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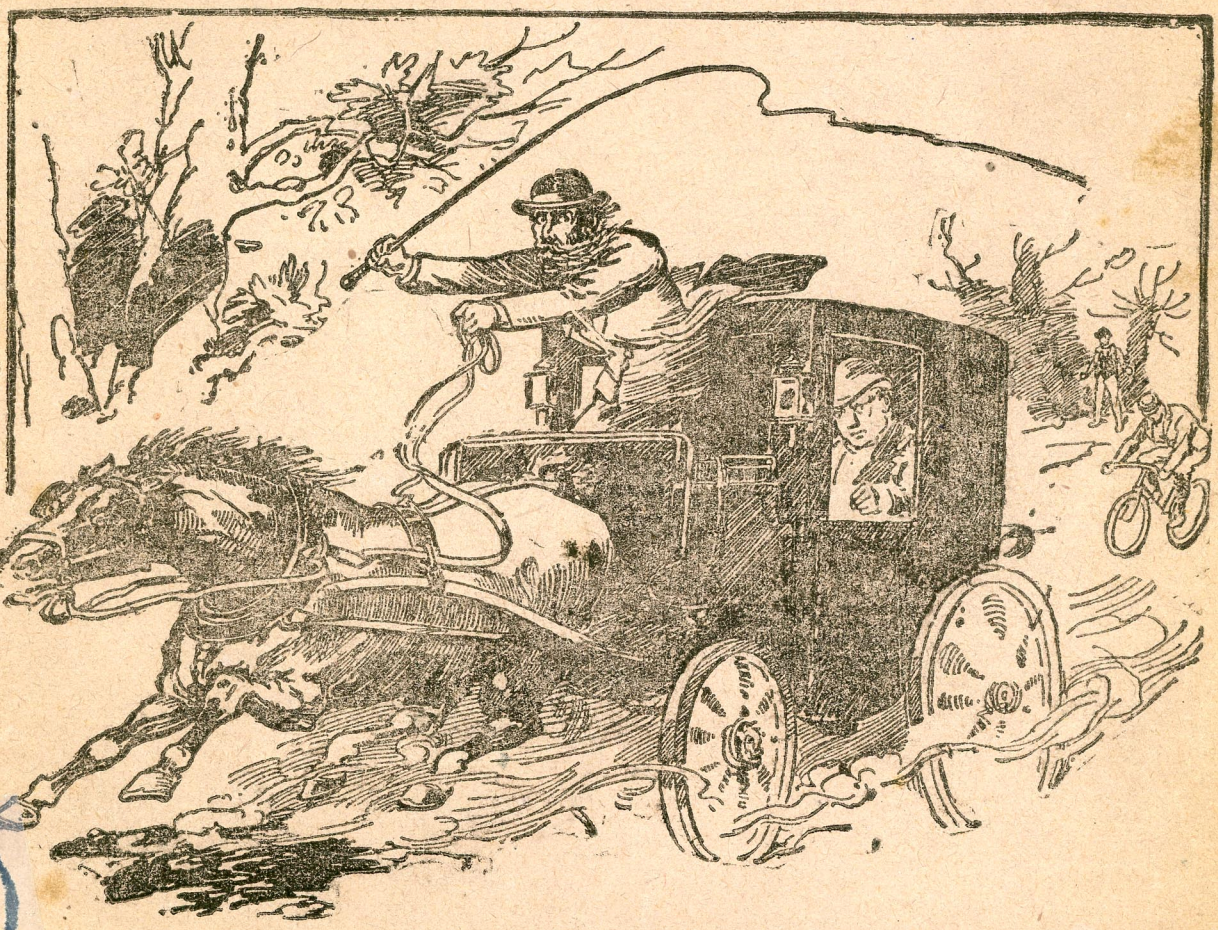
FOUND DEAD.



Followed at top speed by the cyclist, the carriage was driven furiously down the road.

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FOUND DEAD.

CHAPTER 1.

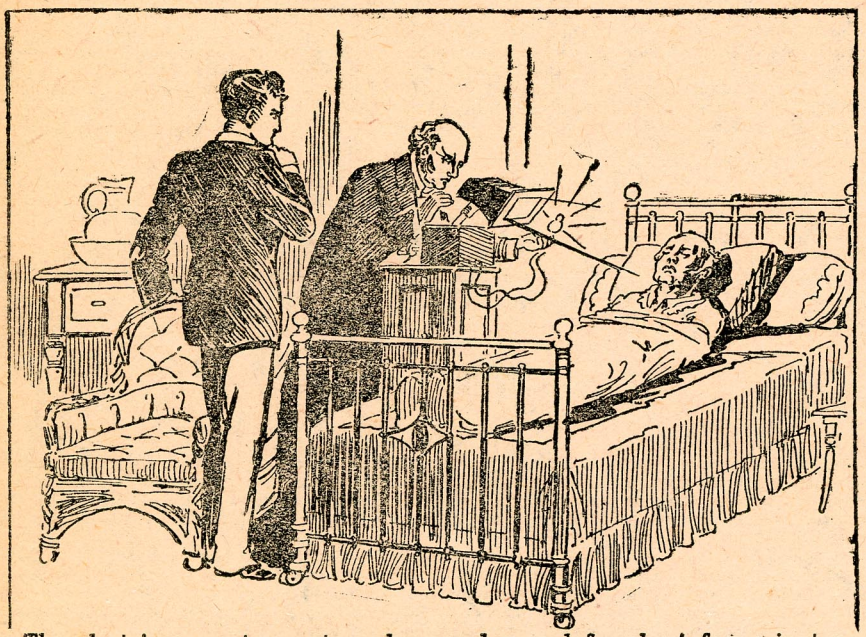
TERRIBLE TIDINGS—ERNEST MONTAGUE RETURNS TO LONDON—THE BUTLER'S STRANGE AGITATION—MURDER OR SUICIDE?

"Merciful Heaven! Can this terrible news be true? My father dead! No, no, it cannot be! Where is Milner's letter? I must read it once more; it cannot be as he says. There must be some dreadful mistake!"

Ernest Montague picked up the letter that had dropped from his nerveless fingers the moment before, and once more his eyes scanned the closely-written pages.

As he read the direful message, the blood forsook his face and the brightness went out of his eyes, leaving them dull and expressionless for an instant. The next, though, they were filled with an unutterable woe, and, with a groan of anguish, the young man bowed his head upon his arms, thrown in the wildest grief across the table.

Thus he sat for fully ten minutes, the breakfast which his landlady had just served up being quite forgotten. At last the young man roused himself with another groan, and raised his head.



The electric current was turned on, and passed for about four minutes through the vacuum tube.

He pushed away the neglected breakfast, muttering:

"I cannot eat anything after these dreadful tidings."

Rising to his feet, he walked unsteadily to the fireplace, and leaning one elbow on the mantelpiece supported his temples upon his hand, standing in an attitude of the deepest dejection and misery.

"Oh, my father!" he groaned again. "To think that you should be now nothing but a lifeless piece of clay. Oh, the thought is agonising—agonising! I shall go mad with grief and despair if I think much more of your terrible fate!"

Then, after a few minutes' silence: "It cannot be so dreadful as Milner seems to hint. No, I will not believe it! My father, than whom no saner man existed, commit suicide! I will not believe it for one single instant! And yet—and yet the circumstances of the whole terrible affair—no, no, it cannot be true—it is not true! It is a foul libel on my dead father!

"Ah, Heaven! What terrible thought is this that has come into my head? Murdered! My father has been done to death by some dastardly scoundrel? But who—who would murder him? Everybody who came in contact with him loved and respected him. No one could help liking him! Perhaps he was waylaid, murdered, for what he had upon him by some ruffian. I will read Milner's letter over again. It may help me to get at the true solution of the mystery."

He crossed over to the table, this time walking more steadily, and took up the letter which had so dreadfully upset him once more. He read it carefully through, and then, standing in the middle of the room, he cried aloud:

"My father never committed suicide! He has been most foully done to death by some black-hearted scoundrel, of that I feel assured. Everything points to either suicide or murder. I know my father was incapable of the former crime. He was murdered, without the shadow of a doubt; and, as there is a heaven above me, I will never rest until I have run his murderer to earth and brought him to the justice he has outraged! Yes, my father! I swear I will never rest until I have brought your slayer to the scaffold, until I have cleared your name from the foul imputation of suicide! You have passed into that unknown world that lies beyond the grave, but you can hear me, I know. I swear to track down your vile murderer and see justice done!"

Ernest Montague raised his right hand aloft as he made this fierce and impassioned outburst, and then he dashed the moisture from his eyes with a fierce, impatient gesture, and, springing once more to his feet, said in tones, which shook in spite of his herculean efforts to control them:

"There is no time to be lost. I must away to London, and see the remains of my poor father ere they are consigned to their last sad resting-place. I must be there for the inquest, and to refute the base calumny which dares to accuse him—him, who had the fondest, truest, noblest heart that ever beat in man's bosom—of taking his own life. He has been foully murdered; I know it. His lifeless body was found on Wanstead Flats by some labourers proceeding home from their work late last night. There was a bullet wound in the head, and a revolver, with one chamber discharged, beside his outstretched hand. As Milner says in his letter, it looks suspiciously like suicide; but there is some dark and terrible mystery behind this apparently clear case. Yes, I must catch the first train to London."

Ernest called his landlady, and, concealing his emotion as well as he could from her eyes, told her of his great bereavement, and his intention to return at once to London.

The motherly old soul saw how awfully cut up he was, and sympathised with him from the depths of her kind heart.

"Oh, the poor, kind gentleman," she said, "to be murdered like that! It is shocking! I knew your father well, sir. He always stopped with me when he came for a holiday to Brighton, And to think he is no more! Oh, Mr. Montague, I feel as if I had lost someone belonging to me! I have certainly lost a dear, kind friend."

An hour later saw Ernest flying to London as fast as the express could carry him. What his thoughts were on the journey the reader can well imagine, we think, from the foregoing lines.

He had left his father, Jeffrey Montague, the head of the great banking firm of Montague and Son, Lombard Street, in the full enjoyment of health and strength, to take a few weeks' holiday at the seaside, and now he was summoned home by a message from his father's faithful butler, Milner, who had been with the family since he (Ernest) had been a child, to the effect that that father he had so loved and revered was no more—that he lay a corpse, killed, it was supposed, by his own hand.

Oh, it all seemed too terrible to be true!

Ernest had wired to Milner to meet him at Victoria, and as the train drew up at the station, and the young man sprang from the carriage, he beheld the butler on the platform.

"Oh, Mr. Ernest, this is indeed a sad home-coming for you," said the man, as they met. "The whole house is nearly distracted with grief, and your poor mother is prostrated and confined to her bed with the shock."

In next Friday's "UNION JACK." "THE THIRD MAN."

"Tell me—tell me all, Milner!" huskily whispered the young fellow, looking into the faithful servant's distressed face. "Do people really think it a case of suicide?"

"Don't take on so, sir. People do say he took his own life, but—but——"

"We must refute the base calumny, Milner! No, no, he did not commit suicide! But—but let us get into the brougham, then—then we can discuss this dreadful affair better. I—I am glad you brought the brougham, Milner, instead of the dog-cart. I don't want to see people, and have to listen to their cheap expressions of sympathy. At any rate, not until I have looked once more upon his face, and verified my own terrible suspicions."

The coachman exchanged a sorrowful recognition with the young fellow as he approached the vehicle, and, at his own expressed wish, the butler, Milner, got in along with him.

The brougham rattled out of the station, and, rousing himself with an effort from the gloomy reverie into which he had fallen, Ernest turned to the butler, who apparently did not care to obtrude upon his young master's grief, and said:

"We must put a stop to these rumours of suicide, Milner, before they can spread. My father was not the man to commit suicide, that you know. Suicide indeed! He has been most foully and cruelly murdered!"

A startled expression crossed Milner's face, and a wild, sacred light leaped suddenly into his eyes. He fell back amongst the cushions of the brougham, and, with a deathly white face, and lips positively trembling and colourless, faintly gasped:

"Murdered, sir! Oh, no, no! he could not have been murdered!"

Ernest Montague turned like a tiger upon the terrified man; but gave a great start as he saw the effect his words had had upon the latter.

"Yes, if ever a man was murdered my father was!" he fairly hissed. "Don't look at me like that, man! I mean what I say. My father did not commit suicide. He was murdered! You seem startled and surprised. Why should you be? You surely ought to have known him better after all the years you have been with him than to think him capable of so cowardly an act as to take his own life."

"But—but, Mr. Ernest, everything points to——"

"Silence, Milner; breathe another word that casts aspersions upon my father's honour, and as sure as I am his son I will wring your infernal neck! I tell you he has been murdered—foully and brutally murdered. There is not the shadow of a doubt about it in my mind, and I have sworn, as surely as there is a Heaven above me, to never rest until I have run his murderer to earth!"

The butler's face turned the ashen hue of death, and he trembled in every limb. He made a half involuntarily movement, as though he would have shrunk into the furthest corner of the brougham.

He seemed as though striving desperately to say something; but though his lips moved no sound issued from them.

Ernest Montague did not appear to notice these strange symptoms on the part of his father's old servant—he was too carried away by just indignation; and after the last fierce outburst he turned his head aside and stared out through the window of the brougham at the busy London street.

But his eyes saw not the hustling, bustling throng, the ceaseless procession of vehicles. They were blinded for the time being with grief and woe, and his brain seemed on fire.

CHAPTER 2.

THE HOUSE OF DEATH—ERNEST'S GRIEF—THE MARK OF THE BULLET—DR. HOLMES OFFENDS ERNEST—THE LATTER MAKES A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

When Ernest Montague reached the stately mansion in Weston Square, which had until that morning known his father as its master, he found all the blinds closely drawn, and the whole place sunk under that terrible gloom and silence which bespeaks the house of the dead.

The servants from the housekeeper downwards looked the grief and sympathy they all felt, for they had lost a noble and kind master.

Ernest went straight to his mother's room, but was met on the threshold by the family doctor, who drew him aside and told him she was in a precarious state.

"The shock has brought on brain fever," the medical man said, "and she is quite delirious. I should not advise you to see her just yet. She cannot recognise you, and the sight of her in such a state will only unnecessarily distress you."

But the young man was not to be ruled by the good-intentioned medico. He insisted on seeing his mother, and found that it was even as the latter said. She was too delirious to recognise even his face or voice.

Ernest left his mother's room with a heart like lead.

"Oh, Heaven!" he groaned, "am I to lose my mother as well?"

"No, no, Mr. Montague," the doctor hastened to reassure him. "It is not so bad as that. She will recover, I have not the slightest doubt; but she has received a severe shock, and we can only wait for time to effect a remedy."

Ernest next visited the room in which his father lay, stretched upon a bed, with a sheet covering the face.

He reverently lifted the sheet, and looked upon the beloved face—that face, which had smiled so often and so lovingly upon him since his earliest days, but which would never smile upon him again.

The eyes were closed, and but for the "death pallor" Ernest could almost have believed him to be peacefully sleeping. The features were in nowise distorted, either with pain or fear; they were as calm and placid as ever they had been in life.

Ernest bent down over the body with a choking sob, and imprinted a long and fervent kiss upon the cold and irresponsive lips, which would never breathe his name again on this earth, or give him good advice, as in the old, old days.

"My father, oh, my father!" moaned the distracted young fellow. And, throwing himself upon the corpse, he kissed the pallid cheeks and brow with frantic love and despair.

Kind-hearted Dr. Holmes brushed the moisture away from before his eyes, and, laying a hand gently on the young man's shoulder, tried to disengage him from the body.

"Come, come, Ernest," he said, with all the freedom of an old and trusted friend; "don't give way like this. Come with me!"

