that the best time to start was at break of day.

Jack and Sam did not relish such an early start, but as they felt confident that it would be impossible to shift Pete that day, they agreed to the other arrangement, and the men got up early to give them a good send-off.

THE END.

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