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“STRICTLY BUSINESS”

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"STRICTLY BUSINESS"

BY
F. MORTON HOWARD ✓
AUTHOR OF "HAPPY RASCALS," ETC.



NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
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TO

David Whitelaw

CONTENTS

EPISODE	PAGE
I. "STRICTLY BUSINESS"	1
II. A WATCHING BRIEF	27
III. CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE	53
IV. BLACK CATS ARE ALWAYS LUCKY	75
V. A MATTER OF ADVERTISEMENT	101
VI. "ALL'S FAIR——"	124
VII. HIDDEN TREASURE	144
VIII. A SPECIAL PERFORMANCE	167
IX. THE GREEN EYES OF THE LITTLE BIRMING- HAM GOD	192
X. THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM	215

“STRICTLY BUSINESS”

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EPISODE I

“STRICTLY BUSINESS”

IN at least three inns, the landlords, on hearing the news, spoke words of grave warning to their assistants. More than one inexperienced tradesman, foolishly finding satisfaction in the tidings, began to rummage eagerly among old accounts. In the local police-station, the inspector instructed his subordinates to stand no nonsense. And the harbour-master removed his rabbits from outside his kitchen door to an apartment at the top of the house.

The “Jane Gladys,” after long absence, was back again in her home port.

Doomed to pleasant disappointment, however, were such good folks of Shorehaven as anticipated any spectacular ill-conduct that evening on the part of the returned crew. Before the rope fender of the despicable “Jane Gladys” had rubbed the sides of the quay for five minutes, an atmosphere of heavy gloom had settled upon the hardy mariners who peopled her, and this though they had arrived in port in the best of spirits, and were, moreover, furnished with several half-formu-

lated plans of campaign which only awaited the inspiration of environment to touch success in the form of financial or liquid bonuses.

For the harbour-master, ever ready to placate the "Jane Gladys," was waiting on the quay for her with such correspondence as had come addressed to her in her absence. And Captain Peter Dutt, taking his mail and sorting through it perfunctorily, found his attention arrested by an envelope imperatively marked "Urgent."

Ripping it open, he glanced rapidly through the missive it contained. This done, he pushed his cap to the back of his head with a helpless gesture, blowing stertorously, and then read the letter for a second time.

After that, he stared about the vessel for some while, blinking incredulously. At last, with a comprehensive sweep of his arm, he summoned his crew about him. Leaving their labours to be completed by indignant hands on the quay, they gathered round the plump little form of Captain Dutt.

"Boys," announced the skipper, simply, "the show's bust!"

There was a startled, perplexed silence, and then the voice of Mr. Joseph Tridge rose aggrievedly.

"What 'ave they been finding out about us *now*?" he wanted to know. "Some folks is never 'appy without they're trying to make mischief. What are we supposed to 'ave done wrong now, eh?"

"It can't be that chap we sold the fish to in Star-cross," declared Mr. Horace Dobb, the cook. "Because I saw 'im the night before we left, and 'e never said a word about it to me. Kept 'is 'ead turned stiff the other way all the time, in fact."

"There was that chap in Teignmouth," recalled the

aged Mr. Samuel Clark, uncomfortably. “You know, what we sold the—the tobaccer to.”

“’Im?” returned Horace, the cook, with scorn. “’E ’asn’t got a leg to stand on. I never told ’im it was smuggled tobaccer, did I? I simply said it was stuff that ’adn’t paid duty. No more it ’ad! Serves ’im right for jumping to conclusions, just because a sailorman’s carrying a parcel on a dark night!”

“Yes, boys,” said the skipper, with a long, quivering sigh, as one awakening to cold reality from a happy dream, “it’s all over! All over! Itchybod!” he remarked, with sad satisfaction in finding the word. “Itchybod, that’s it!”

“And ’oo’s ’e?” truculently demanded Mr. Tridge. “What’s ’e got to say against us? Why, I’ll take my oath I ain’t ever even ’eard of ’im before!”

“It ain’t a ’im,” explained the skipper. “It’s a bit of clarsical learning I’ve picked up in Latin, and it means ‘the game’s up.’ Boys, prepare for the worst!”

“Which of us?” asked Mr. Horace Dobb, not without apprehension.

“All of us!” replied the skipper. “Our owner’s giving up business, and ’e’s goin to sell all ’is ships!”

Again there was a hush, and then, from the hinder spaces of this period of shock, there crept forth the voice of Mr. Horace Dobb, the cook, attuned to a sweet reasonableness.

“We’ll be all right,” he contended. “Just as if anybody would ever buy the old ‘Jane Gladys’!”

“Except,” slowly said Mr. Clark, “to break ’er up!”

As some ill-omened sound in the still watches of the night may paralyze its hearers into a cold, suffocating inaction, so did the grisly words of Mr. Clark bring his companions to silent, wide-eyed consternation. The

debonair Mr. Peter Lock was the first to recover, but, though he roundly stigmatized Mr. Clark as being a gloomy old horror, there was no elasticity in his tone, and his effort to exhibit unconcern by lighting a cigarette was marred by the manifest shaking of his fingers.

"Well, there it is, boys," presently said the skipper, with an unconvincing attempt at briskness. "It's as much a surprise to me as it is to you. For myself, I shan't go to sea again after the next trip. The owner's fixing me up a bit of a pension. And as for you chaps—well, if you'll take my advice, you'll start looking round for fresh jobs without delay."

"And they'll take some finding," stated Mr. Horace Dobb. "'Oo is likely to engage us off the 'Jane Gladys' I'd like to know?" he asked the skipper, with some indignation.

"Some'ow the fact that we've sailed on the 'Jane Gladys' doesn't seem to be a recommendation," mentioned Mr. Clark, regretfully.

"Contrariwise!" said Mr. Tridge, tersely.

"She *might* be bought up and repaired and repainted and refitted," ventured Captain Dutt, but with no great hope.

"'Er new owners would never keep *us* on, though," frankly opined Mr. Tridge. "They'll 'ave 'eard too much about us."

"Ho, hindeed?" said Horace, loftily. "Well, in that case, I don't know as I'm anxious to sail under folks what listen to gossip."

"Luckily, we've got a full week before we leaves 'ere again," remarked the skipper. "That'll give you time to keep your ears open, and, if any of you finds anything to suit you meantime, I shan't stand in the way of you leaving when you want to. And it'll be about

two months before the ‘Jane Gladys’ is put up for auction, so you’ll ’ave plenty of time to go on looking round.”

“And so we shall *after* them two months,” dismally foretold Mr. Samuel Clark. “When first I come on this boat, twenty-seven years ago,” he told the skipper, reproachfully, “I was given to understand it was a permanent job. If I’d known——”

“Well, there it is,” said Captain Dutt, again rather lamely, “and it can’t be helped.”

He waited a little while, uncomfortably conscious of the unhappy visages of his crew. Then, with symptoms of commendable emotion, he scuttled to his cabin. The mate, hitherto silent, addressed to the crew a few words of sympathy with himself, and followed his superior. The four sailormen of the “Jane Gladys,” bleakly regarding each other, expressed their feelings in this crisis in a sort of forceful, rumbling fugue. This done, they sulkily retired to their bunks, to lie down and meditate over the impending upheaval in their affairs.

But before long Mr. Clark began to snore challengingly, while Mr. Lock sought distraction of mind by rising and performing a number of arias on his melodeon, whereat Mr. Tridge, a slave to music, sat up and joined his voice to the harmony in a melancholy wail which he called “tenor.”

Mr. Horace Dobb, the cook, was a man of temperament, and he found himself keenly resenting these encroachments on his ruminations. A person who openly plumed himself on the possession of superior brain power, he now desired opportunity to explore this gift to the fullest. Also, he had in his pocket a shilling which he preferred to spend privily, rather than in the company of Mr. Clark, who had but ninepence, or

of Mr. Lock, whose sole wealth was fourpence, or of Mr. Tridge, who had nothing at all.

Wherefore, then, Mr. Horace Dobb, crying aloud his utmost annoyance at this disturbal of his peace, bounced from his bunk and repaired to the bar-parlour of the "Jolly Sailors," a discreet inn on the quayside which gave promise of being an excellent refuge where a man, equipped with a shilling, and an anxiety about an unsettled future, might commune comfortably with his thoughts.

In this sanctuary the cook of the "Jane Gladys" remained for some while, with his cogitations becoming lighter and lighter in texture with every lift of his glass, till presently he had reverted to the normal, and was once again looking on the world as nothing more formidable than a vast territory bristling with chances for a quick-witted sea-cook to grasp.

And, therefore, when the door opened to admit Captain Simon Gooster, of the "Alert," it was but natural that Horace's bouyant imagination should present to him the bulky figure of the new-comer as not being alone, but as stalking in arm-in-arm with smiling Opportunity.

"Evening, sir," said Horace, very respectfully.

Captain Gooster nodded, glanced at the measure which Horace had hastily emptied, and then, disappointedly, glanced away again. Mr. Dobb ventured to commend the weather, to which Captain Gooster responded, absently, and, indeed, somewhat fretfully. Horace at once conceded that doubtless Captain Gooster was right, but the skipper of the "Alert," passing on, selected a seat in a remote corner and there posed unsociably.

Mr. Dobb, dissembling his irritation, entered into casual talk with another patron, who, it transpired, had

a precocious child at home, an infant whose sallies so diverted Mr. Dobb that soon his glass was being re-filled for him by order of the gratified parent. Immediately after, Horace's interest in the prodigy seemed suddenly to wane, though this was due less to thankfulness than to the fact that he had perceived Captain Gooster to be looking at him in a concentrated and speculative manner.

The captain's stare fascinated Horace, and continually his eyes roved back to the skipper of the “Alert,” and each time he accorded Captain Gooster a more ingratiating leer on meeting his gaze. At last Captain Gooster beckoned authoritatively and patted the empty chair beside him, whereat Mr. Dobb readily sprang to his feet and took the indicated place, leaving the sire of the infant prodigy indignantly helpless in the very middle of a family anecdote.

“You're the cook of the ‘Jane Gladys,’ ain't you?” opened Captain Gooster.

“At present, sir,” said Mr. Dobb.

“I've 'eard about you,” remarked Captain Gooster.

“I dare say you 'ave, sir,” guardedly returned Mr. Dobb.

“You're the one they call 'Orace,” continued the other.

“Mostly, sir,” agreed Mr. Dobb.

“Mind you, I ain't the kind of man 'oo's fool enough to believe all he hears,” said the skipper of the “Alert.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Horace, gratefully.

“I've 'eard Cap'n Dutt say you're a real smart, sharp, clever chap.”

“Ah, well, of course 'e *does* know what 'e's talking about, sir,” observed Horace, with the air of one making a concession.

"I've 'eard old Peter Dutt keep on by the hour about your cleverness and artfulness," said Captain Gooster. "'E swears you're a wonder, and, if 'alf 'e says about you is true, so you are."

Mr. Dobb, nodding his head, modestly refrained from speech. Captain Gooster, as though he had satisfactorily disposed of all preliminaries, sat back and stroked his chin in thought for some moments.

"I'm glad I came across you to-night, 'Orace," he said, at length. "A man with a 'ead-piece—that's what I'm looking for."

"Well, that *is* lucky!" declared Horace. "I'm looking out for another job and the 'Alert' would just suit me."

"Yes, I 'eard about the 'Jane Gladys,'" said Captain Gooster, slowly. "But I wasn't looking out for a man for my crew. It's just a private matter. You 'elp me, if you can, and as far as a pint or two goes——"

"You'll excuse me, sir," interrupted Mr. Dobb, with dignity, "but brain work ain't bought with pints, nor quarts, neither. I'm looking for a job, not a evening out."

"Well, we'll see," temporized the master of the "Alert." "If you needs a job and does me a good turn, I ain't the man to forget it."

"Thank you, sir; and a gentleman's word is good enough for me!" stated Mr. Dobb, profusely. "And you won't ever regret taking me on the 'Alert.' And I can start this week with you, if you like."

"Steady!" begged the startled captain. "Why, you ain't even 'eard what the trouble is yet."

"I'll soon settle it, sir, whatever it is," vaunted Horace. "Just you tell me about it, and leave the rest to me."

“Well, then,” said Captain Gooster, confidentially, “to begin with, you must know I’m a widower.”

“Ah, I see! You’ve been a-carrying on,” diagnosed the cook, cheerfully. “Well, we’ll soon choke ’er off. I reckon, on the ‘Alert,’ you ought to pay me——”

“A widower!” repeated Captain Gooster, frowning at Mr. Dobb’s precipitancy. “And I don’t mind confessing to you that I was disappointed in my marriage. You see, I married for love.”

“Oh, well——” commented Horace, shrugging his shoulders.

“And *she* married me for my money.”

“Ah, women’ll do **anything** for money,” said Mr. Dobb.

Captain Gooster, sitting suddenly erect, dissected the observation in silence.

“I can see what a disappointment it must ’ave been for both of you,” continued Horace. “’Owever, let’s ’ope you ’ave better luck next time, sir.”

“I mean to!” asserted Captain Gooster. “Marrying for love is a snare and a sham and a deloosion. I’ve learned wisdom. ‘Strictly business!’ that’s my motter in future.”

“And it ain’t a bad motter, neither, sir,” approved Mr. Dobb, thoughtfully. “Strictly business!” he repeated, nodding his head over it. “It’s a jolly good motter.”

“Yes, and next time,” went on Captain Gooster, “I marries for money. And I may add, what’s more, that I’ve got my eye on a certain lady already.”

“’As she got ’er eye on you, though?” queried Horace, sagely.

“She ’as. In fact, not to beat about the bush, both of ’em ’as!”

"Both of 'em?" queried Horace.

"There's two parties," explained the master of the "Alert." "I'm keeping my eye upon both of 'em."

"Once I 'ad my eye on two parties at the same time," recalled Mr. Dobb. "One day they got introduced to each other. And I went 'ome in a cab."

"My two 'ave known each other all their lives."

"Well, they won't go on knowing each other much longer," acutely prophesied Mr. Dobb.

"And they lives together in the same 'ouse."

"If you'll excuse me saying so," observed Horace, civilly, "you've got a dashed sight more pluck than sense. Two in the some town is bad enough for the 'eart, with all the excitement you get in turning a corner when you're out with one of 'em. But two in the same 'ouse——"

"It's mother and daughter, you see," elucidated Captain Gooster. "Goffley is the name. Mrs. Goffley is a widow, and Ann's 'er daughter. They live in Shorehaven 'ere."

"First I've 'eard of 'em," said Horace.

"Ah, they're new-comers. They bought that little second-'and shop what Meyers used to keep at the corner of Fore Street. A snug little business. It only wants a man be'ind it, and it'll be a little copper-mine."

"And you've chosen yourself to be the man be'ind it? Good luck to you, sir!"

"What with my little bit saved up, and my job on the 'Alert,' and the little shop earning profits at 'ome, I shan't be doing so badly for my old age," stated Captain Gooster, complacently. "But there's just one little drawback—I shall 'ave to marry one of them two females, and each time I imagine myself married to

one, I finds myself wishing it 'ad been the other. You've only to see 'em both, and you'd understand.”

“Well, which of 'em's got the money?” asked Mr. Dobb. “That ought to settle the question easy enough.”

“That's just the trouble. I can't find out for certain which of 'em 'as got the cash. I've 'eard rumours that old Goffley left all 'is money to 'is daughter, with instructions to 'er to look after 'er ma. And then I've 'eard rumours that 'e's left everything to 'is wife, with instructions to look after 'er daughter. Far as I can see,” disconsolately ended Captain Gooster, “whichever of them females I marries, I shall always 'ave the other as a burden round my neck.”

“Which of 'em gives all the orders?” inquired Mr. Dobb. “'Oo is the boss of the two?”

“They both bosses,” returned the skipper of the “Alert.” “And they both tries to boss each other, most independent. That's what makes it so difficult. I've tried all ways to find out which is the one I ought to make up to, but I can't. And that's where I want your 'elp.”

“I see,” said Horace, softly. “That's what you're going to give me a job on the ‘Alert’ for, eh?”

“Well, you get this job settled satisfactory for me, and you won't 'ave no cause to complain,” promised Captain Gooster. “You be 'elpful to me and you'll be 'elpful to yourself.”

“Well, suppose you was to ask 'em straight out, sort of joking like, which one of 'em 'ad got the money,” suggested Horace, but with no great confidence.

“Tried that!” retorted Captain Gooster, curtly. “No good.”

“Which of 'em seemed most annoyed at the ques-

tion?" asked Mr. Dobb, shrewdly. "*She'd* be the one 'oo 'adn't got any."

"They neither of them said nothing. They just looked at me, and I began to talk about the weather."

Horace, leaning back, folded his arms and tightly closed his eyes. Captain Gooster realizing that his companion was thus incubating thought, forbore from offering further speech, but sat waiting in some anxiety for demonstration of Mr. Dobb's ingenuity.

"You'll 'ave to take me up there and let me see 'em," said Horace, at length. "Introdooce me to 'em as the new cook you're signing for the 'Alert.' That'll be the truth, so it'll be quite all right."

"What? A skipper introdooce 'is new cook——"

"Well, if they seems surprised at all, you can tell 'em what a superior young man I am really, and 'ow I'm an old friend of yours, and so on. It's the only way I can do anything—I must see 'em personal. Suppose I was to start making inquiries off the neighbours, for instance. The fat would soon be in the fire then, wouldn't it?"

"Matter of fact," confessed the skipper, with reserve, "there 'as been more gossip about already than I care for."

"Let me see 'em and keep my eyes open and ask a question 'ere and there, most innocent, and I'll find out the truth quick enough," boasted Mr. Dobb. "It won't be too late to call on 'em to-night, will it? Just about right, I should think; with luck, we ought to catch 'em just at supper-time. You wait 'ere, and I'll run back and tidy myself a bit."

"All right. I should think that's the best thing that can be done," said Captain Gooster, ambiguously.

Mr. Dobb took a swift departure to the "Jane

Gladys,” finding an empty fo’c’sle, and thus being able to garb himself for ceremony without loss of time in answering questions. Returning to the “Jolly Sailors,” his improved appearance won a grunt of approval from Captain Gooster, and then, together, the two men repaired to their objective in Fore Street.

They found Mrs. Goffley and her daughter amid the ordered confusion of the little second-hand shop. Captain Gooster made Horace known to the ladies as an old acquaintance unexpectedly encountered in the town. Introductions thus achieved, the gentlemen were hospitably conducted to partake of supper amid the more congenial surroundings of the back parlour.

Mr. Dobb claimed but little prominence in the talk, and, indeed, seemed bent on eliminating himself as far as possible from the interest of his hostesses, and this was rendered the more easy for him by the fact that both ladies appeared to concentrate their attentions on the skipper of the “Alert.” Mr. Dobb, however, was vigilant towards all that was going forward, and when once or twice the ladies bickered, he plainly submitted every word of their spirited utterance to the closest analysis.

And when at length they left the house, Horace had arrived at certain deductions, which he hastened to lay before Captain Gooster.

“It’s the old gal what’s got the money,” he stated. “She done the carving, for one thing. And, for another, it was ’er that put the coal on the fire. Besides, I ask you, ain’t it only reason that ’er late ’usband would ’ave left ’er everything, knowing from the look of ’er that she couldn’t ever really ’ope to get married again? No, I bet that rumour you ’eard was right—’e’s left ’is money to ’is wife, with instructions to look after ’er

daughter. P'r'aps she's to 'ave it after the old gal's popped off," propounded Horace, delicately.

"Ah, but that's just what I'm frightened of," said Captain Gooster. "Suppose I married the old lady, and one day she pegs out and the daughter gets the lot? A nice return that 'ud be to me for all my kindness, wouldn't it?"

"But there's nothing to prevent the old lady 'anding over the money to 'er second 'usband while she's alive, to speckylate with, is there? And once it's in your name——"

"'Orace, if I could only think 'alf as clear as you," remarked Captain Gooster, "I'd be driving my own carriage and pair by now!"

He halted, gazed back at the Goffley abode, and patently came to decision.

"Wait 'ere for me," he directed. "I'm goisg to strike while the iron is hot. I'm going to propose to the old geezer now and get it over!"

He traced his way to the shop, knocked, and was admitted. Scarce five minutes had elapsed ere he was again at Horace's side. Captain Gooster's reply, in response to an interested question, took the form of a fierce growl of wrath.

"What, she wouldn't 'ave you?" asked Horace, in surprise.

"Oh, yes, she 'ad me right enough!" exclaimed Captain Gooster, with extreme bitterness. "Oh, she's 'ad me proper! And *you'll* get a job with me on the 'Alert,' I don't think! Clever? Ha! Smart? Ha, ha! Sharp? Oh, ha, ha, ha! Why, I believe your brains must be more like a wool mat than anything else!"

"But if she's accepted you——"

"Accepted me?" bellowed Captain Gooster, passion-

ately. “She jumped at me! Put ’er arms round my neck and made such a noise a-kissing of me that ’er daughter come ’urrying in from the kitchen at it! And Ann said it was ridic’lous, and Mrs. Goffley said it was love, and Ann crinkled ’er nose sarcastic, and told ’er mother that I was simply marrying ’er for ’er money, as any one could see.”

“There you are!” cried Mr. Dobb. “You picked the right one, anyway.”

“Wait a bit!” urged Captain Gooster. “Of course, I says at once that I’m pained and ’urt by such a suggestion, and that of course I’m only marrying Mrs. Goffley for love. ‘Sure?’ she asks, smiling at me in a way what would ’ave been tantalizing in a young gal. ‘Positive certain!’ says I. ‘Money,’ I says. ‘What’s money to me? I’ve got plenty of my own!’ ‘There you are!’ she says to Ann. ‘Just as well though, ain’t it?’ says Ann, with a sniff. ‘Because, you know, ma, you ain’t got any money, ’ave you? It all belongs to me, don’t it?’”

Mr. Dobb, finding verbal comment inadequate, took off his cap and shook his head helplessly.

“Well, when I ’eard that,” narrated Captain Gooster, “the room sort of went round and round for a bit, and the next thing I knew was that I was saying I must not keep you waiting here any longer. And, with that, I stumbled over the mat and left the place. And as for *you*——”

“’Alf a minute, sir,” requested Mr. Dobb. “I can see you don’t understand diplomaticism. You ’ave to run a few risks to start with, and then you sets ’em right afterwards, when you’ve got what you wants—that’s diplomaticism.”

“If *you* was to get what you really wants——”

"After all, sir, it's only what you asked me to do," contended Horace. "'Elp me to find out which one of 'em 'as got the money,'" says you to me, "'and I'll give you a job on the 'Alert.'" Well, I 'ave 'elped you to find out. You know now that it's the daughter what's got it!"

"Yes, and I've been and proposed to the mother!" groaned Captain Gooster.

"Well, you've only got to change over," suggested Horace.

"Step back and say it was really Ann I meant to ask, I suppose?" girded Captain Gooster. "Just as if the daughter would 'ave anything to do with me now! Just as if the old 'un would let me off 'er 'ooks now, the artful, deceiving old cat!"

"You could work up a quarrel with 'er," prompted Mr. Dobb.

"She ain't the sort to quarrel till after we're married," ruefully answered the skipper of the "Alert." "After that, it'll be a different story, I bet!"

Mr. Dobb, coming to a standstill, lightly tickled the nape of his neck for some minutes.

"I've got it!" he pronounced, brightly. "Call and see 'er to-morrow, and speak to 'er as man to man. Tell 'er you made a mistake, and it ain't love but only respect for 'er old age!"

"And she'll just answer me back snappy that *she* ain't making a mistake, any way," prophesied Captain Gooster. "No, there ain't no way out, that I can see, short of suicide. And," he added, lapsing into extraordinary gloom, "I don't know that I wouldn't prefer *that* to that old gal with no money be'ind 'er! And as for you and a berth on the 'Alert,'" he ended, sav-

agely, “you just let me catch you on board ’er for a single moment, even on a visit!”

He swung round and strode off, totally disregarding the expostulatory noises of his companion. Mr. Dobb, thus deserted, sauntered along in restive dejection, but suddenly a greater decisiveness came into his bearing, and soon he was cantering along in eager pursuit of the master of the “Alert.”

“Now—now—now I ’ave got it, sir!” he puffed, catching up with Captain Gooster. “Come to me in a flash, it did! You must take me along to see the Goffleys again to-morrow night.”

Captain Gooster violently mentioned a mutual meeting, which involved considerable travel, as having priority over Mr. Dobb’s suggestion.

“You must keep on taking me there,” insisted Horace, undaunted.

“Just to make me laugh,” observed Captain Gooster, grimly, “tell me what the idea is.”

“Why, I’ll sink my feelings, and I’ll carry on a bit with the old gal!”

“Carry on with——” gasped the “Alert’s” skipper.

“Make goo-goo eyes at ’er, flirt with ’er, play slap-’ands with ’er,” amplified Mr. Dobb. “And if you don’t give me a job on the ‘Alert’ after *that*—— Why, chaps ’as got medals for less than that! Far less!”

“Give you a job on the ‘Alert’ for playing slap-’ands with my missis-to-be?” queried Captain Gooster, in bewilderment.

“Yes; and one day you catches us at it,” sketched Mr. Dobbs, knowingly. “And you accuses us of flirting, and you ’as a tremendous row with ’er, and, though it breaks your ’eart, you casts ’er off! And there you

are—free! And you can bet that quarrelling with her ma will give you a good send-off to begin courting Ann with. You can see that she's that sort."

"Yes; and what 'appens to you?"

"Oh, I get that job on the 'Alert'," answered Horace, simply. "You can trust me to protect myself safe enough where women are concerned."

Captain Gooster, weighing the pros and cons, could detect no flaw in the scheme. Next afternoon, by appointment, he met Mr. Dobb at the corner of Fore Street, and together they repaired to the little second-hand shop. Enthusiastically did Mrs. Goffley bid them enter and stay to tea, an invitation which was signalized, rather than seconded, by a prolonged sniff from the younger lady.

Mr. Dobb, now reversing his behaviour of the previous evening, exhibited himself in the light of a sparkling blade. Riddles galore did he propound to enliven the proceedings, and many were the diverting anecdotes he furnished forth, though, indeed, in some of these he checked himself, finishing them a trifle lamely with endings which had the flavour of improvisation about them.

His geniality, however, went far towards neutralizing the acrimony of Miss Goffley, and by the time adieux were said Captain Gooster was well satisfied with his confederate.

"I reckon you've made a fine start, 'Orace," he said, as they strolled together down Fore Street. "And tomorrow you must talk more particularly to the old gal, so as to give me a chance to try to make up a bit of the leeway with Ann."

Such heed did Mr. Dobb give to this instruction that

when, on the following evening, they called at the little shop, he devoted his conversation almost exclusively to the widow.

“Splendid!” was his patron’s verdict, when they left. “I see she was a bit impatient at first, but before long she was listening to every word you said. Why, she never even noticed that I was talking quite a lot to Ann.”

“Ah, and she was answering you, what’s more! I see you! What did you say to ’er?” asked Mr. Dobb, curiously.

“Oh, I was just sort of generally mysterious and wistful and ’eart-’eavy, like you advised,” replied Captain Gooster. “And I got ’er to confess that there was a time when she ’oped——”

“Then she’s as good as yours!” joyfully declared Horace. “And the berth on the ‘Alert’ is as good as mine!”

It was during the following evening that there occurred a startling development in the engagement of Captain Gooster to Mrs. Goffley. Horace and that lady had been chatting together gaily, and Miss Goffley was permitting the captain to turn over her music at the piano for her, when suddenly the skipper of the “Alert” sprang to the centre of the room and crashed both his fists down upon the table.

Mrs. Goffley, with an agitated squeal, tugged her hand away from Mr. Dobb’s grasp.

“Too late, ma’am, too late!” thundered Captain Gooster.

“I—he—we—he was only telling me my fortune!” protested Mrs. Goffley, guiltily.

“I see ’im telling it,” retorted the skipper, grimly.

"Do you think I ain't got any eyes? Carrying-on! Flirting! That's what you was up to! Don't trouble to make up lies about it."

"Just because I was making myself pleasant to your friend," began Mrs. Goffley, with spirit.

"You go on making yourself pleasant to 'im!" recommended Captain Gooster. "I'm done with you!"

"And I must say, ma, I'm not surprised, either," mentioned Miss Goffley, with a toss of her head.

"I've got witnesses to prove you was carrying-on," said the captain. "I've got the law on my side, and that's all I need. I'm finished with you, ma'am, and I wish you a very good evening. Oh, a very good evening, indeed, ma'am!"

Aloofly averting his gaze from the agitated dame, he hurried from the house as speedily as possible. Horace, half an hour later, came to him in the bar-parlour of the "Jolly Sailors."

"There was a proper bust-up after you'd gone," Mr. Dobb said, with relish. "But, after they'd both 'ad 'istericks, things was a bit quieter."

"And Mrs. Goffley?"

"She said it was good riddance to bad rubbish! Said so over and over again. And now for business after pleasure. When do I start on the 'Alert'?"

"Well, we sails at the end of the week, as you know, on the same day as the 'Jane Gladys.' You can come then, if all goes well."

"Ah, I knew I shouldn't go begging for long!" said Horace, with considerable pride. "I knew I shouldn't be long finding something to suit me."

"I shall 'ave to get the Goffley business settled first, though," hedged Captain Gooster. "I've got to bring Ann up to the mark yet, don't forget. Not that I

'ave any fears, though. Why, she's as good as said she'd——”

“But, my word, what a life them two women will be leading each other for the next few weeks!” exclaimed Horace, with a shudder.

“I shall get Ann to keep quiet about our engagement when we *are* engaged. And when we get married it'll be by special licence, unbeknown to 'er ma. I can afford it, if Ann's got the money coming to 'er.”

“You take my advice, sir,” urged Horace, earnestly, “and rush your wedding through as quick as ever you can. Don't you run any risks, for the old gal will be doing all in 'er power to p'ison the young gal's mind against you. There's many a slip between the bottle and the glass, don't forget.”

“I'd get it settled to-morrow, if I could.”

“Well, luckily, *I'm* still friends there, don't forget. I'm waiting to quarrel with the old gal when it's more convenient. At present, she just sits looking loving and 'opeful at me. And I'll call round there to-morrow morning, first thing, and get Ann to meet you somewhere, and you must persuade 'er as 'ard as you can. Pack all the love you'd make in a ordinary engagement into three days, an' get 'er to marry you before you sails. That's the way to do things, if you wants to be sure of 'er. And if you wants any odd notes or messages taken to 'er, I'll see to 'em for you.”

“You don't suppose I wants to go near the 'ouse, do you?” asked Captain Gooster, with a shiver.

And thus three more days passed, while the affairs of the “Alert” were shamelessly subjugated to the claims of Cupid. On board the “Jane Gladys” Horace was watched vigilantly by his shipmates, and he maddened them with constant veiled allusions to a most lucrative

and superior berth which his talents and charms were securing for him. Already had he handed in his provisional resignation to Captain Peter Dutt, already was he bearing himself as a gentleman of social standing far above that of his present companions.

Came the afternoon prior to the day which was to witness the departure both of the "Alert" and the "Jane Gladys" from Shorehaven.

Captain Simon Gooster, passing up Fore Street, had on his arm a lady whose countenance exhibited pride and triumph. For a climax had been achieved at the registrar's office, and Miss Ann Goffley was now Miss Ann Gooster no longer, but was, for better or for worse, Mrs. Simon Gooster.

"There's no need to be flustered," said the bridegroom to the bride, when they reached the little shop. "We've got to break the news to 'er sooner or later, and 'Orace 'as promised to be on 'and to give us a 'elping word 'ere and there. She can't let off all the steam she'd like to—not in front of 'im."

"I shall be flustered if I like!" insisted Mrs. Gooster. "Don't you start ordering me about! If I ain't allowed to be flustered on my wedding-day, I should like to know when I am allowed to be."

Captain Gooster, after a glance of dawning uneasiness at his bride, led the way through the shop. The new Mrs. Gooster's mother was unsuspectingly laying the table for tea, and Mr. Dobb, to the captain's relief, was seated in the arm-chair.

"We've done it!" announced Captain Gooster.

"I'm Mrs. Gooster now," said the younger lady.

"Lor'!" exclaimed Mrs. Goffley. She turned to Horace and giggled coyly. "Shall we tell 'em?" she asked.

"Not much to tell," returned Mr. Dobb, airily.

“Only that you and me was married, too, this morning, by special licence!”

“Lor’!” cried the skipper’s wife, in her turn.

“Quite private,” explained Horace, briefly. “She even paid for the licence, so as to get it over quick. I fancy she must ’ave guessed what you and—and Ann was up to.”

“Oh, well, there’s no accounting for tastes!” said the skipper of the “Alert.” “Anyway, there can’t be any cause for ill-feeling between any of us now, can there? But, really, I don’t quite see, ’Orace, ’ow *you* come to——”

“So you two got married on the quiet, too, did you?” interrupted Mrs. Dobb, with a curious glint in her eyes. “Well, p’r’aps you was wise. Because, of course, you must ’ave known that I’d never ’ave given *my* consent, after the way you treated *me*, Cap’n Gooster?”

“Yes, I knew that well enough,” agreed the skipper.

“You married Ann for her money, of course,” stated the elder lady, dogmatically.

“Nothing of the sort!” stoutly maintained Captain Gooster. “Love—nothing but love! It was because I’d found out that it was ’er I really loved all the time that I broke it off with you. If Ann ’adn’t got a single penny coming to ’er——”

“And she ’asn’t!” said Mrs. Dobb, with emphasis.

“Trying to frighten me?” suggested the smiling captain. “Why, you admitted to me yourself that it was ’er that ’ad all the money!”

“So she ’ad,” returned Mrs. Gooster’s mother—
“*then!*”

“What do you mean—then?” asked the captain, thickly.

“Why, it was all to be ’ers,” explained the new Mrs.

Dobb, "unless she married without my consent. My 'usband arranged it like that to protect 'er from fortune 'unters, and very lucky 'e did, too! You needn't shake your 'ead! It's all quite true. 'Ere's a copy of my 'usband's will. I showed it to Dobb 'ere when 'e was trying to console me that evening after you'd left—you know, when you threw me over!"

"You—you *knew* when you advised me to——" roared the skipper, wheeling on Mr. Dobb.

"I did," shamelessly admitted Mr. Dobb. "Part of it I worked out, and part of it worked itself out for me! You see, I—I 'appened to fall genuine in love with my new wife 'ere and——"

"You needn't trouble to tell lies about it!" shouted the skipper.

"And don't you roar at my 'usband like that, neither!" ordered the elder lady. "And I may as well tell you that I'd 'ave taken 'im if I 'ated 'im—I'd 'ave taken the first man what come along! Anything to let you see you wasn't the only chance I'd got! And——"

"Well, but what becomes of the money that should 'ave been 'ers—the money you've diddled me out of?" cried the captain.

"Why," said Horace, softly, "it just stays with *us*!"

"And you knew this when you advised me to get married on the quiet to Ann, yonder?"

"Certingly," said the unabashed Horace. "Didn't we both agree that 'Strictly Business!' was a jolly good motter?"

"And you," went on the skipper, wheeling on his bride—"you didn't tell me nothing, for fear of losing me?"

“And so I should have,” she said. “And don’t you stare at me like that, neither! If you think that I’m the kind of wife that can be bullied, you’re making a big mistake! And now I’ll get my portmanteau, and you can take me down to your cabin on the ‘Alert.’ You don’t think I’m going to stay on in the house with these people, do you?”

“Still, any time you’re passing,” said the cook, “I’ll be pleased to welcome my stepdaughter and my son-in-law. *I* don’t bear no ill-will, and I shouldn’t like to think that others would.”

“Well, you’ve lost your berth on the ‘Alert,’ any way,” said Captain Gooster, inadequately. “You needn’t think I’d ’ave you now, because I shouldn’t!”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t accept it, in any case,” said Mr. Horace Dobb. “’Oo’s to look after the shop? You said yourself that it needed a man, and I’ve provided myself for it. And you know ’ow useful I can make myself, don’t you?”