The young man suffered himself to be persuaded to rise up from over the corpse, and was slowly and submissively about to accompany the doctor from the room, when suddenly he broke away from the latter's firm but gentle clutch, crying:

"The wound! The bullet wound! Where is it? I must see it—examine it!"

He ran back to the body, and with reverent touch began to feel among the scanty iron-grey locks for the wound. Dr. Holmes stepped up beside him, and whispered:

"He shot himself behind the right ear. See, here is the mark—the hole where the bullet entered. The hair is singed and the skin blackened, you see. Those facts prove he must have put the muzzle of the revolver close up to his head."

Ernest wheeled round with a furious cry.

"Dr. Holmes!" he said, his fine face ablaze with indignant anger. "Do you dare to think—to tell me that my father shot himself? Sir, you know in your heart he was incapable of such an act. My father did not commit suicide! He has been murdered—yes, you can start—murdered, I tell you!"

"Come, come, Ernest," said Dr. Holmes, gently taking hold of the young man again by the arm. "Come away, come with me! This terrible affair has upset you; your nerves are all unstrung, I can see. Come, you want rest and quiet."

"Unloose me, doctor! My nerves are not unstrung. There is nothing wrong with me. I mean what I say. My father has been murdered, by whom I do not know. But I shall make it my business to learn. I will track down and bring this ruthless miscreant to justice, if I have to search for him the wide world over."

"Yes, yes, we shall see justice done, Ernest," answered the worthy medico, thinking it best to humour the unhappy young fellow, whose brain, he feared, might be turning under his loss. "But come now, like a good lad, with me. You can do no good by lingering any longer here."

"You are quite right, doctor," replied Ernest, in a calmer voice. "I must be up and doing. I must have time to think—to think how I can trace my father's murderer."

With a half shudder, the good old doctor once more urged the young man to accompany him from the room, and the latter yielded meekly.

But once they were outside the door of the room, and beyond the influence of the dread presence of death, Ernest turned to the doctor and said:

"Doctor Holmes, you believe my father committed suicide. You, his old and trusted friend, his confidant these fifteen years! How can you do him so grave an injustice?"

And with that the young fellow turned on his heel and strode off to his own room.

The doctor stood looking after him in mingled astonishment and mortification.

"He is quite right—quite right," he said at length, shaking his head solemnly. "I should have been one of the last to believe Jeffrey Montague capable of taking his own life. But then there is every evidence of suicide. And yet—and yet the lad has raised doubts in my mind after all! But no, it is impossible; who would murder him? He hadn't an enemy in the world that I know of, and he could not have been murdered by footpads, for both his purse and gold watch were found untouched upon him. Besides, what would take him so far from either his home here or his office in Lombard Street as Wanstead Flats? He could have had no business out there.

No, no, the theory of murder won't hold water; I must reluctantly incline again to the belief that he committed suicide. Business men often have troubles unknown to those they love, or which they keep on purpose from them. Who knows but that the firm of Montague and Son was getting into low water, that the fact preyed on his mind, and that he brooded over his difficulties until his mind was partly unhinged, and he determined to make away with himself? Yes, yes, that I firmly believe is the true solution of the seeming mystery."

And the good doctor, quite satisfied in his own mind that he had solved the puzzle, went down to his carriage, and, a few minutes later was on his way to another of his patients.

Ernest Montague held firmly to his original belief that his father had been murdered. In fact, he would not for a single instant entertain the idea of suicide. He considered it would have been rank treason—treason to the noblest, kindest father that ever son had.

The inquest would be held on the body in a day or two, and he felt that unless he could discover something in the meantime, something which might be considered conclusive proof that his father had been murdered, the coroner's jury would return a verdict of suicide, and lasting disgrace be for ever attached to his name.

At all costs he must save his dead father's honour, obtain some clue which would enable him to refute the base calumny.

He sat up nearly the whole night at his window, staring out with unseeing eyes at the dark scene, thinking—thinking how could he satisfy the coroner's jury that his father had been murdered.

The faint, grey light of breaking day began to illumine the eastern sky. It grew stronger; but he still sat in the position he had occupied all night, wrapped in thought.

Stronger and stronger the light grew, until suddenly King Sol himself burst into view, and his glorious golden rays shot into the room and danced upon the fair head of the silent, motionless figure by the window.

Motionless! No, he was so no longer. He had sprung to his feet simultaneously with the sunburst, his face irradiant with a wild hope and joy.

"It is so!" he gasped hoarsely. "The wound is behind the right ear. Oh, Heaven be praised! I can now prove my father was no suicide. What is the time?"

He pulled forth his watch, and saw that it was ten minutes to five.

"I cannot disturb the doctor yet," he said. "I will creep into the room for just another peep at the body to make sure of the position of the wound."

The young fellow stole down the stairs softly. None of the maids, he knew, would be yet about, and he did not wish to cause any unnecessary alarm.

The door of the death chamber was, of course, unlocked, and he had but to turn the handle and enter. He did so, and then crept on tiptoe, as though he were afraid of waking the departed soul, to the side of the corpse.

Once again he raised the sheet from over the face of the dead, and felt with his fingers for the wound among the sparse locks.

It was, as he had thought, behind the right ear.

CHAPTER 3.

ERNEST PAYS DR. HOLMES AN EARLY VISIT—A STARTLING TRUTH—THE BULLET MARK BEHIND THE DEAD MAN'S EAR—ERNEST AND DR. HOLMES USE THE RONTGEN RAYS—NO TRACE OF A BULLET IN THE MURDERED MAN'S SKULL—THE MYSTERY DEEPENS—ERNEST'S WILD THEORY—HE COUNSELS A POST-MORTEM.

Dr. Holmes was more than astonished, worthy man, on descending to his breakfast-room a few minutes after eight to learn that Mr. Ernest Montague had called to see him.

"Humph!" grunted the medico, slightly elevating his eyebrows. "What can he want with me so early? No change for the worse in his mother, I hope."

To the servant, who had informed him of the young man's visit: "I will see him at once, Jane. Tell your mistress to keep breakfast back a few minutes."

He approached his reception-room, and greeted Ernest cordially.

"Your mother?" he began anxiously, when the ordinary courtesies of life had been exchanged. "I sincerely hope she has not taken any change for the worse."

"No, doctor," replied the young fellow, who was evidently labouring under great excitement. "My mother, the nurse told me, had if anything taken a turn she thought for the better this morning."

"Ha!" ejaculated Dr. Holmes, with a sigh of relief. "Then to what do I owe this early visit?"

"Doctor, I was anxious to see you. I have made a great and important discovery. My father, you may remember, was shot behind the right ear. Now, do you recall any peculiarity he had?"

The doctor looked the amazement he doubtless felt, and asked slowly, as though he had not caught the question aright:

"Do I recall any peculiarity of your father's?"

"Yes, doctor!" burst in the young man excitedly. "Do you not recollect he was left-handed?"

"Why, yes, so he was. But what has that got to do with the sad affair? A—ah, of course, and the wound is behind the right ear. I see—I see!"

And the good old doctor became as highly excited as the young fellow before him.

"You see, doctor," cried Ernest wildly, "being left-handed he could not possibly have shot himself behind the right ear."

"Stay, stay, not so quick, Ernest! He could have done so, but not very easily. He would have had to screw his head round—so!"

And the doctor, suiting the action to the word, threw his left arm across his chest, doubled his left hand over his right shoulder, and craned his neck over the other to illustrate the fact that a left-handed man could really manage to shoot himself behind the right ear.

"You see it could be done. But I agree with you, Ernest, that it is extremely improbable that your father, supposing he did meditate suicide, would shoot himself in such a manner—or, for the matter of that, that anyone should."

He bent his brows in deep thought for several minutes. Then suddenly turning to Ernest, he cried with an excitement he vainly attempted to conceal.

"My boy, I am inclined to believe now that after all you are right—that your father has been murdered, and that it is not, as I at first thought, a clear case of suicide. It is highly improbable that any man, left-handed as your father was, would have shot himself behind the right ear, seeing the extravagant attitude he would have to assume to do so. And—and yet who could have killed him? It is quite clear the revolver was put quite close to his head; and then, again, there is his presence in a locality so far removed from either his home or his place of business. What could he possibly have been doing on Wanstead Flats? He could surely have had no business there?"

"That is the point, doctor, at which the theory I am trying to build up breaks down," remarked Ernest. "If I could account for his presence the previous night at Wanstead, I might be more sanguine as to the result of my search for his murderer. For, doctor, I firmly believe my poor father was cruelly and foully done to death by some scoundrel or scoundrels, and it shall be the mission of my life to bring the wretches to justice, and clear my father's name from the breath of scandal."

The doctor said nothing in answer to this, but looked on the young fellow with evident admiration in his eyes.

"Doctor," continued the young man, "you frequently use the Rontgen rays in your practice. I want you to employ them in the case of my father, and locate the fatal bullet."

"I already intended to do so, Ernest, before the inquest. I will be round with the apparatus in a couple of hours' time."

Ernest left the doctor's residence, and, true to his promise, Dr. Holmes drove up to the house of sorrow two hours later.

He first visited and examined poor Mrs. Montague, and when he opened the door of the sick-room to depart, he found Ernest waiting for him in the passage.

"You have brought the apparatus, doctor?" asked the young fellow, in a whisper.

"Yes, it is below."

The two men descended the stairs for the apparatus, and then proceeded to the room in which the dead man was lying.

In a very few minutes, Dr. Holmes had everything ready, and the sheet was drawn from over the head of the corpse. Then a celluloid film was bent to form the perfect contact necessary to a sharp picture, the electric current was turned on, and passed for about four minutes through the vacuum tube.

At the end of that time, the doctor was satisfied he had secured a good radiograph, and the pair at once hurried with the camera to Ernest's dark-room, for the young man was himself an ardent amateur photographer.

A few minutes of anxious suspense followed the immersion of the film in the chemical, and then, with hands positively trembling, so great was his excitement, the doctor took the negative up and examined it under the red light.

A perfect shadowgraph of the dead man's head had been obtained, showing the skeleton skull; but both Dr. Holmes and Ernest in vain searched the film for any indication of a foreign substance—in other words, the bullet they desired to locate.

"Perhaps if we were to use a magnifying-glass it might assist us," suggested Ernest, and he disappeared from the room, to presently return with one.

But, though they examined the negative with it, no trace

whatever of any foreign substance could be detected upon the plate.

"This is certainly very strange," remarked Dr. Holmes. "The shadowgraph is perfect in every respect apparently, and yet there is no trace whatever of the bullet, or even of a fractured bone. I do not understand this at all."

Ernest Montague made no comment. He seemed wrapped in thought.

"Doctor," he said suddenly, turning to that perplexed worthy, "are you sure my father died from a bullet-wound?"

The medico started, and, wheeling round with keen surprise upon his face, answered:

"Certainly! Did you not yourself see the mark left by the bullet where it entered the skull, just behind the right ear?"

"And yet we cannot find any trace of a bullet in this radiograph, which is seemingly perfect in every respect."

"I must admit I am mystified. There is no evidence of any bullet in the radiograph, as you say; but, then, he must have died from a shot. The mark of the wound proves that."

"I don't know so much about that, doctor. Listen to me a moment. We are both now of the opinion that my poor father did not shoot himself. That someone else did seems the only possible conclusion; and yet an application of the Rontgen rays fails to reveal any bullet. Doctor, it is my firm conviction that the reason why there is no indication of a bullet in the radiograph is because there is really no bullet in the skull!"

"Oh, it could not have passed out, or I would have found the hole it left in its passage," Dr. Holmes hastened to assert.

"Exactly, sir; that is why I am led to believe that my father was not shot at all."

"Not shot?" gasped the doctor, falling back, in utter astonishment. "Oh, ridiculous, Ernest!" How, then, did he meet his end?"

"Ah! I only wish I could answer that question, Dr. Holmes. That's where I am baffled. But, I repeat, I do not believe now my father was shot."

"But what about the bullet-mark, Ernest?"

"It is a sham one, I am convinced. A bullet-wound can be very easily imitated. A simple puncture in the side of the skull and a little gunpowder rubbed round it and fired would make the deception complete."

Dr. Holmes stared at the young man, as though he had two heads.

"Gracious me, Ernest! What has put such an idea into your head?"

"The simple fact that we can discover no bullet in the skull. It may seem a wildly improbable theory, this of mine; but I feel certain I am at last on the right track, and that it is a correct one."

Dr. Holmes, too, was struck with the likelihood of this solution to the mystery, and bent his brows until they met, as was his wont when engaged in deep thought.

"Ernest," he said, after a few minutes' reflection, "I am beginning to think you may be right in this theory of yours after all. The fact, as you say, that no bullet is to be traced in the radiograph we took of the skull, certainly would seem to give the lie direct to the popular belief that he met his death from such. Ernest, would you have any objection to a post-mortem being held on the body?"

"I would strongly counsel one, sir. I wish to get at the bottom of all this mystery, and learn how my poor father met his end, so that I may have some clue to work upon in my search of his murderer."

"Very good, then. I will see the coroner, and urge upon him the necessity of postponing the inquest for a day or two, until a post-mortem can be held."

CHAPTER 4.

WHAT THE POST-MORTEM REVEALED—"DEATH DUE TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF POISON"—ERNEST DETERMINED TO GET AT THE BOTTOM OF THE MYSTERY—HE CROSS-QUESTIONS MILNER, WHO ACTS IN A MOST EXTRAORDINARY MANNER—ERNEST'S GRAVE SUSPICIONS OF THE MAN—HE IS ATTACKED BY A MYSTERIOUS ASSAILANT AS HE ENTERS THE LIBRARY.

The post-mortem was held in due course upon the body of Jeffrey Montague, and Dr. Holmes himself was present at it.

The evidence of the medical practitioner who conducted the examination, created the profoundest sensation when it was given before the coroner's jury on the following day.

No bullet could be found in the skull, and repeated shadowgraphs taken by the Rontgen rays wholly failed to show the presence of any foreign substance whatsoever; but—and here came the most startling piece of evidence—in the tissues of the body unmistakeable traces had been found of a deadly and mysterious poison—a poison quite unknown to modern science.

How the poison had been introduced into the dead man's system, the medical men could not be certain; but, on making a thorough examination of the body, they had discovered a small clot of blood in the fleshy part of the right arm, midway between the elbow and the shoulder. Whether the drug had been introduced into the system by means of an incision here the doctors were not prepared to say, though they were inclined to think it highly probable.

In the face of this new development, the coroner's jury could not do otherwise than abandon their preconceived notions of suicide, and return a verdict of "Death due to the administration of poison."

At the termination of the inquiry, Ernest Montague had a long talk with both Dr. Holmes and the other medical man who had conducted the post-mortem. They assured him they had no knowledge whatever of the mysterious poison they had discovered in the body.

"It is our joint opinion that it is some rare and practically unknown drug," said the latter, "and I would personally advise you, Mr. Montague, to allow us to submit the fluids we have obtained from the tissues to some skilled analyst—Dr. Cowley, for instance."

"By all means do so, gentlemen. I do not intend to leave a stone unturned to aid me in getting at the bottom of this terrible mystery. Dr. Holmes, if you have no objection, I will ride home with you? I wish to talk the matter over with you at some length."

The two entered the carriage, and, as they drove along, the doctor explained to the young man upon what he and his brother medico had based their theory of poisoning.

Ernest listened attentively, and, after the other had ceased speaking, was silent for several moments. Then he suddenly turned to his companion, and asked:

"Doctor, did you ever hear my father mention that he had any enemies?"

"No, I never did," was the answer. "Still, it is quite possible he had, for, after all, the best of us cannot help making enemies sometimes; but he was never quite so intimate with me as to make me his confidant in such a personal matter as that. You yourself should be more likely to know if he had than I."

"He hadn't any enemy in the world that I know of," replied Ernest thoughtfully. "He was universally liked by all who came in contact with him, so far as I know. Ah! a happy idea. I shall speak to Milner. He has been in my father's service for over eighteen years, and if anyone should know, he ought."

"Yes," coincided the doctor, "I should speak to Milner, if I were you. It is quite possible your father may have had some enemy that you knew nothing of. Though I do not pretend to say he had, he may have had some secret in his life, which he kept even from you, his son!"

Silence fell between the pair after this, and when the carriage drew up in front of the doctor's residence, Ernest excused himself from entering, and returned home on foot.

The whole of the way back, he was busily turning over in his mind the possibility of his father having had some secret foe, of whom even he had been unaware; and the instant he had reached the house, he told the footman to send Milner to him.

When the butler entered his young master's presence, the latter eyed him with unfeigned astonishment, for that usually quiet and dignified servant seemed to be labouring under some great excitement, which it was evident he was making strenuous efforts to conceal.

His face was deathly pale, and his eyes had a strange, wild look in them—such a look as a hunted creature might be supposed to have, so Ernest amazedly told himself. He was trembling, too, in every limb.

"Why, what on earth is the matter, Milner?" asked Ernest. "Are you not well?"

"I—I am all right, sir," stammered the man, in greater confusion than ever, apparently, at the discovery by his master of his excited state. "It's—it's—— My nerves are a little unstrung, sir, that's all. I'm not as young as I was, sir, and the terrible discovery Dr. Holmes and the other medical gentleman made at the post-mortem, sir, gave me a great shock. You see, sir, we had all made up our minds that poor master was shot, sir; that he—he—you know what I mean, sir—and then for it to come out at the inquest, sir, that he was never shot at all; but poisoned—murdered, sir. It gave me a dreadful turn."

Ernest never once took his eyes off the butler's face while the latter was speaking, and he saw that the man avoided meeting his gaze, and seemed uneasy under his scrutiny; that he shuffled about from one foot to another, and, in a word, conducted himself altogether in a most strange and unaccountable manner.

A vague and terrible suspicion flashed like lightning across Ernest's mind.

He recalled the butler's strange behaviour in the brougham on the day of his return home from Brighton.

Could it be possible that this man knew more about the terrible affair they were all trying to get at the bottom of than he cared to admit? His conduct now was certainly suspicious in the extreme.

And yet, as Ernest remembered how long and how faithfully the man before him had served his father, he felt constrained to put the vague, half-formed suspicion from him immediately.

No, no! Ernest felt, if ever a servant had loved a master, Frederick Milner had his late one.

"Sit down, Milner. I want to ask you just a few questions," said Ernest, in a tone which he wished to make reassuring, and even confidential.

The butler took a seat in a way which showed plainly he was still very far from being at his ease.

Ernest, however, feigned not to notice his perturbation.

"Milner, the medical evidence at the inquest, which you heard as well as I, leaves no doubt whatever in my mind that my father was wilfully and deliberately poisoned by some enemy he had. Now, you have been in his service, and, I might almost say, his confidence nearly twenty years. Have you any idea who that enemy could have been? Did he ever mention to you that he had an enemy who sought his life?"

Ernest was little prepared for the effect these simple questions had upon the butler. The man half rose from the chair, with an ejaculation of dismay; then he fell back gasping, every vestige of colour deserting his face, which worked involuntarily, as though he were suffering the acutest agony.

"No, no, no, Mr. Ernest," came struggling huskily from his lips. "I—I never heard your father mention he had an enemy."

Again that dreadful suspicion of the man rushed upon our hero's mind; but, pretending not to have noticed the other's agitation, he continued, half musingly:

"I am convinced I have hit upon the solution to the mystery, and that my father was done to death by some vindictive and merciless foe. I will overhaul all his papers, and try and see if I cannot find some clue this very night."

Again, the butler seemed deeply agitated, and a look akin almost to terror shot athwart his face, which did not escape the sharp eyes of his young master.

When Ernest was once more alone he threw himself back in his chair, and set his wits busily to work.

What was the meaning of Milner's extraordinary agitation and evident anxiety?

Had the man anything to hide? Did he know something he was unwilling to admit about the murder of his master?

Could it be possible Milner himself was the murderer?

The man's strange conduct lately would seem to be sufficient justification for the suspicion, and yet Ernest could not bring himself to altogether believe one, who had been a faithful and trusted servant apparently for so many years, could be guilty of such a crime—could have murdered his benefactor.

Where lay the motive? It was clearly not robbery, for his father's purse and watch had been found upon his corpse untouched.

The only one who could possibly benefit, to all appearances, by his father's decease was himself.

Moreover, it was highly improbable that Milner could have had any hand in the deed, for the man was evidently not one of very high scientific attainments, and the poison which had been employed was one quite unknown, so Dr. Holmes had assured him, to the cleverest European toxicologists.

No, he felt he must look further afield, if he wished to discover the murderer.

But, and again that haunting suspicion of the butler assailed him, what was the cause, then, of the latter's strange agitation?

The more he reflected upon the matter, the more he felt convinced that Milner, at any rate, knew more than he cared to divulge.

He decided he would keep a sharp eye upon the man, set a detective, perhaps, to watch his movements, and he himself would make inquiries as to where the man was on the night of his father's murder.

In the meantime, though, he would carry out his intention of overhauling his dead father's letters and papers. He might light upon some clue or other; there was no saying.

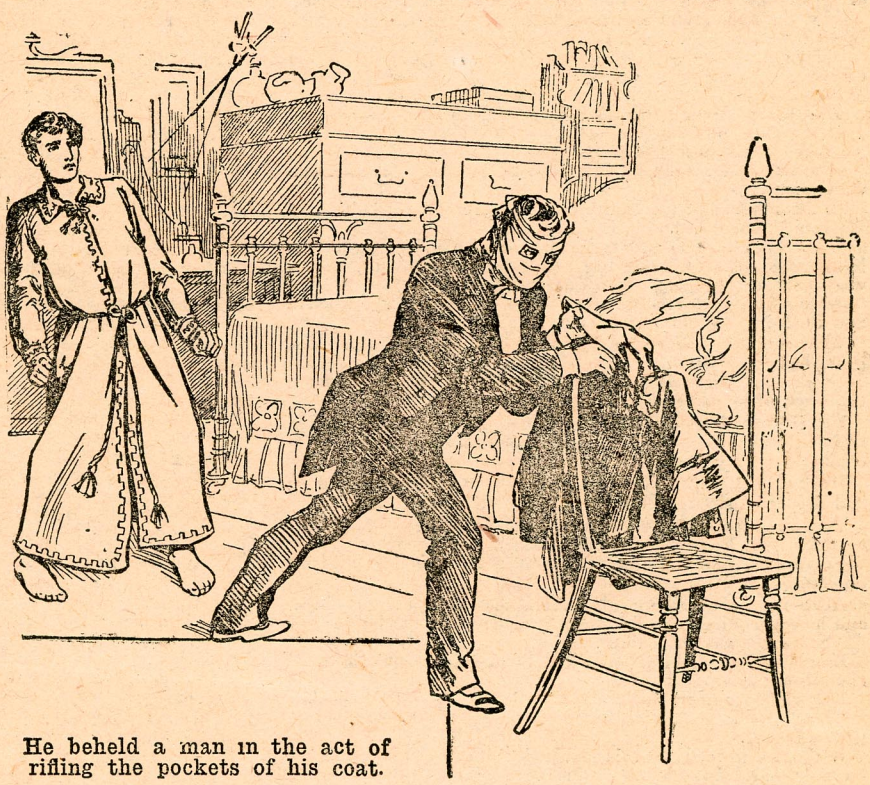
With this object he ascended to the library, which was on the floor above, and, deeply occupied with his reflections, turned the handle of the door and entered.

He had barely crossed the threshold, when a heavy cloth or bag was flung over his head, and he was jerked backwards with a violence which caused him to lose his balance and tumble flat upon his back.

CHAPTER 5.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR—THE SEARCH FOR THE ASSAILANT—STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BUTLER—THE POLICE CALLED IN—ERNEST FINDS A CLUE AT LAST—MILNER NOT TO BE FOUND—WHERE HAS HE VANISHED TO?

Ernest Montague was so taken by surprise at this strange assault in broad daylight in his own home, that he could not even utter a cry before he found himself stretched upon his back on the floor.



He beheld a man in the act of rifling the pockets of his coat.

The sound reached his ears, through the muffling folds of the cloth over his head, of a door shutting, and finding himself, to his surprise, unmolested further, he quickly disengaged himself of the encumbering cloth.

He looked hastily round him. The room was deserted; his mysterious assailant had vanished.

He remembered the sound he had heard of the closing door, and, rushing to it, wrenched it open.

There was no one in the passage beyond.

"Milner! Jones! Hobbs!" shouted Ernest at the top of his voice.

Then he rushed back into the room and rang the bell violently.

Again he was back in the passage, and was tearing down the stairs like a madman, taking these four and five at a jump.

He almost ran into the arms of the footman, Jones, and Milner, who came rushing from their part of the house in the utmost consternation and amazement.

Hobbs, the groom, too, made his appearance, and the trio were astounded when their young master had excitedly gasped out what had occurred.

Instinctively Ernest's eyes sought the butler's face, but he could read nothing beyond evident surprise in it.

The other servants now, alarmed by their young master's shouts and furious ringing of the bell, came flocking upon the scene, and a general hunt for the mysterious intruder was organised.

"He cannot have got out of the house," declared Ernest. "Hobbs, you take the back of the premises and collar the first stranger you encounter there. Jones, you take the front and do likewise. Milner, come with me! We will search all the rooms upstairs."

But though the butler accompanied Ernest through every one of the rooms, from the kitchen and pantries in the basement to the bedrooms on the top floor, not a living soul was to be found.

In utter stupefaction, our hero returned to the second floor, and once more entered the library.

Now he discovered what he had been too excited before to notice—namely, that all the drawers of a large bureau, in which his father had kept all his papers, were pulled out, and their contents tumbled and littered about in the wildest confusion.

Without a doubt, the mysterious intruder had been in the act of ransacking the late Jeffrey Montague's private correspondence when Ernest had surprised him.

With what object? our hero now asked himself.

Did he need any answer? What other object could the stranger, whoever he was, have had than to try and find some paper or letter which it was to his interest to abstract?

And that paper or letter, had the thief been able to secure it?

If so, then perhaps the one possible clue to his father's murderer was lost to him.

Ernest turned to address Milner, who had entered the room with him.

To his amazement the man was gone. He had slipped out of the room unobserved.

With his suspicions now fast ripening into certainty that the butler was at least a party to the murder of his parent, Ernest was about to rush from the library in chase of him, with a view to arresting him ere he could possibly get away, when a new thought struck him and made him pause.

Why should Milner rush off in so highly suspicious a manner, if he had succeeded in finding and securing possession of the only piece of evidence against him—the letter he was supposed to have abstracted from the bureau?

No, if he had secured this, he would have stood his ground and brazened the affair out until he had a favourable opportunity to destroy the tell-tale clue.

He had fled, without a doubt because he had not found it, and dreaded that it would fall into his (Ernest's) hands.

Yes, our hero felt sure that was the true reading of the man's conduct; and he darted from the library, only waiting to lock the door after him to prevent a second possible intrusion in his absence before he ran downstairs.

A group of alarmed and excited servants were gathered there, and he eagerly demanded of them had they seen the butler.

"No, sir," was the chorus.

Ernest rushed to the front of the house, and found the footman, Jones, waiting there.

"Has Milner passed out, Jones?" the young fellow asked.

"No, sir. I thought he was with you!" was the man's surprised answer.

Without a word, Ernest dashed back through the hall and the servants' part of the house to the rear of the premises.

Here Hobbs was still on guard.

"Hobbs!" he cried, "have you seen Milner?"

"No," was once more the answer he received.

"Then he must still be in the house!" muttered the young man, and back he rushed.

"Jane! Lizzie! Mrs. Hopper!" he cried to the group of servants. "Have you seen Milner anywhere?"

Again he was answered in the negative, and he immediately told the women to go to the butler's own room and look for him there.

He himself went back to the library and commenced hunting amongst the tumbled papers and documents for he knew not exactly what. Something, which he believed would serve as a clue to the murder or the motive for the crime; but whether letter, paper, or some other widely different article, he could not tell.

He had found nothing, which by the greatest possible stretch of the imagination could be regarded as a clue, when a trembling knock came to the door, and, in answer to his response, a couple of the housemaids, looking very scared and flurried, entered:

"Mr. Milner is not in his room, sir, and he is nowhere to be found about the house. Jones and Hobbs, too, sir, say he cannot have passed out or they would have seen him!" stammered one.

This news was so thoroughly startling that Ernest wheeled round like lightning.

"What!" he said. "He cannot be found, and yet he has not left the house? Then he must be hiding somewhere. Jane, send for the police at once. I will have the whole house searched from top to bottom. The villain shall not escape me! His flight is in itself conclusive evidence of his guilt."

The maids vanished, and Ernest resumed his search among his father's papers and belongings, for what he hoped might prove a clue.

He had not had time to go through all the drawers before he heard the police admitted below, and he was about to close and lock the bureau, when his eye rested upon a small, crumpled piece of paper which lay upon the floor near his left foot. It had evidently fallen out of one of the drawers.

A wild ray of hope that he had at last found what he wanted shot through him, as he quickly stooped and picked it up.

His hands trembled with eagerness as he unfolded it, and then, as his eyes lighted upon several lines written in a very small and neat hand, he uttered a cry of joy.

But the next instant the exultant light died out of his face, for what he read ran as follows:

"I will give you one more chance. If you value your peace and happiness, if you do not wish your name to be dragged through the mire, and the fruits of your crime to be visited upon the innocent heads of your wife and son, you will meet me at this address, 16, Plethora Street, Forest Gate, to-morrow evening, at 8.30.—FROM ONE WHO KNOWS YOU AND WHOM YOU KNOW."

Ernest had got his clue at last!

Without the shadow of a doubt this was the letter which had lured his father to his doom.

But what did it all mean? The writer of this note evidently knew something about his father, which the latter dreaded being made known. What could the scoundrel know?

Could his father have had some dark secret in his past life? That seemed to be the only answer to the question.

If not, then what did the words "if you value your peace and happiness, if you do not want your name dragged through the mire and the fruits of your crime visited upon the heads of your wife and son," mean?

Ernest Montague staggered like a drunken man, and clapped his hand to his throbbing brows.

Oh, merciful heavens, had his parent been guilty of some terrible crime? He could not believe it—believe it of that father whom he had always regarded as the most upright and honourable of men.

He sank into the nearest chair utterly overcome, and tried to think the matter out clearly.

As he did so, footsteps approached the door of the library, and a knock startled him.

"Come in," he said, in such husky tones he did not recognise them as his own.

He had barely time to crush the letter almost into pulp in his hand, when the door opened and Jones the footman put in his head.

The police is below, sir," he said.

"All right, Jones. I shall be down directly."

The man vanished, and, rising to his feet, Ernest brushed his right hand wearily across his temples; then, thrusting the mysterious letter inside his breast-pocket, he descended to the hall, where he found a police-sergeant and two constables awaiting him.

He at once informed them of the mysterious occurrence in the library and the unaccountable disappearance of the butler, and the sergeant suggested that they should search the house thoroughly from top to bottom for fear he should be in hiding in one of the rooms, biding his opportunity to slip out of the house unseen.

The suggestion was acted upon, and every room in the place, even including the library, was subjected to a most exhaustive search, but without avail.

The butler was not to be found, nor indeed the slightest trace of him.