That evening, when Messrs. Lock and Tridge and Clark, hearing something of what had transpired, trooped down to Fore Street to find Horace, they discovered him already engaged in bringing the stock and fixtures into line with his own ideas on such matters.

Very readily he told them the tale of his marriage, and, further, pointed out that the future might hold many occasions when his shipmates of the “Jane Gladys” might find it profitable to link their talents temporarily to the fortunes of the little second-hand shop.

But when Mr. Tridge remarked that the “Jane Gladys” was sailing early on the morrow, and that

therefore a little loan would be both acceptable and timely to her crew, Mr. Horace Dobb did not reply in words.

Instead, he stood erect and pointed over his shoulder, with a jerk of his thumb, at a notice which he had been at some pains to illuminate on a panel of wood, and which now hung conspicuously on the wall of the little shop.

Simultaneously, Messrs. Lock, Tridge, and Clark turned to regard the board. It bore the simple legend, "*Strictly Business.*"

EPISODE II

A WATCHING BRIEF

MR. PETER LOCK, in the bowels of the "Jane Gladys," had attired himself for outdoor promenade with a meticulous attention to detail which had spurned Mr. Joseph Tridge to scornful mention of beauty-doctors and mashers and tailors' dummies. Mr. Lock, in no wise offended by these oblique compliments to his appearance, had finally lingered for a full half-minute before the cracked little mirror in fastidious self-examination, and then had gone ashore for the express purpose of keeping an appointment with a friend.

Five minutes later he reappeared. He explained that a complication had arisen, for his friend had brought a friend with her to the trysting-place, so that another gentleman was now indispensable to secure balance to the party. As the result of eloquent appeals and lavish promises, Mr. Tridge was reluctantly impressed into the rôle of temporary friend to the friend's friend.

Matters thus adjusted, Messrs. Tridge and Lock departed, leaving the fo'c'sle of the "Jane Gladys" empty but for the brooding figure of the stout and aged Mr. Samuel Clark.

For a long while Mr. Clark sat on the edge of his bunk, wrapped in doleful reverie, and motionless save when, from time to time, a deep sigh agitated his vast shoulders. At last, however, a well-remembered whistle

sounded from the quay, and instantly roused Mr. Clark from his gloomy meditations.

"'Orace!" he exclaimed, sitting erect, and his eyes began to gleam with a dawning hopefulness.

A few minutes later Mr. Horace Dobb descended into that fo'c'sle wherein aforetime he had been so prominent a dweller, though now it needed strong imagination to believe that, less than three weeks ago, he had served the "Jane Gladys" in such a menial capacity as cook. For Mr. Dobb was wearing a horseshoe pin and a massive watch-chain, and a soft hat of adventurous aspect. He carried a bloated umbrella which had somehow acquired a quality of being a mace-like symbol of authority. And, also, Mr. Dobb was smoking a cigar.

In short, he presented a visible proof that marriage need not invariably be a failure, provided that one selects as bride a manageable widow with a snug little business of her own.

"Doing the Cinderella hact all by yourself, are you?" observed Mr. Dobb. "It couldn't be better. I've brought some one on purpose to see you."

"I could trot across to the 'Jolly Sailors' and get——" began Mr. Clark. "At least," he amended, ingenuously, "if I 'ad any money I could."

"Not necessary," stated Mr. Dobb. "'E's a teetotaller."

"A teetotaller?" echoed Mr. Clark, suspiciously. "'Ere, what's the game—bringing a teetotaller to see me? 'Strewth, 'Orace!" he cried, in sudden alarm. "You ain't going to tell me that being well-off 'as gone to your 'ead and given you silly ideas, are you? You ain't going to tell me that you've turned teetotaller, too, and the pair of you 'ave come down to try and

convert me? I won't 'ave it!" he declared, wrathfully. "I ain't going to 'ave no one trying to meddle about with my constitootion, never mind 'ow old a friend 'e is!"

"And don't *you* start thinking evil of *me!*" returned Mr. Dobb, with spirit. "I won't 'ave it, neither!"

"Well," protested Mr. Clark, significantly, "*you* a-going about with teetotallers!"

"Well, p'r'aps it do look fishy," conceded Mr. Dobb. "But you oughter know me better than that! You know me motter, Sam, don't you? 'Strictly Business!' Well, my friendship with 'im is strictly business. You don't suppose I could ever 'ave a friendly friendship with a teetotaller, do you?"

"I should 'ope not, indeed!" answered Mr. Clark, severely.

"I met 'im in the way of business, and I've got to know 'im pretty well," continued Mr. Dobb. "And now there's something he wants done, and I thought of you for the job at once."

"Much obliged to you," said Mr. Clark, stiffly, "but I ain't sure that I wants to do jobs for teetotallers."

"Don't you be a silly old idjit, Sam," tolerantly recommended Mr. Dobb. "You don't want to go cutting off your nose to spite your face—particularly with the sort of face *you've* got! I was only speaking figgerative," he hastened to add, at Mr. Clark's indignant stare. "Ain't the old 'Jane Gladys' to be sold soon, and won't you be out of a job then?"

"I was thinking about that when you come down 'ere," admitted Mr. Clark, sorrowfully.

"Very well, then," argued Mr. Dobb, "you want to do the best you can for yourself. You take on this 'ere job I've mentioned, and you'll 'ave a nice easy

life ashore for the next week or two, and all the time you can be looking round for a proper job. And you're far more likely to find one by being on the spot than by rushing round frantic after you're paid off, ain't you?"

"Of course I am," agreed Mr. Clark. "And I know the skipper'll let me go any time I want to. 'E said so, only the night before last, when me and Peter and Joe give 'im a parting present for three-and-nine."

"There you are!" cried Mr. Dobb. "You take on this job with the chap I've brought—Poskett, 'is name is. And while you're doing it, me and you will keep our eyes skinned to find you a permanent job in the town."

"I take it as very kind of you, 'Orace," said Mr. Clark.

"Then you takes it wrong," returned Mr. Dobb. "I'm doing it for business—strictly for business. You and me and them others 'ave worked a few good plans in the past, and I can see that my little second-'and shop in Fore Street gives us a chance to work a lot more, if we was all close together. I mean to get you and Peter Lock and Joe Tridge all settled 'ere near me in Shore'aven. *Then* we'll show 'em!" he prophesied, with satisfaction.

"All four of us 'atching up ideas together again? Oh, blessed wision! Oh, 'appy prospect!" murmured Mr. Clark, moved to rhapsody. "Bring on your tee-totallers!" he invited. "With that before me, I'm ready for anything!"

"I'll call 'im, and 'e'll tell you all about it," said Mr. Dobb, and, going on deck, he soon returned to the fo'c'sle in convoy of a short, pallid gentleman, whose very side-whiskers seemed trimmed into semblance of stern rectitude.

Horace introduced Mr. Poskett to Mr. Clark and the trio sat down at the table. After Mr. Poskett had refused the offer of a cup of cold water, considerably suggested by Mr. Clark, the object of the visit was at once approached.

"It's like this, Mr. Clark," stated the visitor, "children is very difficult things to manage properly these days, I find."

"Thrash 'em!" advised Mr. Clark, assuming an air of efficiency in all matters. "And not only thrash 'em, but keep on thrashing 'em! That's the only way to manage children, it seems to me, if you wants a quiet life."

"Yes, but what about it when the child is a girl of twenty?" demurred Mr. Poskett.

"Stop 'er pocket-money!" promptly advised Mr. Clark.

"Yes; but supposing she earns her own pocket-money?" propounded Mr. Poskett.

Mr. Clark, emitting a baffled grunt, passed to silent examination of the problem. Mr. Horace Dobb, settling himself deep in his seat, tilted back his head and puffed at his cigar, as one who postponed intervention till the affair was more clearly established.

"You—you might lock up 'er bonnets," hazarded Mr. Clark at last, but with no great confidence.

"But she 'as to go to her employment behind the counter at Messrs Wicklett & Sharp's shop in the High Street," objected Mr. Poskett. "She comes 'ome for dinner, and goes back again to the shop in the afternoon."

There was another pause, and then Mr. Clark regretfully admitted that it seemed to him something was wrong somewhere, but he could not quite tell where it

was. He respectfully intimated that he might understand better were Mr. Poskett to be more explicit in information.

"My niece," said Mr. Poskett, complying. "She's been and got herself engaged!"

"Tut-tut!" murmured Mr. Clark, politely shocked.

"She has! Without my permission! She never even asked me!" complained Mr. Poskett. "Not that I should have given it, mark you, if she had asked! What right has she to go and get herself engaged when she is needed at home?"

"Ah, what right, indeed?" asked Mr. Clark, with indignation.

"Where's 'er gratitude to me and 'er loving aunt, who have brought 'er up since she was eleven?" demanded Mr. Poskett. "Is it not 'er duty to tarry with us while we 'ave need of 'er? We cannot spare 'er, for she is too useful. I grant that she 'as done 'er fair share of work in the past, but that ain't any reason why she should seek to avoid it in the future, is it?"

"Certainly not!" stated Mr. Clark.

"She's got a earthly 'ome where she's well looked after and kept up to the mark," declared Mr. Poskett, his voice taking a high-pitched monotone. "Do we not know 'oo it is that lays in wait to find work for idle 'ands? Work and plenty of it is the only right way to bring up a young female. Idleness of body leads to idleness of thought, my friends, and——"

Mr. Dobb emitted a cough with a long, droning tail to it, and this served its purpose in restoring Mr. Poskett to more natural speech.

"Any way," he said, "when Nancy ain't at the shop, we does our best to keep 'er time properly hemployed for 'er. As I say, it's the only right way to bring young

females up, and Nancy will admit one day, when me and my wife 'ave passed away to our reward, that she was very well brought up indeed! Tidy up the 'ouse, and off to the shop; dinner, wash-up, back to the shop again; 'ome again, bit more tidying up, and then bed," he sketched. "Now, ain't that a model life for a young female? What more can a right-minded girl want?"

"Ah, what, indeed?" sighed Mr. Clark.

"But is she content?" asked Mr. Poskett, sadly. "Oh, dear, no! She knows that all flesh is grass, and yet she talks about wanting amusements and recreation! And her nearly twenty! And now and then she gets quite out of control, and indulges in all manner of worldly vanities. Only last week she went to a whist-drive! When she come back, I wrestled with the evil spirit within 'er for a full hour, trying to get 'er to say she repented."

"And did she?" queried Mr. Clark.

"She did not, alas! She was that 'ardened that she only said the enjoyment was worth a bit of suffering for afterwards! And now she's gone and got 'erself engaged!"

"'Oo to?" asked Mr. Clark.

"That's just it," complained Mr. Poskett. "That's what we wants to know! We don't know 'oo 'e is, and she won't tell us; and she's that deceitful we can't find out! I spent 'alf an hour, only yesterday, questioning and ex'orting 'er, and she had not even the grace to cry! If it wasn't for all the money we've spent in bringing 'er up, and for 'er being so useful in the 'ome, I'd 'ave nothing more to do with 'er! I believe she would like things to come to such a sorry pass, too!"

"And I'd not blame 'er——" began Mr. Clark,

absently. "I mean," he began again, more carefully, "and I shouldn't blame you, neither."

"I must do my duty," said Mr. Poskett, unctuously. "'Er place is with me and 'er aunt, and I must keep 'er there!"

"And you ain't got the least idea 'oo the young fellow is?" asked Mr. Clark.

"Not the least! She won't bring 'im to the 'ome. She knows too much for that, because I'd soon send 'im about 'is business, 'ooever 'e is! She won't even tell us 'is name! All she says is that he don't hold with the same views as us about anything, and that there'd only be trouble if we met. And so there would! And she says she prefers things to go on as they are for a little longer, till they're quite sure they really wants to marry each other. She says 'is very way of earning a living would 'orrify me, so don't that just show you? Can you wonder I'm 'eart-broken?"

"If I was you," said Mr. Clark, resolutely, "I wouldn't rest till I'd found out 'oo 'e is! I wouldn't be beat by a gal!"

"Ah, now you're coming to it, Sam!" struck in Mr. Dobb. "That's something of the idea I've talked over with Poskett 'ere. What 'e wants is a kind of watch-dog to that niece of 'is; some one 'oo'll follow 'er everywhere, and find out 'oo it is that's making up to 'er. Then Poskett will know 'ow to act. But, you see, 'im being a big man in the prayers-and-penitence line round 'ere, it 'ud look so bad for 'im to go loafing round the streets all day playing private detective. And 'is missis is too delikit, she says."

"As a local preacher," said Mr. Poskett, "I 'ave many hengagements, and between them and business my time is fully occupied."

"In short," remarked Mr. Dobb, "'e's ready to pay you to follow 'is niece about everywhere in 'er spare time, so as you can find out 'oo's the young man. And when you 'ave found out—which will take you some days, I expect, the pair of 'em being very artful to all accounts—you must go straight to Poskett and tell 'im. That's all 'e wants you to do, and 'e'll pay you well for it. But you'll 'ave to give every minute of your time to it, otherwise 'e wouldn't go to the trouble and expense of engaging some one special for the job—would you, Poskett?"

"That is so," agreed Mr. Poskett. "Well, what do you say, Mr. Clark? Will you help to restore a girl to the proper henjoyment of 'er 'ome life?"

"When you puts it like that," said Mr. Clark, slowly, "it don't sound so—— I must say, though, it ain't exactly the sort of job——"

He broke off to shake his head in a troubled, dissatisfied way. In so doing, he caught a glimpse of Mr. Dobb's face, and was arrested by the slight but emphatic nod which Mr. Dobb accorded him.

"All right!" said Mr. Clark, at once obeying the habit of years and yielding initiative to the ex-cook. "I'll do it!"

Things progressed swiftly after that decision, and outstanding details were settled all the sooner because Mr. Dobb had somehow taken over control of the negotiations. Ten minutes later the trio had left the "Jane Gladys" and Mr. Dobb was returning to his emporium, while Mr. Clark was taken by Mr. Poskett to his abode, there to be introduced to wife and niece, so that general acquaintanceship with the family might prove a weapon in Mr. Clark's hand, if necessary.

Reluctance was plainly discernible in Mr. Clark's

demeanour as he entered Mr. Poskett's domicile, and, taken into the front room, he glanced about him with something of guilt. Relief at discovering the apartment to be void of feminine presence was evidenced by an unconscious exclamation of pious gratitude.

"Ah, 'ere she comes!" announced Mr. Poskett.

"Wait a bit!" begged Mr. Clark. "I been thinking——"

He clutched at his host's arm in some trepidation as the door opened and an elderly female of unaffectionate aspect entered.

"This," said Mr. Poskett, "is my wife," and explained the reason of Mr. Clark's presence to that lady, while the seaman himself, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief, smiled unconvincingly, and vaguely remarked that girls would be girls, and that there was no need to be too worried about it.

Before Mrs. Poskett could reply to these remarks, the latch of the front door clicked.

"Ah, 'ere's Nancy at last," observed Mr. Poskett.

"And—and that reminds me, I—I forgot something!" stammered Mr. Clark. "Appointment! Made a week ago! I must be going—now—at once!"

"You sit down!" firmly ordered Mr. Poskett. "You 'ave set your 'and to the plough, and you must not look back. Besides, 'ow could you have made an appointment a week ago? You were at sea then, weren't you?"

"Why, I wrote a letter, and—and——"

"But you could not post it at sea."

"I put it in a bottle and threw it overboard," gulped Mr. Clark, edging nearer the door. "See you some other time. I——"

He ceased abruptly at sight of the girl who had

entered the room and was now standing by the door, a little surprised at this unusual incidence of a visitor.

"This is Mr. Samuel Clark, Nancy," said Mr. Poskett, seizing the opportunity. "And 'e's an old friend of Mr. Dobb's, and one 'oo 'as a deep knowledge of the world and its pitfalls——"

"'Ere, steady!" murmured Mr. Clark.

"And 'oo, I feel sure," continued Mr. Poskett, with a leathery smile at the other man, "will give you good counsel and guidance if ever the need for such should arise."

Miss Nancy Poskett, clearly suspecting the nature of this tribute, bowed distantly to Mr. Clark, and sat down in a corner.

"'Ave you come straight 'ome from Wicklett & Sharp's, Nancy!" asked Mrs. Poskett, mistrustfully.

"I came back by way of East Street, aunt."

"Meet anyone you know?" inquired Mrs. Poskett.

"One or two people," replied the girl, carelessly.

"And 'oo were they, pray?" demanded Mrs. Poskett, at once.

"Oh, no one you know, aunt," replied Nancy, and began to fidget with her brooch.

"Why, you're wearing a ring!" shrilled her aunt at that, and the girl quickly concealed her hand. "A new ring!" went on the elder lady in awesome tones. "And on your engagement finger!"

"Yes," said Nancy, "that was the finger it was meant for."

There was a scandalized little wait. Mr. and Mrs. Poskett shook their heads, muttering inchoately. Mr. Clark gazed upon the mutinous damsel with but thinly veiled admiration for her courage. Just as Mr. Poskett cleared his throat and drew a deep, long breath, thereby

intimating that he had garnered a few fitting phrases for immediate use, the girl rose and strolled to the door.

"I'm just going upstairs to put on my other hat and my coat," she mentioned, casually.

"You—you're not going out again, Nancy?" quavered Mrs. Poskett, aghast. "Why, it's a quarter to eight!"

"I want to run out and post a letter, aunt."

"Dressing up to go and post a letter!" groaned Mrs. Poskett, sepulchrally.

"Mr. Clark will drop it in the post for you on his way back," said Mr. Poskett.

"Thanks, but it's rather special," returned the girl; and passing out of the room, she closed the door quietly after her.

"There you are!" breathed Mrs. Poskett. "There's a brazen hussy to deal with! She's going out to meet *him!*"

"You follow 'er the moment she leaves," Mr. Poskett directed Mr. Clark. "And don't let 'er out of your sight."

Miss Nancy, returning soon after, in smart outdoor toilet, shook Mr. Clark's hand and bade him a quite disinterested farewell. A few moments later the front door closed behind her with a definite snap, and, a few moments later still, Mr. Clark was in the street, intent on following her.

She was already some score of yards away, but none the less an encouraging remark offered by her uncle from the doorstep to Mr. Clark on the pavement caught her ear. She glanced back, and then went on her way at slightly accelerated speed.

Thrice did the girl turn unexpected corners, and

thrice did the portly Mr. Clark have to break into a clumsy trot before he brought her in view again. And then she continued unremittingly to the very end of a particularly long thoroughfare, and faithfully did the panting Mr. Clark tag along in her wake on the opposite side of the road.

Presently, Nancy came to a corner at the end of the thoroughfare, and here she stopped, gazing expectantly this way and that. Mr. Clark with a nimbleness surprising in one of his build, skipped into the doorway of a shop. The girl, suddenly resuming her course, passed swiftly round the corner out of sight.

With a feeling that the climax of the chase was at hand, Mr. Clark darted from his lair and ambled after her. Breathlessly he rounded the corner, and here he narrowly averted collision with Miss Poskett, who was standing quite still beneath a street lamp.

"Er—er—good evening, miss!" stammered Mr. Clark. "I—I *thought* it might be you! 'Ow—'ow do you do?"

"You've been following me!" she scornfully charged him.

"Oh, no!" he declared. "Just a—a coincidence! I—I simply 'appened to be coming this way, and—and——"

"Fancy! And are you going along this road here on the right, too?"

"I am, miss."

"Well, I'm *not*!"

"Then—then I'll wish you good evening again," he said, and wandered forlornly away.

Nancy sped off again. Mr. Clark, swinging round, once more followed the trail, but with greater caution.

The girl, turning and twisting among the huddled streets of the old seaport town, gave her exhausted pursuer an engrossed half-hour.

Then, again, she halted—exactly opposite her own dwelling. And Mr. Clark, tottering to a full-stop, fancied he heard a low, gleeful laugh between the ensuing opening and shutting of the Posketts' front door.

It was a stiff and weary-eyed Mr. Clark who called to see Mr. Horace Dobb at his shop next morning. Mr. Dobb, when furnished with the narrative of the previous night's events, merely smiled unsympathetically.

"Never mind!" he said. "It'll all come right in the end. You just keep on, to show you're in earnest. 'Ave you arranged with Captain Dutt to leave the 'Jane Gladys' to-day? Good! And got all the money owing to you? Better! Now you must go and sit and rest yourself in the 'Green Dragon,' opposite Wicklett & Sharp's in the 'Igh Street. You'll be able to see when she comes out for dinner then, and keep an eye on 'er again."

Faithfully did Mr. Clark obey these instructions. Not only did he shadow Miss Poskett home in her dinner-hour, but he hung about the road till she emerged again, and then watched her back to her place of employment. But in the interval he was far from happy, and his only solace was to be found in the discovery that more than one householder spoke respectfully to him under the impression that he was so thrilling a thing as a detective in the local police force.

That same evening found him in grim ambush outside Messrs. Wicklett & Sharp's place of business, and

there he lurked till the blinds of the shop were lowered, and at last Miss Poskett came tripping out. After gazing round far more carefully than the sentinel realized, Nancy hurried away.

Sedulously did Mr. Clark follow her, rejoicing that he had had the foresight to don an easier pair of shoes this evening. But to-night the course was short. A couple of hundred yards were covered, and then the girl flitted into a big, official-looking edifice.

"The Registry Office!" ejaculated Mr. Clark. "No, it ain't; it's the Free Library!"

He passed into the interior of the building and proceeded to efface himself behind a newspaper-stand in a draughty, ill-lit corner.

Miss Poskett, seating herself at the table nearest the fire, selected a magazine. This, Mr. Clark felt sure, was but a ruse, for every time that the swing-door opened the girl raised her head expectantly, and then glanced up at the big clock before returning her attention to the magazine.

Half an hour passed—an hour. Mr. Clark, prevented from the solace of tobacco by imperative notices, found the time dragging most tediously. His legs had begun to ache with the strain of standing and he felt chilled, and savage; but he did not dare to risk discovery by moving to more comfortable quarters. Another thirty minutes crept by, and a new and exquisite agony had come to Mr. Clark, for he was thinking now of the many snug inns with which the town abounded, and picturing the enjoyment of Messrs. Tridge and Lock in some such paradise at that moment.

Another forty minutes lagged painfully past. The janitor of the library began a sonorous locking-up in

adjacent apartments, and still Miss Poskett remained to divide her attention between the swing-door, the clock, and the magazine.

"Closing time, please!" pronounced the janitor, entering.

Miss Poskett, springing readily to her feet, quitted the edifice. Mr. Clark, one vast sensation of numb passion, followed more slowly after her.

Miss Poskett, looking neither to the right nor the left, walked briskly back to her abode; and again Mr. Clark fancied that he heard a gurgle of malicious satisfaction as the girl entered the Posketts' household and closed the door after her.

So furious was Mr. Clark that late as was the hour, he stamped round to Fore Street and knocked at the door of Mr. Dobb's little shop. The house was in darkness, but after Mr. Clark's third thunderous assault on the panels, an upper window opened and the head of Mr. Dobb, crowned with so obsolete a thing as a night-cap, protruded in inquiry.

"Finished, *me!*" roared Mr. Clark, to this apparition.

"Don't you be a silly old stoopid!" counselled Mr. Dobb. "You stick to your job like a man!"

"But it ain't a man's job!" declared Mr. Clark. "Sneaking about, watching gals, at my time of life! I'll trouble you to 'and in my resignation for me to Mr. Poskett, because some'ow I don't think it 'ud be safe for me to see 'im—safe for 'im, I mean!"

"You wait a bit," directed Mr. Dobb. "I'll come down to you."

And this he did, unbolting the shopdoor and revealing himself in a chaste dressing-gown of crimson flannel. Dragging the fretful Mr. Clark into the back premises, he hospitably set out glasses and a bottle, and Mr.

Clark's snarls of annoyance died away into murmurs of faint protest.

"Look 'ere," said Horace, seriously, "you take it from me that you're doing very well. Better than you think. It don't matter whether you catches 'er with the chap or not; the main point is that he knows by now that you're in earnest."

"But 'ow does 'e know?" queried Mr. Clark.

"She's told 'im! She's kept away from 'im on purpose to diddle you, but she's let 'im know by a note what's 'appened last night, and you can bet she'll let 'im know what 'appened to-night."

"'Ow do *you* know?"

"Because," was Mr. Dobb's astonishing answer, "because I know 'oo the fellow is! I not only know 'im, but I know 'im well enough to be very friendly with 'im, and it was 'im what told me she's sent 'im word."

"But if you knows 'oo 'e is, why don't you tell old Poskett and settle the affair?" asked Mr. Clark, very naturally.

"Because that ain't in the programme," replied Mr. Dobb. "'Strictly business!'" he quoted, enigmatically. "Surely you ain't forgot that?"

"Well, why don't you tell *me* 'oo 'e is, and let *me* tell old Poskett?"

"There is such a thing as digging up pertaters before they're ready to be dug," remarked Mr. Dobb, mysteriously.

"Well, anyway, 'ow did *you* find out 'oo the chap was?" asked Mr. Clark, with something akin to professional jealousy.

"Two or three days back," related Mr. Dobb, "I 'ad a very 'andsome-looking overmantle mirror for sale 'ere. It was in the window, and it caught Miss Poskett's

eye. And she stepped in and admired it, and asked the price, and you could see she thought it was a bargain. But she went out again, trying to be off'and."

"Well, is it a riddle, or are you supposed to be telling me something?" asked Mr. Clark, as his friend made a long pause.

"I thought you'd guess the rest, easy. First thing next morning in comes a certain young gent, and said 'e'd 'eard I'd got a overmantel for sale, and 'e bought it straight off, almost without looking at it. Ah, if only there was more lovers in the world, it 'ud be a happier place altogether!" stated Mr. Dobb. "For chaps in my line of business, anyway!"

"Oh, well, I shall be glad when it's all over and done with, that I do assure you!" said Mr. Clark. "I reckon I owe old Poskett something for getting me to take on a job like this, and a grudge is a debt of honour to me, don't forget!"

"I don't mind what you do to 'im after it's all over," said Mr. Dobb. "In fact, I reckon to quarrel with 'im myself before very long. It won't matter a bit, because I 'ave pumped 'im dry in the way of business already."

"Well, I wish you'd tell me——" began Mr. Clark, wistfully.

"You wait! You see, Sam, you're all right, but you ain't clever; and if I was to tell you 'oo the chap is and what I've 'atched out, you'd try to be clever and 'elp me, and that 'ud spoil everything."

And this was an attitude from which Mr. Dobb was not to be wooed by all the blandishments of Mr. Clark, so at last the stout sailorman, relinquished further effort, repaired to the modest lodging he had taken for himself in the town, and there retired to bed.

So soundly did he sleep as the result of the strain of detective work that it was already nearly noon when he was awakened next morning by the advent of a visitor in the form of Mr. Dobb.

"I was quite right," announced Horace. "That gal's sent another note to 'er young man about the way she tricked you last night. Very tickled by it, 'e was; but, at the same time, 'e sees what a old nuisance you're going to be to 'em when they wants to meet."

"You've seen 'im?" asked Mr. Clark.

"I 'ave! I've been 'aving a long, confidential chat with 'im. But I ain't come to talk about that now. I 'appen to know of a job what might suit you—a job as ferryman down at the 'arbour."

"Just the one job in the world I'd really like!" cried Mr. Clark, enthusiastically. "Rowing across the river all day from a pub. on one side to a pub. on the other!"

"The pub. on this side is the 'Flag and Pennant,' " said Horace. "The landlord there runs the ferry, and 'is ferryman is leaving to-morrow."

"I'll go up and ask for the job."

"That ain't the way to set about it—not in this case. You want to use the 'ouse for a few hours first, and then lead up to the job tactful-like. Tell the landlord about your present job, and 'ow you don't like it, and so on, and come to the ferry gradual."

Mr. Clark, bowing to the superior wisdom of Horace, spent the whole of the afternoon, after he had watched Miss Poskett from her work to her home and back again, in the bar-parlour of the "Flag and Pennant" and it was not till tea-time that he decided that he had acquired sufficient standing as a patron of the house to advance a little further in the matter of the ferry.

"There's good jobs and bad jobs, ain't there, sir?" he observed, rather irrelevantly, to the dapper young landlord. "I wish I could change my job. I got a rotten job at present."

"Oh!" said the landlord, without much interest. "What's the job?"

"Watching a young gal—a artful, tricky young gal."

"Watching her? Do you mean you are married to her?"

"'Eaven forbid! I'm watching 'er at 'er relations' wish to find out 'oo she's carrying-on with unbeknown to them."

"I shouldn't have thought it was a very pleasant job for a man like you," observed the landlord, disdainfully.

"It ain't! Far from it! Little did I think, when Poskett asked me to keep a eye on 'is niece——"

"Miss Poskett, eh?" exclaimed the landlord, with sudden interest. "And so *you* are the chap who's trying to find out who's dangling after Miss Poskett, are you? Why, it's——"

He checked himself sharply. For a few moments he stood tapping his fingers on the counter and eyeing Mr. Clark.

"What's Poskett going to do when he finds out?" he asked.

"Send 'im about 'is business pretty sharp!"

"Just the thing!" exclaimed the landlord.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Look here," went on the other, in some excitement, "I don't mind admitting to you that I've got more than half a mind to have a try after Miss Poskett myself. I wondered why she wouldn't have anything

to say to me until, a few days ago, I happened to see her with the chap she fancies. If Poskett got rid of him——”

“Hexactly, sir!” concurred Mr. Clark. “That ’ud be your chance, wouldn’t it?”

“It *would!*”

“Then tell me ’oo ’e is, and——”

“No; if Miss Poskett got to hear I was mixed up in it—— But I’ll tell you what I *will* do! Here, come to the window! See that cottage across the harbour—the one with the figurehead in the garden? Well, he lodges there. His name is Jones—William Jones. Here, come back!” cried the landlord, forcefully detaining Mr. Clark. “Don’t you understand that you’ve got to catch ’em together first? Now, he hasn’t been out lately, because he hasn’t been very well. But if you were to watch that cottage——”

“I’d catch ’im whenever ’e left, and if I followed ’im——”

“That’s it! He’s sure to be meeting her sooner or later. You’ll easily recognize him—he’s got a big black moustache, and he’s a tall, thin chap.”

“But suppose ’e left the ’ouse and didn’t cross the ’arbour, and I was stuck on *this* side?” artfully suggested Mr. Clark.

“I have it!” cried the landlord of the “Flag and Pennant.” “Blessed if I don’t do you a good turn, since you’re going to do me one! You can take over my ferry-boat. Then you can row backwards and forwards all day, watching the place unsuspected. And if you see him leave and not cross the harbour, you can row over as quickly as you can and follow him. And if he does cross, why, he’s bound to come over in your ferry, and then you can always jump out after

him and track him till he meets her, and then you can fetch old Poskett along to see 'em!"

"It certainly sounds a proper plan," approved Mr. Clark. "But after I've fetched Poskett—do I lose the ferry job then?"

"No," said the landlord, handsomely. "I'll let you keep it on, on the usual terms. After all, some one's got to do it, and it may as well be you, especially since you'll have helped me a bit."

Overjoyed at this facile arrangement, Mr. Clark celebrated his new engagement so thoroughly that he quite omitted to provide unwelcome escort for Miss Poskett that evening. Next morning he entered upon his new duties, and rowed back and forth across the estuary with ever a vigilant eye lifting towards the cottage with the figurehead in its garden.

But no one answering to the description of William Jones did he discern all day, and when at last business was over at a late hour, he went along to see Mr. Horace Dobb and tell him all that there was to be told.

"Ah, now you're all right!" said Mr. Dobb, patronizingly. "So mind you do the job satisfactory, and keep your eyes well open."

"I shall give Poskett notice at the end of the week," said Mr. Clark. "Now I'm hindependent of 'im, I want to get shut of 'is nasty little job as soon as possible."

"But you mustn't," pointed out Horace. "Far as I can see, the main reason why Lupcott, the landlord of the 'Flag and Pennant,' 'as given you the job of ferryman is that so you can get rid of this 'ere rival for 'im."

"I forgot that," admitted Mr. Clark. "Never mind,

I'll soon nab the pair of 'em now, and then I can turn over a new leaf."

But, indeed, Mr. Clark had not succeeded in catching even a glimpse of Mr. William Jones by the next day, nor the next, nor the next after that. Confessing his failure rather apprehensively to his patron, Mr. Lupcott, he was relieved when that gentleman, bidding him cheer up, cited the precedent of Bruce's spider.

A few more days passed. Mr. Clark, now well established in his new sphere of activity, was winning custom and popularity by the nice distinction of his manners and the careful choice of his vocabulary, and was almost forgetting the very existence of the secretive Mr. Jones, when one morning the affair of Miss Poskett's love passage suddenly loomed large again before him.

It so chanced that Mr. Clark had just started from the further side of the river, when loud shouts for his immediate presence claimed his attention.

"Bit of a 'urry, seemingly," commented Mr. Clark, and obligingly began to row back.

There were two male figures awaiting him. One of them was brandishing his arms and bellowing; the other, taking matters more calmly, leaned in repose against a post, smiling at his companion's vehemence. The excitable gentleman was Mr. Poskett, the other was Mr. Horace Dobb.

"A nice thing! A nice thing!" raved Mr. Poskett, as the nose of the ferry-boat grounded and Mr. Clark stepped ashore. "You're a fraud! A impostor! A broken reed! A foolish virgin!"

The bewildered Mr. Clark, gazing from this figure of wrath to the placid mien of Mr. Dobb, received a slow, significant wink from that gentleman.

"I've been betrayed!" shrilly declaimed Mr. Poskett. "I've been wounded in my tenderest feelings! While you've been pretendin' to be so watchful and alert, my niece 'as slipped away and got married! She's just sent me a telegram, telling me about it, and 'ow she was starting off on 'er 'oneymoon!"

"'As she—'as she married 'im, after all?" queried Mr. Clark, in a surprised tone that was not entirely devoid of approval.

"She 'as! She's been meetin' 'im regular the last few days, it seems, and——"

"Married that 'ere Jones, and I never so much as set eyes on 'im!" marvelled Mr. Clark. "There's artfulness!"

Mr. Poskett, gasping for words, shook his head helplessly.

"It was Mr. Lupcott, of the 'Flag and Pennant,' she married, Sam," said Mr. Dobb, softly.

"Ah, 'e told me this morning that 'e was going away for a few days, and 'e clapped me on the shoulder and laughed, and I wondered why!" cried Mr. Clark. "But—but that 'ere Jones——"

"There never was any Jones, Sam," explained Mr. Dobb, in gentle accents. "Lupcott invented 'im simply to keep you fixed in one spot, so 'e could go on meeting Miss Poskett. Matter of fact, *I* invented 'im for Lupcott! It was Lupcott 'oo was after 'er all along, as I knew."

"But—but——"

Mr. Dobb nodded significantly towards Mr. Poskett.

"Look 'ere!" readily cried Mr. Clark, advancing on that gentleman threateningly. "This 'ere slipway is private property, and I'm in charge of it. And I don't

want you 'anging about 'ere listening to gentlemen's conversation! I don't like the looks of you, me man. I never did, and I never shall, so clear out!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" murmured Horace, shamelessly.

"If you've got anything to say to me," warned Mr. Clark, "I advise you not to say it! Get! See? Get!"

Mr. Poskett, noting the terrible earnestness of Mr. Clark's visage, glanced wildly about him, and discovered how remote the slipway was from civilization. Yielding suddenly to panic, he turned and trotted away, followed by the heartless laughter of Mr. Dobb and certain blood-curdling threats from Mr. Clark.

"That's settled 'im!" stated Mr. Dobb. "'E ain't the sort to trouble you again."

"And a good job too!" declared Mr. Clark. "It's the first really comfortable minute I've spent since first I took 'is little job on."