The police were strongly of the opinion that he must have contrived in some way to slip past either Jones or Hobbs, the menservants who, the reader will remember, were posted at the front and back of the house respectively; but these were loud in their assertions that no human creature could have got out without their seeing him.

Anyway, no butler was to be found in or about the premises, so the only natural inference seemed to be that he must have got away somehow or other, despite the precautions taken.

Ernest was like one in a dream. He could not understand it all. Mystery seemed to be piling upon mystery.

He thanked the police-officers for their assistance, and authorised them to institute a systematic search for the missing butler, and then dismissed them with a handsome honorarium each.

CHAPTER 6.

ERNEST DETERMINED TO PERSIST IN HIS INVESTIGATIONS—THE STRANGE NOISE IN THE BEDROOM — THE NOCTURNAL INTRUDER — THE FIGHT IN THE DARK—ERNEST RECOGNISES HIS ANTAGONIST—THE LATTER BREAKS FREE—HIS UNACCOUNTABLE DISAPPEARANCE—WHAT IS THE MYSTERY OF THE LIBRARY?—ERNEST BEWILDERED.

As soon as the police had taken their departure, Ernest went straight to his own room, and set himself down for a good think.

He had obtained the clue he wanted, he firmly believed, and yet the allusions in the letter seemed to hint at his father having committed some terrible crime, which if brought to light might mean lasting disgrace and ignominy for all who bore his name.

Under the circumstances, Ernest asked himself, should he persist in his attempt at investigation of the mystery surrounding his parent's death?

Would he be doing right in unearthing some long buried secret of his father's past? A secret which, perhaps, might afterwards cause him to regard that father he had so loved and respected with scorn and abhorrence.

After long and deep reflection, Ernest concluded that he would be doing right.

What proof had he that his father had committed any crime beyond the veiled hints in this letter he had found?

Might that not be the fabrication of some vile, would-be blackmailer, who, when he found he was unable to get anything out of his father by his lying accusation, had in revenge murdered the latter?

Yes—yes, that was what he was inclined to think was the solution to the whole terrible enigma.

And would he be justified, then, in allowing matters to rest, and in letting his father's murderer go free, simply out of fear he should learn something he would have preferred not to regarding his dead parent's past?

No, a thousand times no! He would elucidate this mystery; he would bring the murderer to justice, be the cost to himself what it might.

He determined to say nothing about his find, even to the old friend of the family, Dr. Holmes; but first thing on the morrow he would go to the address contained in the letter he had found, and unmask the dastardly assassin.

Then his thoughts reverted to Milner and the latter's extraordinary disappearance.

That in itself, he thought, would seem to point to the man as an accessory to the crime, if not the actual murderer. He would set the whole machinery of the law in operation against him, and, if his suspicions proved to be correct, he would not spare him for all the years he had been in his father's service.

The fact that the butler could have had a hand in the murder of a master, who had been so true a friend to him for such a period aggravated the crime.

No, if Milner were guilty, he deserved and should have no mercy.

Dr. Holmes called later on in the evening, and reported that Ernest's mother had taken a favourable turn, and that if she were kept quite quiet and undisturbed she would probably be all right again in a day or two.

That night Ernest retired to rest with a comparatively light heart. He had reasoned with himself that his father could not possibly have been guilty of any act in his past life that would not bear the light of a full and proper investigation; and he had obtained a clue he believed to the murderer's whereabouts.

All he would have to do on the morrow would be to go to the address in the letter, and effect the arrest of its occupant.

He did not for a moment believe that Milner would be the man who had written the note and whom his father met—but that that most treacherous of servants was in some way implicated in the murder he had now not the slightest doubt, and that the fellow should meet his just deserts he was equally as determined.

He had hung the coat, in the breast-pocket of which reposed the letter he had found in the library, over the back of a chair by the head of his bed, when he lay down.

It must have been long after midnight, when he was suddenly awakened out of a deep sleep by a strange noise in the room.

Opening his eyes he looked round, but the chamber was sunk in deep gloom, and he could see nothing. He was about to turn over on his side again and compose himself for sleep, when again the noise struck upon his ear.

It was the handle of the door rattling, he felt sure. There was someone softly turning it on the outside.

In an instant he was wideawake, and, quickly sitting up, he stared across at the door, which, however, was wrapped in the profoundest shadow.

He could not see the handle, but again a faint "creak, creak" reached him, and now he felt sure the door was slowly being pushed open, though in the intense gloom he could not see it moving.

With the instinctive belief that his midnight visitor was after the letter he had found in the library, Ernest slipped noiselessly out of the bed on to the floor, and glided to the chair.

To insert his hand inside the breast-pocket and secure the precious clue was the work of an instant; then he crept as noiselessly and concealed himself behind the chest of drawers to await developments.

He regretted the fact that he had no weapon of any kind in case the intruder might be armed; but, armed or not, he was determined the fellow should not get out as easily as he got in.

A few minutes of anxious suspense, and then his strained ears distinctly caught the sound of stealthy footfalls upon the floor.

Peeping cautiously round the edge of the chest of drawers, he beheld a man in the act of rifling the pockets of his coat.

The fellow's back was turned towards him, and, rising quickly to his feet, Ernest took a quick step forward, and flung himself upon the man.

A startled, horrified cry broke from the stranger's lips, and he struggled desperately to free himself. But Ernest was a powerful young fellow, in the full health and vigour of manhood, and, in less time than it takes us to tell it, he had the man down on the floor and pinned by the throat and right wrist.

The intruder wore a handkerchief, with two holes cut in it, over his face to serve as a sort of mask, and Ernest, determined to get a glimpse of the fellow's features at all costs, suddenly let go of his throat, and made a clutch at the handkerchief.

It came away at one wrench, and Ernest uttered an involuntary cry of horror and amazement as he recognised in the nocturnal intruder the butler Milner.

So stunned was he at this discovery that he was quite incapable of action for the minute; and, with a wild cry, the unmasked scoundrel freed his right wrist, and, with an exhibition of strength scarcely to be expected of him, flung our hero backwards.

Ernest lost his balance, staggered, and went down sideways upon one elbow. Ere he could regain his equilibrium, the butler was upon his feet, and was darting towards the door.

Our hero was after him with lightning speed, shouting loudly to him to stop; but Milner flew along the passage and down the stairs as only mortal terror can make a man fly.

Ernest himself bounded down the stairs at breakneck speed, and was hard upon the fugitive's heels, when the latter gained the library.

The door stood ajar, and Milner was through it like a flash. Ernest reached it as it was banged to in his face.

He wrenched at the handle, but the desperate man inside had put his back to the door, and ere our hero could exert his strength to force it open, the key grated in the lock and he was fastened out.

Enraged now beyond measure, Ernest put his shoulder to the door with the intention of bursting it open; but it was stoutly made, and firmly resisted his efforts.

Chafing at the check, he ran back several paces, and then, bounding forward, hurled himself bodily against the door. It gave way with a crash, and he was precipitated into the room upon his hands and knees.

Scrambling quickly to his feet, he looked around in utter stupefaction.

The library was untenanted; there was not a trace to be seen of the butler.

With a strange, eerie feeling creeping over him, Ernest drew out his matchbox and lit the gas. The light revealed nothing.

He lifted up the tablecloth, and peeped underneath. There was no one in hiding there.

He rushed to the bureau and looked behind it. No one.

Across to a large cupboard at one side of the room he ran, and pulled open the door, fully expecting the fugitive to spring out upon him. It was empty.

He stood stock-still, and drew his hands across his eyes.

Was he awake or dreaming?

Had the midnight intrusion, the struggle with his visitor, the chase down the stairs, all been simply a fantasy of the brain.

No, he would not believe it. He was never more wideawake in his life, and he had distinctly seen Milner rush in and heard him lock the door upon him. Yes, there was the door with the lock sprung.

There was not the faintest room for doubt but that the incidents of the past few minutes had been no dream but stern reality. The butler had been in the library only the minute before.

Then where had he got to? He could not vanish into air, and there was assuredly no one in the room.

He crossed to the windows. These were latched and shuttered on the inside, the same as the footman, Jones, who locked up every night, had left them.

The fugitive could not have escaped that way, and the only

other possible egress from the room was the chimney, which he knew well was too narrow to admit of the passage of a corpulent man like the butler.

To make doubly sure, though, Ernest took up the poker and thrust it as high as he could up the chimney. But the only result was he brought down a shower of soot upon the sleeve of his dressing-gown.

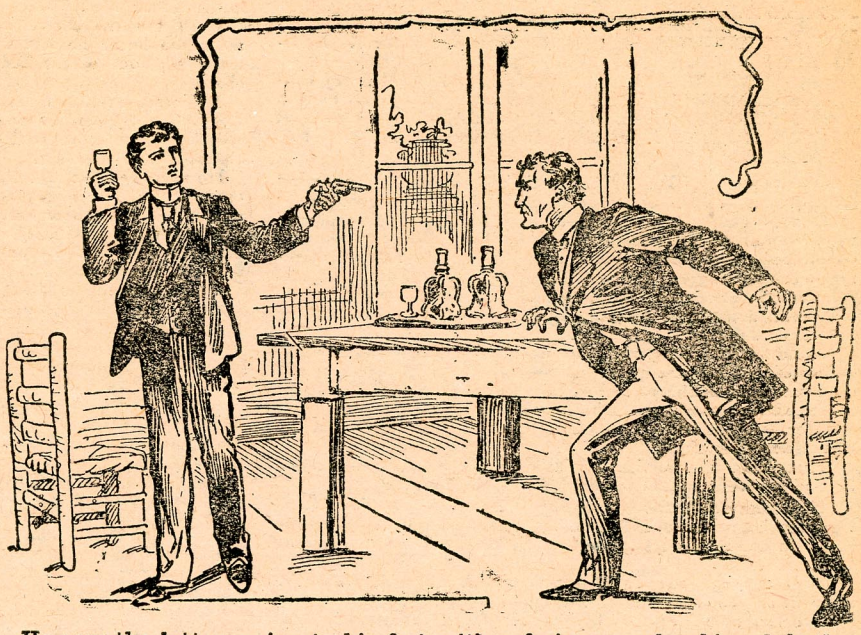
Completely mystified, and with a strange, superstitious dread creeping over him to which he was not usually subject, Ernest returned to his bedroom; but he could not get to sleep again very easily after that most mysterious occurrence. He had taken the precaution of locking his door this time to prevent a return visit from the mysterious intruder, who he told himself now could not possibly have been Milner.

No, it might have been someone extremely like the butler, but it never could have been he.

And yet, who else could it have been?

It was a most mysterious affair altogether—it was most uncanny. He could not understand it.

He fell asleep towards morning, and did not wake till late the next day.



He saw the latter spring to his feet with a furious snarl, whipped forth the revolver, and, facing half round, covered the wretch with it.

CHAPTER 7.

ERNEST PROCEEDS TO FOREST GATE—NO. 16, PLETHORA STREET—THE OLD LADY NEXT DOOR—ERNEST HEARS SOME REMARKABLE TIDINGS—ON THE RIGHT TRACK AFTER ALL—MILNER AGAIN—ERNEST GIVES CHASE.

The funeral of Jeffrey Montague was not to take place until the day after, so Ernest, who had left all arrangements for it in the hands of his father's brother, who had come up to London from his home in the North of England, determined to carry out the intention he had formed overnight of going out to Forest Gate, and, if possible, discovering the murderer of his parent.

He felt he must lose no time, for if his visitor in the night—be the fellow Milner or someone else—already knew that he had the address, there was very little likelihood he would not find the birds flown on his arrival.

Still, he believed he had hold of a grand clue, for even if the late occupant of 16, Plethora Street had received warning and disappeared, he would be able to learn something of the man's personal appearance from the neighbours, and so set the police upon his track.

True to his original purpose, too, he told no one, not even Dr. Holmes, who called to see how his mother was progressing, where he was going, or on what errand; but he took the precaution of slipping into his breast-pocket a six-chambered revolver.

He journeyed on the Underground Railway to Mark Lane, and then took the train again at Fenchurch Street for Forest Gate. On reaching this, he inquired his way of the ticket-collector, who informed him Plethora Street lay in the direction of West Ham Cemetery.

He thereupon set out, and, by dint of persistent inquiry from passers-by, at length found Plethora Street. It was a very quiet and evidently highly respectable street. There was not another soul to be seen in it besides himself, except a woe-begotten specimen of the genus milkman.

His heart beat rapidly as he went along one side of the street, and read the even numbers "2" and "4" on the first couple of doors. All the houses he passed appeared tenanted except the very one he sought—No. 16.

This, greatly to his chagrin, though not very much after all to his surprise, he saw was empty. There were no curtains to any of the windows, which were dirty and begrimed, and, furthermore, decorated each with a bill bearing the legend "To be let."

He pushed open the gate and entered the neglected and tangled plot of ground in front of the house, which would probably be dignified by the name of a garden. Approaching what was presumably the parlour-window, he peeped in through the dirt-encrusted panes, but saw only a bleak, unfurnished room.

Next he turned his attention to the bill, in hopes of learning something, and read: "Apply next door, No. 18, for key and full particulars."

Ernest decided he would take the bill's advice, and apply next door for full particulars. In answer to his pull at the bell, a garrulous old lady made her appearance, and he saw at a glance that if anything was to be learnt about this mysterious house and its late occupant he would have very little trouble in learning it from her.

"Good day, madam," he began. "You are trying to let the house next door, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. Would you care to look over it? I can let you have the key."

"Thank you. I should like to see the house. Has it been long empty?"

"Only a couple of months, sir."

"A couple of months?" gasped Ernest, falling back in utter astonishment. "Why, I—I thought it was occupied a week ago!"

The woman looked at him in evident surprise.

"Oh, no, sir. There has been no one living there for the past two months."

Ernest was bewildered. What did it mean? Then a light broke in upon him, and he asked eagerly:

"I suppose you have had a great many people after it, though?"

"Why, yes, sir. Only the week before last there was a gentleman here looking after it."

"And you let him have the key to see over it?"

"Yes, and he as good as took the house. Paid me a week's rent in advance—for I'm the landlady, sir—and told me he was taking it for a friend. He even went to the trouble of putting curtains up on all the front windows, sir, and the following evening his friend came to see the house. At least, I presume it was his friend, for neither of them called on me: but about an hour later they both drove away in a cab, and I haven't heard tell of either of them since. They went away with my key; but I had more than one, and I was a week's rent to the good, so I had no great reason for complaint, I thought. When my daughter went out in the morning, the curtains were down from the windows, and the house was quite empty, when we went through it a day or two later. It was strange conduct, wasn't it?"

Ernest did not answer her question. He was greatly excited, for he felt he was on the right track, after all.

"You say you saw the second gentleman who came to see the house his friend had taken for him. What was he like?"

"He was tall and thin, sir; about fifty years of age, with grey hair."

"How was he dressed? Had he a dark brown overcoat on, light plaid trousers, and was he wearing a soft felt, brown

hat?" demanded Ernest quickly, describing the attire his father was wearing at the time he was found murdered on Wanstead Flats.

"Yes, sir. You have described his dress exactly, sir. Do you know him, then?"

"Oh, my father! my poor father!" groaned Ernest.

Then, after a few minutes' silence, he said:

"And the other man—the friend, the one who paid you the week's rent, and took the key off you—what was he like?"

"He was short and stoutish, sir; very dark, with longish black hair, and a heavy black beard. He wore a light dust-coat and a bowler, if I remember rightly!"

Ernest had now no doubt in his mind that the individual whom the old lady had described was the man who had murdered his father.

The villain had clearly lured his parent to this empty house, overpowered him in some way, and then, while he was unconscious, injected the deadly poison, and driven off with him in a cab to Wanstead Flats, which was close by. At that hour of the night there would be few people on the Flats, and the murderer would not be likely to be interfered with.

He either dragged or carried the body to the spot where it was afterwards found, and left it in such a manner that it would look a clear case of suicide.

The young fellow reeled in horror at the revelation of what he believed was the exact mode of procedure adopted by the assassin.

"Did—did you see the men drive away from the house?" asked Ernest at length.

"No, I did not myself," she answered. "I only heard the noise of the cab-wheels; but my daughter, who sleeps in the front bedroom, was just going to bed at the time, and looked through the blinds. She says, though, she did not see two men get into the cab. She only saw one man and the driver. The driver had to almost carry the other man down the steps and put him into the cab. He seemed dead drunk, and quite helpless. The cabman got into the cab with him for a few minutes, I suppose to learn where he was to drive him, and then got on his box and drove away."

The clouds of mystery were breaking; a light was beginning to appear to Ernest Montague. He realised at once that the cabman was none other than the murderer himself; the apparently helplessly-intoxicated man his father, under the influence of some stupefying drug.

The few minutes the cabman had been inside the cab with his victim would be all-sufficient for him to make the incision in the latter's wrist, inject the poison, which robbed him of life, and make a sham bullet wound.

For several minutes after the woman had ceased speaking, Ernest was unable to find his voice, with deep horror and emotion. At last he found means to huskily ask for the key of the house next door.

He would explore it. Who was to say what clue or clues he might not find within it?

The old lady went into her house, and presently reappeared with the key, and a minute later our hero had admitted himself into the dwelling in which his father, he fairly believed, had last seen the light of day.

It was an ordinary six-roomed house, containing a parlour, a kitchen, a scullery, and three bedrooms. Ernest determined to go systematically through the premises; but it was not until he came to the back bedroom on the second floor that he made any discovery.

Then, as he was hunting round, poking everywhere, he came upon an old handkerchief, tossed apparently out of the way in a corner of one of the cupboards.

He seized upon it eagerly, and, as he shook it out, the unmistakable odour of chloroform floated to his nostrils.

Another clue. Without doubt the handkerchief had been used by the murderer to stupefy his victim before he injected the poison into the latter's veins.

Ernest felt a wild spirit of elation. Without the shadow of a doubt he was on the right track of his father's murderer at last, and no mistake.

He left the house, returned the key to the garrulous old landlady next door, and was on his way back to the railway-station, when, just as he turned into Station Road, he beheld, standing at the corner of a street, and apparently watching him, none other than Milner.

The fellow seemed rather taken aback at being discovered, and, turning like lightning, darted quickly down a side-street.

Ernest never waited to think what he should do, but immediately darted across the road in hot pursuit.

The butler was some distance down the street, running for his life, and, but for the two flying forms, it was deserted.

Ernest ran as he never ran before; but fear probably lent wings to the ex-butler's feet, for he got over the ground at an astonishing rate, considering his age. He was across Dames Road, and had turned up one of the short streets which lead to Wanstead Flats, while Ernest was yet a good distance behind.

People turned to look after the flying pair in astonishment; but our hero was too engrossed with the intention of running down his man to think of raising any cry, which might have made the pedestrians ahead try to stop Milner.

CHAPTER 8.

HOW THE BUTLER EVADED HIS PURSUER—DICK HASTINGS—A FRIEND IN NEED—WAITING FOR NEWS—THE LONE HOUSE NEAR HIGHAM'S PARK—WHAT IS THE MYSTERY?—A STRANGE TEST, AND A STRANGER ENTERTAINMENT.

Milner gained the Flats, and at once made off across them, making for the main road through them.

Ernest was now close behind, straining his every nerve to overtake the fugitive. Suddenly, to his utter astonishment, he saw a brougham, which was slowly approaching along the Woodford Road, stop as Milner came up to it, and the driver spring from his seat and throw open the door of the vehicle.

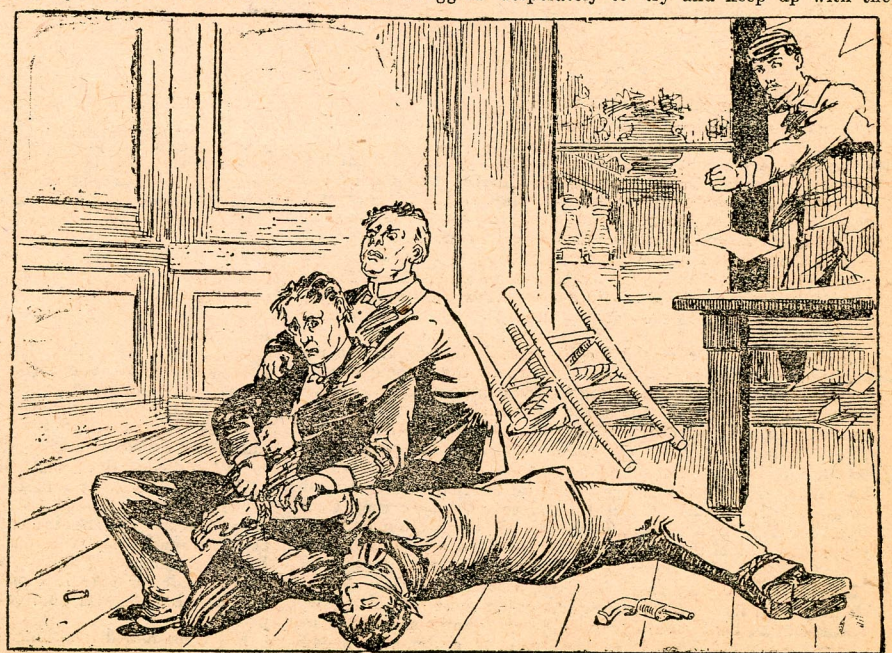
The butler bounded inside, the driver nimbly regained his seat, and, with a sharp crack of the whip, caused the horse to leap forward at a speed which instantly put all pursuit out of the question.

Ernest halted in complete stupefaction and dismay. Then the identity of the driver of the brougham rushed upon him like a flood.

He was short and stout and bearded, and was wearing a fawn dust-coat. It was the man the woman in Plethora Street had described as the companion of his father on the night of the murder. It was the murderer himself!

As this belief fastened upon the young fellow, he started in chase of the brougham; but the vehicle had had a good start, and the horse was bounding forward like a mad thing, under terrific cuts of the whip from the driver, who was standing upright on the box, lashing at it with all his might.

Ernest struggled desperately to try and keep up with the



The next moment Dick Hastings looked into the room.

"THE THIRD MAN." In next Friday's "UNION JACK."

brougham, but it drew further and further away from him at every step he took, and he was left far in the rear. He was quite out of breath with his long chase already, and he gnashed his teeth with chagrin as he realised his impotency.

And to think he had had the murderers of his father almost within his grasp, for he now no longer doubted that Milner the butler had had a hand also in the dastardly deed.

There was the violent ringing of a bicycle-bell close behind him, and, as he staggered rather than stepped aside, he turned his head round and uttered a gleeful cry as he recognised the rider bearing down rapidly upon him.

"Dick! Dick Hastings!" he shouted, and the cyclist, on the point of careering past, turned quickly. Then, hastily slowing down, he sprang from the saddle, and wheeled the machine lightly towards our hero with one hand, holding out the other with the exclamation:

"Why, Ernest, I am surprised to meet you out here!"

Our hero grasped his old college chum's hand cordially, and huskily stammered:

"Dick, quick! Mount again, and after that brougham for your very life! Catch it up, and don't let it escape. You have heard of my father's murder. That brougham, I have every reason to believe, contains his murderers. Quick, quick, man; don't stand staring at me like that! After them, after them, run them down! See where it goes to. I myself will go on to Leytonstone Station and await you there. After them, Dick, quick, or they will get away after all!"

One fervent handclasp to show he understood, and the next moment Dick Hastings had vaulted into the saddle of his bicycle again, and was "scorching" after the fast disappearing brougham as cyclist never "scorched" before in this land of lynx-eyed policemen and cycle-prejudiced magistrates.

Ernest Montague stood in the middle of the road looking after the cyclist.

"Pray Heaven he does not lose sight of the brougham!" he murmured, then stood there silently watching—watching until his eyes were strained, and both brougham and cyclist had dwindled into mere specks.

With another muttered prayer that Dick Hastings might not fail to achieve his object, our hero now turned and struck across the flats in the direction of Leytonstone. He reached the station, and commenced his weary wait there.

Oh, how the time dragged! After only a quarter of an hour's wait, Ernest felt as if he would go mad with suspense and anxiety; but he fought madly against the feelings which agitated him and strove to overcome his impatience, until at last he partly succeeded.

An hour passed—two hours—three. Then, when at last his patience was once more beginning to give way under the terrible strain of waiting and hoping, he caught sight of Dick Hastings riding rapidly towards him along the high road.

In another instant the two had met, and Ernest eagerly gasped out his inquiries.

"I have succeeded, old fellow," was the rejoinder, which filled our hero with wild delight. "I tracked the brougham to a house in Hale End, close to Higham's Park. It is a large, old-fashioned house, standing deep in its own grounds. But surely, Ernest, you are mistaken in thinking they could have been the murderers of your father that I followed?"

"I am not mistaken, Dick!" replied our hero excitedly. "The man who was inside the brougham was my late father's butler, whose conduct recently led me to suspect him, and I have every reason to believe that the driver was the actual murderer. But say, Dick, we have no time to lose if we would effect the arrest of the ruffians. Will you accompany me to Higham's Park, and point out this house to me to which you tracked the pair? I can tell you everything as we go."

Dick Hastings expressed his willingness to assist Ernest to the best of his power, and a few minutes later saw the two standing on the platform inside the station, waiting for the next train to Walthamstow.

Our hero rapidly narrated for his friend's benefit all the remarkable occurrences, which had led up to the coincidence of their meeting under such strange circumstances on Wanstead Flats, and by the time the train came in and they were on their way to Walthamstow, Dick was as excited as his friend, and more impatient even, if that were possible, to reach their destination.

At Walthamstow the two got out and hurried to Hoe Street Station on the Great Eastern Line close by, where they took tickets for Higham's Park. There is only one station between Hoe Street and Higham's Park, and within a very short space of time they found themselves at the last-mentioned place.

Leaving the station, Dick Hastings, wheeling his bicycle beside him, took the lead, and after traversing some little distance, pointed out to his friend a grand old hall, almost smothered in ivy, and partly hidden from the road by a densely-wooded garden.

While in the train the pair had decided on their course of action, which was that Ernest should go boldly up to the house and demand to see its occupant, while Dick rode off on his "bike" to fetch the police.

Accordingly, the pair now separated after a hearty handclasp, and Ernest but waited to see his friend disappear round a bend in the road before he pushed open the gate and strode boldly up the avenue to the house.

Mounting the broad, stone steps in front of the hall-door, he gave a lusty peal at the bell, and it clanged and reverberated through the house, producing strange hollow echoes, which somehow had an eerie effect on the young fellow's nerves.

He waited for some time, but no one came, so again he rang, and once more the bell clanged and echoed through the great building as though it were empty, and a strange, superstitious dread seized upon Ernest.

The house seemed wrapped in a silence as of the grave, and the whole place was so lonely and desolate-looking it struck a chill to his heart. The garden was overgrown with weeds, he noticed; the hedges unkempt and gappy. Everything—the very trees that shut him in from the road—seemed dead and lifeless.

He descended the steps, and went across what had once been a handsome lawn to the French windows. They were thick again with dust, and the blinds inside were close-drawn, so that he could not see in.

He stepped back a pace to look up at the second floor windows, when a voice behind him startled him so in the solitude and eeriness of the place that he almost uttered a cry of dismay.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

Ernest wheeled round, and beheld standing at his elbow a small, thin man, with a deathly-white complexion, thin, clean-cut lips, guiltless of beard or moustache, and a pair of coal-black eyes, which glistened and twinkled in the sunlight like a venomous snake's.

The gentleman's appearance—for he was gentlemanly dressed—so surprised Ernest for the moment that the latter was unable for several minutes to articulate a word.

"Well, sir," again snapped the stranger, in tones like the sharp yelp of a savage little terrier, "what can I do for you?"

"Are you the occupier of this house?" queried Ernest, recovering his power of speech and thought with an effort.

"I am!" was the snappy rejoinder.

"Here is my card, sir. I have come here in search of a man named Frederick Milner, who, I have every reason to believe, is a murderer! He has been traced here."

"Milner! Why, bless me, that is the name of my coachman, but his name is Edward. Ah-ha! I see. Frederick is the name of his brother, who was here to-day to see him, and I remember Edward Milner gave me the name of Mr. Jeffrey Montague, of Weston Square, London, as a reference, before I engaged him as my coachman a fortnight ago.

"Humph! you say his brother is a murderer. I read the account in the papers of your father's death, for I presume it was your father. Come inside, and I will send for Edward. Now, I remember, his brother was here a couple of hours ago, and the pair may have gone off somewhere together, for Edward asked for half a day's leave to-day. But come inside, anyhow! This is indeed a terrible affair, and must be inquired into. Have you brought the police with you?"

"No," replied Ernest. And was about to add that he had however sent for police assistance, but on second thoughts he determined to say nothing on that point.

A prey to the strangest of feelings, he followed the gentleman round to a side entrance, which had hitherto escaped his notice; and, passing through this, they entered the house by means of a glass-door.

The strange gentleman went first along a gloomy and perfectly bare passage, and threw open a door at the far end, ushering our hero into a room—probably the dining-room—looking on to a large but neglected fruit garden at the back of the premises.

There were only three articles of furniture in the room, a rickety deal table, uncovered by a cloth, and two rush-bottomed chairs. The floor was uncarpeted, and the walls were devoid of any ornament whatsoever.

Ernest looked round the bleak apartment in utter astonishment, and his strange host said, with a peculiar, cackling laugh:

"Won't you take a seat, Mr. Montague? You are surprised at the state of this room, I suppose? but I must tell you I am poor, very poor, though I strive to keep up outside appearances, as you see," and he indicated his handsome attire. "Don't think, though, that I haven't any furniture. Oh, yes, I have beautiful furniture; but it is packed away—packed away, you understand, for fear it should wear out. If it wore out, you know, I should never be able to replace it, for I am poor—very poor!"

His voice ended in a long-drawn wail, and Ernest realised he had to deal with either a lunatic or a most despicable old miser.

CHAPTER 9.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY—ERNEST SUSPECTS HIS HOST—THE POISONED WINE AND THE ANTIDOTE—A VILLAIN FOILED—ERNEST AT THE MERCY OF A FIEND—MILNER INTERVENES TO SAVE HIM.

Ernest sat down upon one of the chairs, and his strange host continued, with another cackling laugh:

"But for all my poverty, I am not inhospitable. It isn't often I receive a guest, and we will crack a bottle of old port together to celebrate the occasion. He! he! he!"

Before Ernest could raise any objection, the mysterious master of that most mysterious house had glided to the door, opened it, and disappeared through it.

Ernest sprang to his feet. The idea of treachery flashed like lightning upon him, and he took a quick step towards the door, as though with the intention of following this strange being.

But then, as he remembered the revolver in his breast-pocket, he stopped and smiled confidently.

If necessary, he could and would use the weapon; he had nothing to fear, armed as he was. Besides, the window of the room opened on to a terrace, from which he could easily gain the garden in case of emergency.

No, there was no cause for alarm, he assured himself. His strange host was probably only a bit miserly and crack-brained.

Anyway, he drew the revolver from his pocket, and carefully examined all the chambers. They were quite intact, and, with a smile at his own vague suspicions, he thrust the weapon back into his pocket, and waited for the return of the owner of the house.

He was not kept waiting long, for presently he heard the strange old chap's footsteps in the passage, and the latter re-entered with a tray on which were a couple of glasses and two decanters.