"Never mind, Sam, it served its purpose," said Mr. Dobb. "Soon as ever 'e spoke to me about 'is niece, and as soon as ever I knew that Lupcott was in it, I began to look round for a chance. And when I learned Lupcott's ferryman was leaving 'im, I saw the chance sticking out as plain as plain. Luckily I was friendly with all parties. It was *me* what put Lupcott up to the plan of giving you the ferry to look after to keep you from interfering; it was *me* what suggested you to Poskett for the job of watching 'is niece; and it was *me*, Sam, what advised Lupcott not to let you know 'ow things really stood, in case you might want to be too 'elpful. And I know what you are when you tries to be clever."

"Well, I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you," murmured Mr. Clark.

"Put two and two neatly together, 'ave you, and found out 'oo the answer is?" bantered Mr. Dobb. "Ain't I a wonder? All that 'ead work done by me, and you only 'ad to stand by and wait—and you didn't even know you was standing by and waiting. So now, if you likes, you can take me into the 'Flag and Pen-nant' and stand me something to drink success to your new career."

"Wait a bit," said Mr. Clark, counting his available wealth. "Get in the boat, and let me take you across the river and back again. The fare'll be tuppence. And then we can *both* 'ave a drink!"

EPISODE III

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

SUPERLATIVE virtues of construction and design, never before suspected, were boldly claimed for the "Jane Gladys" in the auctioneer's announcement which advertised her imminent sale. So respect-compelling was the list of good qualities now stated to be embodied in the unlovely hulk of that ancient vessel that even the two members of her crew who lingered on in residence as caretakers felt that their social standing was enhanced by association with such a superior craft. In order to demonstrate their new-found dignity, they left unperformed as much menial work as possible, preferring to sun themselves on deck in more fitting and gentlemanly leisure.

Thus it was that Mr. Joseph Tridge was idly leaning against the side one morning, surveying the horizon with a certain bored restfulness, and Mr. Peter Lock was reclining on deck in triple enjoyment of pipe and newspaper and slippered ease, when a voice hailed the "Jane Gladys" from a small boat further out in the river.

In the boat was the venerable Mr. Samuel Clark, formerly the doyen of the "Jane Gladys" crew, and now, by the grace of Fate and the artifice of man, the motive-power of the little ferry which plied across Shorehaven Harbour at its mouth.

"Why, 'ullo, Sam!" greeted Mr. Tridge, waking to extreme cordiality. "Just the chap I was 'oping to see! Tie up and come aboard!"

"Not me!" replied Mr. Clark, very definitely.

"Not just for a chat?" wheedled Mr. Tridge. "It's a bit dull for us 'ere, you know, Sam."

"I ain't going to risk it," replied Mr. Clark. "I only give you a friendly shout as I was passing, like. You ain't going to cut my 'air again to-day, Joe, so you might just as well understand that at once. You cut it yesterday, and you cut it last Thursday, and you cut it last Toosday. I don't mean to be unfriendly or un'elpful, Joe, but you've got to give it a rest to-day!"

"Well, I must practice on something!" protested Mr. Tridge.

"Practice on Peter Lock, then," recommended Mr. Clark.

Mr. Lock rose and looked over the side. Mr. Lock's hair, oiled and combed to a miracle of sleekness, glistened in the sun; Mr. Lock's chin and cheeks, bizarrely ornamented with strips of sticking-plaster, presented an object-lesson in first aid to the injured.

"I've struck!" announced Mr. Lock. "I ain't going to humour him no more. I've let 'im practise shaving on me till me face looks as if some one had been playing noughts-and-crosses on it in red ink, and I've let him shampoo and brilliantine my hair till I can't hardly read for the smell of it."

"'Orace told me to put in all the practice I could," said Mr. Tridge, stoutly. "And I'm going to."

"But what for?" queried Mr. Clark. "What for? That's what I wants to know."

"So do I!" admitted Mr. Tridge. "'Orace 'asn't told me yet. All 'e's told me to do is to train meself for 'air-dressing, and that's what I'm doing. What 'Orace says is good enough for me!"

Mr. Clark nodded approval of such simple loyalty.

He mentioned that even when Horace had been cook to the "Jane Gladys" he was always averse from premature revelation of the workings of his mind; and went on to say that now Horace was no longer Horace the cook, but had blossomed out into Mr. Horace Dobb, second-hand dealer, carrying on business in a little shop in Fore Street, Shorehaven, he cultivated an even greater reticence in matters of diplomacy.

"'Learn a bit of 'air-dressing,' says 'Orace to me,'" narrated Mr. Tridge, "and I'm learning a bit of 'air-dressing according. 'Orace 'as got something in 'is mind, you can depend on that. And I take it a bit uncharitable of you, Sam, not to 'elp me and 'Orace. 'Ow can I practise 'air-dressing if I don't get no 'air to dress?"

"Practise on the ship's mop," put forward Mr. Clark.

"I've done that," said Mr. Tridge, with scorn for so obvious a suggestion. "I've propped that up and give it a 'air-cut over and over again, till it's only a bare stump now. Yes, and I've clean-shaved the ship's scrubbing-brush, too, to see how I'd get on with a really stiff beard. But you must 'ave living models to do any good. 'Ow else can you tell if you're 'urting?"

"Oh, well," yielded Mr. Clark, "just to keep your 'and in, I'll let you shave the back of my neck if you like, only don't forget that the back of me neck don't leave off level with the top of my ears."

He fastened his boat and went aboard his old home. Seating himself resignedly on a packing-case, he submitted to the ministrations of Mr. Tridge. So that Mr. Horace Dobb, appearing presently on the gang-plank, expressed commendation of the assiduity with which Mr. Tridge was seeking to acquire tonsorial skill.

"All the same, 'Orace," remarked Mr. Tridge, "I *should* like to know what the idea is."

"Only another day or two, Joe," promised Mr. Dobb, "and then, if things pan out right, you'll be cutting 'air in a little shop practically your own. 'Ow's that, eh?"

"Well, I take it as very kind of you, 'Orace," said Mr. Tridge, with gratitude.

"Then you takes it wrong," retorted Mr. Dobb. "You know my motter, don't you?"

"Yes, we all knows it," put in Mr. Lock, a little hostilely. "It's 'Strictly Business!' Saved you a pint or two in its time, hasn't it, that motter?"

"It 'as," confirmed Mr. Dobb, by no means abashed. "It is a jolly good motter, far as I'm concerned. And this 'air-dressing idea is strictly business. I'm working it for all our sakes, and mine most of all. When I've got Joe settled as a barber and found something for you, Peter, the four of us ought to work some good deals together, from my little place."

"A ferryman, a barber, a—a something else, and a second-hand dealer," catalogued Mr. Lock. "It ain't a bad web to spread. Lots of rubbish gets sold because of rumours about them being vallyble."

"Exackly!" concurred Mr. Dobb. "And barbers' shops and ferry-boats is the place for gossip. And there's lots of strangers visits Shore'aven during the year."

"And so you're going to start me in a barber's shop!" remarked Mr. Tridge, with great satisfaction. "Will there be a cash-register?" he asked, as an interesting after-thought.

"No, *I* ain't going to start you, Joe," corrected Mr.

Dobb. "It's a Mrs. Jackson what's going to start you, only she don't know it yet."

"A widow!" divined Mr. Tridge.

"A old widow, and a bit of a pal of my missis's," supplemented Mr. Dobb.

"Ah, I guessed there was a catch somewhere!" sourly stated Mr. Tridge. "Well, I ain't going to get married, see? I ain't at all the marrying sort. I prefers to remain single, thank you. Besides which, I've got one somewhere, already."

"That's all right, Joe," returned Mr. Dobb, soothingly. "I expect she'd turn up 'er eyes at you in 'oly 'orror in any case. She's a pillar of temp'rance, Joe, and a anti-smoker and a anti-gambler, and all the rest of it."

"No wonder she's a widow!" softly commented Mr. Lock.

"And, anyway," said Mr. Tridge, churlishly, "I don't want no business dealings with a woman like *that!*"

"You won't see 'er often, Joe," returned Mr. Dobb. "She only comes into Shore'aven once a month or so, just to collect the rents of a few cottages she's got. Comes in for the day, she does, settles 'er business, gets a cheap tea along of my missis, and back she goes 'ome, a good three miles away."

"Well, where do I come in?" asked Mr. Tridge.

"You comes in at one hundred and twenty-one, 'Igh Street," replied Mr. Dobb. "That belongs to 'er. It's a little, tiny, squeezed-in shop what she owns. It's a barber's shop."

"I see. And I'm to be the hassistant," surmised Mr. Tridge.

"Hassistant? Why, it's so small that if there was

to be a hassistant there'd be no room left for a customer! No, Joe; you're to run the 'ole show. The chap what's there now is leaving soon, you see."

Mr. Dobb, anticipating the further curiosity of Mr. Tridge, went on to explain that the present tenant was in occupation of the premises on profit-sharing terms with the landlady. The stock and fixtures had recently come into Mrs. Jackson's possession in the course of business, subsequent to the temporary employment of a broker's man.

And now Mrs. Jackson, loth to lose her interest in the barbering profession, designed to procure yet another hairdresser to fill the place, on the same terms of partnership, of the dispossessed tenant.

"Of course," said Mr. Dobb, "I ain't supposed to know much about it. I only know what she's told my missis in gossip, and I must say my missis is a good 'un at asking a few simple questions over a cup of tea without appearing noseey over it."

"Well, and what do I do now?" asked Mr. Tridge. "Go up and ask 'er for the job?"

"Bless you, no!" was Horace's baffling response. "Why, she's filled it already, far as she's concerned."

"That's the back of my neck, Joe, when you've finished cutting rashers out of it," came Mr. Clark's mild reminder.

"Well, 'Orace shouldn't go giving me shocks like that!" indignantly exclaimed Mr. Tridge. "'Ere 'ave I been spending a 'ole week learning 'air-dressing in all its branches, and now, just when I'm perfect, 'e breaks the noos to me in a roundabout way that I've wasted my time for nothing!"

"I said as far as *she* was concerned, Joe," remarked Mr. Dobb. "Not as far as *I* was concerned. That's

a very different matter. You just carry on and wait a day or two. And you, Sam Clark, you tell your boss that you're rather hexpecting to 'ave another attack of colic soon, and stand by to take horders from me at any minute."

Refusing to shed further enlightenment at this juncture, Mr. Dobb turned and left the "Jane Gladys" with rather a consciously Napoleonic stride.

For the rest of that day Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock found engrossing employment in devising theories as to the exact nature of Mr. Dobb's machinations. Mr. Lock was of opinion that Mr. Tridge would be called on to impersonate Mrs. Jackson's new partner in the hairdressing business, though he admitted that he could not imagine how this was to be carried through to complete success. On the other hand, Mr. Tridge, displaying a truculent species of pessimism, obstinately inclined to the belief that yet a parson and a wedding-ring would be found to be lurking at the back of Mr. Dobb's strategy.

And Mr. Samuel Clark, ever somewhat crude and confused in his ideas, plied his ferry all that afternoon, oblivious of his surroundings even to the point of returning thanks for a tip of a French halfpenny. The only thing his mind could dwell on was that, at some near date, the widowed Mrs. Jackson was to be lured by Horace into a hairdressing saloon and there relieved, by some pretext, of the money she had been collecting in rents. The morality of such a proceeding did not trouble the plump sailorman; he found sufficient extenuation in the thought that it was the job of the police to prevent such things.

But late that same evening, at the "Jolly Sailors," Mr. Dobb exhibited himself in a more communicative

mood. Assembling his former shipmates around him, he extended a strictly rationed hospitality towards them, and then, of his own free-will, reverted to the twin subjects of the hairdressing business and Mrs. Jackson.

"The old gal came in to tea quite unexpected to-day," he said. "That's three times in a little over a fortnight. 'Owever, I sold 'er a second-'and dish-cover, so she's paid for more than she's ate up to now. She sat a long time over 'er tea chatting to my missis. Of course it didn't hinterest me, so I went out into the shop. Only I couldn't 'elp 'earing a lot, because some-'ow I'd left the door open, and it would 'ave looked so rude to 'ave closed it deliberate between us."

He leaned back and, with a smile of profound self-satisfaction, eyed each of his friends in turn.

"Well?" prompted Mr. Tridge.

"The new chap she's got 'er eye on is arriving the day after to-morrow to see the place and fix up finally with 'er. Oh, she's very took with 'im! She ain't ever seen 'im yet, but 'is letters 'ave touched 'er 'eart proper. It seems 'e's just the very sort of chap she's been advertising for—a lifelong teetotaller, a non-smoker, never bets nor swears, always punctual, steady, and methodical."

"In short," restively summarized Mr. Tridge, "just the sort of chap I *ain't*! Seems to me I stands a fine chance against 'im with a silly old geezer like 'er!" he added, ungallantly. "'Owever, go on!"

"'E's coming down from London by the hexpress. Well, now, supposing 'e didn't harrive, or something went wrong and they failed to come to a hagreement? Why, the shop would be standing empty from next Saturday, and she'd be at 'er wits' ends to find some one else! She's spent pounds in hadvertising for a

teetotal, non-smoking barber as it is. Well, up you goes to see 'er, Joe Tridge, gives *me* as a reference, and gets the job temporary. And once you're in, you ain't the man you used to be if anything short of dynamite gets you out of that job again."

"But why couldn't you 'ave recommended me to start with?"

"I didn't know in time. And, for another thing, she was so set on getting a pattern of virtue. But when she finds things 'ave gone wrong, and there's no time to spare, unless she's willing to lose money by it, she won't be so partic'lar, and she'll overlook some of your faults, Joe, if you keeps the rest of 'em dark."

"You seem pretty sure things are going wrong," said Mr. Tridge.

"I can feel it in me bones," returned Mr. Dobb. "Anyway Mrs. Jackson's coming in the day after tomorrow to meet this chap at one hundred and twenty-one, 'Igh Street. Now, I *may* be at the station when 'e arrives, and pass the time of day with 'im."

"I can 'ear the dawn breaking," observed Mr. Tridge, humorously. "You'll tell 'im there's nothing doing, and say you were sent by 'er to meet 'im and tell 'im so. And she'll think 'e never come?"

"Helementary, Joe," criticized Mr. Dobb. "Most helementary! 'E'd write to 'er when 'e got back, and then the fat 'ud be out of the frying-pan and into the fire. No, I mean to fix it so that she's finished with 'im for good and all two minutes after she's first set eyes on 'im!"

"And 'ow do you do that?" asked Mr. Lock. "Mesmerism?"

"No, circumstantial hevidence," returned Mr. Dobb,

happily. "There's more people comes a cropper over circumstantial hevidence than over the truth coming out by haccident, and that's saying a lot!"

He glanced warily about him, and then raised his arms in a gesture inviting closer heed to his words. Four heads bent over the table; three pairs of ears listened attentively. From one pair of lips came a whispered fluency of instruction and explanation. Finally, Mr. Dobb sat back with simpering pride, and his three companions unanimately expressed their awed respect for his brain-powers.

Again Mr. Dobb bent forward to add sundry details, promising to instruct those selected for dramatic rôles at a more private opportunity on the morrow.

Mr. Samuel Clark, flattered by having the star part assigned to him, promised that he would rehearse on every possible occasion during the following day.

Some twenty-two hours later Mr. Dobb called at Mr. Clark's lodgings to see whether he was fulfilling this promise, and Mr. Clark at once afforded him something in the nature of a dress rehearsal.

"Puffect!" declared Horace, with enthusiasm. "A born actor couldn't do it better, especially when you rolls your eyes up like that. I see it was blowing a bit fresh when I come along just now, so there'll be a nice little ground-swell off the 'arbour-mouth to-morrow. 'Ave you arranged to 'ave colic to-morrow, like I told you?"

"All fixed up; and I've got some one else to look after the ferry for the day, and I've borrowed a small boat, like what you said. And I shall be waiting where you told me all the morning."

"That's the idea!" approved Horace. "And now we'll just go and see if Peter Lock remembers all he's

got to say, and then we'll see if the clock in the 'Jolly Sailors' keeps good time."

Mr. Horace Dobb was patrolling the platform of Shorehaven railway-station next morning when the express from London came to a standstill there.

Of the few passengers that thankfully alighted, the majority were sailormen. Several women and children made up a goodly share of the rest of the number. Of the half-dozen residue, five were gentlemen known to Mr. Dobb by sight or personally. The sixth was a complete stranger, and Mr. Dobb, with a pious expression of gratitude for this simplification of his task of identifying Mrs. Jackson's expected visitor, at once approached him.

"Are you going straight back to the Town 'All, Mr. Binson?" asked Horace, innocently.

"I'm afraid you're making an error," was the reply. "My name is not Binson."

"Mean to tell me you're not Mr. Binson, our town-clerk of Shore'aven 'ere?" demanded Mr. Dobb, incredulously.

"No, I am not. I am a complete stranger to this town."

"Well, well," marvelled Mr. Dobb, "you are the exact image of Mr. Binson, that's all I can say."

"Indeed?" returned the other, with scant interest in the coincidence. "Well, as I say, I am a perfect stranger here. I should be glad, in fact, if you would tell me the nearest way to the High Street. I have a business appointment there."

"Oh!" said Mr. Dobb, with equal listlessness. "Which end of 'Igh Street? It makes a difference 'ow you goes from 'ere, according to which end you want."

"Number one hundred and twenty-one. It's a barber's shop."

"I know it," said Mr. Dobb. "Name of Bonner."

"At present, yes," conceded the other. "It really belongs to a lady, though—to Mrs. Jackson. Perhaps you know her?"

"'Eard of 'er, I fancy," returned Mr. Dobb, cursorily. "Pity you got out at this station, though. Your nearest would 'ave been the station the other side of the river. 'Owever, you come along of me, and I'll see you on the right road. Shall we just 'ave one gargle before we start?"

"Gargle?" asked the other one, in perplexity.

"Tonic," elucidated Mr. Dobb. "Drink."

"Thank you, no," was the reply. "I am a lifelong abstainer from all alcoholic drinks."

"Just as you like," said Mr. Dobb, readily. "Well, come along with me, and I'll take you down to the ferry and get you taken across the river, and you'll soon be there."

"I didn't know there was another station. I suppose the ferry *is* the shortest way? I'm not a good sailor, and——"

Mr. Dobb's eyes glinted.

"Oh, you'll be all right!" he declared, and led the other man by devious paths away from the neighbourhood of the High Street and down to the harbour. To avoid questions which might be thorny to answer, Mr. Dobb walked swiftly and a little in advance of his companion, who, evidently deeming Mr. Dobb something of a roisterous blade, seemed relieved by this arrangement. Arrived at the quay, Mr. Dobb perceived the lounging form of Mr. Samuel Clark, and led the stranger up to him.

"This gent wants you to row 'im over to near the 'Igh Street, ferryman," said Mr. Dobb. "Oh, and be as quick over it as you can," he added, holding Mr. Clark's gaze; "because 'e says 'e's not a very good sailor."

"I'll be as quick as I can," promised Mr. Clark; "but there's a pretty strong tide running, sir, don't forget."

"There's no risk I suppose?" asked the visitor, smiling a little anxiously.

"Bless you, no, sir," declared Mr. Clark, cosily. "You'll be as safe as 'ouses with me!"

With a courteous exchange of compliments, Mr. Dobb parted from his new acquaintance. A minute later Mr. Clark had begun to convey his passenger across the river, and Mr. Dobb was returning homeward with the mien of one whose morning has been well spent.

"The current seems quite strong," remarked the gentleman from London.

"It are," agreed Mr. Clark, straining at his sculls. "The current's always pretty strong 'ere when the tide's running out. Like a mill-stream sometimes, and the worst of it is that you don't know it till you get well out on it."

"I hope we'll land at the nearest point opposite."

"We'll *try* to land there," amended Mr. Clark, gravely. "Matter of fact, the tide's stronger to-day than I've ever known it before."

"We seem to be drifting further and further down the river," observed the other, now clearly falling prey to nerves. "Do you think it would be better to turn round and go back?"

"Turn round, sir—with the tide running *out*?" asked Mr. Clark, in accents almost scandalized. "Why,

we should be capsized for dead, certain sure, in less than no time. Begging your pardon, sir, but it's plain you're no sailor, to talk like that. No, we can't turn back."

"Well, perhaps if you were to—to keep the—the front of the boat pointed straighter for the bank opposite——"

"I can't!" stated Mr. Clark. "The tide's too strong. We must land as near as we can, that's all. I never knoo such a tide!" he ended, pettishly.

"You—you don't think there's any chance of being carried out beyond that lighthouse there at the very end, do you?"

"I 'ope and pray not!" soberly returned Mr. Clark.

He bent to his skulls with the greatest determination. A more sophisticated passenger might have noticed that the ferryman was pulling far harder with one arm than the other. The present fare, however, was engrossed in observing more and more of the opposite bank slip by.

"I do believe we shall be carried right out to sea!" he said at last, with the utmost concern.

"Not if *I* can 'elp it!" denied Mr. Clark, and gave a straining, spectacular display of oarsmanship.

"We *shall* be carried out to sea!"

Mr. Clark, shipping his skulls with commendable neatness, stared owlshly at the passenger for a few moments, and then ejaculated:

"Ooh! Ooh, ah!" with intensity of feeling.

"What is it? Whatever is it?"

"Ooh! Ooh, ah!" repeated Mr. Clark. "It's my 'eart!" he explained, hollowly, and made a fearsome rolling of his eyes. "I've strained it, or busted it, or something."

"But—but we shall be capsized—drowned!"

"I couldn't row another stroke just now, not to save my life," groaned Mr. Clark. "And you mustn't try to take the oars, not even if you know 'ow to manage 'em. You'd upset the boat if you tried to change places with me, and you'd upset it if you tried to row from where you're sitting."

His passenger, abandoning a half-formed intention, sat very still.

"Can't we shout to the people ashore?" he asked, dismally, as the little boat swept on past the harbour lighthouse.

"They couldn't 'ear you," moaned Mr. Clark.

"I could wave to them!"

"And upset the boat?" asked Mr. Clark, faintly. "She's very, very easy upset. The chap what owns this boat never tells 'er 'istory when 'es 'iring it out to visitors in the summer."

"What can we *do*? What *can* we do?"

"Do? Why, nothing, except 'ope. We must just let the old boat float out and trust to luck."

"But—but——" protested the other, wildly.

"Ooh! Ooh, ah!" bellowed Mr. Clark, in accents of acute anguish, as the easiest way to foreclose vain conversation.

He sat back, groaning horribly, and rubbing various portions of his anatomy, a fearful glare in his eyes. The other man, watching him miserably, took a firm grasp of the seat as the little craft began to pitch and dance over the turmoil of the harbour-bar.

"We—we—we——" murmured Mr. Clark, with difficulty.

"We what?" asked the other, eagerly.

"I dunno," said Mr. Clark, blankly.

There was dire silence, The little boat drifted further and further out, till it was clear of the harbour, and here the scour of the tide carried it well away from the roadstead.

Mr. Clark, opening one eye, shrewdly surveyed the locality.

"Just—just remembered," he said. "We've got a anchor 'ere in the locker—a anchor and any amount of cable. We'll chuck it over, and we'll ride 'ere, as easy as easy, till the tide turns."

"Don't you feel strong enough to row us back now?"

"'Ave a 'eart, sir!" begged Mr. Clark, reproachfully. "It 'ud pull my arms out of their sockets to row against this current. But we'll be all right 'ere. Once I get the anchor overboard, like this, we'll be as safe as safe."

"All very well!" fulminated the passenger, recovering a little spirit when he noted that the anchor had checked further seaward flow. "But why——"

"Ooh! Ooh, ah!" interrupted Mr. Clark. "For 'eaven's sake, sir, don't go a-hagitating of me. When I 'ave attacks like this, I'm sometimes liable to fits, and if I 'ave a fit 'ere, over goes the boat, and it's all up with both of us!"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" wailed the other, subsiding.

"I—I'm going to lie down in the bottom of the boat," announced Mr. Clark, wanly. "And if I smokes a pipe that might do me good, by composing of my nerves."

He kindled his pipe, and forthwith settled himself very comfortably in the bottom of the boat. For head-rest, he had a pillow he fortunately happened to have brought with him. By a similar kindness of chance, he had also provided himself with a thick overcoat, and with this he now snugly covered himself.

Ensued a bleak period of human silence, accentuated

by the lapping of the water round the boat, and the phantom-like scream of wheeling sea-birds. The passenger, sitting humped-up in an attitude of complete dejection, surveyed the prone Mr. Clark and subconsciously became aware of the gentle, rhythmic fall and rise of the anchored craft.

“Really, it’s most unfortunate!” he whined, at last. “Most unfor——”

He stopped abruptly; his expression was a blend of alarm and self-suspicion.

“Dear me!” he muttered. “Oh! I do hope——”

Mr. Clark, stirring, opened one eye sufficiently to see that the complexion of his companion had passed to a strange olive-green shade, and that he was holding his palm to his forehead. Mr. Clark closed his eye again with a warm glow of satisfaction.

Twenty minutes later, Mr. Clark again glanced at his companion. That gentleman’s complexion was now some shades lighter, though still green of hue, and he was sitting with his arms hanging limply by his side. His expression suggested that he had no further interest in life.

“’Ow are you gettin’ on?” asked Mr. Clark.

The other man, turning a pair of glassy eyes on him, shook his head dolefully and groaned. Mr. Clark, settling down again in comfort, was callous enough to smile.

Another half-hour elapsed, with the stout ferryman taking life easily at the bottom of the boat, and with the passenger gaining inside information as to the treacherous nature of a small boat when anchored in deep waters. Then, for the third time, Mr. Clark appraised the state of his passenger and decided that the time for convalescence had come.

Heartily remarking that the rest had done him a world of good, he resumed his seat and began to scull towards the harbour with the greatest of ease. His passenger, drooping woefully in his place, evidenced no emotion whatever at this impending termination to his troubles.

In excellent style Mr. Clark regained the sanctuary of the harbour and drew near to the quay. Mr. Peter Lock, an alert sentinel there for some while past, was waiting to greet him.

"Oh, poor fellow!" sympathized Mr. Lock. "He *do* look ill!"

"You needn't trouble to feel sorry for 'im, Peter," said Mr. Clark. "'E's in that state 'e don't know what's 'appening, or whether it's 'appening to 'im or somebody else. Got a bit of a 'eadache, ain't you, sir?" he bawled at the passenger.

"Oh!" groaned the sufferer, making feeble gestures with his hands and showing the yellows of his eyes. "Oh!" he moaned again, and would have collapsed had not Mr. Clark passed a supportive arm round him.

"There you are, Peter. How's that?" said Mr. Clark, with something of a showman's pride. "Give me a hand to get 'im out of the boat and up on to the quay. All O.K., I s'pose?" he added, enigmatically.

Mr. Lock nodded.

"She's going to 'ave tea with 'Orace's missis, and she's there now. She's been up to the station twice to see if a Mr. Briblett 'ad arrived, but there was no trace of 'im."

"Briblett," murmured the passenger, dazedly. "That's my name. Don't—oh, don't bother me! I'm ill—*ill!*"

"'Orace 'as kept out of 'er way all the time, in case some one might 'ave seen 'im up at the station this

morning," whispered Mr. Lock. "She might begin to smell a rat before the bomb goes off, if she starts putting questions to 'im."

With a certain inconsiderate vigour the two friends half-lifted, half-dragged Mr. Briblett from the boat and assisted him up the steps to the quay.

"A drop o' brandy is the only thing to do this poor gent any good," prescribed Mr. Lock, producing a flask.

The stranger, although in a comatose condition, proved true to his lifelong traditions, and feebly waved the stimulant aside.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Lock, "if 'e won't drink it, p'r'aps the *smell* of it might do 'im good!"

Thus speaking, he delicately sprinkled Mr. Briblett's shoulder with a few drops of the spirit, and then very fraternally shared the remainder with Mr. Clark.

"And now off we goes!" directed Mr. Lock, and, supported by the two sailormen, the cadaverous Mr. Briblett tottered forward on two swerving, unstable legs. Closed were Mr. Briblett's eyes, and the expression on his face was one of pained indifference to all mundane affairs.

By quiet side-streets was Mr. Briblett conducted to the neighbourhood of the little shop in Fore Street. Rounding a corner, the trio at last reached that emporium. Mr. Lock remembered to knock Mr. Briblett's hat off for him, retrieving it with sundry muddy adhesions, and replacing it on the sufferer's head at a rakish angle.

Then the door of Mr. Dobb's shop flew open, the three lurched over the threshold, and Mr. Dobb quickly flitted in after them from nowhere. A moment later Mr. Clark and Mr. Lock were exhaustedly mopping their foreheads, and their burden, unceremoniously

dumped into a chair, was lolling back in his seat, too indisposed even for protest at his treatment.

"Good gracious, whatever——" began Horace's spouse, appearing in vast surprise at the inner door.

Mr. Lock, perceiving a second female rising from a chair in the back parlour, began to speak loudly and rapidly.

"We've just found this chap lying 'elpless at the corner of the road," he stated. "We brought 'im 'ere because 'e said 'e wanted to find a Mrs. Jackson, sir, and we thought that p'r'aps you might know the good lady. Though whether she'd care to admit to knowing *him*, I shouldn't like to say, her being a most respectable lady, by all accounts."

"'E must 'ave been drinking the 'ole of the day!" observed Mr. Clark, in tones of righteous contempt. "I see 'im myself go into the 'Jolly Sailors,' and the 'Blue Lion,' and the 'Cutlass and Cannon'."

"I see 'im myself this morning," said Horace. "I see him come out of the station, and I thought 'e looked a pretty queer fish. 'E come straight out of the station and went into the 'Railway Inn.'"

"I see 'im leave the 'Flag and Pennant' at dinner-time," contributed Mr. Lock. "'E left there to go to the 'Royal George'."

"Brandy, too!" intoned Mr. Clark, sepulchrally. "You just bend down and sniff. If you can't smell brandy, I'll——"

Mr. Briblett, raising his head with extreme difficulty, partly opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he demanded, weakly. "I'm—I'm not at all well! I feel ill—very ill!"

"So I should think!" concurred Mr. Lock. "And the language he was using!"

"Said 'e'd backed three winners out of five yesterday, and didn't care if it snowed pink!" supplied Mr. Clark.

"Wanted us to 'ave a game of 'apenny nap with 'im on the steps of the Town Hall," added Mr. Lock.

"Said 'e'd come down to see about a 'air-dressing business, but it could go to—but 'e wasn't going to trouble!" stated Mr. Clark.

As one existing on a plane of complete isolation, the stricken Mr. Briblett rose unsteadily to his feet. Clutching at the back of his chair, he swayed delicately a while, and then sat down again.

"I—I'd like to go to sleep," he announced. "I want to go to sleep! I want to lie down! Oh, I feel so queer! That boat, drifting out to sea——"

"Boat—sea!" cried Mr. Clark, readily. "There you are! Delirious, and no wonder! Raving—raving! What a 'orrible hexample for all right-minded men!"

There was a little wait. Then Mrs. Jackson, coming out of a sort of trance, pushed past her hostess and stepped through the doorway of the back parlour. For three long seconds she stared at Mr. Briblett, and then, drawing a deep breath, she shrilly began to take the predominant part in the conversation. . . .

Five minutes later Mr. Dobb, Mr. Clark, and Mr. Lock were standing some streets away, dazedly fanning their brows.

"'Ow the dooce was I to know?" whispered Mr. Dobb, brokenly. "'Ow the dooce was I to know the chap would be so punctual as to be too early for the hexpress and come straight along to see Mrs. Jackson at 'er 'ome?"

His hearers shook their heads in confession of inability to answer the question.

"And 'ow the dooce was I to know," continued Mr.

Dobb, bitterly, "that she'd asked this other chap to come down and 'elp 'er with 'er business affairs, now 'e'd got back to England after fifteen years in the Colonies, and never been to Shore'aven before to see 'er? 'Ow the dooce was I to know? . . . Why, I didn't even know she'd *got* a brother!"

EPISODE IV

BLACK CATS ARE ALWAYS LUCKY

IT had been a day thickly veined and marbled with emotions for the little group of men who, aforetime, had in some measure controlled the sea-going vagaries of that decrepit old barque, the "Jane Gladys." For, that day, the "Jane Gladys" had ceased to be a ship dowered with an imposing collection of virtues perceptible only to the auctioneer, and had become but so much old wood and rusting iron to be exploited by the speculative marine-store dealer who hazarded the highest price for her unlovely bulk.

This distressful climax in the nautical career of the "Jane Gladys" was not allowed to go unwitnessed by those who had so long lived and thrived amid the sinister shadows of her ill-repute as a barque that was the natural home of venal duplicities. The erstwhile crew of the "Jane Gladys," those established confederates in mercenary plot and counterplot, had rallied to watch the transfer of their stronghold into alien and unsympathetic ownership, and, in the untroubled throng about the auctioneer, they stood as figures thrust apart from their fellow-men by the stern arm of Tragedy.

Captain Peter Dutt was there, his countenance a very show-case of mournful reminiscence as he gazed upon his late command, although he had retired ashore on a comfortable pension, and had already taken to bragging about his extraordinary prowess as an amateur

grower of vegetables. That venerable and corpulent amphibian, Mr. Samuel Clark, was there, too, having contrived to evade for a while his present duties as ferryman across Shorehaven Harbour in order to attend this dismal chapter in the history of the vessel upon which he had served for so many years. And Mr. Horace Dobb, who formerly graced the cook's galley of the doomed ship, was also in attendance in the great glory of garb which was explained and justified by the fact that he had married a widow and a snug second-hand business at one fortunate sweep.

But, as may be inferred, the regrets of Captain Dutt, of Mr. Clark, and of Mr. Dobb were almost entirely retrospective, for their daily bread was assured. The future was firm ground for their feet to tread, and their woeful deportment had therefore merely a sentimental value. Far more earnest and practical was the grief at the passing of the "Jane Gladys" of the two remaining members of her old crew, Mr. Peter Lock and Mr. Joseph Tridge.

Despite the assiduity with which these two gentlemen had of late pointed out to the great god Luck ways by which he might help them, that fickle deity had proved himself singularly unresponsive. And this meant that neither Mr. Lock nor Mr. Tridge had any attractive prospects to solace them for the loss of their employment on the "Jane Gladys."

By personal inquiry they had discovered that no master mariner was prepared to risk the morale of his crew by importing into the fo'c'sle anyone who had been even remotely connected with the "Jane Gladys," nor was a task ashore obtainable when once they had mentioned the only references they could give.

True, Mr. Dobb had promised them his favour, but,

so far, nothing had come of it save the abortive attempt to procure employment for Mr. Tridge as a hairdresser. Not that there was any question as to Mr. Dobb's sincerity of purpose, for, in projecting philanthropies for his two unfortunate shipmates, he was largely considering his own interests. "Strictly Business!" was the self-chosen motto that controlled Mr. Dobb's energies in every direction, and always there was present in his mind the idea that profitable disposal of stock from the shop in Fore Street might skilfully be accelerated by the placing of his old accomplices of the "Jane Gladys" in strategic situations about the town.

But, apart from securing Mr. Samuel Clark his present job, Mr. Dobb's efforts had hitherto been negligible in result, and now, of those who mourned the end of the "Jane Gladys," none mourned her with more genuine feeling or with a greater sense of personal bereavement than Mr. Lock and Mr. Tridge, for others were only mourning for memories, while they were mourning a lost home.

Gradually, however, as the day had worn on, they had struggled with and overcome their melancholy, mounting, indeed in the end to a flippant hilarity which fitted but incongruously with the gravity of their prospects.

But this was not till the day was nearing its close. The early afternoon had been a space of sighs and doleful head-shakings, for, at the close of the sale, Captain Dutt had led his old subordinates into the "Turk's Head," and here they had all spoken so wistfully and reverently about the "Jane Gladys" that the landlady had wondered how one of them could have come back wearing a green and pink tie from a funeral.

Mr. Horace Dobb, not averse from exhibiting the opulence of his new sphere in life to his former skipper, competed with that worthy for the honour of being prime host to the party. It was a challenge which Captain Dutt's pride forbade him to refuse, and so round after round of refreshment was served, till by degrees a brisker mood descended upon the company.