"My name is Cranworth—Ralph Cranworth, at your service, Mr. Montague," said the man, as he placed the tray on the table, and proceeded to slowly and gingerly fill up the two glasses from one of the decanters, which apparently contained port wine.

"Come, now, take your glass, and we will discuss the object of your visit, while we drink success to your mission. Ho! ho! It isn't often I have a friend to drink with me now—now that I am so poor—so very poor!"

Ernest hesitated. A suspicion that the wine might be poisoned filled his mind.

But he had seen his host fill the two glasses from the same decanter, and he was left to choose his own glass. So he reasoned with himself that, after all, his suspicions must be unfounded.

He told himself he would be sure to be on the safe side if he drank exactly what the other drank.

Accordingly, he stretched forth his hand and picked up the tumbler furthermost from him, for he was determined he would run no risks.

His host's face was imperturbable, as he quietly took up the glass that was left, and, holding it up to the light, said, with another of his hideous, cackling laughs:

"Well, here's your health, Mr. Montague! I am delighted to have made your acquaintance!"

With that he tossed off the whole contents of his glass at a draught, and immediately setting down the empty tumbler on the table, stretched forth his hand for the second decanter, and refilled it with what Ernest, in astonishment, saw was apparently water.

Not knowing what to make of this, but determined to carry out his intention of drinking exactly what the other drank, Ernest, too, tossed off the contents of his glass, and then rising, said:

"I presume that is water in the other decanter? With your permission, I will take a glassful of it. I never drink wine undiluted."

The expression of mingled chagrin and rage which shot athwart his strange host's face as he spoke, told Ernest that his suspicion of poison was well-grounded, and he had now not the slightest doubt that the second decanter contained the antidote to the drug, which had been added to the contents of the first.

With a quick movement he decanted the apparent water into the glass with his right hand, while he slipped his left quickly inside the breast-pocket of his coat, at the same time keeping a watch on his strange host out of the corners of his eyes.

He saw the latter spring to his feet with a furious snarl, and, quicker than the lightning flash, he whipped forth the revolver, and, facing half round, covered the wretch with it.

The scoundrel shrank before the gleaming barrel; and, catching up the glass he had just refilled with his right hand, Ernest took several paces backwards, still covering the villain before him with the revolver.

Then he raised the glass to his lips, and tossed off the draught, fortunately without any ill-effects, just the beat of a second before the ruffian launched himself like a wild beast upon him.

As Ernest reeled back under the impetus of the other's spring, the revolver went off, the bullet striking the ceiling harmlessly. The next moment the two were staggering round the room, locked in a fierce embrace, the ruffianly host uttering snarls and screams like some wild beast.

Ernest would, undoubtedly, have thrown and overpowered his adversary in another minute or two, but the fellow's rage lent him extraordinary strength, and presently our hero's heel caught in a crack of the flooring and tripped him up.

He fell backwards, the other atop of him, and his head came with a sickening thud against the leg of the table.

Innumerable lights danced before his eyes, consciousness deserted him, and he lay stunned and helpless where he had fallen. His diabolical antagonist scrambled to his feet, and rubbed his hands gleefully.

"At last! At last, he is at my mercy!" he chuckled. "Now to bind him hand and foot! Then I will serve him as I served his father!"

He glided quickly to one of the cupboards, wrenched it open, and pulled forth some strong cord. As he did so, the door of the room flew open, and Milner appeared, with a white, scared face.

"What has happened, Edward?" he asked. "I heard a shot fired! Oh, you have not killed him?"

"No, no! The revolver he was armed with went off accidentally. Quick! quick, brother, help me to bind him! He is only stunned, and may recover consciousness any minute!"

Trembling in every limb, the ex-butler lent his aid, and in a few minutes the pair had reduced Ernest to utter helplessness, binding his hands and feet securely with the cord.

"Now to fix the gag!" chuckled Ernest's assailant; and, drawing forth his handkerchief, he proceeded to tie it tightly over our unconscious hero's mouth.

That done, he picked up the revolver, and, turning to his trembling, terrified associate, said:

"Go! Fly this instant! It is scarcely likely he has ventured here alone, and the police may be down upon the place any moment! Make for the railway-station! I will follow, and overtake you!"

"What, further fiendish work do you meditate?" demanded Milner, his face pallid from terror. "No, I shall not go without you. Edward, you shall not murder the boy, as you murdered his father! I have risked everything to save you from the consequences of your other terrible crime, and I tell you you shall not injure him. I am no murderer, thank Heaven, though he thinks me so; but I feel certain I shall be an involuntary one if I leave this house without you. Edward, brother, it is you who should fly. I am innocent; you are guilty—guilty of that boy's father's murder! Yet, out of my brotherly love for you, I have sacrificed myself—brought myself under suspicion; and, perhaps, in danger of the scaffold too, in my endeavours to save you. I conjure you by the tie between us, to fly, and to give up your fiendish design of wreaking vengeance upon him, who is guiltless of all wrong-doing!"

"I am not to be baulked of my long-cherished revenge. I will kill the son as I killed the father, and thus destroy all who bear his name! Frederick, you may not interfere. I tell you, if you raise a finger to aid him, or to prevent me effecting my purpose, I shall shoot you with as scant mercy as I would the veriest stranger! Go! leave me to my cherished revenge!"

"I shall not. Edward—Edward, by the memory of the sacred tie between us—by the memory of our mother, I——"

"Will you go, or am I shoot you, as I threatened?"

Frederick Milner stood for one moment as though turned to stone. Then, with a positive shriek of: "You shall not! You shall not!" he bounded forward like a panther, and hurled himself upon his brother.

CHAPTER 10.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE BROTHERS — A FIEND'S DESIGN — FOILED AGAIN — THE MURDERER'S END.

There was a sharp report, as Edward Milner pressed the trigger of the revolver, and the ex-butler staggered back, with a choking cry:

"Oh, Heaven, Edward, you have shot me!" he groaned, sinking to his knees, and pressing one hand in agony over the wound in his side.

"Mad fool, to think to come between me and my revenge!" retorted the inhuman wretch before him. "You brought your fate upon yourself!"

Frederick Milner rolled over upon the floor, fainting with pain, while his brother darted swiftly from the room.

He was gone only for a few minutes, however, and returned carrying a tiny phial and a hypodermic syringe.

His face was lit up with a most fiendish look of triumph as he shook the phial and held it up to the light, the better to survey the reddish, blood-coloured liquid it contained.

"Yes," he hissed rather than murmured, "I will kill the son as I killed the parent. This little phial contains a far deadlier nerve poison than any known to the scientific world. Bah! Europe thinks itself far in advance of any other portion of the earth in everything. It is behind the East, at any rate, in toxicology. The Javanese and Philippine islanders could teach European savants something about many herbs and drugs they have never even heard the names of. Ha!"

He stood in an attitude of listening, for there suddenly came a loud and peremptory knock at the front door, instantly followed by the violent ringing of the bell.

"Curse the luck! It is the police!" he gasped, and his face took on an ashen hue.

Then once more that savage, diabolical expression swept over it, and, seizing up the syringe from the table, upon which he had laid it, he hoarsely whispered:

"I shall not be robbed of my revenge, police or not. If I have to meet my doom, I shall send his son to the grave before me!"

With frantic haste he uncorked the phial, and drew the poison into the syringe. Then, rushing to the side of our still unconscious hero, he hastily pushed up the sleeve of the latter's coat.

He was about to stick the needle into the bared white arm, when a hand grasped him by the collar and jerked him backwards.

It was Frederick Milner, who had recovered from his swoon in time to drag himself across the floor and prevent the fell deed.

"You shall not—you shall not murder him!" he gasped painfully, struggling feebly, but desperately, to wrest the deadly syringe out of his brother's hand. "Oh, help! Heaven, help!"

His cry died away in an articulate gurgle, as, with brutal strength, the would-be murderer flung off his detaining grasp, and once more raised the needle to run it into Ernest's arm.

The ex-butler, with a last despairing effort, once more threw his arms around his brother's body, and tried to drag the latter back. Even as he did so, there came the crunch of footsteps on the terrace outside the window. The next moment the glass was shivered into fragments, and Dick Hastings looked into the room.

What he saw made him hurl himself bodily against the framework of the window, which gave way instantly beneath his weight; and in a moment of time he was inside the room, cut and gashed in several places it is true, but reckless of his own injuries in his anxiety for his friend.

The two Milners were struggling upon the floor; but Dick and the constables, who had followed him into the room, quickly tore them apart. Then it was seen that Frederick was mortally wounded. Indeed, he was almost at his last gasp, though his eagerness and determination to save his old master's son from a horrible death had hitherto sustained him.

He now fell back in Dick's arms, breathless and utterly exhausted; and, furthermore, with the pallor of death creeping over his face.

He was too far gone to even speak, though he seemed to be making desperate efforts to do so. A torrent of blood suddenly gushed from his mouth and nose, his eyes fixed in a stony stare, and then, with a convulsive shudder, his spirit took its flight.

Throughout this scene, Edward Milner stood surveying his brother, with an expression of baffled rage and sullen ferocity only upon his cruel features. There was no trace upon them of pity, much less remorse.

The hardened officers of the law, who gripped him firmly by either wrist, were moved by the dying man's agony; but not his brother.

He gave utterance to a wild, mirthless laugh, as the latter fell back dead, and cried:

"Serve the fool right! He would come between me and my revenge! Listen to me! It was I, and I alone, who killed Jeffrey Montague! That man there, my brother, had nothing to do with the crime!

"Twenty years ago, Montague was the means of my being sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude, for the manslaughter of my father. It was on his evidence solely I—then barely turned twenty years of age—was convicted. I swore to be revenged, and, throughout my term of servitude, I nourished and planned my scheme of vengeance. But when I was released, I found myself a pariah—an outcast. My own brother there disowned me, and I—I was too cautious then to attempt to wreak my vengeance upon the head of the man whose evidence had come so near sending me to the scaffold.

"I went abroad to the Philippines, and worked on plantations there until in time I became wealthy, and owned some of the best-paying plantations myself in the islands. But the idea of revenge had never left me. I returned to England, armed with a deadly nerve poison I became acquainted with during my residence among the Philippines. I was bent upon having the life of Jeffrey Montague; but I went cautiously to work. I arranged all my plans for my foe's murder beforehand; then I contrived to meet him outside the door of his own home, one evening, as he was returning from business. He did not recognise me, for I wore an excellent disguise, and I threatened to expose certain indiscretions of his early life if he did not pay me to keep my mouth shut. He threatened instead to hand me over to the police as a blackmailer, and dared me to do my worst.

"My plan was to inveigle him somehow to an empty house I had rented in Forest Gate; and, after that interview, I sent him a note which worked the oracle beautifully. He kept the appointment, and, as soon as he entered the house, I felled him from behind with a sandbag. Then I chloroformed him, and, while he lay unconscious, injected the poison into his veins!"

The self-avowed murderer paused at this point of his narrative, and a shuddering sob from where Ernest Montague lay told his friends that he had recovered his senses, and was listening to the terrible recital.

"Yes," continued Edward Milner, "I poisoned Jeffrey Montague; then I made a sham bullet-wound at the back of the right ear, where a man would be likely to shoot himself; and, leaving him dead in the house, went to fetch my brougham from a hotel close by where I had left it. I drove back to the house, left the brougham at the door, re-entered, and, half carrying, half pushing the corpse before me—for he was already dead—succeeded in getting it inside the vehicle and propping it on one of the seats. Then I mounted the box and drove to Wanstead Flats. I did not keep to the road; but turned into the scrub, and, when I reached the spot where the body was found I pulled up, dragged the corpse out, and put the pistol beside it to simulate suicide. I then drove on here, and that self-same night posted a letter to my brother Frederick, whom Mr. Montague had taken into his employ after my conviction, acquainting him with what I had done.

"He came to see me, and seemed dreadfully cut up over the affair, alternately threatening to hand me over to the police and urging me to fly the country. He believed that the note I sent Jeffrey Montague, if found among his papers, would lead to my detection, so he determined to try and secure it. You, Ernest Montague, surprised him in the act, and he had to resort to subterfuge to escape. You wondered where he had vanished to, how he had got out of the house unobserved. As a matter of fact, he did not leave the house at all until the dead of night. He was concealed all the time in a secret hiding-place in the library itself—in a small hidden chamber built in the thickness of the wall beside the fireplace. It was a sort of secret safe, in which your father, Ernest Montague, kept many valuable documents and deposits ere removing them to the strong-room of the bank. It was not air-tight, so my brother could breathe quite easily inside, and listen to all going on in the room.

"I do not think I can tell you anything more that you do not already know, except this, perhaps, that you think you have me safe and fast now a prisoner. Poor fools! Look in my face, and read therein how I will yet cheat the gallows and you all. Ere you seized me, I contrived to inject the poison with which I meant to kill you, Ernest Montague, into my own veins. It takes ten minutes before the drug begins to act upon the system, and the ten minutes are now nearly up."

It was even as he said, for as the eyes of all were turned upon him, in horror and incredulity, they saw his eyes glowing with unnatural brightness, and a vivid, hectic flush overmantling either pallid cheek.

Another instant, and he reeled and fell back into the arms of the constables, moaning feebly. Then a sudden spasm shook him from head to foot, his eyes rolled horribly, and, writhing and twisting, he fell to the floor, rolled over once, and lay still.

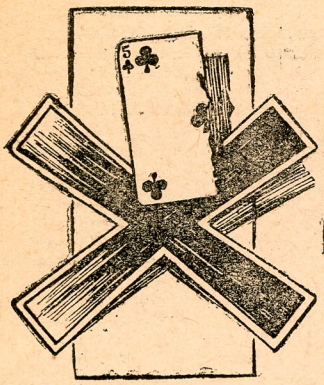
When they bent over him and attempted to raise him they found that he was dead.

So the mystery surrounding the poisoning of Jeffrey Montague was at last cleared up, and Ernest had kept his word, inasmuch as he had hounded down to death the murderer of his father.

When the affair got into the papers it created the profoundest sensation; and the funeral of the murdered man a day later was attended by a large number of the merchants of London, who thus showed the last tribute of respect to one they had so honoured and admired in life.

Mrs. Montague recovered from her illness, and lived to see her son as highly honoured and respected in the City, in the capacity of the head of the firm of Montague and Son, Bankers, as ever his father had been.

THE END.



THE SIGN OF THE SCARLET CROSS

By CLAUD HEATHCOTE,

Author of "Four British Boys," "Val the Boy Acrobat," "Roy Royal of St. Miriam's," "The Red Light," "Dick Danvers," &c.

BEGIN HERE.

The story opens on Harry's fifteenth birthday.

Harry and Pierre Evison, whose son Harry thinks he is, are about to have tea, when Harry's great chum, Shaggy, a newsboy, enters, and tells them that a body has been dragged from the Thames at Limehouse, and that on the breast of the dead man is a strange tattoo—a scarlet cross, and half of the five of clubs. On hearing this, Pierre Evison turns deadly pale.

Harry asks Shaggy to tea. The newsboy tells his chum that he has a few papers to sell first, and goes out.

He does not return, and Harry sets out in search of him.

In the street he meets Paul Lamaret, who asks if he knows where Pierre Evison lives. Harry directs him to their home, and goes on his way.

A few moments later Paul Lamaret enters. "Pierre Evison, otherwise Pierre Goubert, I salute you!" he says. And he tells him that he has come to take his life because he has not killed one Horace Temple, as he promised to do. The pair fight with rapiers, and Pierre is mortally wounded. The murderer escapes. Harry, meanwhile, goes to where Shaggy lives. He is out. Harry is about to leave, when he sees a rat gnawing a paper. He takes it from the animal, and discovers it to be a letter half eaten away. He puts it into his pocket and goes home. He discovers Pierre dying, and is told by him that he is not his son; that his family name is Temple; and that he must beware of the Lamarets, all of whom are marked on the breast with the scarlet cross and the half of the five of clubs. Then he falls back dead.