It was not till past tea-time that the party had begun to break up. Mr. Clark was the first to leave, having suddenly remembered that he had faithfully promised to return to the ferry at one o'clock sharp. And next Mr. Dobb went, pleading the calls of business, and purchasing a cigar at the bar as he left, with excellent effect. For Captain Dutt, after silently and disapprovingly considering such an action on an ex-cook's part, at last stigmatized it as a kind of Socialism, and bought Mr. Lock and Mr. Tridge a cigar apiece to re-establish his prestige.

Soon after, Captain Dutt reluctantly announced that he, too, must now depart, and Messrs. Tridge and Lock accompanied him to the nearest draper's shop, where he sagely selected a bonnet to be presented to Mrs. Dutt the moment he got home. And when the skipper, already holding the hat-box before him in a propitiatory manner, had passed from their sight round a corner, Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock looked hard and remindedly at each other, and then made search in their pockets.

As a result, the one party produced a shilling and five pennies, and the other party disclosed a florin and a halfpenny; frank and unabashed confession admitted these coins to be "change" which the skipper had forgotten to pick up amid the mental distractions of the afternoon.

Whereupon, congratulating themselves and each other on this presence of mind in face of opportunity, Mr. Lock and Mr. Tridge had retired to the tap-room of the "Royal William," and had there abundantly developed their policy of drowning dull care.

By now the night was well advanced, and a fevered, reckless brilliance was illuminating Mr. Lock's personality, lighting up all those manifold polite accomplishments of which he was a master. Thus, he had entertained the company with a series of imitations of bird-calls, and performed clever feats of legerdemain with corks and pennies and hats.

Mr. Tridge was in complete eclipse. He had tried hard to be not ungenial, but his temperament was different from Mr. Lock's, and every minute of revelry only found him more and more subdued and morose. He had struggled against this psychological handicap, even to the extent of exhibiting to the company four or five styles of dancing with which he was familiar, but so morose and forbidding was his countenance as he jigged and gyrated that none dared claim his attention by offering applause, so that when he sat down again it was amid complete and discouraging silence.

Mr. Lock, however, shone still more effulgently as the evening progressed. Knotting his handkerchief into semblance of a doll, he affected that it was a wife and that he was its husband, and built up on these premises a highly diverting ventriloquial monologue. And, after that, he successfully introduced some farmyard mimicry, and then got well away with card tricks.

Appreciative, and even enthusiastic, were Mr. Lock's audience, and none was more enthusiastic or appreciative than the plump, fresh-faced little landlord of the "Royal William." Not once, nor twice, but thrice, did

he pay tribute to Mr. Lock's powers in the medium most gratifying to that artist, and his flow of hospitality ceased only when a big and stern-visaged lady came presently and stood behind the bar at his side. And, thereafter, the licensee of the "Royal William" took, as it were, but a furtive and subsidiary interest in Mr. Lock's entertainment; while the lady eyed the performance with a cold hostility which was inimical to true art.

And whether it was that Mr. Lock grew a little flustered under her malign regard, or whether it was that he sought to sting the landlord into revolt against domestic oppression, the fact remains that he began to intersperse his card tricks with humorous, but inflammatory, remarks bearing on the subject of domineering wives and too submissive husbands.

It is possible that the landlord of the "Royal William" derived amusement from these sallies. Certainly his eyes gleamed at each thrust, and more than once he turned away to conceal a grin, but he was too craven to exhibit open hilarity at Mr. Lock's satires. The landlady, however, did not hesitate to betray her feelings in the matter, and thus it was that, at the tail of an amusing anecdote of domestic tyranny, Mr. Lock found himself confronted with a stern and acidulated request to sit down and keep quiet unless he wished to find himself in trouble.

Mr. Lock, a little nonplussed, glanced at the landlord to enlist his support. The landlord's gaze was apologetic but unhelpful. Mr. Lock looked around among his admirers, but their demeanour had become absent and constrained. Mr. Lock turned and regarded Mr. Tridge; Mr. Tridge was wrapped in his own sable

meditations. Pettishly, Mr. Lock flung down the pack of cards and sulked in a corner.

The landlady, having thus suppressed unwelcome propaganda, indulged in a tight-lipped smile of triumph, and began a rinsing of glasses. The hush deepened in the room, developing an atmosphere which brought Mr. Lock back to remembrance of his own insecure position in the world, and this was rendered still more discomfoting by what followed. For an amiable gentleman in a check coat, after twice clearing his throat, sought to re-establish light conversation, and asked the landlord whether there was yet any news of Ted.

"I had a letter from him," answered the landlord, coming out of a sort of thoughtful trance.

"Thanking you for all the kindnesses you've showed him, I lay," hazarded the checkered gentleman.

"No," returned the landlord, slowly. "'E only asked me to send on after him a pair of boots he'd left behind for mendin'."

"Fancy bothering about boots!" marvelled the other. "If *my* uncle died and left *me* a greengrocery shop——"

"And a nice little business, too, by all accounts," struck in an individual in a mackintosh.

"Ay, by *his* accounts," agreed the landlord. "If half he said was true, he won't have to do any more billiard-marking and odd-jobbing."

"Not while the money lasts, at any rate," said the man in the mackintosh. "Have you got anyone to take his place yet?"

The landlord, shaking his head, replied that he had not yet found a successor to Ted. Billiard-markers, he added, were scarce; people who desired employment as such were, as a rule, of one or two unsatisfactory classes, knowing either too little or too much.

Mr. Lock, assimilating this talk, lifted his eyes and peered as it were through the mists of his troubles. Here, obviously, was a vacancy going, and one which he was well qualified to fill, for his knowledge of the billiard table was neither elementary nor academic. A post as a marker and odd-job man at the "Royal William" appealed with equal force to his temperament and his talents. He could conceive of no form of employment more compatible with his desires. He almost groaned with mortification at the thought that he had allowed a *faux pas* to ruin his chances of so delectable a situation.

None the less, he determined to make sure that his opportunity was indeed irrevocably lost, and, to that end, when the landlady had temporarily quitted the apartment, he sidled up to the host of the "Royal William," and put a blunt inquiry to him.

"No chance whatever!" answered that worthy, regretfully shaking his head.

"You'll find me just the sort of chap you want," pleaded Mr. Lock.

"I've no doubt of it," accepted the landlord. "If it was only me what had the say, you could start tomorrow. I don't mind admitting straight to your face that I've took to you. You've got a civil, well-bred, amoosin' way with you. You'd get on like a house afire with the gents in the billiard-room. But——"

He shook his head again, sighed, and left the ellipsis to carry its own implication.

"The missis, eh?" said Mr. Lock, sadly.

"The missis," agreed the landlord.

"I suppose it 'ud be no good my trying to——"

"It 'ud be no good your trying anything!" interrupted the landlord, with conviction. "You can bet

she's got her knife into you, and you can bet nothing 'ud please her more than to twist it round like a corkscrew."

"Well, if I had a job here," contended Mr. Lock, "she'd have a lot more chances to twist it."

"Look here, I'd give you the job if I dared, but I dare not, and that's flat and honest," said the landlord, earnestly. "I daren't! See? That's how it is—I daren't! But here she comes; *you* can ask her about it, if you like."

The landlady, returning, bent a gaze of extreme displeasure on both Mr. Lock and her husband at finding them in commune. Mr. Lock, studying her countenance but the briefest while, turned away.

"I don't think it matters," he remarked.

Twenty minutes later the law's exigency emptied the "Royal William." The fresh air outside immediately had a restorative effect on Mr. Lock's spirits, giving back to him his normal buoyancy, so that he shed his worries like a mantle, and became again his gay and debonair self. Mr. Tridge, however, had come to a slow and obstinate truculency of mood, and avowed an open antagonism to all mankind.

And this divergency of outlook led to an unfortunate sequel, for, as they made their way back to the ship, which was only to continue as their home until the formalities of her sale had been completed, a black cat shot across their path, and Mr. Lock gleefully hailed its transit as a fortunate omen.

"Black cats are always lucky!" declared Mr. Lock, with elation.

"You're a liar!" churlishly declared Mr. Tridge.

"But they are!" insisted Mr. Lock.

"And I'll prove you're a liar!" cried Mr. Tridge,

irately, and forthwith struck Mr. Lock a greivous blow on the right eye.

"'Ere—steady!" shouted Mr. Lock.

"'Oo are you giving orders to?" bellowed Mr. Tridge, in high passion, and straightway smote Mr. Lock's left eye. "*Now* do you think black cats are always lucky?"

Mr. Lock, sitting down on a convenient doorstep, pressed his palms to his eyes, too engrossed in a species of private astronomy to reply to Mr. Tridge's question. Mr. Tridge, as one who had creditably sustained the truth of his assertions, cocked his head proudly and walked on. Mr. Lock, recovering after a while, followed him with marked caution, nor did he attempt reprisals. But this magnanimity was less because he knew that no one would be more surprised and apologetic on the morrow over the occurrence than Mr. Tridge, than because Mr. Tridge was altogether a larger and more powerful man than Mr. Lock.

Mr. Tridge, achieving the "Jane Gladys" in grim solitude, made his simple preparations for slumber, and lay down in his bunk with a sigh of weary content. He was fast asleep ere Mr. Lock ventured down to the fo'c'sle and wooed repose.

* * * * *

"'Strewth!" cried Mr. Tridge, in utter amazement, waking next morning.

Mr. Lock, who had just risen reluctantly to dress, turned an inquiring gaze on his shipmate.

"*Now* what is it?" he asked, petulantly.

"'Strewth!" exclaimed Mr. Tridge again, staring incredulously at the polychromatic setting of Mr. Lock's

eyes. "Peter, you *must* 'ave been a-going it last night!" he added, with intense conviction. "My word!"

"Me? No worse than you!" denied Mr. Lock.

"You must 'ave got to scrapping," surmised Mr. Tridge. "Did you win or lose?"

"What do you mean?" sourly questioned Mr. Lock. "I never scrapped with no one. I was—I was imitating canaries. Canaries don't scrap."

"'Ow did you get them two awful big black eyes, then?" wonderingly queried Mr. Tridge.

"Black eyes?" murmured Mr. Lock, perplexed. "Black eyes?"

"Black and red and green and yaller and blue and purple and horange," supplemented Mr. Tridge.

Mr. Lock crossed to the little mirror which hung on the shelf.

"So I 'ave!" he said, in blank surprise. "So I 'ave! I thought it was only the front part of my 'eadache!"

"Two real beauties!" declared Mr. Tridge. "You must 'ave got nasty over something, Peter. Why didn't you leave it to me to do your scrapping for you, like we always does? I shouldn't 'ave got 'it like that, you can bet!"

Mr. Lock, disturbed by the discovery, sat down on the edge of his bunk and shook his head, an action which caused him such discomfort that he lay down again.

"Can't you remember 'ow it 'appened, Peter?" asked Mr. Tridge, with genuine sympathy. "If you can remember the chap *I'll* step along and square up with 'im for you," he promised.

"I've been trying to remember," said Mr. Lock.

"I don't think it was a scrap, though. I believe it was a hexaplosion somewhere. I seem to remember a lot of sparks."

"Now I come to think of it, I seem to remember a fire or something," murmured Mr. Tridge, after mental gropings. "Or was it something to do with the 'arbour-master?"

The twain lay silent, striving to recollect the cause of the alteration to Mr. Lock's countenance, and they were still silently seeking to establish the origin of the disaster when Mr. Horace Dobb made his appearance in the fo'c'sle.

"Well, did you 'ave a good time last——" he began, and then broke off at sight of Mr. Lock's contused features. "Ah, I see you did!" he ended, sapiently.

"*Both* of 'em! That's what I can't understand," mused Mr. Tridge. "*Both* of 'em! 'E must 'ave been carrying something in his arms at the time, that's the only way I can hexplain it."

"'Ow did it 'appen, Peter?" asked Mr. Dobb, curiously.

"I can't remember yet whether it was a man or the hact of providence," confessed Mr. Lock. "I've got a headache and can't think clear."

"Pity," commented Mr. Dobb. "I've come down to see you on a little matter of business, but if you ain't equal to——"

"Talking business always clears my 'ead," said Mr. Lock, eagerly. "Have you found me a job, then?"

"Found you a road leading to a job," amended Mr. Dobb. "I can put you on it, but you must walk up it yourself. 'Ow do you like the hidea of going around with a milk-cart?"

"Not much," frankly returned Mr. Lock.

"It'll do you all right to go on with," urged Mr. Dobb. "You've got to find something to do, ain't you?"

"Peter Lock in a milk-cart!" marvelled Mr. Tridge. "A *milk*-cart! Don't that just show you what a rum world this is?"

"I shan't half get chaffed!" foretold Mr. Lock.

"You needn't keep it longer than it takes you to find a better job," pointed out Mr. Dobb. "Meanwhile, you'll be remaining in Shore'aven 'ere, and we shall all be in touch with each other, like what we've always planned on."

"But a milk-cart!" protested Mr. Lock. "Now, if it 'ad been a wine and spirit shop——"

"Think of all the pretty gals you'll be 'anding in cans to!" recommended Mr. Dobb. "Everything's got its bright side."

"Come to think of it, it ain't such a bad job," agreed Mr. Lock, brightening. "When do I start?"

"You've got to get the job first," Mr. Dobb reminded him. "You'll 'ave to play up for it very careful and polite and artful, and that's why I thought it was a better chance for you than for Joe, there. There's a old geezer, a Mrs. Golightly, what you'll 'ave to be hextra special hattentive to. 'Er 'usband runs a grocery shop, and she's going to start the dairy business as a side-line in a week or two. You play your cards right, and the job is yours for the asking. You see, you're going to do the old geezer a favour before she knows what you're after, and that's always a big 'elp."

Mr. Dobb paused and pointed impressively at Mr. Lock.

"You're one of the finest amytoor animal doctors in England," he told him.

"Ho, am I?" said Mr. Lock, casually. "First I've heard of it."

"Same 'ere till a hour ago," returned Mr. Dobb. "Only I 'appened to be talking with 'er, and one thing led to another, and then I see you just 'ad to be good at animal doctoring."

"Why?" asked Mr. Lock.

"Why, because you're going to cure 'er pet cat of fits for 'er."

"Am I?" remarked Mr. Lock. "'Ow do I do that?"

"That's for you to decide," answered Mr. Dobb, easily. "It'll be the beginning of your job in the milk line. It's lucky she's got a pet cat with fits, ain't it? It's a black cat, too. Black cats," he stated, dogmatically, "are always lucky."

At mention of these words a swift tremor coursed through Mr. Lock's frame, and he sat up in his bunk, staring hard at Mr. Tridge, and gradually raising a rigid forearm to point accusingly at him. A similar start of surprise pulsed through Mr. Tridge, and after a long, horrified stare at Mr. Lock's damaged optics, he suddenly turned on his mattress and guiltily drew his blankets over his head. Mr. Dobb, viewing this by-play in surprise, offered the theory that his friends were rehearsing for employment as kinema actors.

"I know who done it now!" cried Mr. Lock, bitterly. "And so does he! It was you talking about black cats, 'Orace, what done it!"

"I done what by talking about black cats?" demanded the mystified Mr. Dobb.

Mr. Lock irately made the situation clear to Mr. Dobb, who, as soon as he had regained composure, assumed the rôle of peacemaker so successfully that ere

long Mr. Tridge was encouraged to emerge again from beneath his blankets and promise all manner of recompense to Mr. Lock at some future date when liberality should be more convenient. This understanding reached, Mr. Dobb returned to the object of his call.

"Soon as ever Mrs. Golightly told me about 'er cat 'aving fits," said Mr. Dobb, "I thought at once of you, Peter. Remember that cat you cured of hiccups at Teignmouth?"

"I *said* it was cured," shamelessly corrected Mr. Lock. "I never went back to see once I'd got the money for it."

"Anyway, you can *start* to cure this old geezer's cat for 'er, can't you? You've got till next Saturday aboard this old boat, 'aven't you? Well, suppose you get the cat and bring it 'ere, and keep it with you till then?"

"I see," said Mr. Lock, readily. "Then I can take it back to 'er and say I'm sorry, but I'm leaving the town to find work elsewhere; and what a pity it is, seeing that the cat's so much better already under my treatment."

"That's the hidea, Peter!" concurred Mr. Dobb. "The old gal is regularly wrapped up in that cat. She couldn't make more fuss of it if she tried. And 'er 'usband is very fond of it, too. It's more like a nursery than anything else when that cat comes into the room, and to 'ear 'em both sit round hencouraging it to eat its meals! It's like a baby spending a day with its grandparents!"

"They'll be very grateful if I can cure it of fits," said Mr. Lock, thoughtfully; "and if I 'aven't had time enough to do it——"

"They'll pretty well offer you that job in the milk

line without being asked, simply to keep you near your patient," prophesied Mr. Dobb. "You dress yourself now and come along with me, and you'll see what a simple, easy affair it is to a smart chap like you."

"See?" said Mr. Lock severely to Mr. Tridge. "Black cats *are* always lucky, after all!"

Half an hour later Mr. Lock, furnished with a very circumstantial story about a carriage accident to account for the spectacular state of his features, had the felicity of being introduced to Mrs. Golightly and her husband by Mr. Horace Dobb. The conventions of etiquette thus fulfilled, Mr. Dobb came straight to the point of the business in hand.

"Peter's going to do you a favour and cure that 'ere cat of yours, ain't you, Peter?" he observed.

"All being well, yes," said Mr. Lock, modestly.

"If *you* can't cure it, no one can!" gushed Mr. Dobb. "You're a wonder at curing animals, Peter, and you knows that's true. Remember that dog you cured for the dook?"

"Which one?" asked Mr. Lock, carelessly.

"The—the blood'ound," answered Mr. Dobb.

"I meant, which dook?" said Mr. Lock.

"The—the one what give you the gold watch and chain," replied Mr. Dobb. "Show 'em to Mrs. Golightly, Peter; she'd like to see 'em."

Mr. Lock's hand made a movement towards his waistcoat, and then checked itself.

"I forgot," he said, with a smile. "I left it at the bank in London, along with all them other testimonials and medals I've got for animal doctoring. A chap what lives a travelling, seafaring life," he explained to the lady, "needs to be careful of his property."

"Yes, indeed," she assented. "But I wonder you don't give up the sea and settle down ashore."

"So 'e means to one day," struck in Mr. Dobb. "'E's going to give up seafaring and animal-curing, ain't you, Peter, and settle down quiet and peaceful ashore?"

"In a nice, quiet, respectable job, when I find one to suit me," said Mr. Lock.

"I wonder if you'd——" began the lady, and then paused. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind seeing poor Jonathan now?"

Mr. Lock professing readiness to interview his prospective patient, both Mr. and Mrs. Golightly bustled from the room, making loud and endearing appeal to the stricken feline to come and be shown to the kind gentleman. Left alone, Mr. Lock and Mr. Dobb winked very pleasantly at each other.

"It's as good as yours, that job is, Peter," said Mr. Dobb. "She nearly offered it to you just now of 'er own accord. Did you 'ear 'er? You've made a 'it there, Peter, my boy! Keep it up!"

Mrs. Golightly, returning presently with an undistinguished-looking black cat in her arms, postponed consideration of its condition while she delivered an affectionate address on the manifold virtues of the animal. Mr. Lock, after gravely listening to the tale of so much excellence, plainly enhanced his favour with the good dame by remarking that the cat reminded him very much of a similar animal, the property of a countess, which he had cured of sunstroke in two days. He added that the countess's gratitude was most touching and substantial.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mrs. Golightly. "I do 'ope you ain't going to charge me very, very much for curing Jonathan! I ain't a countess, not by no means."

"I shouldn't dream of charging you anything, ma'am," replied Mr. Lock. "I've already took a great fancy to this cat, for one thing, and for another, I believe we all ought to do folks good turns whenever we get the chance."

He now bent professionally over the cat, felt all the joints in its tail in a highly technical manner, and then gravely studied its eyes. Mr. and Mrs. Golightly, watching him, awaited his verdict in breathless suspense.

"He can and shall be cured," said Mr. Lock. "If," he added, "I can do it in the time."

Within the hour the afflicted animal had taken up temporary residence on board the "Jane Gladys." Sundry dainties which had, at Mr. Lock's instruction, been secured for the patient's diet served as an excellent dinner that day for two impecunious mariners. An indignant black cat found that "rest and quiet" were terms interpreted on the "Jane Gladys" by enforced seclusion in a sea-chest while the human occupants of the fo'c'sle enjoyed a protracted siesta after their meal.

Indeed, it was only when a late tea had restored full energy to Mr. Lock that he recollected the needs of his patient. A foray in the galley was rewarded with the discovery of a red herring in a dark corner, and, armed with this booty, Mr. Lock prepared to inaugurate an altered course of dietetics for his patient.

Cautiously he raised the lid of the chest, but not cautiously enough; for the black cat, wearied of solitary confinement, slipped through the opening, and, easily dodging the convulsive clutch of Mr. Lock and the outstretched hands of the interested Mr. Tridge, it streaked out of the fo'c'sle and up on to the deck. Mr. Lock's ill-timed recriminations of Mr. Tridge's clumsiness caused a regrettable delay in pursuit, and

when at last the two sailormen had reached the deck, the black cat had completely vanished in the darkness.

Frenzied and exhaustive search was made, only to be abandoned in the end when sundry sportive souls on the wharf took to jocund mimicry of the enticing calls made by Mr. Lock and his companion. Loudly did Mr. Lock bewail so inauspicious and swift a termination to his high hopes of the conduct of a milk-cart.

And moodily did he make his way to Fore Street, there to seek Mr. Dobb in his home, and tell him of this underhand trick which the cat had played upon one who had desired to deal benevolently by it.

"Well, it's no good crying over spilt milk-carts," pronounced Mr. Dobb, when his visitor began to sorrow over the wreck of his ambitions. "You've got to be up and doing—that's all. As long as that cat don't turn up at its old 'ome, you've always got a chance of finding it again somewhere."

"Suppose we don't find it, though?" asked Mr. Lock.

"Things might be worse even then," said Mr. Dobb. "After all," he hinted, "one black cat is very like another. And they can't talk and give things away, can they?"

"No," agreed Mr. Lock, immensely relieved. "And, besides, a cat that's been taken away to be cured of fits ain't hardly likely to look quite the same when it comes back again, is it?"

A nod of perfect understanding passed between these two keen tacticians, and Mr. Dobb promised that he would take care to call frequently at the residence of the Golightlys to ascertain whether Jonathan was controlled by homing instincts sufficiently serviceable to lead him back to his mistress. In that deplorable event, it was decided that action must depend upon the in-

spiration of the moment. In the meanwhile, Mr. Lock expressed his firm intention of securing another black cat from somewhere, and making its escape a matter of impossibility this time.

And thus it was that Mr. Lock, going wistfully about the environs of the harbour at a late hour that night at last managed to track down and capture an animal of the species and colour that he desired. He conveyed his protesting prisoner swiftly aboard the "Jane Gladys," and there he extemporized for it a prison system from which not even a cat provided with a burglar's kit and the ability to use it could have escaped.

For three days did Mr. Lock keep close watch and ward over his captive. Mr. Dobb, on reconnoitring duty, was able to tell him that the vanished Jonathan had not yet put in an appearance at his home, and that the Golightlys were looking forward with the liveliest emotions of thankfulness to the moment which should restore to them their pet cured of its ailment by Mr. Lock's veterinary skill.

"But s'pose," put forward Mr. Tridge, one afternoon, in a pessimistic mood—"s'pose that that there first cat turns up at 'is old 'ome one day after you've got your other cat settled there. It'll be awkward, won't it?"

"Not a bit of it," vaunted Mr. Lock. "I shall be working at the place by then, so it's a 'undred to one that I shall catch sight of it first, and then there won't be no fatted calf killed for the returned prodigal, you can bet. I shall just collar it and shove it in a sack and come down and have a look to see how the old harbour is getting on."

"Ah, but s'pose you ain't on the spot?" persisted Mr. Tridge. "What 'appens then?"

"Why, I shall swear it can't be their beloved Jona-

than, because 'e'd never 'ave left my sight while I 'ad 'im 'ere, so the new-comer must be a stray. Oh, I'll manage them all right, don't you fret!"

Next morning Mr. Lock arrayed himself in his best, shaved himself to a miracle of velvet smoothness, and brushed his hair with extraordinary interest, for he purposed now to restore the pseudo-Jonathan to its expectant master and mistress, and to bring diplomacy to bear upon the securing of the coveted post of chaperone to a milk-cart.

"Pity my eyes don't lose a bit of their colour," he observed, studying his reflection in the glass. "They look just as black as they did when we first 'ad that little dispute, Joe."

"They look as if you might only 'ave got them last night," agreed Mr. Tridge. "'Pon my soul, they makes me feel almost like a bad character myself, just to be talking to 'em."

Mr. Lock, recognizing the futility of wishes, dropped the subject and took up the imprisoned cat. Slipping it into a hamper, he set off up town with it, and speedily came to the home of the Golightlys.

"'Ere's you cat, ma'am," he said to that lady, handing the animal over to her.

"My, that's never our Jonathan!" cried the lady.

"Don't he look well?" asked Mr. Lock, with enthusiasm. "I reckon he's more than half cured by now."

"But—but this is ever so much bigger than our dear old Jonathan," objected the lady. "Bigger and—and stouter."

"That's the treatment and diet I give 'im," explained Mr. Lock. "It always 'as that effect on my patients. It puts on weight and improves their coat wonderful. Ah, I never grudged him nothing! The best of every-

thing he's had, even though I've 'ad to go short myself sometimes."

"Well, he certainly is wonderfully improved," said the lady, gratefully. "I shouldn't 'ardly have ever known 'im. And in that short time, too! 'Owever did you do it, young man?"

"Trade secret," said Mr. Lock, promptly.

"He—he don't seem to take much notice of me," said the lady, a little disappointedly. "Before he went away, when I used to speak to him, 'e'd look back at me and mew like a Christian; but now 'e don't even seem to like me 'olding 'im."

"You're a bit strange to 'im at present, that's all," Mr. Lock assured her. "'E'll be loving and affectionate to you again very soon. And, as for 'is fits—well, I can take my solemn gospel oath that he ain't even had a attempt at one all the time 'e's been in my charge."

"How splendid!" cried Mrs. Golightly. "I'm sure he looks heaps better. You must 'ave took good care of 'im."

"I did," Mr. Lock asserted. "Never let him out of my sight for a single moment. Brushed and combed him three times a day, fed him on tid-bits, give him his physic regular with an oyster after it to take the taste of it out of his mouth, and used to sit by 'is side at night till he fell off to sleep."

"You have been good to him!" cried the lady, moved by such devotion. "I wish I could make it right with you, some'ow!"

"I done it because I took a fancy to the cat," said Mr. Lock, "and I don't want no reward. I shall miss the old chap, though," he went on, lowering his voice. "I'm sorry to part with him, for his sake as well as my own. If he could only have had a bit longer under

my care, he'd 'ave been cured for good and all of them fits. As it is, there's always the chance that they may come on after a while, and I'll be far away by then."

"But—but can't you stop here in Shorehaven?"

"No, mum. I've got my living to earn, and there ain't a job going here that would suit me. I want to give up the sea. I used to be a milkman afore I was a sailor, and naturally I'd like to take on the job of milkman again, only there ain't no vacancies in this 'ere town."

"That's just where you're wrong!" cried the lady, in high good humour. "I'm starting a dairy business here next week, and I'm looking out for a man to take the milk-round!"

"Well, well," breathed Mr. Lock, "if ever there was a coincidence——"

He ceased abruptly, for sometimes Coincidence has two long arms and uses both simultaneously. Mr. Lock, gazing spellbound at the doorway, saw Mr. Golightly framed in it, and clasped in Mr. Golightly's embrace was a black cat.

"Jonathan!" stated Mr. Golightly, simply.

"What?" screamed the lady.

"Just found him outside the back door, mewling enough to break his heart," said her husband. "Look at him! Covered in mud, half starved——"

"That ain't your cat!" denied Mr. Lock. "'E's only a mangy old stray you've got 'old of. There's your Jonathan in the fire-place there. Cured and improved out of all recognition."

Mrs. Golightly picked up both cats and set them side by side.

"Jonathan!" she called, and the cat that Mr. Lock had brought foolishly strove to get up the chimney,

while the other animal, uttering a half-plaintive, half-delighted mew, tottered forward to lick the lady's hand.

"'Never let him out of my sight'!" cried Mrs. Golightly. "'Washed and brushed him every day! Fed him on all the best! Sat by 'im till 'e went off——'! 'Ere!" she ended, fiercely. "You go off—now—this minute! Else——"

Mr. Lock, ever one to recognize defeat, turned to take his departure. Mrs. Golightly, retrieving the alien cat from the chimney, thrust it into the hamper.

"'Ere, take your rubbish with you!" she ordered; and, thus encumbered, Mr. Lock took his departure.

"Blest if I am so sure that black cats are always lucky!" he murmured, dazedly.

At the corner of the road he ran into Mr. Horace Dobb. Mr. Dobb was in a state of considerable excitement.

"You 'aven't left that cat at the Golightlys' yet, then?" he observed, with relief. And, taking Mr. Lock by the arm, eagerly dragged him forward. "Well, then, the Golightlys 'ave lost their second chance of a cat, that's all! 'Ere, come on in 'ere!" he directed, turning into the "Royal William."

The aggressive landlady and the cheerful little landlord were behind the counter. At Mr. Dobb's entry, they both turned expectantly towards him, and the severity of the landlady perceptively waned.

"'Ere's the young fellow I spoke about just now!" cried Mr. Dobb. "Look at the state of 'is eyes, and you can see I was telling the truth!"

"And 'as 'e got it there in the basket?" asked the landlord, eagerly.

"'E 'as!" declared Mr. Dobb, and, unfastening the lid of the hamper, he allowed its occupant to escape.

"That's 'im!" cried the landlord, raptly.

"That's our dear, dear little lost one!" shrilled the lady, in happy agitation.

"Well, you're a trump!" declared the landlord, turning to Mr. Lock. "This gent 'ere 'as been telling us all about it!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Lock, lamely.

"Yes, indeed," answered the landlord. "We 'appened to mention to 'im that our cat was missing, and 'e told us 'ow 'e knew of a cat what 'ad been saved from torture by a sailorman. There was a great big 'ulking chap and another chap 'ad got 'old of our cat," narrated the landlord, "and you see 'em ill-treating it, and you interfered, and they knocked you about cruel, and give you two terrible black eyes——"

"And they are terrible, too!" said the landlady, with a sympathetic shudder. "You must 'ave suffered, young man."

"I did, ma'am. I did!"

"But you saved our pet!" cried the landlord. "You see, that gent there's been telling us all about it! It come out quite by accident, to—we was talking about billiard-marking; that was what led up to it, some'ow. Anyway, you saved our cat, and me and my missis are very grateful to you for it. And you've been keeping it till you felt less knocked about, and then you were going to try and find its home! Well, you're saved that trouble, anyway!"

"From what I saw of you the other night," confessed the landlady, "I should never have thought you could have behaved so noble."

Husband and wife now retired apart for a brief whispered colloquy. Within one minute of its conclusion, Mr. Lock had been offered and had accepted the

vacant post of billiard-marker and odd-job man to the "Royal William". . . .

Late that same night, Mr. Tridge ceased undressing and looked across at Mr. Lock.

"You're right, Peter!" he admitted. "They *are!*"



EPISODE V

A MATTER OF ADVERTISEMENT

“JOE,” said Mr. Horace Dobb, coming out of a long meditative silence, “’ave you ever ’ad words with a prize-fighter?”

“Once,” admitted Mr. Joseph Tridge. “And only once! Never no more for *me!*” he ended, very definitely.

“What ’appened?”

“Why, I *started* to ’ave words with ’im,” returned Mr. Tridge.

“Well?” prompted Mr. Dobb.

“That’s all,” stated Mr. Tridge, simply.

“Did ’e ’it you back?”

“Not ’alf, ’e didn’t!”

“And what did you do?”

“Went ’ome in a cab,” succinctly supplied Mr. Tridge.

Again silence prevailed in Mr. Dobb’s snug back parlour. Mr. Tridge, sitting respectfully upright in his seat, once more fixed a forlorn and rather anxious gaze on his host. The late cook to the “Jane Gladys,” untroubled by his old shipmate’s appealing visage, settled down more comfortably in his arm-chair and puffed in cosy rumination at the stump of a cigar. A clock, acquired by Mr. Dobb in the course of business, stood on the mantelshelf. From the facts that it had just struck eleven and that its dial registered a quarter to two, anyone thoroughly familiar with its idiosyncrasies

would have deduced that the correct hour of the evening was something between six and seven.

Mr. Dobb, presently producing a penknife, impaled his cigar-stump on the point of its blade and thus pursued his smoke to its exceedingly bitter end. Still he forbore from speech, and at last Mr. Tridge, with a deep sigh of regret, rose to his feet.

"Well, I may as well be going now," he asserted, mournfully. "Good-night, 'Orace."

He crossed to the door, and there he halted.

"And if I was you," he announced, bitterly, "I should *swallow* the rest of that there seegar! You won't lose none of it, then. And, besides, it can't taste worse than it smells!"

Mr. Dobb, in no wise irritated by this little ebullience of feeling, smiled up pleasantly at his visitor.

"What's your 'urry?" asked Horace. "Come and sit down again! We 'aven't finished 'alf our chat yet."

With marked readiness Mr. Tridge returned to his chair, contritely murmuring an apology for his impoliteness.

"That's all right," said Horace, handsomely. "Seegars is never quite right when other chaps is smoking 'em. I've noticed that myself. Now, let me see, what were we talking about?"

"About me starting in a little 'air-dressing business of me own," replied Mr. Tridge, leaning forward eagerly.

"No, *we* wasn't talking about that," corrected Mr. Dobb. "*You* was."

"I've figgered it all out," continued Mr. Tridge, undeterred, "and for twenty quid I could get going. And I'd pay you your money back in instalments, and pay you interest at the rate of——"

"I shan't take no hinterest from you, Joe," observed Mr. Dobb, with a kindly smile, "and I shan't take no hinstalments neither. In fact, I shan't want no money back from you at all!"

"Well, if ever there was a true pal——" gabbled Mr. Tridge, with the liveliest gratitude. "I always knew it! If ever there was a real friend in need——"

"I shan't want no money back from you at all, Joe," interrupted Mr. Dobb, coldly, "because I shan't let you 'ave none to begin with. I shouldn't dream of it!"

"Well, of all the mean, 'ard-'earted, un'elpful, false friends——" exclaimed Mr. Tridge, in high vexation.

"You go into the shop there, Joe," directed Mr. Dobb, "and you'll see my motter 'ung up large on the wall. 'Strictly Business!'—that's my guiding prin-cerple, and you knows it! Business is business, and friendship is friendship, and when you tries to mix 'em you gets a little of each and not enough of both."

"But lending me twenty quid to start on my own with would be business," contended Mr. Tridge. "I'd pay you back."

"I dare say you would," retorted Mr. Dobb, sceptically. "If you could. But s'pose the speckylation turned out a failure, eh? No, Joe, I ain't going to risk my money, and there's a end to it. Or, rather, there *won't* be a end of it. And now let's change the subject and talk about something hinteresting."

"But—but—but," spluttered Mr. Tridge, wrathfully, "it was *you* what made me lose all my time learning 'air-dressing! Cut and cut old Sam Clark's 'air, I did, till it looked as if 'is 'ead 'ad been varnished! Practised clean shaving on Peter Lock till 'is chin was so sore 'e 'ad to grow a beard! It was you that was going

to get me settled as a 'air-dresser, you remember?" he sneered.

"Yes, I remember," confessed Mr. Dobb, flushing a little at the recollection. "Oh, well, mistakes *will* 'appen," he put forward, with an effort to be casual.

"Mistakes *did* 'appen," amended Mr. Tridge. "And 'ere am I with the old 'Jane Gladys' sold from under me, and me the only one of 'er crew out of a job. There's Peter Lock in a snug billet, there's old Sam a-ferrying fit to bust 'isself all day, there's you married to a widow and 'er second-'and shop, and only me left out in the cold!"

"Well, and I want to see you settled," declared Mr. Dobb. "When the four of us are well spaced about Shore'aven, we'll be able to work some fine deals, bigger than ever we dreamed of on the old 'Jane Gladys.' "

"Then why don't you 'elp me to settle?" demanded Mr. Tridge, not unreasonably.

"'Eaven 'elps them what 'elps themselves, don't forget, Joe," was Mr. Dobb's pious reply.

Impatiently Mr. Tridge rose again to his feet and stalked to the door. Again Mr. Dobb invited him to return to his seat and tarry longer.

"I don't say as I won't 'elp you to 'elp yourself, Joe," observed Mr. Dobb. "In fact, if you only wouldn't be so 'asty, and would listen to what I 'ave to say, you might feel sorry for all the things you're trying to think of to say about me as you stands there."

Mr. Tridge, with a demeanor nicely balanced between resentment and humility, once more sat down.

"I ain't forgot 'ow you're situated, Joe," said Mr. Dobb, gently. "I've bore you in mind constant. And I've been waiting for you to come and see me these last few days. I got a little matter to put before you,

Joe, what ought to be good for twenty quid at least, if you cares to tackle it."

"Why didn't you mention it before?" asked Mr. Tridge, suspiciously.

"Well, I wasn't quite sure 'ow you'd take it," returned Mr. Dobb. "You see, there—there's a certain amount of disgrace about it."

"If it brings in twenty quid," said Mr. Tridge, frankly, "I shan't think it disgraceful, whatever it is."

"And—and there's a certain amount of suffering," added Mr. Dobb, watching his friend narrowly.

"Once I get me fingers on the twenty quid, I shall soon stop suffering," asserted Mr. Tridge, cheerfully.

"Well, you remember me asking you just now if you'd ever 'ad a quarrel with a prize-fighter?"

"Yes, I remember. But what's that to—— 'Ere, 'strewth! 'Orace!" cried Mr. Tridge, in alarm. "I twig your game now! You're wanting me to match against a prize-fighter! No, thanks!" he said, with the utmost firmness. "Once bit, twice shy!"

"Wait a bit!" begged Mr. Dobb. "You 'aven't 'eard what I've got to say!"

"And don't want to, either! Not if there's a prize fight at the end of it! Not for fifty blessed quid! I've 'ad some! No, thank you, 'Orace. I ain't fighting no prize-fighters on the thin chance of getting a purse of twenty quid—if I win. Not *me*, 'Orace!"

"But you won't 'ark to what I say!" complained Mr. Dobb.

"No, I won't!" asseverated Mr. Tridge. "While I've got the senses I was born with, I'll 'ave nothing to do with prize-fighters, and that's flat!"

"You mean it?" asked Horace. "That's your last word?"

"I do!" returned Mr. Tridge, in complete determination. "It are!"

Mr. Dobb shook his head a little perplexedly, and was clearly on the point of saying something further, when he changed his mind and frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling for some while. Mr. Tridge, with arms doggedly folded, stared at him in resolute opposition.

"As a matter of fact, Joe," said Mr. Dobb, at last, "you're on quite the wrong tack. Prize-fighters ain't got nothing to do with it."

"Then what did you drag 'em in for?" countered Mr. Tridge.

"I only wanted to see if you knew what kind of chaps prize-fighters was like to get into trouble with."

"Well, and what did you want to know that for?" queried Mr. Tridge, vigilantly.

"So as to see whether you'd realize, by comparison, what a very different sort of job this is I'm offering you."

"'Ave it your own way," said Mr. Tridge, guardedly. "You go on and say all you've got to say, and I'll listen. That's all I'll promise."

Thus encouraged, Mr. Dobb began to entertain his old shipmate with a character sketch of a certain Mr. Jevvings, Christian name either Haugustas or Hadolphus.

But whatever uncertainty Mr. Dobb might have as to Mr. Jevvings' correct baptismal name, he had none as to Mr. Jevvings' character. Mr. Jevvings, testified Horace, was a sport, a nut, a scorcher, a lad of the village, and a real caution. Also, it appeared, he was a knockout, a go-er, and, likewise, a cough-drop. Alternatively, he was also the limit. Mr. Tridge, nodding his head sapiently over these titles to fame, epitomized

them all in the surmise that Mr. Jevvings must be a lively sort of card, and this description of the young gentleman gained Mr. Dobb's cordial agreement.

Blessed with a gay disposition, an abundance of cash, and a widespread reputation for boisterous exploits, one might have expected that Mr. Jevvings found life replete with satisfaction. But, no! said Mr. Dobb. Oh, dear, no! There was something which inexorably qualified Mr. Jevvings' enjoyment of existence. As Mr. Dobb phrased it, there was always a wasp in Mr. Jevvings' jam.

It seemed that that young gentleman, although of average build, sadly lacked physical prowess, so much so that, in some of his roystering adventures, antagonists had thought nothing of playfully ruffling his hair prior to throwing him through a window. Courage in plenty had Mr. Jevvings, else would he long ago have retired into obscurity, but he had no skill at arms, and very frequently this precipitated an anticlimax in his spirited doings, so that they ended unheroically for him. Too often, in fact, had this happened of late, and consequently Mr. Jevvings' reputation as a dashing blade was beginning to be clouded by a certain ribald contempt for his activities.

These things did Mr. Dobb explain to Mr. Tridge, in the terms most easily understood of his old shipmate. Arrived at this point, he leaned impressively forward and tapped Mr. Tridge on the knee.

"And now," stated Mr. Dobb, "'e's got a idea for making people like 'im more serious. He's going to 'ave a fight with some one and knock 'im clean out."

"But from what you've been telling me," objected Mr. Tridge, "'e couldn't knock a fly off the wall."

Mr. Dobb, sitting erect, favoured his friend with a vast lingering wink. Then he continued his exposition.

It appeared that Mr. Jevvings was a close acquaintance of Mr. Dobb's. Recently he had come unostentatiously to Mr. Dobb and had confessed to him the bitterness that was vexing his soul. It was, in fact, Mr. Dobb who had suggested a semi-public demonstration of his fistic powers which should compel admiration and respect. With this proposition Mr. Jevvings had fallen in so enthusiastically that he had left all arrangements, financial and otherwise, to be consummated by Mr. Dobb.

"So that's where *you* comes in," explained Mr. Dobb.

"I see," said Mr. Tridge, acutely. "I says something to 'im, 'e knocks me down, and I get twenty quid for it?"

"Oh, not so helementary as that, Joe!" replied Mr. Dobb, pained at such lack of artistic imagination. "It's got to be worked up to, neat and natural. And there's got to be time for people to talk about it, before it comes off, as well as after. It'll be a swell thing, fought out reg'lar in a boxing-ring, with seconds and all."

"And when 'e's knocked me about long enough," supposed Mr. Tridge, "down I goes, and takes the count-out?"

Roughly, agreed Mr. Dobb, that was about the size of it. But the preliminaries, he pointed out, would need careful handling to create sufficient stir to satisfy Mr. Jevvings, and also Mr. Tridge would be required to take enough punishment to make the affair look convincing ere he succumbed to Mr. Jevvings' knock-out blow. This, he explained, was the voluntary humiliation and suffering to which he had alluded earlier in the evening.

“Well, if ’e’s ’alf the rabbit you make ’im out to be, ’e can’t ’urt me much,” complacently theorized Mr. Tridge; “and, as for ’umiliation, I’ve been ’umiliated for nothing at all in police-courts before now, so I certainly don’t mind being ’umiliated for money.”

Mr. Dobb, warmly eulogizing Mr. Tridge’s philosophy, assured him that the money was safe enough. Once arrangements were in trim for the combat, he—Mr. Dobb—would hold himself personally responsible for its payment.

“And we’ll set the ball rolling this very night,” said Mr. Dobb, with a computative glance at the clock. “Jevvings’ll be up in the ‘Rose and Crown,’ along of some of ’is pals. You must manage to get into a haltercation with ’im straightway, and leave the rest to me and one or two others what are in the know. We’ll see that a boxing match is fixed up between you, and you can leave all the arrangements to us.”

To all this Mr. Tridge assented with perfect readiness. Mr. Dobb then added a few simple instructions, and, after a single rehearsal, pronounced Mr. Tridge perfect in his rôle. Summoning his wife from some remote apartment, Mr. Dobb affably slipped his arm through Mr. Tridge’s, and the pair set off for the “Rose and Crown.”

“That’s ’im—that’s Jevvings!” whispered Horace, as they entered the crowded saloon bar. “That quiet-looking young feller in the check suit, with the pink tie, sitting reading the noospaper with patent leather boots on.”

Mr. Tridge, with a nod of comprehension, began to cross the floor. He was in the act of passing the young man when he stumbled clumsily, and, to preserve his

balance, first knocked off the young man's hat and next ripped the newspaper from his grasp.

"Why can't you keep your great feet out of the way?" bellowed Mr. Tridge, furiously. "You ought to sit with 'em sticking out of the window, the size they are! You don't want patent leather on 'em—you wants red lamps on 'em and a watchman's box by the side of 'em! Of all the awkward——"

Mr. Jevvings, while preserving his calm under this onslaught, rose from his seat with a singularly sinister expression. Then, catching the expressive face of Mr. Dobb, he sat down again, a little helplessly. An awed hush had fallen on the room; frequenters of the apartment carefully setting down their glasses stared incredulously at the truculent Mr. Tridge.

"I must ask you to apologize!" said the aggrieved Mr. Jevvings, in a somewhat fluty voice.

"You ask away!" returned Mr. Tridge, with jocund ferocity. "You keep on till you're as black in the face as your blessed great boots! Apologize to a splay-footed whipper-snapper like you? Why, I'd sooner give you a smack in the eye! Far sooner! And so I would, too, for two pins!"

A sort of stifling surprise agitated the room and those gentlemen who were in the forefront of the quarrel cautiously stood back, while those on the outer rim of the altercation craned eagerly forward.

"If you don't apologize," said Mr. Jevvings, firmly, "I shall thrash you!"

"Ho, yus, *hin-deed!*" derided Mr. Tridge. "Come on, then!" he invited, and posed himself combatantly.

Audible was the rustle of amazement that coursed through the spectators. Mr. Jevvings, rising, began to turn back his coat-cuffs. There was a tense hush.

And then, as the folds of a curtain may come sweeping down to suspend the action of a play, so did Mr. Horace Dobb and the landlord of the "Rose and Crown" effectively intervene at this juncture.

With a deft certainty of grasp, Mr. Dobb and the landlord took command of affairs. Smoothly and swiftly did they regularize the situation. Building from the foundation that a mere rough-and-ready scrap was unthinkable in the chaste altitudes of the "Rose and Crown's" saloon bar, a scaffolding of suggestions was run up with a celerity which suggested previous consultations, and presently, within this scaffolding, the outlines took shape of a pugilistic encounter of considerable ceremony, involving a ring, judge, seconds, and all the other paraphernalia of the craft.

Mr. Tridge, listening interestedly, heard the arrangements brought to a conclusion with the fixing of a date at that day week for the encounter. Mr. Jevvings having signified his entire willingness to accept the terms of the contest, Mr. Tridge gave his own acquiescence to the programme, adding rather gratuitously that, on the Sunday afternoon following the contest he would call round at the hospital with a bunch of grapes for Mr. Jevvings. Alternately he proposed to send a handsome wreath of white flowers.

"Right you are, then—that's all settled!" said Mr. Dobb, exchanging a glance of relief with the landlord. "And now, Joe, I think we'd better leave 'ere. Hettiquette, you know, hettiquette! 'E was 'ere first, and it's 'is privilege to remain."

He seemed in some anxiety to remove Mr. Tridge from the scene, and, taking him by the arm, drew him to the door. Here he led the way out into the street. Mr. Tridge, with a farewell remark to the effect that

his opponent would be well advised to catch measles before the week was out, was about to follow Mr. Dobb, when a stout gentleman solemnly stepped forward to pat his shoulder with approval.

"I admire your pluck," stated the stout gentleman.

"Huh!" exclaimed Mr. Tridge, glancing scornfully at Mr. Jevvings. "It don't need much pluck!"

"But you know who he is, don't you?" asked the other, wonderingly.

"Don't know and don't care!" was Mr. Tridge's reckless reply. "I shall expect to learn 'oo 'e is at the inquest, anyway."

"You don't know who he is?" gasped the stout gentleman, and then he patted Mr. Tridge's shoulder again, but this time it was commiseratingly. "Why, that's Ted Burch—you know, *the* Ted Burch! 'Toff' Burch, the Swindon Slogger!"

"What?" squealed Mr. Tridge. "A—a—a prize-fighter?"

"Middleweight champion of——"

"But—but I thought 'is name was Jevvings?"

"So it is, *pro tem.*," returned his informant. "He's stopping here *nem. con.*, doing a little quiet training for a match he's got next month against Billy Traske, of Birmingham, and——"

Mr. Tridge did not await further instruction concerning Mr. Edward Burch. He had passed through the door with extreme celerity and was already cantering passionately in pursuit of Mr. Horace Dobb.

Speedily catching up with his quarry, Mr. Tridge seized him and charged him with the blackest of treachery towards an unsuspecting friend. Mr. Dobb, but slightly stirred by the accusation, obliquely admitted

its truth by regretting that Mr. Tridge should so soon have learnt the truth about Mr. Burch.

“But—but what did you want to play me a trick like that *for?*” roared Mr. Tridge.

“Why, because you’d never else ’ave dared to do what you did,” calmly replied Mr. Dobb. “You said yourself you’d ’ave nothing whatever to do with prize-fighters. That’s why I ’ad to take all the trouble to make up all that yarn I told you about Jevvings being a wild young chap of this town. Otherwise I’d never have brought you up to the scratch.”

“Well, you don’t suppose I’m going any further with it, do you?” demanded Mr. Tridge. “No fear!”

“Oh, but you can’t back out now, Joe!” argued Mr. Dobb. “It ’ud look so silly and cowardly if you backed out now.”

“I don’t care ’ow it *looks* if I back out! I know ’ow it will *feel* if I *don’t* back out, anyway! I can’t think what possessed you to play such a silly trick on me! Getting me to agree to stand up to a professional boxer under false pretences! Why, I’ve half a mind——”

Mr. Dobb, beseeching Mr. Tridge to maintain calm, now promised to impart the exact truth of the matter, prefacing his statement with a catalogue of grisly things which he said he hoped would happen to him if he diverged from complete veracity by as much as a hair-breadth.

He admitted that Mr. Burch, otherwise Mr. Jevvings, was a pugilist of some prominence with a deserved fame for neat and businesslike finishes to his bouts. It was, it transpired, the aim and ideal of Mr. Burch to put a similarly neat and businesslike finish to his forthcoming encounter with Mr. William Traske, of Birming-

ham. And, indeed, there was not the slightest doubt of Mr. Burch's ability to do so. Unfortunately, there were others who held the same confidence as to the result, and this materially affected the betting on the issue of the match. In short, so overwhelmingly was Mr. Burch the favourite that it had become a matter of extreme difficulty to find anyone willing to bet against him, no matter how tempting the odds.

In these circumstances, it was thought expedient that something should transpire to lessen the popularity of Mr. Burch in betting circles. The landlord of the "Rose and Crown," a party vested with considerable financial interests in Mr. Burch, had talked the matter over with other supporters, and together they had agreed on a plan. Further, the landlord of the "Rose and Crown," being a close friend of Mr. Dobb's and conversant with his abilities for organization, had called him in counsel and enlisted his services in the matter.

Briefly the scheme was this. Mr. Burch was to become involved in a quarrel with a local nobody, and to agree to settle the difference with boxing-gloves. Mr. Burch was to perform but indifferently at this match, failing to make the most of opportunities, and not getting in the knock-out blow till the twentieth round. There were spies in the Burch camp, and this strange remissness of his would indubitably be reported leading to a resurgence of confidence among the supporters of Mr. Traske, and so creating a profitable reaction on the betting market.

"But they'll twig it's a put-up job," contended Mr. Tridge.

"No, they won't, not them! You see, the affair's supposed to be kept very quiet. Of course, it's really a matter of hadvertisement, to hadvertise that Burch

'as gone dead off form; but seeing that it's a personal matter 'e's fighting about, they'll never dream 'e ain't in earnest."

Here, then, concluded Mr. Dobb, was the real office that Mr. Tridge was required to fill, and the only difference in it to that which he had aforetime imagined it to be was that he was expected to stand up to a professional boxer of proved ability, instead of a mere amateur of indifferent skill.

"The fighting part's just the same," pointed out Mr. Dobb. "You've only got to let 'im play about with you for a bit, and the twenty quid is yours."

"*Play about?*" echoed Mr. Tridge.

"That's all, Joe," said Mr. Dobb, reassuringly. "And you get twenty quid for it. It's a big sum, but I know we can rely on you to keep your mouth shut. And 'ere's the 'Jolly Sailors'—let's turn in and talk it over quietly."

This they proceeded to do, though, as time progressed, they talked less and less quietly. Mr. Dobb, after drawing over and over again an agreeable mental picture wherein Mr. Tridge, for a few paltry taps on the nose, was rewarded with a hair-dressing business of his very own, at length won the admission from his friend that it seemed worth it, after all.

"'Course it is," affirmed Mr. Dobb. "You can take a bit of punishment, can't you?"

"I can *take* it all right," acquiesced Mr. Tridge. "The worst of it is that I always takes it faster than I gives it."

"Besides, Joe, 'e won't 'it you very 'ard," wheedled Mr. Dobb. "You see 'e's got to give the idea that 'e's out of form. And it won't be till the twentieth round

that 'e knocks you out, so you'll 'ave plenty of time to get used to the idea."

"And I might go down of my own haccord in the nineteenth," said Mr. Tridge, brightly. "Then 'e won't 'ave a chance to put me properly to sleep."

So that, when at length the law of the land compelled the "Jolly Sailors" to be churlish with its hospitality, Mr. Tridge had promised that no effort should be lacking on his part to crown the match with success, and he and his old shipmate parted on the best of terms.

Next morning, however, Mr. Tridge's courage had suffered a relapse. Calling on Mr. Dobb at an early hour, he proclaimed his intention to abjure the match. In vain did Mr. Dobb fawn upon him with honeyed words; in vain did Mr. Dobb conjure up for him a splendid vision of a barber's shop with "J. Tridge" in big letters over the door. Mr. Tridge was obdurate to mere verbal blandishments. It was only when Mr. Dobb, in desperation, offered to come with him and enter into pourparlers for early occupation of the little shop Mr. Tridge knew to be standing empty, that that unwilling gladiator again agreed to hold to the terms of his contract.

And even then he managed things with so adroit a reluctance that, before the day was over, Mr. Dobb, to clinch matters more effectually, was jockeyed into standing surety for the rent of the little shop, so that Mr. Tridge could enter into tenancy straightway.

For the next twenty-four hours Mr. Tridge was occupied with pails and brooms, getting his establishment into order, to the exclusion of all thoughts about the impending combat. That night, however, he was too tired to sleep, and next morning he again sought out

Mr. Dobb to place his resignation in his hands. But Mr. Dobb treated the crisis diplomatically by advancing him the wherewithal to purchase sundry implements of the hair-dressing profession. And, after that, Mr. Tridge could not but vow that he would cause no further concern of mind, and this promise he loyally kept.

None the less a marked moodiness of manner overcame him as the day of the encounter drew near, and often his deportment was that of a man doomed to early disintegration. To cheer him, Mr. Dobb contrived for him a secret meeting with Mr. Burch, who revealed himself as quite an amiable young gentleman, and promised Mr. Tridge that he should receive no real hurt until the final blow of the contest.

“And that,” interpolated Mr. Dobb, encouragingly, “you won’t be in your senses to feel, Joe, for more than a millionth part of a second, so you needn’t worry about that.”

And so we come to the day of the meeting, with Mr. Tridge, now visibly a prey to the direst forebodings, and with but a pathetic interest in his hairdressing shop, ready for immediate opening. For hours Mr. Tridge had gazed round the tiny place, sighing profoundly, as one who has achieved an aim too late in life, or else he had fondled the shining new implements reverently, as if already they were relics.

Mr. Dobb did his best to dissipate these mournful fears, reporting to Mr. Tridge that his financial share in the affair was abundantly secure, and that as soon after the conclusion of the contest as Mr. Tridge was able to think clearly, the landlord of the “Rose and Crown” was empowered to pay out to Mr. Tridge twenty pounds, less the amount already advanced by Mr. Dobb. And also Horace had endeavoured to stimulate Mr. Tridge’s

interest in life by causing to be affixed to the wall of the place of meeting a huge poster which announced the imminent opening of the Magnolia Toilet Saloon (proprietor, J. Tridge), Bridge Street, Shorehaven.

At six o'clock that evening Mr. Tridge was disturbed in a singularly vain effort to secure a little refreshing slumber, and was called upon to receive Mr. Peter Lock. Mr. Lock, at the earnest request of his old shipmate, had consented to act as Mr. Tridge's second, and by way of inculcating the proper bright spirit in his principal with a little facetiousness, he now entered the apartment with slow, measured tread, and with extraordinary gravity of mien.

"Joseph Tridge," announced Mr. Lock, sepulchrally, "your hour is come!"

"Don't go making a mock of sacred things!" irritably requested Mr. Tridge. "It ain't funny—not at this minute."

"Joseph Tridge," droned on Mr. Lock, undeterred, in the same hollow tones, "have you made your will?"

"It so 'appens," snapped Mr. Tridge, "I 'ave! This very hafternoon! Thanks be I ain't left nothing to grinning i-i-enas!"

Mr. Lock, perceiving that Mr. Tridge's nerves were not yet keyed to appreciation of personal badinage, now endeavoured to rally him by narrating to him a number of droll anecdotes, all of which Mr. Tridge received in stony silence. Mr. Lock was still indefatigably endeavouring to cheer his principal when the stout and venerable Mr. Samuel Clark made his appearance.

Mr. Clark essayed no levity of conversation. On the contrary, he crossed in silence to Mr. Tridge and gravely clasped his hand. This done, he patted Mr.

Tridge on the shoulder with deep sympathy, shook his hand again, and then sat down with a long, deep sigh.

"Cheerful, *you* are!" growled Mr. Tridge. "What do you think you've come to—a fooneral?"

"Oh, no; not yet—not yet, Joe!" Mr. Clark made haste to reply. "But I must say I 'ad a most hextry-ordinary dream about you to-day. Most hextryordinary! I dreamed you was killed in this 'ere fight. Funny thing I should dream that, wasn't it?"

"*Funny?*" fulminated Mr. Tridge.

"Anyway," interposed Mr. Lock, "dreams always goes by contraries. It'll be the other chap what'll——"

"In my dream," said Mr. Clark, "the other chap was so overcome by 'orror that 'e 'anged 'isself. So there you are—take your choice!"

For some moments Mr. Tridge sat apparently considering the selection. Then suddenly he rose and looked sadly in the mirror, and next he went slowly round the room, gazing at every article as though in tender farewell. Finally, shaking his head, he passed out of the apartment, and, followed by Mr. Clark and Mr. Lock, made his way to the "Rose and Crown."

Here he found Mr. Dobb, who professed keen relief at sight of him, and forthwith conducted him to a dressing-room attached to the arena. Mr. Lock now offered to his principal much sage advice with regard to the coming contest; but Mr. Tridge was too occupied in his own mournful meditations to give useful heed.

"What—not dressed yet?" asked Horace, in surprise, entering the cubicle presently. "Why, you'll be late! The 'all's packed to overflowing, and there's three chaps fell through the skylight already!"

As one in a dream Mr. Tridge began to disrobe and, later, to habit himself in the athletic garb Horace had procured for him.

"Now, come along!" ordered Horace, impatiently. "And for goodness' sake, Joe, stop your knees from rattling so loud, else the referee won't be able to 'ear 'isself speak! And do try to look 'appier!"

"I can't!" confessed Mr. Tridge.

And now events marched through a haze to meet Mr. Tridge. He was aware of being pushed on to a platform by Mr. Lock's shoulder, of being introduced to a crowded audience, of being fitted with enormous gloves. He heard plaudits greet his name, and would automatically have smiled his acknowledgments had he had the least control over his features. He saw the graceful, well-knit, frame of his adversary vividly superimposed, as it were, on a cloud made up of seconds and attendants.

"Time!" declared an authoritative voice. Mr. Clark breathed on Mr. Tridge a final cheery but unteetotal wish for his good luck; Mr. Lock gave him a shove; and he found himself facing his opponent. He caught a glimpse of the Magnolia Shaving Saloon advertisement, and he subconsciously wondered whether a ceremonial black shutter had been included among the stock and fixtures.

Mr. Jevvings bore down on him, glove outstretched, for the etiquette of handshaking. As hand met hand, Mr. Jevvings winked surreptitiously at Mr. Tridge in token of remembrance of the terms of the secret treaty. A sudden alertness illumined Mr. Tridge's mind.

And as Mr. Jevvings carelessly stepped back from the handshake, Mr. Tridge's left arm shot out, unexpectedly and violently and accurately. With a terrific

impact it landed squarely on the jaw of the unprepared Mr. Jevvings.

Mr. Jevvings momentarily had the illusion of sailing skyward. Then he landed on the floor with a resounding thud.

Mr. Tridge, palpitating almost tearfully 'twixt fear and hope, hovered near him; but he lay there inert, and they counted him out. And so Shorehaven's most sensational boxing-bout came to an abrupt end at its very start.

Again high emotion wrapped a mist around Mr. Tridge, but now it was tinged with a roseate hue, for, lo! The fight was over and he was still alive, and, more wonderful still, uninjured. This alone he could apprehend with the forefront of his mind, but remoter regions of his brain took heed that there was cheering and drinking and speeches; there was abject worship from the stout Mr. Clark, warm commendation from Mr. Peter Lock. And, most gratifying of all, there was public presentation of the residue of the twenty pounds, correct to a penny, and also there was a collection which a dazed but approving audience supported to the extent of eleven pounds four and six.

Within an hour Mr. Tridge was being lionized in the bar-parlour. Men strove for the honour of buying drinks for him, feeling well repaid if he recognized their existence in return. Quite plutocratic people vied with each other for the privilege of speaking deferentially to him, and importantly bade each other hush when he condescended to voice his opinions on any subject. For Mr. Tridge had won a battle in record time against the wildest expectation, and was now a hero and had raised himself into the ranks of the Temporary Immortals.

Mr. Dobb alone appeared out of sympathy with the popular mood for acclamation. For some while he sat silently watching Mr. Tridge among his courtiers. At last, unable to repress his emotions any longer, he rose and led Mr. Tridge into the obscurity of the passage outside.

"What the dooce did you do it for?" irascibly demanded Horace.

"It was a hinspiration," said Mr. Tridge, modestly. "Just as the start was called, I looked up and I see that hadvertisement of my saloon. Somehow it come into my 'ead all in a flash what you said about the match being all a matter of hadvertisement, and a idea come to me that almost blinded me. I didn't see why *I* shouldn't get the hadvertisement for me and my saloon. I could see 'ow everybody 'ud troop up to be shaved by a chap what 'ad knocked out Toff Burch of Swindon. I could see 'ow useful my reppytation would be to keep customers in order when they complained if I cut 'em. And then I done it. Almost before I could think 'ow I was to do it, I done it. I knew I shouldn't get a better chance, I knew 'e wouldn't be troubling at all and that 'e wasn't hexpecting me to do anything, and I done it. And it come off."

"'E'll 'alf kill you for it later on," prophesied Mr. Dobb, with malevolent satisfaction.

"Oh, no, 'e won't! I've 'ad a chat with 'im since 'e come round. 'E *was* pretty sore about it, 'e owned, but 'e don't so much mind now. For why? Already they're hofferin' three to one against 'im for 'is match with Traske of Birmingham. So 'e's quite satisfied, after all. And I've took care to see that I ain't hexpected to meet 'im again, because I've been telling every one I'd made a vow long ago to give up boxing

for hever from this night forth, and they all agrees with me that I couldn't 'ave made a better end-up."

"Well, every one else may be satisfied, but *I ain't*," said Mr. Dobb, a little awkwardly. "I'll tell you for why. Knowing 'ow things was planned I'd been making a good lot of bets at long odds on this match—fourteen pounds in all—*against* you, of course. And, seeing as you've upset everything, I reckon it 'ud only be friendly and fair, out of your collection and so forth, to make good a bit of my loss to me."

"Come round to-morrow when I open," invited Mr. Tridge, happily, "and you shall be the first customer and I'll shave you free. There!"

"Don't try to get out of it like that, Joe. Fair's fair! If you'd done what you was hexpected to I'd 'ave made money. As it is, I've lost it. And you've got your collection, and the rest of your twenty quid, and——"

"And I've got a motter, too, 'Orace," said Mr. Tridge, softly, turning to the door of the bar-parlour. "*It's the same as yours*," he ended, with a grin, as he returned to adulation.

EPISODE VI

“ALL’S FAIR——”

THE single, succinct phrase, “Doings!” linked to an address and an hour, had been passed round among the former shipmates of that obsolete vessel the “Jane Gladys,” and this slogan, acting much after the manner of a Fiery Cross, had immediately rallied the old confederacy to a ready eagerness to stand shoulder to shoulder again to take toll of the world by the exercise of those devious methods at which they were so expert.

And now here, in the cosy back parlour of the little shop in Fore Street, was assembled that quartet upon whom long companionship in the “Jane Gladys” had conferred a sinister brotherhood in ignoble aims and disreputable ambitions; and though each member had passed into a divergent class of shore-abiding life, it was plain that they were all still closely united by a common passion for petty intrigue.

Informal presidency over the meeting was exercised by Mr. Horace Dobb. At Mr. Dobb’s right hand sat the trim and debonair Mr. Peter Lock. On Mr. Dobb’s left was the corpulent and venerable Mr. Samuel Clark, who, by virtue of his appointment of ferryman across the mouth of Shorehaven Harbour, still preserved some remnant of his former nautical environment. Opposite to Mr. Dobb was Mr. Joseph Tridge, who had fortuitously laid aside his maritime jersey to wear a cotton

overall in that hairdressing shop which Fate and force had secured for him.

Despite the stimulating and still undisclosed purpose for which the assemblage had been convened, the opening stages of the reunion were largely made up of spaces of vaunting autobiography, contributed by each of the members in a jostling, ill-disciplined way, sometimes separately, but usually in a pressing, conflicting chorus.

Thus Mr. Clark recounted, with great glee, as an example of his acumen, an anecdote concerning a foreign client who was unfamiliar both with the British system of coinage and the current rate of payment for passage on a ferry-boat. Mr. Tridge, in a similar boastful spirit, rehearsed some of his most successful retorts to customers who complained of dull razors or blunt scissors or intrusive lather-brushes. Mr. Dobb, for his part, supplied glowing accounts of the profits to be derived from the second-hand business by a man who was neither unperceptive nor too scrupulously honest; and Mr. Lock, not to be overshadowed, revealed many hitherto unsuspected ways by which a billiard-marker might add substantially to his income.

And so the time wore on very pleasantly, till at last Mr. Dobb, looking pointedly at the clock, cleared his throat, and leaning his folded arms on the table, patently assumed a waiting attitude. Instantly a hush intervened, and something of an electric thrill coursed through this old and tried combination of small adventurers, for the time for consideration of serious business was come.

“Well, ’ere we are,” said Mr. Dobb, gazing round on his fellows, “all well and truly hestablished in the town of Shore’aven, like we’ve always ’oped and planned.

Sitting round bragging about our cleverness is all very well, but you know my motter, don't you?"

"'Strictly business!'" supplied Mr. Tridge. "And I only wish I 'ad 'alf the friendly pints together it must 'ave saved you!"

"It's a good motter," said Mr. Dobb, equably. "It's saved me a lot of talk, anyway, when you chaps 'ave dropped round on the chance of borrhering a bob or two. 'Strictly business!'—that's got to be the motter for all of us, from now on. We've only to work together, and we can make ourselves 'ated for twenty miles round Shore'aven."

"We used to be 'ated for a 'undred miles round the poor old 'Jane Gladys,'" recalled Mr. Tridge, regretfully.

"'Strictly business!'—that's got to be one of our motters," continued Mr. Dobb. "And the other must be ' 'Elp one another!'"

"Well, I like that!" exploded Mr. Clark. "And only the day before yesterday you refused to let me 'ave a cracked old second-'and teapot on credit!"

"And now 'ere we are, all hassembled for a trial trip, so to speak," said Mr. Dobb, blandly ignoring the interruption. "If we work it right, there's a couple of quid in it for each of you."

"And what do *you* take?" demanded Mr. Tridge.

"I take the risk," answered Mr. Dobb, simply.

"Oh, well, what's the hidea, anyway?" asked Mr. Lock. "The boss 'as only given me one night off from the saloon, so I can't stop here till to-morrow while you and Joe gets arguing as to whether you're a miser or a philanthro-what-is-it! I suppose you've got some notion to put before us? You generally have."

“And I ’ave now.” Mr. Dobb assured him. “A good ’un, too! You know old George Pincott?”

“The chap what’s lately started in the second-hand business in opposition to you?” returned Mr. Lock. “Aye, I know him. He often drops in at our place for a game of billiards.”

“I know ’e does,” admitted Mr. Dobb. “I’ve been taking that into account.”

“I know ’im, too,” put in Mr. Tridge. “’E comes round to me every day for a shave.”

“So I understand,” said Mr. Dobb, dryly.

“’E’s doing pretty well for a new-comer, too, ain’t ’e?” queried Mr. Clark, not without suspicion of relish.

“Too jolly well!” declared Mr. Dobb.

“’E wouldn’t buy my carumgorum studs off of me, though,” mentioned Mr. Clark, as though this were a circumstance that disproved Mr. Pincott’s business inefficiency. “Three chances I give ’im, too, to say nothing of leaving ’em at ’is shop for four days for ’im to make up ’is mind. ’E was out when I left ’em.”

“Oh, ’e ain’t a fool, not by no means!” observed Mr. Dobb. “Well, and now do you know Mr. Simon Lister?”

“I know hof ’im,” volunteered Mr. Clark. “’E’s that old chap what lives in the big new ’ouse along the London road, what used to be something in the hoil and colour line.”

“That’s the chap,” accepted Mr. Dobb. “’E come into a fortune, unexpected, about a year ago. ’E’s one of my regular customers.”

“What! you don’t mean to say a rich old chap like that drops around with old iron and odd crockery to sell to you?” cried Mr. Tridge, in surprise.

"Oh, no!" corrected Mr. Dobb, a trifle loftily. "'E belongs to the hart section of my business. 'E buys off of me; 'e don't sell. 'E buys china and vallyble hornyments and so forth. A collector, 'e is, only the better kind. What they calls a connosher. 'E only goes in for good stuff."

"And 'e buys it off of *you*?" asked Mr. Tridge, incredulous.

Momentarily Mr. Dobb's eye drooped.

"'E don't know so *very* much about hart," he observed. "'E goes very largely by what I tells 'im."

"And what do *you* know about hart?" asked Mr. Lock, gaping.

"If I can do business by making out I knows things," said Mr. Dobb, firmly, "I *knows* 'em! See? Anyway, I make out I do. And 'e's got the money to spare to get a collection together, and 'e comes to me to 'elp 'im, and I ain't the man to refuse 'elp to anyone with money. Pounds and pounds 'e's spent with me, just on my recommendation. I let 'im think that I think 'e knows nearly as much as I do about hart, and 'e thinks, therefore, as I wouldn't think of cheating 'im."

"There seems a lot of thinking about it," said Mr. Lock.

"It's a hobby of mine," returned Mr. Dobb, "thinking is."

"And you wouldn't dream of deceiving 'im, I'll lay!" said Mr. Tridge, ironically. "No more would I sell a chap off the 'Raven' a solid, rolled-gold himitation ring for a quid if I 'ad 'alf a chance!"