Mawker, a craftly old lodger in the house and the father of a fair girl, Angela, enters the dead man's room at night-time for the purpose of searching for a note Harry, whom he has drugged, has in his pocket. While engaged in this search, he hears some one enter the room. It is in perfect darkness, so Mawker cannot see the man's face. But when the latter leaves the room, Mawker finds that a dagger has been plunged into the bed where Harry had been lying.

Through the craftiness of Mawker, Harry is next day arrested on a charge of theft. But he escapes from the policeman, for the purpose of placing some mementoes on the breast of Pierre. To accomplish this, he is compelled to visit the mortuary at midnight, and while discharging this sacred duty, a lady (whose face he cannot see) enters and places a bunch of flowers on the shroud. Harry afterwards overhears a conversation between this mysterious lady and the organist of the church. Then, having fulfilled his duty, he voluntarily gives himself up to the police.

He is tried, and sentenced to be sent to a reformatory for a year. He escapes, in company with a lad called Probyn. They are heard by Merrick, the reformatory bully, who arouses the officials. Probyn stays behind.

Harry tramps to London, and finds Shaggy.

Harry is supposed to have been shot. Together Shaggy and he go to Stentham, and put up at the village inn. Paul Lamaret and a Mr. Trevelyan are also staying there.

Mr. Trevelyan and Lamaret fight a duel, in which Lamaret is wounded. Mr. Trevelyan disappears. Harry learns from Lamaret's mutterings that Mr. Trevelyan is really his father, Horace Temple.

Lamaret is carried to the inn. One day Merrick, who turns out to be Lamaret's son, visits the wounded man, and tells him how he has been deceived in thinking Harry dead.

Lamaret disappears. Harry and Shaggy go to Merrow to visit Mrs. Evans, the old lady who befriended Harry when he escaped from the reformatory. They knock at her door.

CHAPTER 46 (*continued*).

"Is this the house of Mrs. Evans, please?" asked Harry.

"Yes; I am Mrs. Evans," she answered, eyeing them sharply. "What do you want with me?"

"You gave shelter some weeks back to a boy named Harry Evison, who had escaped from Stentham Reformatory?"

"Yes," she answered eagerly. "Do you know him?"

"Well—I have come from him."

"Come from him!" she replied. "Enter—enter!"

She flung the door wide open as she spoke, and thus cordially invited, they entered.

"From Harry Evison," she repeated; "sit down—sit down! I am glad to see any friend of his. I have been wondering and wondering and wondering what had become of him, especially after I read about his death in the newspaper. But I knew that he was not dead—I knew that he was living. I knew that the boy who had been shot down was not Harry Evison. Yet, stay! My tongue runs away with me. You are cold and hungry. Draw nearer to the fire, and I will fetch you something to eat."

"No, no," said Harry. "We are neither hungry nor cold. We are better off than Harry Evison was on that night he came to you, Mrs. Evans."

"He has told you, then——" she began; and then paused, eyeing them curiously.

"Yes; we are particular friends of his," put in Shaggy. "He told us all about it."

"I am so glad you've come. I—I—took a strange interest in the lad. When he came to me on the night of his escape from the reformatory his voice so reminded me of my own boy's. Did he tell you anything of my Jack?"

"Yes," said Harry huskily. "He told us all about him—what a good mother you had been to him, and how shabbily he had treated you. He used to say that an ungrateful son like that wasn't worth thinking of."

"And we're both of us of the same opinion," put in Shaggy.

"Ah, my lad," said the widow, shaking her head sadly, "that's one of the things you can never forget—you can never forget your own flesh and blood, no matter what they've done to you, or what they are. But tell me all about Harry Evison—what became of him after he left here, and what he's doing now?"

She paused, turning her sympathetic eyes fully upon Harry as she finished speaking.

"What became of Harry Evison after he left here?" repeated Harry, with deep feeling. "Thanks to you, ma'am," he made his way to London. Perhaps you will remember that he mentioned the name of an acquaintance of his called Shaggy when he told you his story?"

"Quite well, not only because of the peculiar name, but because of the affectionate way Harry spoke of him. He said he was one of the best and truest friends boy ever had." (Shaggy gave Harry a kick on the shins underneath the table.) "I thought, when he said it, what a splendid thing it would have been had my boy had a friend like that. It would have saved Jack from a lot of mischief, and me from a lot of misery. Instead of that, he picked up the worst companions that could be found—his nearest companion, Phil Merrick, was up to every form of mischief."

"Phil Merrick!" cried both in a breath.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"We have heard of the name, I think," said Shaggy.

When telling the widow his story, Harry had not mentioned Merrick's name; thus it came as a surprise to him that his enemy at the reformatory and the companion of the dead sailor were one and the same.

"Merrick was up to every form of mischief under the sun," said Mrs. Evans. "It was him, I believe, who urged Jack to run away from home; but I'm interrupting you. You were speaking, not of a bad friend, but of a good one. What about this Shaggy?"

In next Friday's "UNION JACK." "THE THIRD MAN." A Detective Story.

"I was going to say that when Harry Evison got to London he went to the home of his friend Shaggy," went on Harry. "Here he found that a relative had left him a good sum of money."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. The poor lad was penniless when he left here."

"No, not entirely penniless; but he would have been had it not been for a friend in need. As he was starting away from the house where he had been so kindly sheltered, the good woman put into his hand a half-crown. Harry Evison was about to decline it. 'If you do,' said the woman, 'you will offend me. You can return it, you know, if you ever become rich.' Harry Evison has never forgotten those words, any more than he has forgotten the other kindnesses he received at that kind lady's hand. Knowing that we were coming this way, he asked us to call upon her, and give her this little keepsake."

As Harry spoke he drew from his pocket the purse with the sovereigns in it, which had been given him by his father.

All the time he had been speaking the widow had watched him closely. When he had concluded, instead of taking the purse, she cried out:

"Ah! now I know you. You can deceive me no longer. It is Harry Evison who is speaking to me!"

"You have guessed rightly, ma'am," said Harry, taking off his moustache and wig. "I felt certain that you would find me out. You are the first one who has penetrated my disguise. I know that my secret will be safe with you, as safe as it is with my friend Shaggy."

"Is that really your friend Shaggy?" cried Mrs. Evans. "How glad I am to meet him."

"I felt sure my golden locks would have betrayed me, ma'am," said Shaggy, imitating the style and tone of Harry; "but they haven't. You are the first one who has failed in penetrating my disguise. I trust my secret will be safe with you?"

The widow smiled; Harry laughed outright, and took advantage of the opportunity to return Shaggy's kick on the shins.

"Now that you have found me out, I can only ask you to accept this keepsake on my own behalf instead of on behalf of my supposed friend," said Harry, holding out again the purse which the widow had ignored.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Evans. "I can hear there is money in that purse. I would rather not receive payment for the little service I was able to render you."

"It is not intended in the light of payment. That would be insulting you," said Harry. "A service like the one you rendered me can never be repaid. But you remember what you said when you slipped that half-crown into my hand. 'You can return it, you know, if you ever become rich.' Well, now I've become a—a——"

"A millionaire—a bloated aristocrat—a guinea-pig!" chimed in Shaggy.

"A bloated aristocrat, as my friend Shaggy suggests!" smiled Harry; "you must allow me to repay that half-crown."

"But there is more than a half-crown here," said Mrs. Evans, opening the purse. "There is gold—five golden sovereigns!"

"Well, what of it? They don't come out of my pocket," said Harry. "A small present from a dear friend of mine to—to—the mother of Jack."

Harry mentioned the name of Jack at a venture. Its effect was electrical.

"Jack—ah! yes, poor Jack! Yes, I will keep it for him. He may come back to me as hungry, and penniless as you were that night. Yes, I will keep it—I will keep it for Jack. Some day he will creep back to my arms again; but the time seems a long time coming!"

Harry now regretted that he had mentioned the name of Jack. There was a painful silence in the room.

It was broken by a sudden hurricane of wind without, and the sound of rain beating against the windows. The shower had increased into a storm.

"The absence of Jack is good for one thing," she said, with a smile. "It keeps a room vacant. You had no intention of returning to London to-night, had you?"

"Certainly; we had no idea of trespassing on your hospitality again."

"But you must. You cannot go out in this storm. That is impossible. Instead of trespassing, as you call it, you will greatly oblige me if you and your friend Shaggy will take up your old quarters to-night in Jack's room. Besides, Harry, there are two friends of yours coming to-morrow whom, I know, you will be glad to see."

"Two friends of mine?" repeated Harry wonderingly. "Who may they be?"

"Benjamin Ford and his son Phil—very different, Heaven be praised, to that other Phil, Phil Merrick. You haven't forgotten them, have you?"

Forgotten them! No, indeed; Harry was not at all likely to forget the burly, good-hearted carman, who had given him a lift in his van to Limehouse, and the remarkable story he had told him of the Scarlet Cross. Nor was he any more likely to forget Phil, his delicate cripple son, whose lameness was the result of a quarrel in connection with that weird sign.

"Forgotten them! No, indeed, Mrs. Evans. I should like very much to meet them. So, if Shaggy doesn't mind, I will gladly stay here for the night."

Of course Shaggy didn't mind; so after supper the widow lit a candle, and conducted the two friends into her son's bedroom.

CHAPTER 47.

SHAGGY'S "BEAUTIFUL IDEA"—THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

When the door had closed on the widow, and the two friends were alone, Harry noticed that the room was precisely as he had left it. Nothing had changed. There was the engraving of Hagar and Ishmael, with the bow and arrow slung across it; there was the cricket-bat in the corner, and the skates; the case of butterflies over the chest of drawers; and, standing on the latter, the same rough model of a ship. They were all waiting there for the son that would never return.

"Is that his portrait?" asked Shaggy, in an awe-struck voice, as he pointed to the portrait on the wall of a kindly-faced man and the curly-haired boy sitting on his knee.

"Yes, that is Jack and his father!" answered Harry huskily.

Mournful as those portraits had seemed when Harry first came to that room, the pathos of it all was increased a hundredfold by the knowledge that the lad in that portrait, whom the mother believed to be living, was dead.

The widow was waiting and waiting, with aching heart, for the son who would never return.

"Some day he will creep back to my arms again," she had said.

But Harry knew that that day would never come on this earth. The dust of the grave was now upon her boy.

"It makes a feller feel a bit queer," said Shaggy, still looking at the portrait—"like as if he'd been a-peeling onions, or was trying to sneeze and couldn't manage it. I say, Harry."

"Yes, Shaggy?"

"I want to ask yer something—that is to say, if yer don't mind?"

"Of course I don't. What is it?"

"Well, it's just this, Harry. It came over me when I went to your funeral. I thought to meself—'S'posing that poor chap they're putting into the grave really was my pal Harry instead of another.'"

"Well, supposing it had been, Shaggy?"

"Supposing it had been I should never have looked upon your face again, should I?"

"I—I—suppose not, Shaggy!"

"Then if a feller goes into the grave it—it—ends all—ends everything?"

"No, Shaggy, I didn't mean that. I didn't at first see what you were driving at. Now I understand. No, no; I don't believe the grave ends all. There's something beyond."

"Well," said Shaggy, in very low, tremulous tones, as he pointed to the portrait of the father and his son, "p'r'aps, though Jack has left his mother, he's got back again to where yer see him in that picture. P'r'aps he's just like an innercent little boy again, and has climbed up to his father's knee."

It was a crude idea—this of the rough, unlettered newsboy—but it was, nevertheless, a very beautiful one.

Harry was too much moved to answer; but before he lay upon his pillow that night he breathed an inward prayer that Shaggy's idea had been realised—that Jack Evans had become in the world beyond the grave as an innocent boy again, and had climbed up to his father's knee and asked for forgiveness.

* * * * * * *

Meanwhile, the widow had descended to the little sitting-room.

She sat by the side of the dying fire, and looked sadly into its flickering light. She was thinking of her boy. Where was he on a stormy night like that?

Lower and lower burnt the embers. Then she stirred them with the poker, and again a fitful blaze came from them.

She took out the purse Harry had given her, opened it, and poured the gold pieces into her hand.

As she did so a face that had been peering into the room pressed itself closer to the pane.

She turned the sovereigns absently from hand to hand, watching their reflection in the flicker of the flame.

"Yes, they will do for Jack—they will do for Jack," she kept repeating.

There was an old bureau in the corner of the room. She took from her pocket a bunch of keys, rose from her chair, opened one of the drawers of the bureau and put the purse inside.

"They will do for Jack—they will do for Jack! He may want money when he comes home, or perhaps—perhaps—who can tell?—he may have made a fortune. He may have grown better every way—every way. If he was only a handsome, manly young fellow like that Harry Evison! Perhaps he is—

perhaps he is! Hark! What a night!" She went to the window. The face that had been looking in was hastily drawn away from that corner which had been left unprotected by the blind. "A fearful night! Quite a hurricane. It's bad enough on land. It must be still worse at sea. Where can Jack be—where can——"

There was a gentle, almost timid knock at the door. Low as it was the widow heard it. Her heart began to beat rapidly.

Was that Jack? Had he returned?

She had always somenow thought that when he returned, he would return at night-time and in the tempest.

She opened the door. The rain came beating in with the wind, and for the moment she could see nothing clearly. But presently she was able to discern the figure of a ragged, grimy-looking man.

"Got a mouthful of bread to give a man? I'm a'most starving!"

Mrs. Evans' face fell. The man before her was not her boy. It was a tramp.

She was a brave woman; but she knew that tramps, as a rule, were a very objectionable class; and from what she could see of the man before her, he seemed as evil a specimen of that class as could be found.

"I've got scarcely enough bread for myself," she said. "What are you doing out a night like this?"

"I've got no home 'cept the workuss. I stayed at Brambleton Workuss last night; and I was trying to tramp to Croydon, but the storm came on and spoilt me. I've come down in the world, I have, through no fault o' my own. I was always a steady-going, industrious feller, till misfortune overtook me. But the greatest misfortune of all is that I've lost my boy and can't find him, though I've been tramping all over the country in the hopes o' dropping across him."

"Lost your boy, do you say? Come in—come in for a moment, and warm yourself by the fire. Perhaps I shall be able to spare you a crust of bread and cheese, after all."

Lost his boy! Those words were the open sesame to the widow's heart. Lost his boy! Here was a poor, old man, of greater courage than she, facing the tempest and poverty to find his son. And she—she did nothing but stay at home, and moan and groan and weep, hoping against hope that her son would return.

She would take a lesson from this old man. She would be up and doing. To-morrow she would commence the search for her son—ay, even though it led her the wide world over.

The tramp gladly entered, and took the widow's chair by the fire. But the moment she had turned her back, and had gone to the larder for the purpose of getting him something to eat, he rose from the chair, and crept swiftly to the bureau.

He first tried the drawer where the widow had put the purse, and found it locked. Then he tried the others, with the same result.

"Hem! Artful cat! She's locked 'em all, and put the keys in her pocket. Ahem! I must get those keys. But how? It's a dellerket bis'ness!"

He now heard the footsteps of Mrs. Evans returning along the passage from the larder; and he as swiftly and stealthily retreated from the bureau as he had advanced to it.

Mrs. Evans entered with a large plate of cold meat and bread, and a mug of ale. The tramp's eyes lit up as he caught sight of the ale.

"I'm afraid, ma'am, that I'm putting you to a great deal of trouble," he said humbly. "It is very kind of you, ma'am; it is, indeed."

"Come, draw up your chair, and make as hearty a meal as you can. Perhaps the storm will have cleared off by that time. Meat is a little more substantial than bread-and-cheese. I'm sorry that I have nothing better than table ale to offer you."

Table ale! The tramp pulled a long face at this, and muttered under his breath:

"Table ale! Darned sarsaparilla! Never mind; better that swill than water."

He gulped down half of the ale at a mouthful, drew a wry face, and then started briskly on the cold meat.

"What is the name of the boy you're looking for, may I ask?"

"Bob Ayres! I s'pose you haven't seen a youngster hereabout with that name, have yer?"

He rested his knife and fork points uppermost on the table as he spoke, and leaning on the handles looked from between them at the widow.

CHAPTER 48.

"DARNED SARSAPARILLA"—THE STORM—THE STRUGGLE—LIFE AND DEATH.

"Bob Ayres!"

Mrs. Evans repeated the name as though uncertain whether or not her ears had deceived her.

"Yes'm; Bob Ayres—that's the youngster I want to find." He took another gulp of the table beer as he spoke, made another wry face as he sat the jug down, and again muttered, with a curse—"Darned sarsaparilla!"

The widow stared at the man. She now knew well enough that her ears had not deceived her; but she was bewildered by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the inquiry.

She recalled well enough that that was the name of the youth whom Harry Evison had met on the night of his escape from the reformatory; the sailor boy from the "Ajax," with whom he had exchanged clothes and names. The question was—which of these two was the man before her in search of? Was he in search of the real Bob Ayres—the lad who was in his grave, or was he in search of the lad who had assumed his name—he who was sleeping at that very moment under her roof?

She scarcely knew how to answer for fear of incriminating Harry in some way. She opened her lips to speak, but no sound came from them.

The wind threw itself with a loud shriek at the door, as though demanding entrance. Baffled, it whistled and howled round the cottage, and then swept onward, shrieking and moaning to the hill-top.

"God ha' mercy!" said the tramp, shivering. "It's a cussed night to be abroad in! I've been out in a few nights, but this takes the cake—strike me, if it don't. It'll about settle me afore I get to the end o' my journey."

"How far's that?"

"Don't know quite, somewhere about a dozen miles, I reck'n. You don't happen to have a stronger tap than this, do yer, mum?" He looked into the empty beer jug, as he spoke. "It's very good tipple, of its kind; but as the legs remarked to the head, when it dissolved partnership with the trunk—'There ain't much body in it! I wouldn't ask it; but, yer see, I've a long journey before me, and want supporting by the way. So if yer could find a stronger tap——"

"I'm very sorry, but that is the only sort of ale I keep."

"Darned sarsaparilla!" muttered the tramp. But nevertheless, though he denounced the ale, he ostentatiously lifted the jug to show that it was empty, rattled it against the glass, and pushed it meaningly towards the widow.

She was too busy with her own thoughts at the moment to notice this suggestive bit of by-play on the part of the ever-thirsty tramp. How should she find out who the man really was—whether he was in search of the dead sailor-boy or Harry Evison. She knew, from the latter's story, that he had several implacable enemies—enemies who would stay at nothing to get him into their hands—and she feared that the man before her might be one of the mysterious emissaries of the Scarlet Cross.

There could be no harm, however, in asking his name.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"In course you may, mum," he said, pushing the jug to the very edge of the table on that side of it nearest to her. "It's a very distinguished name, and comes of a very distinguished famerly. My name is Ayres—Thomas Ayres, of Portsmouth."

The widow turned pale; her heart went at a quicker rate. He was, then, the father of the dead boy. It was he he was in search of, not Harry Evison. She looked at him with a good deal of pity; and he was looking with a good deal, not of pity but of sadness, at the empty beer jug!

"And you've come all the way from Portsmouth?" she remarked, to gain time. She was still uncertain how to act.

"Yes'm!" he said impatiently, and swearing beneath his breath at finding all his efforts to direct attention to the empty jug quite wasted.

"And you have walked all the way?"

"Yes'm!"—came from the tramp in almost a fierce cry—"yes'm! And a darned dry road it is, too, I can tell yer. I hope yer didn't take my remarks about the ale unkindly. It's very good tipple, as I before said; but it takes a lot of it to strengthen a man up who's on the tramp. So if yer wouldn't mind replenishing the beaker, I should be very grateful to you, mum!"

"Certainly," she said, glad of the excuse to get a moment or two of thought.

She took up the jug and went from the room. Directly her back was turned he made again for the bureau, and tried every drawer, with the same result as before.

"Curse her! She's taken precious good care to lock up the shiners. Hist! She's coming back again with the cholera mixture."

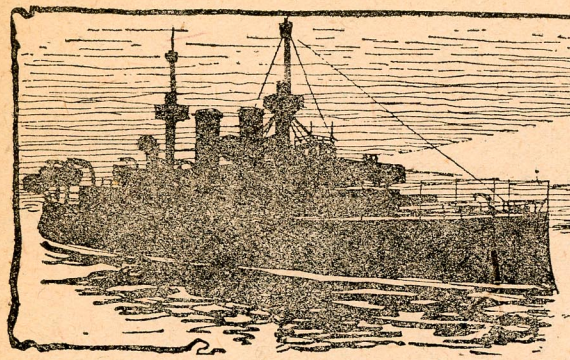
"There's the beer," she said, placing it on the table. "I'm very sorry that I have nothing stronger."

"You can't regret it more than I do, mum; still, what can't be cured must be endured. Yer 'ealth, mum." His face disappeared into the jug. When he had taken a long drink he sat it down again on the table; then, screwing up his face, said: "As a medicine I should say this ale's excellent; but as a drink for a thirsty man——"

Here he broke off, and listened to the storm without.

"My hi! There goes the wind again. Awful, ain't it?"

(*To be continued in next Friday's* UNION JACK.)



FROM THE QUARTERDECK.

The Editor's Chat with his Readers.

The story in next week's number of the UNION JACK is one I am sure will please you, telling as it does of some of the perilous adventures of Sexton Blake, the great detective. Its title is

"THE THIRD MAN,"

and the author is Mr. W. S. Rae, who has written so many successful yarns for the UNION JACK.

Number 2 of the "Harmsworth Magazine" can now be obtained everywhere, price 3½d. It is splendidly turned out; its stories, articles, and illustrations are first rate. There is not a weak thing in it. If you did not buy the first number let me advise you to buy the second. You will not regret your outlay, for you will purchase a sixpenny magazine for 3½d.

An officer's full dress head-piece runs him into no small sum, "N. Rob." Approximately a general's cocked hat and feather costs about £5; an officer's helmet and plume, Life Guards and Dragoon Guards, £12; bearskin cap of the Scots Greys, £10; Hussar sable busby with plume, lines, &c., complete, £15; Lancer cap and plume, £11; Horse Artillery busby and plume, £5; Royal Artillery or Engineer helmet, about £3; Guards' busby, £11; Infantry helmet, £2 10s.; while even the ordinary forage cap costs from 15s. to £1 10s., according to the style and value of lace and trimmings.

You can very easily find the gear of your bicycle, "T. N." Multiply the number of inches in the diameter of the driving-wheel of your machine by the number of cogs on the front chain-wheel, and divide the result by the number of cogs on the back chain-wheel.

The average depth of the oceans, according to the "Shipping World Year Book," is as follows, "Xtra":

Pacific, 4,252 yards; Atlantic, 4,026; Indian, 3,658; Antarctic, 1,690; Mediterranean, 1,476; Irish, 240; English Channel, 110; German, 96; Levant, 72; Adriatic, 45; Baltic, 43.

Provided that you gave audible warning of your approach, "S.," and it was absolutely out of your power to pull up in time, the pedestrian you knocked down cannot claim damages from you, as he was guilty of negligence. On the other hand, if you were injured, you could get compensation from him.

I am sorry to say I cannot tell you the value of your gold ore, "W. S.," as it naturally depends upon how much gold it contains.

In some cases only a few ounces of pure gold are extracted from a ton of ore.

Time on board ship is kept as below. The day begins at noon, and is divided into seven watches, as follows, the watches and crew being so arranged that sufficient rest is allowed all round:

Noon to 4 p.m., afternoon watch; 4 to 6 p.m., first dog watch; 6 to 8 p.m., second dog watch; 8 p.m. to midnight, first watch; midnight to 4 a.m., middle watch; 4 to 8 a.m., morning watch; 8 a.m. to noon, forenoon watch.

Time, a.m.—1 bell, 12.30; 2 bells, 1.0; 3 bells, 1.30; 4 bells, 2.0; 5 bells, 2.30; 6 bells, 3.0; 7 bells, 3.30; 8 bells, 4.0. 1 bell, 4.30; 2 bells, 5.0; 3 bells, 5.30; 4 bells, 6.0; 5 bells, 6.30; 6 bells, 7.0; 7 bells, 7.30; 8 bells, 8.0. 1 bell, 8.30; 2 bells, 9.0; 3 bells, 9.30; 4 bells, 10.0; 5 bells, 10.30; 6 bells, 11.0; 7 bells, 11.30; 8 bells, noon. Time, p.m.—1 bell, 12.30; 2 bells, 1.0; 3 bells, 1.30; 4 bells, 2.0; 5 bells, 2.30; 6 bells, 3.0; 7 bells, 3.30; 8 bells, 4.0. 1 bell, 4.30; 2 bells, 5.0; 3 bells, 5.30; 4 bells, 6.0. 1 bell, 6.30; 2 bells, 7.0; 3 bells, 7.30; 4 bells, 8.0. 1 bell, 8.30; 2 bells, 9.0; 3 bells, 9.30; 4 bells, 10.0; 5 bells, 10.30; 6 bells, 11.0; 7 bells, 11.30; 8 bells, midnight.

Here is an excellent recipe for making indelible writing-ink, "M." No chemical can obliterate it:

Take shellac two ounces, borax one ounce, distilled or rain water eighteen ounces; boil in a closely-covered tin vessel, stirring it until well mixed. Filter when cold through a single sheet of blotting-paper. Then mix one ounce of mucilage of gum acacia (prepared by dissolving one ounce of gum in two ounces of water), and add pulverised indigo and lampblack ad libitum. Boil the whole in a covered vessel, and well mix; then stir again occasionally when cooling, leaving it until the excess of indigo and lampblack subside; after which bottle for use.

Recruits for the Cape Mounted Rifles are obliged to swear allegiance to the Queen, and to serve for five years, "Soldier."

The pay and allowances are as follows:

First-class privates, 6s. per diem; second-class, 5s. per diem.

Sergeants, first-class, 9s. per diem; second-class, 8s. per diem; third-class, 7s. per diem.

Lieutenant, on appointment, 13s. 6d. per diem, with an annual increase of 6d. per diem until the pay reaches 15s. per diem; after ten years' service as such, 17s. 6d. per diem; paymaster, £450 per annum; quartermaster, £365 per annum; surgeon, £456 per annum; adjutant and musketry instructor, £501 per annum; gunnery instructor, £365 per annum.

Captain, on appointment, 16s. per diem, with an annual increase of 1s. per diem until the pay reaches 20s. per diem. Also a contingent allowance of 5s. per diem, which is to cover travelling expenses and to be a remuneration for the care of arms and all other Government property in his charge, and the cost of erecting temporary offices.

Major, £500 per annum, with £100 per annum travelling allowance.

Lieutenant-Colonel, £600 per annum, with £300 travelling allowance.

I should be very glad if my readers would remember that it is quite impossible for me to answer questions, as I am continually asked to do, "next week."

This paper is printed three weeks before you see it, so no answers can appear under that time.

The great currents which flow with a regular movement round the basins of the ocean between the Polar and the Equatorial zones are determined by general causes acting on the entire planet, "James." These causes are the sun's heat; the trade winds; the rotation of the earth on its axis; the rise and fall of the tides all over the globe; the variations in the density of the water, according to its temperature, and the evaporating powers of the atmosphere; its depth, and degree of saltness; and, finally, the variations of barometric pressure.

Taking an average of the payments to soldiers in pensions for wounds for the last four years, "Somers," the amount is as nearly as possible £16,000 per annum.

Printed and Published by the Proprietors at 24, Tudor Street, London, E.C.

A WATCH FOR NOTHING

We are going to give away 1,000 Silver Watches to advertise our Catalogue and our Jewellery. This is no catch, but perfectly genuine. Read our conditions, and then go in and win.

C* *B* *Y'S C*C* *
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R* **** *E*S C*C* *

The words, when filled in, represent the names of three largely advertised articles of food.

DIRECTIONS.

Fill in the missing letters to the above words, and send the answer to us. If correct, we undertake to send you a Solid Silver Watch, a good timekeeper, usually sold by us at £2 2s. Our conditions are that you send us a stamped addressed envelope for us to write and tell you if you are correct; and if you should win the Watch, you purchase one of our Real Silver Chains as per our offer, which we will send you. Write at once, as by delay you may lose the chance.

To convince you of our offer being genuine, we send herewith copies of a few Testimonials which we are daily receiving.

The originals can be seen at our depot on application.

"West End, Honiton,
"October 15th, 1897.

"Gentlemen,—I received the Watch and Albert safely, and am exceedingly pleased with same. I have shown it to my friends, all of whom are astonished to find it such a genuine bargain. One of my friends wishes to know if he could obtain one in the same manner, or has the time expired? With sincere thanks, I remain, yours truly, MR. CROWE."

"10, Dean Street, Liskeard,
"November 1st, 1897.

"Dear Sir,—I received the Watch and Chain on Tuesday last, and I am very pleased with them. The Watch is keeping good time.—Yours truly, MISS R. SWEET."

"The Folly, 8, Thornton St., Hertford
"November 1st, 1897.

"Dear Sir,—I received your Watch and Chain quite safe, and was very well pleased with them; and many thanks for your kindness for sending me one of your catalogues; and perhaps I will have the pleasure of giving you another order before long. I remain yours truly.—MISS E. GATES."

"New Brancepeth, Durham,
"November 2nd, 1897.

"Dear Sir,—Just a line to say that I received the Watch and Chain which you sent me, and was highly pleased with them. I have shown the Catalogue to many of my friends.—Yours respectfully,
"MISS ADAMSON."

P. GRAHAM & CO.
Wholesale & Retail Jewellers,
277, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.

FREE. SEND 6d.

Do not answer this advertisement unless you really want a Gold Watch, as they are worth £5 each, and we can only give them to those who will promise to show them to friends. We have given away over 1,000 Gold Watches of a total value of more than £5,000, and though other firms claim to do so also, not one of them actually has done so. To introduce our catalogue we will send you this solid 14-carat Gold Watch free, if you will take advantage of our marvellous offer. If you want one write to us without delay. With your letter send us 6d. Stamps, for which we will send Brooch and our offer. After you receive Watch you must carry out your promise to show it to friends. The Watch is sent free by registered post on your complying with this advertisement and the offer which we will send. Address:

WATCHMAKERS' ALLIANCE, Ltd., 184, Oxford St., London.
Money returned if not satisfied 100 times over.

PHENOMENAL SUCCESS.

To any person who cuts out this advertisement and sends it to us at once, we hereby guarantee to send, carriage paid, for **20s.** only, the

ROYAL AMORETTE

equal in every respect to the four-guinea organs advertised elsewhere. The **ROYAL AMORETTE** is in a handsome black and gold case, has 16 indestructible steel reeds, and will play not dozens, but hundreds of tunes. We sent one to the Editor of "Fashion Novelties" for his inspection, and he replied: "Herewith please find 20s. for the **ROYAL AMORETTE** you sent on approval. I shall purchase several for Christmas presents, and cannot understand how they can be made at the price. It is the best home musical instrument I have ever seen."

The Royal Amorette, including 6 (six) metal tunes and packed in a strong wooden box, will be sent only to the readers of the UNION JACK who, in addition to forwarding **20s.**, cut out this advertisement. Remit by Postal Order to

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