"China and brickybacks 'e's bought off of me, and a few rare old prints, and some genuine hoil-paintings," catalogued Mr. Dobb. "And some odds and ends what

’e calls bigjewrious and virtue. ’E’s got the money to spend, and ’e wants to spend it, and ’oo am I to stand in the way of a man’s wishes?”

“It’s better than a lottery,” said Mr. Clark, wistfully. “And ’ave you got ’im all to yourself, ’Orace?”

“Up to a few days ago,” replied Mr. Dobb. “And that brings me to the matter in ’and. Old George Pincott got to ’ear about this ’ere Mr. Lister, and ’e’s trying ’ard to get ’is ’ooks in ’im and drag ’im clean away from me. After all, I found ’im first, and so I told Pincott, but ’is only answer was that all was fair in love and war.”

Mr. Dobb paused and sighed at such commercial laxity. Mr. Tridge feelingly remarked that he did not know how the principle acted in war, but that sometimes it made things very awkward so far as love was concerned. He was about to cite an instance when Mr. Dobb again claimed attention.

“Ever been in that poky little sweetstuff shop ’alf way down Market Lane?” he asked, as a general question. “Oh, well, I ain’t surprised!” he continued, as heads were shaken negatively. “It’s a tumble-down, ramshackle little place. But there’s a big hoil-painting ’anging up against the end wall, because that’s the only place where they can find room for it.”

“What sort of a picture?” asked Mr. Lock, with interest. “Saucy?”

“No, it’s supposed to be a bit of scenery—scenery in a fog at twilight, by the look of it. It’s signed by a chap called Carrotti, and the old gal what keeps the shop will tell you that it’s been in ’er family for ’undreds of years. She won’t sell it, she says, because it’s a heirloom in the family.”

"Sentimental old geezer," commented Mr. Clark. "I'd sell—well, I don't know what I wouldn't sell if I 'ad the chance!"

"'Ave you tried to buy it off of 'er?" asked Mr. Tridge.

"I haven't, and I ain't going to, neither," said Mr. Dobb. "I'm going to give old George Pincott a chance to buy it and make a big profit out of it."

"But——" expostulated Mr. Lock, at such altruism.

"It looks," continued Mr. Dobb, imperturbably, "as if it might be one of them there Old Masters. But it *ain't*! Not by no means! I've took the opportunity to examine it pretty thorough, and, though I may not know much about hart really, I do know enough to know that this pickcher ain't worth as much as the frame round it."

"I see!" declared Mr. Lock, slapping his knee exultantly. "You want George Pincott to buy it and then get stuck with it?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't wish 'im anything so unkind as that!" denied Mr. Dobb, primly. "I want 'im to buy it and go along to sell it to Mr. Lister at a good profit."

"You'll be growing wings and learning the 'arp next!" foretold Mr. Tridge, in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Yes, and while 'e's trying to sell it to 'im," purred Mr. Dobb, "I'm going to step in and hexpose it as a fraud! And that ought to get old Lister away from Pincott and back safe to me and my shop for ever and ever, oughtn't it?"

"Yes; but how are you going to get Pincott to buy it?" asked Mr. Lock.

"Well, in the first place," said Mr. Dobb, "don't forget that Pincott keeps a pretty close eye on me, and

that ’e generally goes by what I do, seeing I’m quicker at the business than ’e is. And, for another thing don’t forget that ’e’s a new-comer to these parts, and don’t know that us four was all shipmates together once.”

“Yes, but how——” began Mr. Lock again.

“Ah, that’s where you chaps comes in,” stated Mr. Dobb, and began to converse in lowered, more earnest tones with each of his old companions in turn.

It was on the following evening that the squat and not completely fashionable figure of Mr. George Pincott entered the billiard-room of the “Royal William.” The hour was still early, and Mr. Peter Lock, the marker, was rather forlornly reading a newspaper in a corner. Considerably did he brighten at the advent of even so unremunerative a patron as Mr. Pincott, and willingly did he accept that gentleman’s challenge to play a short game in the interval of waiting for brisker business.

“I see a friend of yours this afternoon, sir,” observed Mr. Lock, casually, after a while. “At least, hardly a friend, but more of an acquaintance.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Pincott, without much interest.

Mr. Lock squinted along his cue, made a shot, and retrieved the red ball from a pocket.

“Mr. Dobb, of Fore Street,” he said.

“Oh, ’im?” said Mr. Pincott.

“Yessir, Mr. Dobb,” went on Mr. Lock; and was silent till he had brought another stroke to fruition. “Looking very pleased with himself, he was, too.”

“Why, was Mr. Lister along with him?” quickly asked Mr. Pincott.

“No, sir, he was alone. He must be finding business very good just at present. He couldn’t help smiling as he walked along, and he stopped and chatted to me as

affable as affable. He told me I ought to give up billiard-marking for picture-dealing. He said there was big money to be made at it by a chap who keeps his eyes open. It struck me at the time that it was rather a pity in some ways that *he* couldn't keep his *mouth* shut. Mind you, sir, I think he'd been——"

Mr. Lock made a pantomimic gesture indicating the assuagement of thirst.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Pincott, with a rising inflexion. "And what else did 'e say?"

"Well, sir, I don't know as I ought to repeat it, you being a trade rival of his, so to speak," said Mr. Lock, chalking his cue afresh. "But, after all, he didn't tell me nothing very definite. It seems——"

He ceased to speak, transferring his entire attention to the preliminaries of a stroke.

"Well, what did 'e tell you?" demanded Mr. Pincott, when Mr. Lock stood erect again with a sigh of relief, and then began to stride purposefully towards the top of the table.

"Who, sir?" asked Mr. Lock, bending for further effort.

"Why, Dobb!"

"Dobb? Oh, yes!" said Mr. Lock. "Ah, I thought there was just the right exact amount of 'side' on that one!"

"About this 'ere Dobb!" Mr. Pincott impatiently reminded him.

"Oh, yes! Well, he didn't tell me so very much, after all, sir. Only something about being on the track of a vallyble picture, what was hanging up practically unbeknown in this very town here, and about him hoping to buy it cheap before anyone else slipped in and snapped it up."

“Oh!” exclaimed Mr. Pincott, thoughtfully. “Oh!” he repeated, still more thoughtfully. “Oh, ’e said that, did ’e? Did ’e tell you where the picture was?”

“No, sir, he didn’t say no more after that. He just lit a cigar and walked on.”

For a few seconds Mr. Pincott silently contemplated this goading mental picture of Mr. Dobb prodigally lighting cigars, plainly an earnest and foretaste of opulence to come. Then Mr. Pincott turned again to the marker and urged him to strive to remember every word that had passed in this interview with Mr. Dobb.

Mr. Lock, obliging, repeated some severe strictures of Mr. Dobb’s with regard to the district council, the state of the weather, and the badness of the local railway service. He was unable, however, to add one iota to that which he had already repeated concerning Mr. Dobb’s boasted pictorial discovery.

In the circumstances it was not surprising that Mr. Lock won the game with unusual ease, for Mr. Pincott had become heavily meditative, and in this mood he continued long after he had left the billiard-table, and it was still on him in a slightly increased degree when he came down to breakfast next morning.

It was soon after that meal that the bell affixed to the door of his shop summoned Mr. Pincott to the counter. Standing near the door, in an attitude somewhat furtive and hesitant, was a stout and aged mariner whom Mr. Pincott identified as the propulsive power of the ferry plying across the harbour mouth.

“Can I—can I speak to you, private and confident, for a minute, sir?” asked Mr. Clark, hoarsely.

“It depends,” hedged Mr. Pincott.

"It ain't nothing to do with carumgorums this time, sir," promised Mr. Clark.

"If it's anything the police might want to know about," said Mr. Pincott, "you've come to the wrong shop. Come at the wrong time o' day, anyway."

"Nor it ain't anything to do with lead piping nor door-knockers, nor anything like that, sir," disclaimed Mr. Clark.

"Then what is it?"

Mr. Clark gazed cautiously about him, and then, articulating into the back of his hand in a conspiratorial way, whispered across the counter.

"Eh?" asked Mr. Pincott. "I didn't 'ear? Carrots? This ain't a greengrocery!"

"I asked," said Mr. Clark, more audibly, "'ow much is Carrottis worth?"

"Carrottis?" echoed Mr. Pincott, puzzled. "What are they, anyway?"

"Pickchers," explained Mr. Clark. "Sort of these clarrsical pickchers painted by a chap called Carrotti, ages and ages ago."

"'Ow the dooce should I know?" irritably began Mr. Pincott; and then his professional instincts asserted themselves. "They—they might be worth anything, up or down. It all depends. What makes you ask?"

"There's a certain party wants to buy one," said Mr. Clark. "And 'e's made a offer for it, and it's been refused. And 'e's asked me to go along and make a little 'igher offer for it on 'is behalf and yet not on his behalf, if you takes my meaning. 'E's frightened that they know 'e's keen on getting it. And I says to myself that if there's money to be made, why shouldn't I make a bit extra, too? That's only fair, ain't it, sir?"

“Yes, yes,” assented Mr. Pincott. “And who might your friend be?”

“Ah, that ’ud be telling,” said Mr. Clark. “And I promised to keep ’is name right out of it. But,” he added, leering artfully, “there’s only you and ’im in the same business in this ’ere town.”

“’Orace Dobb!” cried Mr. Pincott.

“Well, I can take my haffydavit that I never told you ’is name, now, can’t I?” pointed out Mr. Clark, primly. “Well, be ’e ’oo ’e may, why should I take the trouble to buy it for ’im for a small tip when some one else might be willing to give me a bigger one? ’E ain’t got no particular call on me, and business is business when all’s said and done, ain’t it, sir?”

“Of course,” assented Mr. Pincott. “Why shouldn’t *you* be artful as well as anybody else? Where did you say the pickcher was?”

“I didn’t say,” replied Mr. Clark, gently.

“Well, ’ow can I say whether I want to buy it if I ’aven’t seen it?” contended Mr. Pincott, frowning.

“Ah, I wasn’t born yestiddy!” declared Mr. Clark, acutely. “If I tells you where the picture is to be found I might as well be right out of the affair altogether. You’d go along and buy it on your own, behind my back.”

“No such thing,” denied Mr. Pincott, with overdone indignation.

“Oh, well, I can proteck my own hinterests, thanks be!” stated Mr. Clark, easily. “I’ll wait till things is a bit further hadvanced before I commits myself. I’ll find out what price she’s willing to take, and see you again before I sees Mr. Dobb. ’Ow will that do?”

“That’s a good idea,” commended Mr. Pincott. “But—but I shouldn’t waste no time if I was you.

I'd go right down there now, wherever it is, and carry things a step farther without delay."

"And so I will, this minute," agreed Mr. Clark.

He favoured Mr. Pincott with a vast wink, and nodded very knowingly at him in token of mutual understanding. He then took his departure, and Mr. Pincott, giving him a grudging start of one minute, followed cautiously after him. The fact that Mr. Clark, without stopping anywhere, made his way directly back to his employment at the ferry caused Mr. Pincott to speak of that aged man's duplicity in the harshest terms.

"Oh, well, anyway, I'm further than I was last night!" was the consolation Mr. Pincott eventually found for himself. "It's a Carrotti, and Dobb's found it and means to buy it at a bargain, and intends to sell it to old Lister, no doubt. However, there's nothing to prevent *me* selling it to Lister either, if I can get 'old of it. Carrotti?" he mused. "First I've ever 'eard of 'im, but 'e *sounds* all right. Anyway, if it's good enough for Dobb, it's good enough for me."

And with a grin of satisfaction at the prospect of defeating his sole competitor in the district, Mr. Pincott put on his hat again, and sauntered along for his customary shave.

He found the Magnolia Toilet Saloon to be void of customers, and at once sat down in the operating chair. Mr. Tridge, deftly tucking a towel about his patron's throat, began to indulge in conversation with professional fluency.

"And 'ow's business, sir?" he asked. "Pretty bright, I 'ope? There seems to be plenty of money knocking about the town for them as knows where to look for it. I know one gent, a customer of mine, what reckons to clear easy fifty quid over a little deal 'e's

got in ’and, and the funny part of it is that ’e ain’t bought what ’e’s after yet. ’E’s made a offer, but——”

He stopped abruptly and, obtaining Mr. Pincott’s attention in the mirror, frowned warningly at him as Mr. Dobb entered.

“I understand,” said Mr. Pincott.

Mr. Dobb nodded patronizingly to Mr. Tridge, and accorded a rather more patronizing nod to Mr. Pincott. He then sat down quietly with a newspaper to await his turn for Mr. Tridge’s services. This coming at last, he took his place in the chair with marked alacrity.

“Don’t keep me longer than you can ’elp,” he directed. “I’m a bit later than I meant to be already. Give me a nice, clean shave, will you? I’m just on my way to see a lady on business.”

Mr. Pincott, in the act of passing through the doorway, involuntarily turned round and stared at Mr. Dobb.

When, ten minutes later, Mr. Dobb emerged from Mr. Tridge’s establishment, lovingly caressing and pinching a velvet chin, he betrayed not the slightest indication that he was aware that Mr. Pincott was lurking inconspicuously at an adjacent corner. Mr. Dobb, as one with a definite purpose, walked sharply up the street, turned into the neighbouring High Street, and thence crossed the wide market place diagonally. His itinerary was closely watched and imitated by Mr. Pincott.

And next Mr. Dobb made his way down the narrow, tumble-down alley known as Market Lane, still vigilantly attended by his trade rival. Finally, Mr. Dobb halted at a little sweetstuff shop, and without looking round, entered at its door. Mr. Pincott, finding convenient ambush near by, patiently waited for some

minutes, and at last saw Mr. Dobb come again to the threshold of the tiny shop. Here Mr. Dobb turned round, and seemed to be in earnest discussion with some one within, eventually going off back along Market Lane with his hands deep thrust in his pockets and a dissatisfied expression on his face.

Mr. Pincott elatedly watched Mr. Dobb vanish from sight. Then, with long, eager strides, he went across the street and entered the little shop to the symptoms of tempestuous jangling of its door-bell. A female gazed at him inquiringly from behind the counter, but Mr. Pincott made no immediate remark to her, for he was engrossed in staring at a huge and pitchy landscape. Closer examination revealed the signature of "Andrew Carrotti" flung across a corner in a crimson scrawl.

"Very old picture, that," observed the lady behind the counter, speaking with a kind of heavy and mechanical civility. "Been in our family for years and years. Not for sale, of course. We only hangs it up there because there ain't any other room for it. And what can I get for you, please, sir?"

"Not for sale, eh?" said Mr. Pincott.

"No, sir," she replied, definitely. "There's another gent just been in and tried 'ard to buy it, but I 'ad to refuse him. Was you thinking of choc'lates, sir? We've got some just fresh in."

Of certain negotiations which, despite the lady's unwillingness, followed so swiftly and with such continuity of impact, it is superfluous to write. Suffice it to record that Mr. Pincott, fortified and stimulated by the thought that here was something he was snatching from the very grasp of Mr. Dobb, was content to believe that the intrinsic unloveliness of the picture did not matter, and that its value was not its value as a

work of art, but as a piece of property for which Mr. Lister would pay handsomely.

So at last the lady, conceded her sex’s privilege, changed her mind, and was at last prevailed upon to part with the picture at a price which was only satisfactory to Mr. Pincott for the justification it afforded him to demand profits on the higher scale from Mr. Simon Lister.

In some excitement and a decrepit cab, Mr. Pincott carted his purchase direct to that gentleman’s abode in the suburbs of Shorehaven. Mr. Dobb, who had been doing a little reconnoitring duty in his turn, saw the vehicle turn into the London road with its burden, and he followed after it on foot.

Staggering spectacularly beneath his load, Mr. Pincott was ushered into the presence of Mr. Lister.

“Lawks!” was Mr. Lister’s simple tribute to the dramatic quality of the occasion. “Whatever ’ave you got there?” he asked, somewhat unnecessarily. “A picture?”

“Pickcher?” said Mr. Pincott, setting down the landscape flat on the table, and mopping his forehead. “It’ll be about the finest thing in your collection. I bought it for you, a rare bargain. ’Alf the dealers in the kingdom was after it, but I managed to diddle ’em!”

“It—it ain’t very ’andsome,” mildly criticized the worthy amateur.

“’Andsome?” queried Mr. Pincott. “What’s it want to be ’andsome for? It’s a genuine Old Master! ’Undreds of years old! It’s been in one family for generations.”

“Ah, that’s the kind of thing I want,” said Mr. Lister. “And ’ow did you come to ’ear of it?”

"I've 'ad my eye on it for months past," Mr. Pincott told him. "I've been waiting my opportunity. You know 'ow it is in our line. You 'ave to go slow, otherwise you're likely to get the price raised."

"That's so," said Lister, with a nod of appreciation for such nice consideration of his pocket. "And 'oo's it by?" he queried, examining the canvas with enhanced interest.

"Andrew Carrotti, the famous Old Master," returned Mr. Pincott glibly. "Surely you don't need me to tell you anything more about 'im?"

"I don't seem to 'ave 'eard the name before, though," admitted Mr. Lister, very honestly.

"Oh, you've 'eard of 'im and forgot," returned Mr. Pincott, easily. "It'll look well on that wall there, opposite the window, won't it? If you've got any pickcher-cord 'andy——"

"'Tain't every one that's got a genuine Old Master hanging on their dining-room wall," remarked Mr. Lister, with naïve pleasure. "Little did I ever dream, when I used to be serving out 'alf-pounds of sugar——"

"Mind you, you're lucky to get it," said Mr. Pincott. "If I wasn't so himpulsive, I'd 'ave took it up to London and sold it at Christie's, but I'm content with a small profit, so long as I can keep your patronage and——"

"What are you going to ask me for it?" inquired Mr. Lister, with a belated effort to appear businesslike; and evinced no more objection than a twinge of surprise when Mr. Pincott nominated a price.

"I'll write you out a cheque," promised Mr. Lister, and this agreeable feat he was in the act of beginning when the advent of Mr. Horace Dobb was announced. Mr. Dobb, proclaiming that he had come specially to bring Mr. Lister a saucer which matched a cup already

in his collection, betrayed considerable surprise at view of the picture.

“Well, now, I do ’ope you ain’t going to start collecting trash like that, sir?” he observed, reproachfully.

“Trash, Mr. Dobb?” echoed Mr. Lister. “I’m surprised at a man of your knowledge saying that! Can’t you see that it’s a genuine Old Master? Trash, indeed!” he said again, indignantly.

Mr. Dobb bent and scrutinized the landscape closely. Then he shook his head, and smiled tolerantly.

“Pincott’s got to learn the business, just as I ’ad to,” he said. “That ain’t a Old Master, sir, and never was!”

“Don’t you take no notice of ’im, sir!” begged Mr. Pincott. “Why, ’e was after this very pickcher ’imself!”

“Oh, no, not me!” disclaimed Horace. “I only buys and sells genuine stuff.”

“This *is* genuine!” insisted Mr. Pincott.

“So’s that ’ere diamond in your necktie,” scoffed Mr. Dobb. “I *don’t* think!”

“Why, it’s a Carrotti!” cried Mr. Pincott. “And you know ’ow long ago ’e lived, don’t you?”

“Can’t say I do. I’ve never ’eard of ’im in all my life before this very minute. When did ’e live?”

“’Undreds of years ago!”

“’Undreds of years ago, eh?” mused Horace, looking again at the canvas. “Fancy that, now. But the pickcher’s so dirty you can ’ardly see what it’s meant to be. I’ve got a little bottle of stuff ’ere,” he went on, producing a small phial full of a liquid, “and if I might clean up just one corner——”

“Yes, do,” invited Mr. Lister.

Mr. Dobb, moistening his handkerchief with a little

of the liquid, worked industriously at a small region on the canvas.

"Well, well!" he marvelled. "Blest if there ain't another pickcher underneath this 'ere one! If the top one is 'undreds of years old, the bottom one must be thousands! Why, look! 'Ere is a old girl in a crino-line just come to light, and a little bit of what looks like the Crystal Palace. Must be a view of the Great Hexibition, or something!"

"Clean it up a bit more," said Mr. Lister, in a new and strange voice.

Nothing loth, Mr. Dobb renewed his energies over a wider extent, with such success that presently his theory stood substantiated.

"Well, there it is, sir," said Mr. Dobb, standing back from his handiwork. "I shouldn't like to say Pincott deliberately tried to cheat you, but when a man starts in this line of business and knows nothing whatever about it——"

Mr. Dobb gave a half-pitying shrug of the shoulders.

Five minutes later a husky, indignant and profane Mr. Pincott had taken his departure, and the discredited picture had gone with him. Mr. Lister expressed his gratitude to Mr. Dobb in the warmest terms.

"That's quite all right, sir," said Mr. Dobb. "I don't like to see no one cheated by chaps like 'im, if I can 'elp it."

"In future," promised Mr. Lister, "I shall stick by you and abide by your decisions alone."

"I'll look after you all right, sir," returned Mr. Dobb.

That same evening, at a convivial little gathering at the "Royal William," Mr. Dobb loyally and uncomplainingly paid out two pounds to each of his former shipmates.

“A little present from Mr. Pincott,” he observed, flippantly.

“All the same, ’Orace,” said Mr. Tridge, thoughtfully, “’ow was you so cocksure about the pickcher being a wrong ’un? You’d ’ave looked funny if it ’ad turned out genuine. After all, seeing it’s been ’anging up all those years in that there little shop, and never left the family——”

“I knew it wasn’t genuine,” stated Mr. Dobb. “I knew jolly well. Matter of fact, I give that old gal ten bob to ’ang the pickcher up in ’er shop. Matter of fact, it was *my* property to start with. See?”

EPISODE VII

HIDDEN TREASURE

MR. HORACE DOBB, concluding his exposition with an emphatic prophecy of success, settled himself back in his chair, and smiled round on his old shipmates with a certain high, patronizing confidence, as a card-player might triumphantly sit back after spreading an invincible hand on the table for open inspection.

There followed a short, analytical silence, punctuated towards its close by crescendo grunts which indicated a widening and warming comprehension. And next arose an incoherent little duet, made up of the beginnings of exclamations of admiration from the lips of Mr. Joseph Tridge and Mr. Peter Lock, while the tribute of the ancient and corpulent Mr. Samuel Clark took the flattering form of speechlessness, allied to a slow, marvelling oscillation of the head and a gaze almost of veneration at Mr. Dobb.

And then Mr. Joseph Tridge, never a man to restrain honest sentiments, rose from his chair and forcefully pounded Mr. Dobb's shoulder in token of esteem for his astuteness, and at the same time loudly challenged the world to produce Mr. Dobb's equal either in artfulness or fertility of invention. And Mr. Peter Lock affectionately declared that Mr. Dobb, far from being spoiled by life ashore, was now even a bigger rascal than when he had served as cook to the "Jane Gladys," of mixed memories.

These compliments Mr. Dobb equably accepted as his just due, merely observing that he counted himself fortunate to have the co-operation of men who had graduated in craft on that ill-reputed vessel to assist him now in furthering the more ambitious plans for which his present occupations as second-hand dealer offered such scope. As sufficient answer to an interpolated suggestion of Mr. Tridge's, he reminded them that "Strictly Business" was his motto, and explained that, therefore, he would produce no bottles nor tumblers till it was manifest that all present thoroughly understood their parts in the plan of campaign he had outlined to them.

"Let's see," said Mr. Clark. "Peter Lock's the 'ero, ain't he?"

"Not the 'ero," corrected Mr. Dobb. "The rightful heir."

"I've seen 'em at the theatre," stated Mr. Clark, vaguely. "With their 'air all smarmed down with ile, and being shot at by villains, and what-not. There's generally a gal or two in the offing and——"

"Well, anyway," interrupted Mr. Lock, with some satisfaction, "I've got to be pretty conspicuous. What's that worth, Horace?"

"Same to you as to the others," replied Mr. Dobb. "When I've taken one quid, cost price, off the sum received, and another one quid for profit, and one quid more because it's my idea, the rest is divided into five equal shares and we takes each one, and one over for me!"

"Good enough!" accepted Mr. Lock. "All right. I'll be the unfortunate young chap what's lost his great-uncle. What was his name, Horace?"

"'Ennery Pash," supplied Mr. Dobb. "You was the happle of his heye, Peter!"

"Loved me like a father he did," stated Mr. Lock. "Always together we was, didn't you say, Horace?"

"Right up to the day before 'e died so sudden," instructed Mr. Dobb. "And then you went away on business, and you never come back till weeks after the—the melancholy event," he ended, with pride of artistry.

"That's right," said Mr. Lock. "And what was he like to look at, Horace?"

"A snuffy, grubby little chap with sandy whiskers and a bald 'ead," returned Mr. Dobb.

"He don't seem exactly the kind of relation to be proud of," complained Mr. Lock. "Can't you do me better than that, Horace?"

"You don't get misers with top-'ats and white weskits, Peter," pointed out Mr. Dobb. "If 'e'd spent all 'is money on clothes, 'e wouldn't 'ave 'ad any to 'ide in the seat of 'is favourite old arm-chair, would 'e?"

"By the way, 'Orace," put in Mr. Clark, "where did you get the chair to start with?"

"Bought it with a odd lot of stuff at a farm sale a few miles away. It ain't worth stuffing and re-up-'olstering, so I thought I'd try to sell it as it was, and that's 'ow I come to 'atch out this idea I've been a-telling you of."

"Well, you've 'it it on just the right chap in Tommy Lane," approved Mr. Tridge. "'E drops into my place pretty well every day for a shave, and I never see such a old idjit for believing what 'e's told! You ought to 'ear some of the adventures of seafaring life I've told 'im! Why, they almost make *me* choke, telling

'em! And yet he'd swallow 'em down without so much as a cough!"

"'Ere!" exclaimed Mr. Dobb, in some alarm. "'E don't know you and me and Peter and Sam Clark was all shipmates together once, does 'e?"

"No, 'e don't," said Mr. Tridge, flushing a little.

"'Ow do you know 'e don't?" demanded Mr. Dobb.

"Because," said Mr. Tridge, rather reluctantly, "I've always give 'im to understand that afore family misfortunes made me take a 'air-dresser's shop I was second in command on a torpeder-boat!"

"And 'e believed *that*?" cried Mr. Clark.

"'E said that 'e'd guessed it! Said that there was always something about us naval chaps what couldn't be disguised, no matter 'ow 'ard we tried!" related Mr. Tridge, with pride.

"Well, then, we shan't 'ave no trouble with 'im!" foretold Mr. Lock, happily. "I don't know the chap myself; he don't come to the 'Royal William' billiard-saloon, as I knows of. Have *you* ever met him, Sam?"

"'Undreds of times!" asserted Mr. Clark. "I often ferries 'im across the river." Mr. Clark paused, and his eyes twinkled joyously. "'E thinks I used to be a smack-owner!" he crowed.

"Whatever made 'im think that?" asked Mr. Tridge, in surprise.

"I told 'im so!" shamelessly answered Mr. Clark. "A smack-owner! *Me!* Only I was unlucky!"

"A bit of make-believe I can understand," reproved Mr. Tridge, loftily. "But a pack of downright *lies!*"

"Well, 'e shouldn't try to be so clever, then!" said Mr. Clark, with spirit. "If 'e can slip out the other side without paying my fare, 'e think's 'e's done well,

and 'e takes a deal of convincing, too, to get the money out of 'im in the end."

"Yes, 'e certainly watches money pretty close," agreed Mr. Tridge. "Never yet 'as 'e over-paid me by as much as a 'apenny, and 'e tried to beat down the price of a shave till 'e see it was no good. Oh, 'e's got a eye for the main chance all right!"

"That was the character I got of 'im," mentioned Mr. Dobb, dryly. "'Ence this gathering of old friends."

"Anyway," summarized Mr. Lock, "this here Mr. Lane sounds just our mark!"

And with that the confederation went into close committee.

It was during the course of the next afternoon that a rotund little gentleman, with a countenance remarkable for a guileless expression and neatly trimmed side-whiskers, sauntered down to the ferry-boat at the mouth of the harbour.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lane, sir!" said Mr. Samuel Clark, with deference. "Going across?"

The little gentleman, affably admitting this to be his intention, disposed himself neatly in the boat, and Mr. Clark pulled off at his customary leisurely stroke.

"Beautiful weather!" observed Mr. Lane.

"Just right for heverybody except the doctors, as my old pal, 'Ennery Pash, used to say," agreed Mr. Clark, with some emphasis on the latter portion of his remark.

"Lovely lot of ozone in the air to-day," mentioned Mr. Lane, sniffing appreciatively at the odours from the dredger.

"Ah, if 'e could 'ave got more into 'is system, 'e wouldn't be where 'e is to-day," stated Mr. Clark, regretfully.

"Who wouldn't?" inquired Mr. Lane.

"My old pal, 'Ennery Pash."

"And where is 'e now, then?" asked the passenger.

Mr. Clark sorrowfully shook his head and pointed aloft.

"Far as I know," he explained. And added: "'E was a good churchman, according to 'is views, anyway."

Mr. Lane, in response to this sombre intrusion on the brightness of the day, kept a chastened silence. Mr. Clark, sighing deeply, shook his head again, and offered a well-known quotation bearing on the instability of human life.

"P'r'aps you knew old 'Ennery Pash, sir?" he suggested.

"Can't say I did," returned Mr. Lane, apologetically.

"Ah, 'e was a quiet old chap. 'E didn't get about much. There wasn't many as met 'im. 'E stopped indoors most of 'is time, only I thought p'r'aps you might 'ave knowed 'im."

"No. Where did he live?"

"Oh, 'e was always moving!" replied Mr. Clark. "'E never stopped anywhere long, but now 'e's settled for good and all. Five weeks ago, that was."

"Is he buried in the town?" asked Mr. Lane, politely, affecting interest in the sad event.

"No, sir; in Scotland, where 'e was born."

"And what was 'e like?"

"Ah, a little, short, shabby old chap, 'e was. But, then, there was a reason for 'is going shabby."

"Oh, indeed? He was poor, I suppose?"

"Not 'im! 'E was a miser."

"A miser?" said Mr. Lane. "Really?"

"Really! 'E told me so 'isself dozens of times! 'Sam,' 'e says to me, 'you'd never believe 'ow much I've got saved up!' Couldn't bear to spend a penny, 'e

couldn't; and 'e kept it all in the 'ouse. Didn't believe in banks, 'e said."

"And I suppose they found it when——"

"Not a brass farthing!" cheerfully affirmed Mr. Clark.

"Strange! What did his relations do about it?"

"'E'd only got one, a great-nephew, and 'e was away at the time and couldn't be found."

"But who paid for the funeral? It must have cost a lot, taking place in Scotland."

"Some of *us* paid for it, sir, 'is old pals. Leastwise, we sold all 'is furniture and stuff, and raised the money that way."

"But what do you think became of his savings?"

"Well, if you ask *me*, sir I reckon the old fool—begging 'is pardon, I forgot!—the poor old fellow 'ad kept on changing 'em into paper money and 'ad burned 'em by accident, or else because 'e couldn't bear the idea of anyone else getting 'em after 'e was gone."

"I should have thought he'd have been glad for his nephew to get them."

"His great-nephew, sir. Well, that's as may be. All I know is that we found a great 'eap of charred papers in 'is fire-place when we broke in, when we suspected the worst. Lots of it was only old letters and noospapers, and so on, but there might easily 'eve been paper money amongst it. It was all so powdered up. Anyway, that's what we decided on in the end, there being no other way to account for the habsence of the money; and we 'adn't 'alf ransacked 'is chest of drawers and boxes, neither!"

"Strange!" commented Mr. Lane again. "Very strange!"

"So *we* thought, sir," acquiesced Mr. Clark. "'Ow-

ever, 'ere we are," he went on, with an abrupt change of key, as the ferry gently nosed into the opposite bank. "And I never noticed 'ow quick we was travelling; all along of chatting about poor old 'Ennery Pash."

He assisted his passenger to alight, pocketed his fare, and slowly sculled away again across the river.

"Another minute and I'd 'ave bust!" he told himself, in rapt enjoyment. "Sam, my boy, you're like wine—you improves with age!"

The Magnolia Toilet Saloon; Shorehaven, was empty next morning at noon, save for two individuals. One of these was the proprietor, Mr. Joseph Tridge; the other was the trim, debonair Mr. Peter Lock, and to-day he wore a black tie in place of his usual brilliant neckwear.

"'E's sure to be in soon, Peter," Mr. Tridge was saying. "This is just about 'is time. It's no good your complaining about 'aving to 'ang about 'ere. You agreed with 'Orace and us others—— 'Ere quick, sit down! 'Ere 'e comes!"

Mr. Lock, casting aside a newspaper, seated himself at a bound in the operating chair. Mr. Tridge, wrapping a towel about his companion's shoulders, began delicately to powder Mr. Lock's smooth chin. A minute later the door opened, and Mr. Thomas Lane entered with the inquiring, calculating gaze habitual to men entering barbers' shops.

"Shan't keep you waiting a minute, sir!" called out Mr. Tridge. "I'm just finishing this gent."

Mr. Lane sat down readily enough, and Mr. Tridge proceeded to remove the powder from Mr. Lock's chin.

"So you ain't 'eard nothing more about your great-uncle's money, sir?" inquired Mr. Tridge, in confidential tones that just reached Mr. Lane's ears.

"I've pretty well given up hope now," said Mr. Lock. "I begin to think with them others, that he must have burned it. If ever he had it, mind you! Perhaps he only talked about it to keep me up to the mark as his great-nephew. Not that there was any need to do that, though," declared Mr. Lock, rising, as Mr. Tridge removed the towel from his shoulder with a professional flourish. "I was always very fond of him for his own sake."

"I'm sure you was, sir," agreed Mr. Tridge, with sympathy. "But I can't 'elp thinking you've been the victim of bad luck."

"No use crying over spilt milk," said Mr. Lock, philosophically. "Still, I'd like to have had a souvenir in memory of him, even if it wasn't money. But by the time I'd got back here, everything had been sold and the funeral was all over, as you know."

Mr. Tridge nodded, and irrelevantly mentioned the sum of threepence, extending his hand at the same time. A little light which was shining at the back of his eyes abruptly expired when Mr. Lock airily told him to put it down on the account, as usual.

At the departure of Mr. Lock, Mr. Lane took up his position in the chair, and for some while Mr. Tridge wielded the lather brush in silence. Frequently did Mr. Tridge glance in the mirror at his patron, and each time he was pleased to note the continuance of a meditative look on Mr. Lane's face.

"Who was that young chap you were shaving when I came in?" asked Mr. Lane at last. "I don't seem to recognize him."

"Oh, he's been about some time," answered Mr. Tridge. "He's the billiard-marker down at the 'Royal William.'"

"Is his name, by any chance—er—what is it?—oh, yes! Pash?"

"No, his name's Lock, sir—Peter Lock. Funny you should have mentioned Pash, though. 'E was related to old 'Ennery Pash. You know, sir, the old chap they said was a miser."

"I've heard of him," admitted Mr. Lane.

"Mind you, I've never really swallowed the yarn that 'e was a miser," declared Mr. Tridge. "Only one 'as to agree with one's customers, and show an interest in 'em, you know. But as for old Pash being a miser—I wouldn't like to bet on it. I know 'e used to 'ave a lot of registered letters come for 'im, but that don't prove anything, do it? And as for that tale about 'im being seen with stacks of notes as thick as a pack of cards—well, I never met anyone as could swear to it, anyway. Besides, they never found none in 'is cottage afterwards, though they searched every 'ole and corner. Ah, a queer old chap, 'e wos! I can see 'im now, sitting beside 'is fire in that old arm-chair of 'is. 'E never stirred from it if 'e could 'elp it. 'E regular loved that old chair of 'is. Once 'is chimney caught light, and bless me if that chair wasn't the first thing 'e thought of to save!"

"Really?" said Mr. Lane, with interest.

"*And truly,*" affirmed Mr. Tridge. "Soon as ever that chimney began to blaze, 'e lugged that chair out-doors. Ah, and 'e wouldn't leave it, neither, to go in and rescue anything else. 'E just sat tight on it there, out in the middle of the road, and let some one else put out the fire. 'E said 'e wouldn't leave 'is old chair in case some one stole it. A shabby, broken old chair like that, fancy!" scornfully concluded Mr. Tridge. "No wonder folk thought 'im a bit dotty!"

"Why, perhaps he'd——" exclaimed Mr. Lane starting.

"Steady, sir, or I'll be cutting you," warned Mr. Tridge. "P'r'aps what, you was a-going to say?"

"Perhaps—perhaps he was very fond of it," said Mr. Lane, a trifle weakly.

"I been a-telling you he was," remarked Mr. Tridge. "But there! Old people like 'im often 'ave queer fancies like that!"

As one dismissing a thoroughly exhausted subject, Mr. Tridge turned the talk to the doings of Parliament, expounding his views with no more interruption than an occasional monosyllable interjected in a pre-occupied way by his client.

"Let me see, where did you say that young man was employed?" inquired Mr. Lane, when at length Mr. Tridge simultaneously ceased his political remarks and his tonsorial services.

"What young man, sir?"

"Mr.—er—Mr. Pash's great-nephew."

"Oh, along at the 'Royal William Hotel,' sir," said Mr. Tridge, turning aside to conceal a satisfied smile.

It was in the slack hour after tea that same day that the billiard-room of the "Royal William" was honoured by a first visit from Mr. Thomas Lane. He entered coyly, seating himself just inside the door in the most unobtrusive manner. Mr. Lock, idly testing his skill at the table, accorded the visitor a courteous greeting.

"No, I don't want to play, thanks," replied Mr. Lane. "I—I only just looked in, that's all."

"Quite so, sir," agreed Mr. Lock.

Mr. Lane offered no further explanation of his presence, and Mr. Lock walked round the table a few times in leisurely pursuit of that perfection which comes to

practice. The visitor, watching Mr. Lock's activity through narrowed eyelids, patiently awaited opportunity, and this Mr. Lock presently offered him.

"Very good table, this, sir," he observed, casually. "Good as any you'll find in the town."

"Dare say," returned Mr. Lane, absently.

"I ain't come across a public table to beat it," stated Mr. Lock. "Of course, I don't know anything about the private tables in the big houses round here. I expect there are a few good ones in some of them big houses on the cliff. If I was a rich man, I'd have a good billiard-table, I know."

"I see," said Mr. Lane, not very brilliantly.

"Once I did think that maybe I'd have a billiard-table of my own," remarked Mr. Lock, with a smile at his own folly. "But it never come off."

"How was that?" asked Mr. Lane, alertly.

"I was expecting a bit of a legacy," explained Mr. Lock. "Not a big 'un, mind, but I thought if there was enough to buy me a billiard-table that 'ud satisfy me. It would have kept me in recreation for the rest of my life. I'd got my eye on a place to keep it, too, and I'd have made a bit of money out of it, one way and another."

"But——" prompted Mr. Lane.

"But it wasn't to be," said Mr. Lock, with a wistful shake of the head.

"And how was that?" inquired Mr. Lane. "The money was left to some one else, eh?"

"There wasn't no money left at all!" Mr. Lock informed him. "Just a sort of mystery, it was. Anyway, they had to sell the furniture to pay for the funeral, and that tells its own tale, don't it?"

"Well, well!" murmured Mr. Lane.

"Not a stick left when I come back on the scene!" related Mr. Lock. "I'd like to have had something to remember him by, too. Relation of mine, you know, he was. 'Peter,' he used to say to me, 'Peter, I particular wants you to have my old arm-chair when I'm gone.' Always saying that, he was. Why he couldn't have given it to me while he was alive, and have done with it, I don't know."

"Perhaps he didn't want to part with it?" suggested Mr. Lane.

"That was about it, I expect," agreed Mr. Lock. "He'd certainly got a great fancy for that chair. Why, he used to carry it into the bedroom with him at night, and bring it down again in the morning. But, there, it had clean gone when I got back here."

"Couldn't you find out who'd bought it?"

"I did try, sir, but it was no good. You see, it was just a sort of Dutch auction, and people paid their money down for anything they bought, and took it straight away. There was a lot of strangers present, too, far as I could make out, and it must have been one of them that bought that old chair. A chap from the country, some of 'em told me. Dare say that old chair's not more than five miles away at this minute, if the truth was known."

"Why don't you—haven't you advertised for it?"

"Oh, I ain't so keen on it as all that, sir," replied Mr. Lock, carelessly. "I can remember the old chap well enough, without needing his old arm-chair to remind me of him. I don't believe in being sentimental, sir, when it costs money, and a advertisement would cost more than that old chair's worth. Besides, he won't know now whether I've got it or not, and, if he does, it can't make much difference to him, can it, sir?"

With these practical remarks, Mr. Lock turned again to the billiard-table for interest. Mr. Lane, after sitting meditatively for a long three minutes, rose and unostentatiously quitted the room.

The saloon was well patronized when, a couple of hours later, Mr. Horace Dobb strolled in. His eyes sought Mr. Lock's, and, meeting them, a slight upward flicker of the brows was perceptible. Mr. Lock nodded slowly, once, and Mr. Dobb drifted out again.

About ten minutes later Mr. Lane, his arms folded and his head bent in reverie, was occupying his accustomed seat in the bar-parlour of the "King's Arms," when a patron entered with a certain reckless joviality which compelled attention. Mr. Lane, glancing up petulantly at this intrusion on his meditations, recognized the new-comer to be a gentleman who dealt in second-hand goods at an establishment in Fore Street.

"'Evening all!" cried Mr. Dobb, exhibiting an unusual boisterousness of manner. He clung, swaying gently, to the handle of the door, and beamed owlshly round on the company. "'Evening all—and be blowed to the lot of you!"

The lady behind the counter, with whom it seemed that Mr. Dobb was something of a favourite, shook her finger at him in surprised reproach, and asked him what he meant by it.

"I been keeping off a cold!" explained Mr. Dobb, simply.

"So *I* should think!" declared the lady.

A glassy look came into Mr. Dobb's orbs, indicating purposeful concentration. Releasing his grasp on the door, he, as it were, swooped forward and came neatly to rest with his elbows on the counter. This feat achieved, he gazed about him as one seeking plaudits.

"Been keeping off a cold!" he announced again, and performed a little shuffling movement which brought him backwards to the centre of the room. "Look at me boots!" he invited, proudly.

"Why, wherever have you been?" asked the lady. "All that mud!"

"I been keeping—I mean, I been out in the country!" stated Mr. Dobb, returning to the support offered by the bar.

"Been watercrossing by the look of it?" suggested the lady, in playful sarcasm.

"Business!" said Mr. Dobb portentously, and looked round as though to balk the intentions of eavesdroppers. "Business!" he repeated, in a whisper, and solemnly put his finger to his lips. "Norraword!" he urged warningly, and immediately added in the loudest, boastfullest accents: "I've had a good day to-day. Bought a rare lot of stuff!"

He waited indecisively a little time, and then, selecting the chair adjacent to Mr. Lane's, sat down on it with some abruptness of impact.

"Wanter buy a nice set of fire-irons?" he inquired, winningly. "Beautiful set! Bargain!"

Mr. Lane replied to the effect that he was adequately furnished with fire-irons.

"Don't blame you, either!" hazily commented Mr. Dobb, and was silent for a brief space.

"Funny thing about it is," he remarked next, opening one eye to stare at Mr. Lane challengingly, "'alf the stuff come from this town to start with. Now, ain't that a rum 'un, eh?"

"I dare say," politely ceded Mr. Lane.

"Of course it is!" insisted Mr. Dobb, with truculence. "Me going all the way out there to buy stuff

what 'ad come—what 'ad come from Shore'aven to start with! It's a—a cohincydence, that's what it is! Going miles and miles to buy stuff what I could 'ave bought at old Pash's sale, if only I'd been there!"

"Whose sale did you say?" quickly asked the other.

"Never you mind 'oose sale!" returned Mr. Dobb, with reserve. "But, 'oosever it was, the stuff I bought to-day come from it! See? So don't go a-contradicting of me!"

"I'm not!" protested Mr. Lane.

"Oh, yes, you was!" asserted Mr. Dobb. "Why don't you let a man finish what 'e's got to say afore you starts to argue? I'm telling you most of this stuff was bought by a chap in several lots to furnish 'is cottage."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Lane.

"There you goes again!" complained Mr. Dobb. "Anyway, 'e's got a job at the other end of the country now, and——"

Mr. Dobb ceased momentarily, and regarded his boots with a fond smile.

"I 'aven't 'alf been keeping out a cold!" he observed, confidentially. "Talk about mud and rain and cold winds—'oo'd live in the country, I'd like to know."

"Ah!" said Mr. Lane, ingratiatingly. "Who would, indeed?"

To this Mr. Dobb made no response, being now engaged in inward thought.

"Who would, indeed?" said Mr. Lane again.

"Eh?" demanded Mr. Dobb, returning to wakefulness.

"Who would live in the country?" said Mr. Lane.

"Why, *I* would!" declared Mr. Dobb. "I love the country! All the little dicky-birds and—so on!"

He suddenly rose, proclaiming his intention of going home to bed as a preventive measure against chill. He nodded a protracted, dreary-eyed, good-night to each individual of the company present, and then, festooning across the apartment, noisily negotiated the door and passed from view.

No sooner was Mr. Dobb outside in the street, however, than his waywardness dropped from him, and, congratulating himself on his histrionic powers, he walked briskly to his abode.

Soon after breakfast next morning, Mr. Lane was visible in Fore Street. Into half a dozen shop-windows did he peer with an air of boredom, nor did his expression become quickened when at length he ranged himself before the jumbled collection of oddments which Mr. Dobb exhibited to the passer-by.

For some moments Mr. Lane affected a lukewarm interest in a faded photograph of the Niagara Falls, and next he lingered to gaze on a teapot which had suffered casualty in its more obtrusive parts. And, after that, he stepped into the doorway and pretended close scrutiny of a pair of cast-iron dumb-bells, and, under cover of this manœuvre, he glanced into the interior of the shop, and there saw a heterogeneous pile of furniture which was evidently awaiting disposal, and the most conspicuous item in it was a tattered and battered old arm-chair.

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Lane, involuntarily.

At this juncture Mr. Horace Dobb himself made an appearance at the threshold of his shop with evident purpose of ascertaining the state of the weather.

"Good morning, sir!" he said.

"Good morning—good morning!" returned Mr. Lane,

with eager amiability. "Did you keep the cold off all right?"

"Oh, yes, I kept it; but 'ow did *you* know I was trying to keep a cold off?"

"Why, you told me so last night."

"Last night?" queried Mr. Dobb, shaking his head. "Why, I never see you last night, sir."

"In the 'King's Arms,'" prompted Mr. Lane.

"I never went in the 'King's Arms' last night!" denied Mr. Dobb. "I came straight 'ome and went to bed. I'm sure of it."

Mr. Lane was about to contradict, when it was evident that he changed his intention.

"Oh, well, I must have been thinking of some one else," he said, lightly.

"I don't know whether you're interested in furniture, sir," ventured Mr. Dobb. "But I've got some stuff in new to stock this morning, and——"

"I don't mind having a look at it," admitted Mr. Lane, almost skipping into the emporium.

"There's a bedstead for you!" cried the vendor, with enthusiasm. "Real solid, good stuff. Been in a farm-'ouse these 'undred years and more."

"I got a bedstead," said Mr. Lane.

"What about a sofa?" asked Mr. Dobb.

Mr. Lane shook his head. He was giving his attention to the worn old arm-chair.

"You don't expect ever to sell a shabby old thing like that, do you?" he asked, artfully.

"It *is* a bit knocked about," confessed Mr. Dobb. "But it's a real fine old chair of its kind. I reckon to get a pretty good price for it when it's been restored. I'll 'ave it restuffed and reup'olstered, and it'll fetch a big price, I lay."

"It looks very lumpy," observed Mr. Lane, and seized the opportunity to prod the sagging seat with his finger.

He thrilled electrically when his touch encountered something vaguely massy and hard in the horsehair stuffing. Mr. Dobb, who had planned that thrill with the aid of a bulky old volume from the rubbish corner, winked pleasantly at the ceiling.

"I ain't 'ardly 'ad a good look at it yet," said Mr. Dobb. "It was in with a lot of other things I was after, though I meant to 'ave it, of course, soon as ever I spotted it. Genuine antike, that is."

"Oh, I don't think so!" said Mr. Lane.

"Well, it belonged to a old chap 'oo died in Shore-aven 'ere, and 'e'd 'ad it pretty nigh all 'is life, and chance it!" contended Mr. Dobb.

"I wonder the man who bought it then didn't overhaul it," mentioned Mr. Lane, thoughtfully. "Perhaps he did?" he suggested, a little dashed.

"Ah, 'e meant to, but 'e never 'ad the time," said Mr. Dobb. "'E bought it with that idea, 'e told me, and 'e took it to 'is cottage in the country, meaning to see to it. But 'e 'appened to lose 'is job, and, what with finding a fresh one, and then making arrangements to shift 'is family, 'e was so busy that the old chair just stayed up in 'is attic, untouched, from the time 'e took it 'ome to the time I bought it yesterday."

"And what would you be asking for it as it stands?"

"Well, I dunno," mused Mr. Dobb. "It 'ud pay me better to touch it up a bit first, I suppose. A genuine antike, you know. Still, if anybody was to offer me, say—oh, fifteen for it——"

"Fifteen shillings!" cried Mr. Lane, in excitement. "Right you——"

"Shillings? No!" scornfully interrupted Mr. Dobb. "Pounds, of course!"

"Why, it's nowhere near worth that!"

"It's worth what it'll fetch," said Mr. Dobb. "Anyway, by the time I've pulled it into shape a bit, and——"

"I'll give you a couple of pounds for it as it stands," offered Mr. Lane.

"Why, that ain't a quarter of what I give for it myself!" returned Mr. Dobb. "But I've got a set of fire-irons what you can 'ave for two quid, if you like," he offered, brightly.

"I don't want fire-irons," said Mr. Lane, pettishly.

"Well, I don't take a penny less than fifteen quid for that chair. Look at the woodwork! A bit scratched, maybe, but sound—sound and 'eavy. They don't make 'em like that nowadays."

"But *fifteen* pounds!" murmured Mr. Lane.

"Oh, I shall get more than that for it when I've squared it up and restored it," foretold Mr. Dobb, confidently. "Why, I know more than one collector in these parts that'll only be too anxious to secure it soon as ever 'e sees it. In a way, I'm doing you a favour by giving you first chance."

"But fifteen pounds!" protested Mr. Lane.

"Well, I'll say twelve as it stands, seeing as I shan't 'ave to bother with restoring it. There, twelve! Just to make a reg'lar customer of you, only don't go talking too much. Why, you can't get much *new* in the furniture line to-day for twelve; and as for antikes——Solid, that's what it is! 'Ere, 'alf a mo'! I'll just strip the cover off and leave the stuffing aside, and you'll see what a fine strong frame it's got."

"No, don't do that—don't do that!" babbled Mr. Lane, desperately. "It's all right! I mean, I believe you. But—but twelve pounds! I wouldn't mind going to—to four, or even five, but—but *twelve!* It isn't a particularly handsome chair——"

"But you seem pretty keen to 'ave it, sir, for all that," Mr. Dobb pointed out. "However, please yourself. If you don't take it I shall put it in my window there, and somebody's bound to come along and——"

"You—you couldn't let me have it on approval for a day or two?" suggested Mr. Lane, but not hopefully.

"No, sir. This is a cash business. But I'll tell you what—if you like to let me take out the stuffing and leave it 'ere, I'd knock off a quid. Good 'orse'air's always worth——"

"No, no. I wan't it as it is!"

"Then twelve quid buys it!"

Mr. Lane again probed the ragged upholstery of the seat with an investigatory forefinger.

"I'll give you ten," he offered.

"You seem to think I ain't a man of my word," complained Mr. Dobb, indignantly.

"Ten!" offered Mr. Lane, again. "That's my limit!"

Twenty minutes later they had arrived at a compromise, and the sum of eleven pounds ten shillings changed ownership. With his own hands Mr. Lane lifted the chair and staggered out with it to the hand-truck Mr. Dobb had obligingly placed at his disposal.

"There he goes with 'is 'idden treasure," said Mr. Dobb, smiling, as Mr. Lane's small back bent in energetic propulsion of his purchase.

That same evening Mr. Dobb paid thirty shillings into the willing grasp of each of his three old ship-

mates, and fully endorsed their flattering statements as to his mental ingenuity.

A fortnight elapsed, and then, one afternoon, Mr. Lane walked into the emporium. Mr. Dobb, mastering a primitive impulse to point derisively at his visitor, addressed him in honeyed tones of courtesy.

"Ain't seen you lately, sir," he remarked.

"I've been away," said Mr. Lane. "Been taking a bit of a holiday."

"Lucky to be you, sir, to 'ave the money to spare," said Mr. Dobb. "Why, I ain't seen you, come to think of it, not since the morning you bought that antike chair off of me. I 'ope you never repented that antike bargain, sir?" he asked, with tremulous lips.

"Well, I must say it didn't turn out quite as I expected," admitted Mr. Lane; "but I'm not grumbling."

"Spoke like a sportsman!" declared Mr. Dobb.

"Funny thing, when I took that stuffing to bits," observed Mr. Lane. "You'll never guess what I found hidden in the seat?"

"Bag o' gold!" suggested Mr. Dobb.

"No. An old book!"

"Never!" breathed Mr. Dobb, incredulously.

"It's a fact!" asseverated Mr. Lane. "Believe me or believe me not, there was a big, old-fashioned musty old book!"

"Fancy that!" said Mr. Dobb.

"Surprising, ain't it? Anyway, I showed it to a friend of mine, and he said it had evidently been hidden there because it was very rare."

"Sounds possible," said Mr. Dobb, his eyes watering under the strain of enforced gravity.

"As it happened, my friend was right," said Mr. Lane. "Of course, he knew something about old books, and that was why I showed it to him. Anyway, it was a rare old first edition, ever so old, and I sent it up to London, and sold it for thirty guineas!"

"What!" cried Mr. Dobb.

"Sold it for thirty guineas!" repeated Mr. Lane. "Thirty guineas for an old book that anyone who didn't know its value might have thrown away."

"Don't believe it!" declared Mr. Dobb, huskily.

"Well, here's the cheque," said Mr. Lane; "and here's the correspondence."

Mr. Dobb gazed at the documentary evidence. Then, without a word, he tottered into the shop parlour and took the unprecedented step of drinking a glass of undiluted water. The fortunate Mr. Lane, looking round for other chairs to prod and finding none, went out of the dusty little emporium into the sunshine.

EPISODE VIII

A SPECIAL PERFORMANCE

MR. HORACE DOBB, released from the ministrations of the proprietor of the Magnolia Toilet Saloon, critically inspected the reflection of his shaven chin, and then charged Mr. Joseph Tridge with being a niggard as to face-powder.

"'Ere you are!" scornfully said Mr. Tridge, passing him the puff. "'Elp yourself! Go on! Put some on your nose, too. I would, if I was you! Take some 'ome with you in a paper bag. 'Ere, steady!" he ended, snatching the puff out of Mr. Dobb's hand. "It's for powdering, not whitewashing, remember!"

"You ain't got a little complexion cream to spare, I suppose?" asked Mr. Dobb, unabashed. "No, I thought not. Well, then, what about a little drop o' brilliantine, eh? This it? Thanks."

"Don't you be a fool, 'Orace," earnestly counselled Mr. Tridge. "I'm surprised at you, I am, reely! Runnin' after gals at your time of life! What would your missis say?"

"I ain't running after no gals," denied Mr. Dobb. "I ain't even slow-marching after 'em. But I wants to look just-so, because I'm making a sort of deboo in 'igh society this evening."

"Fish supper with the dook and duchess, I suppose?" ironically hazarded Mr. Tridge.

"No; but it's the opening night at the theayter to-night," explained Mr. Dobb, "and I'm going to sit

somewhere near the front seats. 'Ow's that for getting on in life, eh?"

"Free complimentaries," diagnosed Mr. Tridge, "for promising to show window-bills. Why, I've got orders for two myself."

"'Ave you though?" said Mr. Dobb, a little dashed by this discounting of his social value. "Why, I was going to hinvite you to come along with me. We could 'ave tossed up to see 'oo paid for the programme. If you don't come, I shall only 'ave to take the missis, and I don't want to waste a seat deliberate like that, if I can 'elp it."

"I've asked Peter Lock to come along with me," returned Mr. Tridge. "It's 'is night off from the billiard-room. 'Ere, what about asking old Sam Clark, eh? The four of us going together to the theayter like we used to do in the good old, bad old days of the 'Jane Gladys.'"

"Right-o!" agreed Mr. Dobb, very readily. "Anything to hencourage my missis in 'ome life. We'll all four go together. But no getting chucked out in a bunch, though, mind," he stipulated. "I've got business reasons for not wanting to upset the chap what's running the theayter now."

"It's a noo management," mentioned Mr. Tridge.

"I know. It's the fifth noo management in fourteen months, so they tells me. Shore'aven don't seem what you might call a hartistic place, do it? Specially when they done Shakespeare six weeks ago. Only done 'im once, they did, but that was enough. That was what reely led to the sale."

"What sale?" inquired Mr. Tridge.

"Why, the last time it shut. They 'ad a sale of fixtures up there, when the creditors wouldn't take out

their money in tickets. That was where the glass shandy-leary came from."

"Shandy-'ow-much?" demanded Mr. Tridge.

"Shandy-leary. I've got it in my shop now. I bought it off a chap what bought it at the sale. Great big thing it is, what used to 'ang in the centre of the roof. 'Andsome thing it is, too, in its way, all made of sparkly bits of glass as big as——"

"As big as a second-'and dealer's Sunday scarfpin," pointedly suggested Mr. Tridge.

"Aye, pretty nigh," accepted Mr. Dobb, with complacency. "I'm going to sell it back soon to the chap what's running the theayter now."

"Does 'e know you're going to?"

"Not yet, 'e don't," admitted Mr. Dobb. "Why, 'e don't even know I've got it yet. But I've got some one to sound 'im to see whether 'e's at all inclined to buy it, and 'e said 'e won't 'ave it at no price. But it takes two to make a quarrel, don't it? Anyway, whether 'e reely wants it or not, 'e's going to buy it."

"And 'ow are you going to make 'im do that?" inquired Mr. Tridge, with every faith in his old shipmate's commercial omnipotence.

"Ah, I ain't thought quite so far as that yet," confessed Mr. Dobb. "All I've fixed in my mind is that 'e's going to give me thirty-five quid for that shandy-leary. It's old Joe Bindley, that retired builder chap, what's the noo proprietor, you know. 'E bought up the theayter cheap, as a speckylation, and 'e reckons to make a big success out of it. You ought to 'ear 'im talk about what 'e's going to do at 'is theayter! Anyone might think that the next war was going to be perdooced there as a front piece to the big play of the evening."

"I see 'e's starting with a month's hengagement, straight off, of the world-famous hactress, Miss Margureety Delafayne," observed Mr. Tridge, studying a printed announcement on his wall. "'Oo's she, anyway? It's the first time I've 'eard of 'er."

"Ah, she's one of the good-old-might-'ave-been-p'r'apsers," Mr. Dobb somewhat ungallantly informed him. "Not that she ain't still a fine figure of a woman, far as golden 'air and a sealskin coat and light blue satin goes. But hact? Oh, dear me, no! It's more like a fit of the dimals that hacting. Bindley reckons she's going to get all the neighbourhood into the reg'lar 'abit of coming to 'is theayter. She's more likely to cure 'em of the 'abit, to my way of thinking."

"You've seen 'er, then?"

"I paid to see 'er hact once, at Yarmouth. I've always reckoned I've been three pints out from that day to this. Well, I'm off now to fix up with old Sam Clark."

"Meet you outside the show at seven-thirty," said Mr. Tridge. "Mind you ain't late."

"I never am late," replied Mr. Dobb simply, "when there's something for nothing."

Thus it was ordained, and thus it came about that a few hours later, four contiguous seats at the Shorehaven Theatre were occupied by that old-established fellowship of graduates from the baneful academy of the "Jane Gladys." From the time of their processional entry to the rising of the curtain on the play, each of the quartet expressed his individuality in his customary manner.

Mr. Horace Dobb, reflecting very patently the prosperity of the little shop he had married, leaned back in his seat with an air of bored patronage and made

great play with a ring which, when happily it caught the light at a certain elusive angle, gleamed quite visibly. Mr. Joseph Tridge, wearing something new and very arrestive in the way of check suitings, could not but be correspondingly sportive and genial in the truculent, domineering manner. Mr. Peter Lock, trim and brisk and debonair as ever, maintained a joyous flow of scandal about such of the attendance present as had their secret histories discussed in the billiard-room of the "Royal William." And the plump and venerable Mr. Samuel Clark, his rubicund face aglow with happiness in the reunion, beamed impartially on all around him, and with a conspicuous, festooning forefinger, beat time to the orchestra's overture.

But soon after the commencement of the play there developed changes of temperament, subtle and slight at first, but broadening progressively as the performance continued. And thus, before the curtain had descended on the first act, Mr. Peter Lock's brightness was quite gone, and he was sitting in a round-shouldered way, with his arms drooping limply down beside him, while the eyes with which he regarded the stage had in them nothing but dull resignation.

And Mr. Joseph Tridge was fast asleep, and even snoring a little, though this was a venial transgression which appeared to arouse only the emotion of envy among his neighbours. And Mr. Horace Dobb had ceased to look patronizing, but had retained an added intensity to his expression of boredom, and had now come to vehement sighings at frequent intervals.

But Mr. Clark showed no such unfavouring listlessness towards the performance as his companions were exhibiting. Manifestly to the contrary, Mr. Clark was craning forward in his seat with so eager an interest

in the drama that he was quite unconscious of the repressive glances continually directed at him over her shoulder by the lady whose chair-back he was gripping in his excitement. His face betokened the raptest concentration of attention, and several times he had offered audible and emphatic comment on the goodness of the play, and once he had even stared round him challengingly to see why no one endorsed his high opinions.

And when at length the curtain swept down to terminate the first act, there would have been a complete silence in the auditorium had not Mr. Clark at once begun to beat his vast palms together in emphatic approval. A few hirelings of the management, posted remotely about the building, rather timidly followed Mr. Clark's lead, and the curtain, after billowing uncertainly for a while, rose again to reveal Miss Marguerite Delafayne standing solitary on the stage. In a way that was not entirely devoid of defiance, Miss Delafayne began to bow her acknowledgments of the tributes to her art.

"Brayvo!" cried Mr. Clark, leaping to his feet and achieving an almost cyclonic quality in his applause. "Brayvo!"

Miss Delafayne, moved by such warm partisanship in an otherwise unresponsive world, looked straight at Mr. Clark and curtsied in the most queenly manner in his direction. Mr. Clark, placing his fingers to his lips, was about to pay the lady still greater homage, when she went on to bow to a pseudo-enthusiastic programme-seller at the back of the gallery, and Mr. Clark sat down with a dazed but happy expression on his face.

The curtain descended again, and immediately a heavy, discouraged hush enwrapped the theatre.

"Well, thank goodness we ain't bought a programme, anyway!" said Mr. Dobb, at last breaking silence.

"I'm going to buy one now," announced Mr. Clark.

"Don't you be an old fool, Sam," urged Mr. Tridge. "I shouldn't 'ave thought anyone would want to know more about this blessed show than they could 'elp."

"I want to know the—the scenes and—and the names," explained Mr. Clark, hesitantly.

"Then borrer a programme, if you must know the worst," counselled Mr. Tridge.

"I—I want one to keep," stated Mr. Clark, shyly.

"To *keep*?" exclaimed Mr. Tridge.

"Sam," observed the perspicacious Mr. Dobb, "you're a gay old dorg!"

"Did you see 'er look at me?" demanded Mr. Clark, in a burst of senile vanity. "Straight at me!"

"I'd just as soon be looked at by a sack of flour!" declared Mr. Tridge; and instantly there arose a quarrel so bitter that, in the interests of peace, Mr. Dobb had to take the extreme step of curtailing it by offering to pay for refreshment at some convenient hostelry outside.

Mr. Tridge, closing at once with this invitation, rose to follow Mr. Dobb from the building, and so did Mr. Lock. Mr. Clark, however, created a blank amazement by returning an unprecedented answer to such an offer.

"We might be late and miss a bit of the next hact," he explained; and his companions, after solemnly shaking their heads at each other for some moments, went silently away.

They did not return in time for the next act, nor for the next act after that, though such were Mr. Clark's

blissful preoccupations of mind that he did not notice the defection of his comrades until he was passing through the lobby at the conclusion of the performance. And even then he went back into the auditorium to look for his friends, and was much mystified by their disappearance.

It was three days later ere Mr. Clark and Mr. Dobb again met. Mr. Dobb, finding himself near the ferry, had strolled thither to have a few words with his old shipmate. To his surprise, he found a substitute on duty in the ferry-boat, and discovered from that gentleman that for the last three days Mr. Clark, utilizing his favourite explanation of colic, had been making holiday and seemingly intended to make holiday for several days longer.

Mr. Dobb, learning that the present whereabouts of Mr. Clark were unknown to his informant, strolled back into the town, and, at the corner of the High Street, he encountered Mr. Clark.

"'Ullo!" said Mr. Clark, awkwardly.

"Why ain't you at the ferry?" asked Mr. Dobb.

"That's *my* business, 'Orace," stated Mr. Clark, restively.

"I know it is!" retorted Mr. Dobb. "That's why I'm asking you why you ain't there!" He apprehended the gala nature of Mr. Clark's attire, and started in surprise. "You—you ain't been love-making, 'ave you, Sam—not on your wages?" he asked.

"No such luck!" replied Mr. Clark, ruefully. "But," he added, "I know where she lodges, anyway."

"'Oo?"

"Why, Miss Margureety Delafayne," replied Mr. Clark, voicing the name in cadences of mournful satisfaction.

"Oh, 'er!" said Mr. Dobb, with scant interest. "I'd forgot all about that, and I thought you 'ad, too. You generally does."

"I've been watching 'er go in and out of 'er front door these last two days," stated the love-lorn Mr. Clark. "Watched, unbeknown, from the corner of the road, I 'ave. I've just come from there now. Are you going to the theayter to-night?"

Mr. Dobb's reply was pietistic in form.

"Well, *I'm* going," said Mr. Clark. "I ain't missed a performance yet."

And with that proud boast he went on his way, and Mr. Dobb resumed his homeward path. Passing the Magnolia Toilet Saloon, a salvo of taps upon the window claimed his attention, and glancing inside, he found himself being beckoned imperatively by the proprietor.

"Peter Lock's looking all over the place for you," Mr. Tridge informed him. "'E wants you to 'urry round to the 'Royal William' soon as ever you can."

"Why, what's up?"

"The chap 'oose wife tried to poison 'im with the big eyes——" replied Mr. Tridge, a trifle obscurely.

"Poison 'im with big eyes?" murmured Mr. Dobb, grappling with the enigma.

"In the first hact," supplied Mr. Tridge, helpfully. "So Peter says. I was asleep."

"Oh, now I know! Well, what about 'im?"

"'E's practising 'is billiards at the 'Royal William.' Peter thought 'e might come in useful somewhere, sometime, some'ow. *You* know—that glass shandyleary of yours."

Mr. Dobb, without wasting time on mere social amenities, straightway turned and set out for the

"Royal William." Entering the billiard-room, he found it to be occupied by but two persons. Of these, one was the marker, Mr. Peter Lock, and the other was an individual of attenuated physique, theoretically clean-shaven, but actually rather blue-chinned. A top hat, worn occipitally, graced the stranger's head, and an overcoat, featuring some kind of strange fur on its collar, hung on a peg behind the door. These clues, in conjunction with Mr. Tridge's foreword, enabled Mr. Dobb to exploit the occasion without further assistance from Mr. Lock.

Waiting till his old shipmate held temporary possession of the table, Mr. Dobb approached the other gentleman in a manner which can only be described as reverential.

"I 'ope you'll pardon me for the liberty I'm taking, sir," he observed, "but, of course, I recognize you by sight, and I want to thank you for the treat you give me the other night."

"I—I don't remember," returned the stranger. "Was it here, or at——"

"At the theayter, sir. The way you done your part!" breathed Mr. Dobb. "It was wonderful!"

"Oh, *that!*" exclaimed the other, with marked gratification.

"Most henjoyable, sir! Most hinteresting! Most—most hartistic!"

"Very good of you, sir, to say so. Of course it's a strong part, to begin with, and——"

"Ah, but it takes a strong hactor to make the most of a strong part," contended Mr. Dobb.

"Well, I must confess that that big scene I have in the second act——"

“Splendid!” roundly asserted Mr. Dobb. “I reg’lar ’ad to grip my chair.”

“And then at the very end, you know,” went on the other, with ready enthusiasm, “when I come forward and say, ‘So, madam, we meet again——’ ”

“Don’t know when I’ve been more thrilled,” said Mr. Dobb; and turned to frown his disapproval of a slight hissing noise Mr. Lock was making behind his palm.

“Got a bit of a cold, sir,” explained Mr. Lock; and retired into his handkerchief for some moments.

“A wonderful performance, sir,” said Mr. Dobb, addressing the stranger again. “And that of your good lady, too—Miss Delafayne, I mean. Most——”

“Miss Delafayne is not my wife, sir. I appreciate the privilege of being her business manager, but as for being her husband—— In short, her temper! The artistic temperament, of course—the artistic temperament, but—— As a matter of fact, Miss Delafayne is indeed Miss Delafayne—she is unmarried. However, you were kind enough to be talking of my humble talents——”

“And marvellous indeed they are!” declared Mr. Dobb. “And I’m glad to ’ave ’ad the chance, sir, of thanking you for the pleasure your performance give me. And I should be much honoured if you’d allow me to offer you some refreshment on the strength of it.”

Very graciously did the other permit Mr. Dobb to achieve this distinction, and Mr. Lock at once performed the necessary evolutions with a tray.

“Your very good ’ealth, Mr.—er——” said Mr. Dobb. “Let me see, what is it? I forgets the name, just for the minnit, but I remember the face. ’Oo could ever

forget it, after 'aving seen it once—on the stage, I mean?"

"Bellaby," declaimed the gentleman in a fine, rolling voice—"Marmaduke Bellaby, sir, at your service."

Of the swift development that thereupon characterized the friendship thus began, it is unnecessary to write in detail. Suffice it to say that within thirty minutes Mr. Dobb was being addressed, with great frequency, as "laddie." And, as a pendant to this, it may be added that, at an hour perilously close to that appointed for the raising of the curtain at the theatre, Mr. Bellaby hurriedly emerged from the portal of the "Royal William" and went up the road at a trot, already fumbling alarmedly among his tie and collar-stud and waistcoat buttons as he ran. A cordial invitation he had extended at the last moment to Mr. Dobb to witness the performance again that evening as a guest was refused, regretfully but very definitely, on the score of a previous engagement.

"Not likely!" said Mr. Dobb to Mr. Lock, when they were alone. "Once bit, twice jolly, blessed careful! But I'm glad you sent for me, Peter. I think 'e'll be useful—when I can see my way to using 'im. Anyway, I'm meeting 'im again to-morrow, and I shall take partic'lar good care to meet 'im again and again for the next few days, and 'oo knows what's going to 'appen in this strange world?"

"You do!" answered Mr. Lock. "Very often, anyway!"

Superfluous is it to say that Mr. Dobb kept to his expressed intentions with regard to the gifted Mr. Bellaby, for to beat along convivial paths in quest of profitable quarry was ever the form of sportsmanship that appealed most strongly to Mr. Dobb.

So that Mr. Dobb and Mr. Bellaby became the closest of intimates within a very brief while, and there were few of his spare hours which Mr. Bellaby did not pass in the company of Mr. Dobb. And this was a state of affairs which naturally exercised a financial reaction upon the latter gentleman, though he bore philosophically with the expenditure in expectation of the reward it would bring him eventually.

For the moment, however, he had to admit to himself that the precise means to secure this reward was a matter which obstinately eluded his ingenuity, so that his boon companionship with Mr. Bellaby had in it something of that same fatalistic force which impels the gambler to continue to wager optimistically on the same unsuccessful racehorse.

And so, for several days, the friendship bloomed in profuse flower, and behind Mr. Dobb's artless joviality and pride in the companionship of the gifted Mr. Bellaby there was no hint of the problem that obsessed his mind. It was only when Mr. Dobb was alone that geniality dropped from him and was succeeded by a morose calculativeness.

And this was his mood one evening when, parting from Mr. Bellaby at the very stage-door with the expressed intention of attending to certain neglected business, he encountered the love-sick Mr. Samuel Clark.

Dull and vacant was the look in Mr. Clark's eyes, dejected was the hump of his shoulders. Had not Mr. Dobb accosted him he would have passed straight on, so apathetic was the stout ferryman towards his surroundings.

"'Ullo, Misery!" greeted Mr. Dobb.

"'Ullo, 'Orace," returned Mr. Clark, in slow, unhappy tones.

"When's the wedding coming off?" bantered Mr. Dobb.

Mr. Clark started violently and said something reprehensible about Mr. Dobb's inquisitiveness.

"What—is it all off, Sam?" teased Mr. Dobb.

"It are! Not that there was any real chance of it ever being on, but—but——"

He shook his head dolefully and added an unkind aspiration with regard to Mr. Joseph Bindley's future state.

"Why, what's 'e to do with it?"

"Heverything! Mind you, I was never fool enough to think that a girl like 'er—well a woman like 'er, then," he amended, in deference to Mr. Dobb's startled exclamation—"that a woman like 'er would ever take to a old chap like me. I admit I was romantical, but—but one never knows, do one?"

"You might 'ave been 'er ideal, Sam," conceded Mr. Dobb. "As you says, one can't ever know for sure."

"Of course, if ever I'd got to know 'er properly——" said Mr. Clark. "I did once fetch a cab for 'er," he went on, smiling pathetically at the happy memory. "And she thanked me and give me thrippence. At least, she sent it out to me with 'er thanks. I ain't ever spoke to 'er, reely. And now that 'ere Bindley——"

He stopped emotionally, and then again voiced an uncharitable interest in Mr. Bindley's eventual destination.

"Yes; but what's Bindley to do with it?" asked Mr. Dobb. "This is a free country, ain't it?"

"Bindley's a-carrying on with 'er!" stated Mr. Clark, passionately. "I've been keeping my heye on 'er, so

I know. This last day or two I've stood 'elpless at the corner of 'er road and seen 'im call for 'er and take 'er out time and time again. Good as hengaged to each other, they are, so 'er landlady's 'usband's brother told me—and learning *that* cost me one and seven. Yes; and this very hafternoon I see 'em side by side on a seat on the cliffs, where I'd followed 'em, and they was playing slap-'ands, if you please. What do you make of that?"

"You'll 'ave to promise to be nothing more than a brother to 'er, after all, Sam," said Mr. Dobb, with an unsympathetic levity which caused his companion to stare at him in a wounded way and then stalk offendedly on.

Mr. Dobb, resuming his way, reached his abode, and sat down in an arm-chair to indulge in meditation. At the end of twenty minutes he leaped to his feet.

"Good enough!" he cried, joyously.

Mr. Marmaduke Bellaby, sauntering abroad on the morrow, found himself met by Mr. Dobb. In this there was no novelty, nor was there in their consequent adjournment to the "Royal William."

"And 'ow did the show go last night?" asked Mr. Dobb.

"Great, laddie, great!" returned the other, though not entirely convincingly.

"'Ave a crowded haudience?"

Mr. Bellaby regarded Mr. Dobb quizzically.

"Well, we didn't exactly have to turn them away from the doors," he confessed.

"I know," said Mr. Dobb. "I 'appened to look in later on."

"What for?"

"To make certain," replied Mr. Dobb. "You see,

between you and me, it's no secret that business is rotten at the theayter, is it? And it certainly was rotten last night—not half it wasn't, was it?"

"Been like that all the week," gloomily said Mr. Bellaby.

"Well, that could be haltered," observed Mr. Dobb. sagely. "I got a idea. Do us both good, it will."

"What's the scheme?"

"Lose 'er jewels," whispered Mr. Dobb, mysteriously.

Mr. Bellaby, with a superior smile, stigmatized the suggestion as both stale and threadbare. To this Mr. Dobb replied that, elaborated according to the notion he had in mind, the artifice would none the less prove successful.

"Mind you, it's quite time we did something," frankly conceded Mr. Bellaby. "Talk about frosts! She was saying to me only yesterday that if things didn't improve—— Of course for my own sake, I'd like things to improve, but what can one do? We'd all like to hit on something good. But as for losing her jewels, my dear old boy—oh, my dear old boy!"

"Never mind if they did start the idea in the year dot," retorted Mr. Dobb. "The Shore'ven public ain't too used to the idea to sit up and take notice, anyway. She's got plenty of jew'l'ry to lose, ain't she? For myself, I never 'eard anyone rattle quite so much on the stage as she do. Of course, *we* knows it ain't real, but——"

"It's such an old, old scheme, though, laddie," objected Mr. Bellaby.

"You wait and listen to me. I tell you candid that I want this idea worked because it's bound to be a good hadvertisement for me as well as for 'er. She'll get

most good out of it. People'll talk about it, and they'll flock to see 'er at the theayter. But they'll 'ear about my business, too, and that's what I want."

"Well, let's hear, anyway," said Mr. Bellaby.

"It begins with 'er 'aving 'er jew'l'ry stole. That's to say, you arrange things with 'er, and brings the whole lot down to me secret. Well, next thing, you plasters all over the town a full list of the missing jewels, except, of course, there's no need to use the word 'himitation.'"

"Of course not," agreed Mr. Bellaby.

"You 'eads the bill 'One 'Undred Pounds Reward,' promising that to anyone assisting in the recovery of 'er jewels. And you lets the town study that 'ere bill for a day or two. And then a chap brings the jewels to my shop and tries to get me to buy 'em."

"Eh?"

"'E can't read print," explained Mr. Dobb, with a wink, "so 'e don't know about them bills. I charges 'im with 'aving stolen 'em, and am just going to send for the police, when 'e clears out in a 'urry, leaving the jewels with me."

"Ah, now I see!" observed the other.

"Hexactly. *I've* 'ad 'em all the time. Well, I now applies for the reward. The affair 'as got into the papers, and every one's talking about it. There's a special performance, where she wears all 'er recovered jew'l'ry, and you 'ave me up on the stage and 'and over the reward to me—simply a bit of blank paper in a henvelope, of course, but I get a little publicity and *she* gets a lot of publicity, and——"

"Not at all bad," commended Mr. Bellaby. "You being a local man, it looks much more genuine."

"In course it do. That's just the idea."

"'Pon my word, it's worth doing. Come to think of it, though, there's no need for the jewels to leave her possession really. As long as they're hidden——"

"Why, that's just where you miss the best part of it!" urged Mr. Dobb. "When that chap runs out of my shop, the jewels is spilled all over the place. If you like, 'e 'alf stuns me too, to prevent persoot. I know one or two safe chaps what can be passing a minute or two after it's supposed to 'ave 'appened, and they can 'elp gather up the jewels and bathe my fore'ead and so on. 'Ow's that for a yarn for the 'Shore'aven Gazette,' eh? Why, it's as good as a play in itself."

Mr. Bellaby, critically examining the project in all its facets, came at last to the warmest agreement as to its merits, and there followed a period of undertones. Then, to demonstrate his zeal in her cause, Miss Delafayne's manager straightway departed to set the scheme before her, and Mr. Dobb ordered himself a drink, which, before he consumed it, he waved at his reflection in a mirror.

In a short while Mr. Bellaby buoyantly returned. He told Mr. Dobb that Miss Delafayne had been suffering very severely indeed from her artistic temperament when first he had broached the subject to her, but he had left her in the sunniest and most compliant of moods. Mr. Joseph Bindley, too, it seemed, was thoroughly convinced of the merits of the scheme, and had directed that his name, as proprietor of the theatre, should figure in conjunction with Miss Delafayne's as offerers of the reward.

Things being thus satisfactorily in trim, Mr. Bellaby departed again to compile an imaginative list of the jewellery to be lost by the world-famous actress. This done, he left the catalogue with a printer for immediate

attention, and repaired once more to the "Royal William," where he handed to Mr. Dobb an undistinguished-looking parcel.

Mr. Dobb, returning home a little later with this packet under his arm, was hailed by Mr. Tridge from the latter's doorway.

"What you got there, 'Orace?" asked Mr. Tridge, curiously.

"A order for a glass shandyleary," replied Mr. Dobb; and passed on with lightsome step.

That same evening the town of Shorehaven found itself furnished with material for thrilling gossip, for scarce a thoroughfare was there that did not exhibit somewhere adown its length the tally of the jewels that the talented lady temporarily living in their midst had had the misfortune to lose. In front of every printed handbill, with its fascinating heading of "£100 Reward," there lingered an absorbed group, reading amazedly of ropes of pearls, and large and small diamond brooches, of valuable rubies, and rare metals. The manner of their disappearance, and the scene whence they had vanished, were details tactfully left vague, so that the ends of publicity were further served by this opportunity to speculate whether the noted absent-mindedness of genius or mere criminal avarice were responsible for the lady's loss.

For two full days the town theorized and clicked its tongue, and spoke either sympathetically or sneeringly of the affair. Attendance at the theatre suddenly improved, and appreciation which had been denied to Miss Delafayne as a performer was now showered on her as a lady who was supporting material loss with great dignity. Sceptics there certainly were, but these were in a minority, and their number would have been

even less had that perfervid admirer, Mr. Samuel Clark, had the physical powers to convert those disbelievers he happened to encounter.

And then one afternoon Mr. Horace Dobb sent a dictatorial and even arrogant message to Mr. Joseph Bindley, demanding that gentleman's attendance at the little shop in Fore Street at once. Mr. Bindley, a gentleman plain of speech and blunt of manner, went immediately to Mr. Dobb to ask him what he meant by such a message.

"I got a glass shandyleary what belongs by rights to the ceiling of your theayter," returned Mr. Dobb, equably, "and I want to sell it to you."

Mr. Bindley, as became a man who had attained the position of theatrical proprietor, heatedly gave his opinion of such impertinence and strode to the door.

"Ain't you rather mixed up with me to act so 'aughty?" asked Mr. Dobb, in civil accents.

Mr. Bindley halted and swung round to stare at Mr. Dobb.

"Don't you get trying to play any tricks with *me!*" he warned Mr. Dobb. "We've got a understanding, and you stick to it, and I stick to it, and there's an end of it! I don't want no 'anky-panky!"

"Thirty-five quid—that was what I was going to ask for that shandyleary," mentioned Mr. Dobb. "Only I've 'ad a lot of hincidental expenses with it lately, so I'm asking thirty-eight now. And it's worth it—well worth it. You 'ave a look at it, and you'll say so, too. It's a bargain."

"What's the game?" said Mr. Bindley, aggressively. "What are you trying on—a sort of blackmail?"

"Well, yes, that's what it really is," acquiesced Mr.

Dobb, very smoothly. "Only you call it that again, and up goes the price a quid a time! See?"

Mr. Bindley, snorting, laid his palm on the handle of the door.

"They tells me Miss Delafayne 'as got a dooce of a temper," observed Mr. Dobb, irrelevantly.

Mr. Bindley plucked open the door and marched out. Five yards away he halted and came back again to the threshold.

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded.

"It's a lovely shandyleary," declared Mr. Dobb.

"To blazes with your shandyleary, and you too!" bawled the choleric Mr. Bindley. "Why don't you speak straight out?"

"Just what I'm going to," answered Mr. Dobb; and abruptly abandoned his pose of suavity. "Look 'ere, Bindley, I've got you tied up tight! See? 'Ere, glance at that little notice on the wall there. 'Strictly Business!' that says, don't it? Well, that's my motter. I've been planning to sell you that shandyleary, and I'm going to."

"Huh!" scornfully returned Mr. Bindley.

"Huh-ing or no huh-ing, I'm going to! You can't 'elp yourself. You've been trying a bit of artfulness with the public over them lost jewels, so you can't squeal if some one else tries 'is artfulness on *you*. Fust of all, you don't mind admitting I've got that parcel of coloured beads and brass, do you? Suppose I goes and calls in the first ten chaps I meet outside and tells 'em 'ow that jew'l'ry come into my 'ands? That would make you look pretty foolish, wouldn't it?"

"I could say you stole them."

"Not good enough. I can prove any amount of

alleybys. I could prove there couldn't be no other way they *could* 'ave got into my 'ands except through Bellaby."

"I could say he stole them, and you were the receiver."

"Yes, so you could," agreed Mr. Dobb; "and we wouldn't 'alf 'ave a chatty time in the dock explaining 'ow it all really came about. They wouldn't overlook your trying to deceive 'em, as you 'ave done, in a 'urry."

"So, I'm to buy the shandyleary to prevent the truth coming out, am I?" said Mr. Bindley, not without admiration. "It's pretty smart, but not smart enough."

"You've been smart enough in your time, from what they tells me about you," returned Mr. Dobb. "You ought to be smart enough now to see you're cornered. Why, I've got you any number of ways. I could sue you for the reward, for example, if I went about the thing carefully."

"Well, couldn't I deny they were the jewels? They won't agree exact with the description, you know."

"Ah, I thought you might say that! That's my trump card. You say they ain't 'er jewels? Very well, I hexibits the 'ole jolly collection in the very front of my window, and pastes the reward bill over 'em, and writes a paper beside 'em what says: 'These jewels 'ave been found and 'ave not been claimed by anyone. They are all false, and Miss Margureety Delafayne says they ain't 'ers.' That'll start people putting two and two together, won't it?"

"Let 'em!" cried Mr. Bindley, forcefully. "Before ever I'll be blackmailed out of——"

"Easy enough to talk like that," said Mr. Dobb, reproachfully. "But 'aven't you any consideration

for 'er? Why soon as ever the story gets round the town, she'll be the laughing-stock of the place. 'Er and 'er false jewellery will be 'eld up to ridicule wherever she goes. Besides, a little bird 'as told me that you and 'er are doing a bit of courting. Well, if what I've 'eard of 'er temper is true, she'll 'ave something to say to you for allowing 'er to be made ridic'lous like that, when you could 'ave prevented it. Straight, if I was you, Bindley, I wouldn't lose a fancy like that and a bargain of a shandyleary for thirty-nine paltry quid!"

Mr. Bindley, his complexion of a fine purple hue, stood staring at Mr. Dobb.

"It's a dirty trick!" he gasped at last.

"Dessay," said Mr. Dobb. "We've all got to live."

"And if—if I was fool enough to buy your confounded shandyleary, how do I know you wouldn't diddle me again? You might keep some of them jewels back and——"

"Not a bit of it," said Mr. Dobb, quite eagerly. "I'd be glad to 'ave finished with such trickery on the public. You give me a cheque for that shandyleary, and you can take the jew'l'ry away with you when you go, if you like. You'll know it ain't safe to stop the cheque, because that would lead to all sorts of hinquries, and——"

"I shouldn't dream of giving you a cheque. You'd blackmail me again over that, some'ow. But I've got some notes on me——"

"Forty quid?" asked Mr. Dobb, urbanely. "That's the price up-to-date, you know."

"Where's the shandyleary?" growled Mr. Bindley.

"Downstairs in my cellar. And 'ere's the jew'l'ry."

"All of it?"

Mr. Dobb, lifting a package from beneath his counter,

opened the wrapping and displayed a mass of personal ornament.

"You compare that with the list and you'll find there ain't a thing missing," he said, tying up the parcel again and returning it beneath the counter.

"Well, let's see the shandyleary," grunted Mr. Bindley, with ill grace, "and maybe I'll offer you a price for it."

"Spoke like a sensible man!" declared Mr. Dobb. "It's in three parts. I'll carry 'em up."

Elatedly he tripped down into his cellar. He was just about to pick up the nearest portion of the chandelier, when a sudden anguish assailed him. With an anxious cry he ran back up the stairway again.

The shop was empty. Mr. Dobb darted behind his counter. The parcel was gone. He raced out into the roadway, and was rewarded with a view of Mr. Bindley, the parcel tight-clutched beneath his arm, rapidly retiring down the perspective.

Mr. Dobb opened his mouth to shout, then blinked and became thoughtful. And, at long last, he made a helpless, fluttering gesture with his hands and retired forlornly into his shop.

That same evening Mr. Clark, in a state of considerable jubilation, came to see him.

"I've 'ad a bit of luck to-day!" babbled the stout ferryman. "I met 'er face to face, and I'm cured! Why, close to, she's nearly 'alf as old as I am! Bindley was with 'er, and that's what I come to see you about, to see if you can hexplain the mystery. He saw me 'anging about the corner, as usual, and 'e asked me if I'd do a little job for 'im, seeing as 'e reckoned to 'ave a busy time before the hopening of the theayter."

"Well?" sourly prompted Mr. Dobb.

“Well, first of all, ’e give me a bob, and then ’e give me a letter to deliver by ’and, marked ‘Hurgent,’ to the heditor of the ‘Shore’aven Gazette.’”

“Ah!” commented Mr. Dobb.

“But that ain’t the mystery. Then ’e give me another bob and a ’eavy little parcel to be left at the stage-door. It was addressed to Miss Margureety Delafayne, and on it was written in pencil, ‘*From one ’oo repents.*’ Now, seeing ’e was with ’er at the time, what did ’e want to send that there parcel to the theayter for? And what did that bit about repenting mean? Can *you* see any sense in it?”

“No,” said Mr. Dobb, churlishly and untruthfully.

EPISODE IX

THE GREEN EYES OF THE LITTLE BIRMINGHAM GOD

MR. HORACE DOBB sharply closed the tattered volume which had been occupying his leisure, and looked up as if something were momentarily dazzling him. And next he removed his slippared feet from the mantelshelf and very slowly and carefully described an arc with his heels until he was sitting erect in his chair, alertly yet contemplatively, and also with a suggestion of breathlessness, in the manner of one who is visited by an inspired idea.

For a full minute Mr. Dobb remained thus, and then he rose and shuffled out into his shop. Here he opened a cupboard to take from it a small metallic object. Returning to his parlour, he placed this object on the table, and it stood revealed as a posturing figure of tarnished brass, ostensibly Oriental in origin.

And now for a long, long while Mr. Dobb stared at this figure in deep meditation, with his eyelids twitching and flickering impatiently when, now and then, he found that his inventiveness had stampeded him into some mental cul-de-sac. And then he began to pace the narrow confines of the room, walking in a tense, rigid way, as though his thoughts were so delicately balanced on each other that the slightest disturbance of their equilibrium would send them scattering uselessly in all directions.

But at last he halted, nodded his head thrice with keen satisfaction at the idol on the table, and then came to the greatest animation, whistling, snapping his fingers, and even pirouetting a little.

"Green heyes and all, just like it says in the book," he remarked, enigmatically.

And with that he bundled the idol back into its cupboard, and set forth to confabulate with Mr. Peter Lock at his place of employment.

The hour happily being that usually devoted to siesta, Mr. Dobb found Mr. Lock quite alone at his post in the billiard-room at the "Royal William Hotel." Mr. Dobb at once put to Mr. Lock a direct question.

"Well, I don't know," murmured Mr. Lock, reflectively. "There's two or three of 'em. 'Specially at billiards. But, on the whole, I should say that Sinnett is. Come to think of it, I'm pretty certain he is. I don't know where you'd find a bigger, anyway."

"Ah, but does 'e think 'e's smart?" asked Mr. Dobb. "That's the kind of mug *I'm* after."

"He's the sort what's so busy thinking about his cleverness," replied Mr. Lock, "that he don't have a moment to spare for finding out what a fool he really is."

"That's the sort what's good for trade," declared Mr. Dobb, appreciatively. "'E's just the kind of chap I'm needing."

"What's the game this time?" asked Mr. Lock.

"Hidols' heyes," said Mr. Dobb. "I been reading a book," he continued in response to Mr. Lock's uncomprehending stare. "And there was a hidol in it what 'ad real hemerald heyes, and this 'ere hidol was stole from a temple somewhere out foreign by a couple of chaps what didn't know about its heyes, and there

wasn't half some murders and niggers and things in it."

"Why, that's a old, old plot," said Mr. Lock, disparagingly. "You're losing your dash, 'Orace. Fancy *you* having to go to books to learn anything!"

"P'r'aps it'll be a noo enough plot so far as this 'ere Mr. Sinnett is concerned," observed Mr. Dobb, unruffled.

He tarried some while longer in intimate discussion with Mr. Lock, and then departed to interview another member of the translated crew of the obsolete "Jane Gladys," in the plump and venerable person of Mr. Samuel Clark, the ferryman.

Mr. Clark, perceiving the advent of Mr. Dobb, came forward to greet him with marked expectancy.

"Sam, do you know a chap called Sinnett—Mr. George Sinnett?" queried Mr. Dobb.

"Squeaky voice, leather gaiters, nose like a fox?" sketched Mr. Clark.

"That's 'im."

"*Know 'im? I 'ate 'im!*" stated Mr. Clark.

"Just as well," sagely remarked Mr. Dobb. "Nothing like a bit of feeling to make a man sincere in his hefforts."

"Meaning——"

"Why, this 'ere Sinnett is the next down on our list, Sam," announced Mr. Dobb. "'E's down for a Hindian hidol—fifteen pounds."

"And us?" quickly asked Mr. Clark.

"'Alf of it between the three of you," promised the master-mind of the confederacy. "I can hafford to be generous. It only cost me three-and-six."

"Brummagem?" next inquired Mr. Clark.

"Oh, no," denied Mr. Dobb, flippantly. "Real native

Hindian work—that's why I give such a 'igh price for it."

"And Sinnett's going to pay fifteen quid for it?" raptly cried Mr. Clark. "Oh, 'appy day! A dozen times 'ave I ferried 'im across, and never so much as a a'penny for a tip! And then 'e 'ad the sauce to say that the fare ought to be less at low tide, because the distance ain't so far!"

"Never mind," said Mr. Dobb, "everything comes to 'im 'oo don't mind laying low for a bit. What's 'is 'ouse of call, do you know?"

"The 'Flag and Pennant' yonder, when 'e ain't trying to play billiards at the 'Royal William.'"

"Another thing," mentioned Mr. Dobb. "'Ave you got any old scars or wounds on you?"

"There's this old cut on the back of my 'and, what I done that night I was shaving in the fo'c'sle when Alf Runnett come down and tickled me, playful, because 'is gal 'ad gone off with some one else."

"Just right," said Mr. Dobb, examining the cicatrice; and forthwith adopted a preceptory attitude towards the stout ferryman.

Mr. Clark, at the end of ten minutes of instruction, asked a few questions to dispel one or two uncertainties of mind, and then professed a complete trust in his ability to carry out Mr. Dobb's directions. Mr. Dobb, after satisfying himself by something in the nature of a rehearsal that Mr. Clark's confidence was well founded, then passed on for the purpose of seeking an interview of connective interest with Mr. Joseph Tridge, fourth member of the confederacy established long ago in the bowels of the inglorious "Jane Gladys."

That same evening Mr. George Sinnett was taking

his ease in the bar-parlour of the "Flag and Pennant" when Mr. Samuel Clark entered the apartment a little precipitously and flung himself into a chair beside Mr. Sinnett.

"Never mind!" passionately remarked Mr. Clark. "I'll get me rights yet! Fair's fair, ain't it, Sinnett?"

Mr. Sinnett turned and regarded the ferryman with considerable coldness, for Mr. Clark was presumptuously flinging a bridge across a well-defined social space. Mr. Sinnett, noting that the ferryman was a little glassy of orb and rather reckless about the disposition of his legs, frowned unencouragingly and looked away again.

"Fair's fair!" again asserted Mr. Clark, dogmatically. "'Im and me was both in it, and that's what I got for a start-off! Look!"

Mr. Sinnett aloofly disdained the invitation, and next became aware that the back of a huge hand was floating to and fro a few inches below his nose.

"You look at that afore it slips!" directed Mr. Clark, forcefully. "See that scar? That's what I got for *my* share."

"Indeed," said Mr. Sinnett, not quite comfortably.

"In-blooming-deed!" asserted Mr. Clark. "Just as I was climbing over the railings of the temple."

"Temple? What temple?" asked Mr. Sinnett puzzled.

"Ah, I ain't such a fool as to tell you that!" vaunted Mr. Clark. "But the nigger on guard gave me a lick across the back of the 'and with 'is sword, and—— My chum got away all right, though. At least, 'e was my chum in those days. But *now*——"

Mr. Clark concluded his sentence with a deep-throated snarl, eloquent of hatred, contempt, and smouldering fury.

Mr. Sinnett, for lack of more intelligent comment, sipped at his glass in a non-committal way.

"Ah, it's a sailor's life for fun and hadventure!" cried Mr. Clark; and uttered a few tuneful roulades bearing upon his statement.

"'Ere!" he said, ceasing suddenly to be lyrical and leaning forward to address Mr. Sinnett in a kind of large confidence. "There's people fool enough to think that I'm 'anging about Shore'aven just to work the ferry! They thinks *that*, they do. Let 'em, says I. So much the better."

"Well, what *are* you doing here?"

Mr. Clark bent a little further forward and impressively tapped Mr. Sinnett on the knee.

"'E's 'ere!" he whispered.

"He? Who?"

"Why, the chap I've been telling you about. The chap 'oo 'elped me to steal the hidol out of that sacred temple. Run away with it, 'e did, but I been tracking 'im down all these years, and now I've found 'im! And if he ain't got that hidol still——"

"Valuable, is it?" asked Mr. Sinnett, intrigued.

"Can't say. 'Im and me only sneaked it for a lark, only them niggers took it so serious. It don't *look* vallyble, any'ow. Just a fat thing with a fat face and a couple of bits of green glass for heyes. 'Tain't as if it was made of gold, as you could see at a glance. There wasn't 'alf a outcry when we took it, though. After us, they was, for ever so long, and we 'ad to—to take to the jungle to give 'em the slip. And then, one night while I was asleep, my chum took the hidol out of my pocket and 'ooked off with it."

"And you followed him?" asked Mr. Sinnett, with lively interest.

"Everywhere! Worst of it was, wherever I follered 'im, 'e'd 'ad about a year's start. But at last I've found 'im, and——"

With a species of incredulous annoyance at his own garrulity, Mr. Clark stopped abruptly and rose from his chair.

"You been letting me say more than I ought to!" he remarked, severely.

"Oh, no!" returned Mr. Sinnett, smoothly. "Why, you have not even told me the name of——"

"No; and I ain't going to, neither!" truculently interrupted Mr. Clark; and marched from the apartment.

"Queer!" murmured Mr. Sinnett. "Very queer!"

A little later in the evening that gentleman, directing his course homeward by accustomed paths, came to a length of quiet, ill-lit thoroughfare, and here he found himself beholding the unusual. For, in the very middle of the roadway, he could clearly discern two men, who grappled earnestly with each other, swaying this way and that in furious embrace, and yet preserving an eerie and almost complete silence.

For some moments, Mr. Sinnett viewed this phenomenon in amazement, and then he hurried forward. His advent appeared to alarm the antagonists, for, as soon as he drew near, they parted. One of them, presenting a stout figure tolerably familiar to Mr. Sinnett, ran climsily away down the road; the other man, breathing exhaustedly, stood fumbling at his collar in a dazed way. Mr. Sinnett, peering at his features through the gloom, discovered him to be the man who kept the Magnolia Toilet Saloon, one Mr. Joseph Tridge, to wit.

"What's the game?" demanded Mr. Sinnett.

"No game," puffed Mr. Tridge. "Dead serious!"

"Wasn't that the ferryman?"

"Eh?" cried Mr. Tridge, guiltily. "No—oh, no! It wasn't 'im. It wasn't anybody *you'd* know. It—it wasn't anybody *I* know!"

"But I'm certain—— Did he attack you sudden? Why didn't you call for the police?"

"We—we'd rather not 'ave the p'lice mixed up with it. It's a—a private affair. I—I'm all right now."

Mr. Tridge then stumbled dizzily against the other man.

"Here—here!" cried Mr. Sinnett, in concern. "Why, man, you're shaking all over! Here, take my arm and lean on me. The 'Cutlass and Cannon' is quite close; you'd better have something there to pick you up and pull you together."

Mr. Tridge lurched again, most convincingly, and Mr. Sinnett, with many encouraging remarks, began to lead him towards the tavern he had named.

"All the same," muttered Mr. Tridge, hazily, "'e—'e didn't get it."

"Get what?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing! I—I wasn't thinking."

A minute or so after they reached the "Cutlass and Cannon." Here Mr. Tridge, with obvious effort, forced himself to a normal deportment, thus escaping the curiosity of the few patrons present in the tap-room. Under direction of Mr. Sinnett, he sat down in a quiet corner, and soon, under the influence of his companion's prescription, became quite animated. A second potion having been swallowed, and a third ordered, to make quite sure that the required dose should lack nothing in strength, Mr. Sinnett coughed delicately and addressed Mr. Tridge in winning accents.

"You were telling me just now, when—when you were taken queer out in the road—that that ferryman didn't get what he was after."

"Did I tell you it was the ferryman? I never meant to."

"Oh, well, you did! But there's no harm done. A secret is a secret with me. Same as I shan't tell anyone," continued Mr. Sinnett, watching his companion very closely, "that what he was after was an Indian idol."

Mr. Tridge started violently.

"'Ow did you know *that*?" he asked.

"Why, you told me so yourself. Don't you remember?" returned Mr. Sinnett, with a disarming smile.

"No; I—I don't remember. My 'ead was going round and round, and—— Well, I *am* a mug!"

He raised his glass and emptied it. Mr. Sinnett, eyeing him with intensity, immediately had the measure refilled.

"After all," said Mr. Tridge, defensively, "it's as much mine as 'is!"

"Quite," readily agreed Mr. Sinnett. "Oh, quite!"

"'E tried to serve me a dirty trick," said Mr. Tridge, placing an argumentative forefinger on Mr. Sinnett's necktie, "and I served 'im one instead. See? That's fair, ain't it?"

"Certainly," acquiesced Mr. Sinnett, with a straining quality of helpfulness underlying his tone. "Fair is fair, all the world over, of course!"

"'Course it is. And, mind you, I'm hobstinit. If 'e'd come to me, fair and reasonable, in the first place—— You see what I mean? But 'e didn't. Same as them nigger chaps what 'ave follered me about from time to time, wanting to buy it back. I told 'em

once I wouldn't sell it, and what I says I sticks to. See?"

"Clear as clear. When your mind's made up, it's made up."

"That's me," accepted Mr. Tridge, complacently. "Follered me all over the place, they 'ave and hofferd me any amount of money for it. But I ain't a wobbler. What I says I sticks to. See? Let's 'ave another!"

"Yes, let's," agreed Mr. Sinnett, eagerly.

"Tried to steal it off me, them niggers 'ave," said Mr. Tridge, disdainfully, after the rites consequent on a further libation had been observed. "But I'm a match for *them* any day. And they talks about sticking me next time they come across me. Let 'em try that on, that's all!"

"But why do you think they are so anxious to get it back? What do they want to——"

"Hidol!" sagely returned Mr. Tridge, with an explanatory wave of his glass. "What they says their prayers to. Sort of—sort of marscutt, you know. You know, if you 'ad a marscutt and you lost it, 'ow everything 'ud seem to go wrong for *you*? Not that it's brought me much luck."

"Perhaps these niggers you spoke of was at the back of it?" suggested Mr. Sinnett.

"Maybe," said Mr. Tridge, with sublime carelessness. "There was always a nigger around whenever things went wrong, anyway. But I'm a British seaman, I am, and I don't take no notice of niggers. See? And I'm surprised as *you* should, either!"

"I—I wasn't thinking," apologized Mr. Sinnett. "But tell me—do you think perhaps the idol is valuable?"

Mr. Tridge noisily laughed the notion to scorn.

"You ought to *see* it!" he cried. "Just a figger of fun made of brass, with bits of green glass for eyes."

Mr. Sinnett sat vigilantly upright.

"Oh, but are you sure they *are* glass?" he asked.

"Why, what else *could* they be?" returned Mr. Tridge.

"They—they might——" began Mr. Sinnett, and then checked himself. "Er—quite so," he ended, belatedly. "What else *could* they be?"

Mr. Tridge, carelessly flicking the question out of the range of further consideration, now stated that he felt quite recovered from the attack that had been made upon him, and earnestly besought Mr. Sinnett to maintain silence as to the incident, if for no other reason than for the good repute of the Magnolia Toilet Saloon.

"I been wild in my time," confessed Mr. Tridge, "but I don't want folks to think that I'm the rough character I used to be. See? And now good-night, and thank 'ee."

He steered for the door. Mr. Sinnett, with a kindly smile, insisted on accompanying him.

"You—you might be took bad again," he urged, linking arms with him. "I'll come your way and see you safe home."

And this he very charitably did. Mr. Tridge, although leaning heavily on his companion's supportive arm, none the less otherwise ignored the presence of Mr. Sinnett. Moved by contact with the open air to a reflective mood, Mr. Tridge, as he walked, growled aloud a resentful epitome of his conversation in the "Cutlass and Cannon," coming back again and again to dwell on his firmness in refusing to part with his

booty. Arrived at the door of his lodgings, he found his latchkey, and then turned to his escort.

“’Ullo, where did *you* spring from?” he asked, dully.

“I’ve been seeing you home,” replied Mr. Sinnett, in benevolent accents.

“Like your cheek!” grunted Mr. Tridge. “Ne’ mind! Jolly good fellow! Mush ’bliged! Goo’ night!”

He opened the door, and was passing over the threshold, when Mr. Sinnett addressed him a little desperately.

“Ain’t you—ain’t you going to ask me in?” he queried.

“No!” said Mr. Tridge, flatly. “You leave me ’lone!”

“I—I’d like to have a look at that idol you was talking about. Just—just *see* it, you know.”

“Hidol?” exclaimed Mr. Tridge, staring about him alarmedly. “What hidol? I don’t know nothing about no hidol!”

“Oh, but you’ve been telling me——”

“I ain’t never seen no hidol, not nowhere!” declared Mr. Tridge. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! Hidol, hindeed! ’Ere,” he quavered, “’ave I been fool enough to—— But that’s all right! I know I ain’t—I’ve only jus’ met you this very minute, and I ain’t ’ad time to. Well, goo’ ni’, old chum!”

He leered owlshly upon Mr. Sinnett, shook him by the hand, and lurched most realistically over the threshold. Quietly he shut the door, and instantly all inconsequence of manner vanished from him. He stood to listen to the slow, receding footsteps of Mr. Sinnett, and at that moment the two gentlemen exhibited exactly the same exultant expression of countenance.

“We got ’im!” remarked Mr. Tridge to himself, with vast satisfaction.

"Talk about sheer *luck!*" joyously murmured Mr. Sinnett, as he walked away. "George, my boy, you're on the track of something good! Why, it's like one of them old detective tales come true!"

For the ensuing portion of the week, Mr. Sinnett's everyday pursuits suffered neglect, for that worthy had apparently conceived an obsession to have either Mr. Tridge or Mr. Clark continually under observation. And so for each of several mornings he entered the Magnolia Toilet Saloon and sat him down on the bench where those waited who required Mr. Tridge's professional services.

Here Mr. Sinnett would become so engrossed in the newspaper that he would waive his turn for attention till he was the only patron remaining. And when he had no further pretext for lingering, he would be shaved, and then go off to the ferry, where he would be needlessly rowed across the ferry and return by that conveyance almost immediately.

And in the afternoon he would find that he had need of toilet soap, or a bottle of hair-oil, and he would repair to Mr. Tridge's establishment to procure such article, making the matter of purchase as protracted a business as possible. And then he would saunter down to the ferry and, alleging that sea air was good for him, be taken several consecutive journeys across the river under the impulse of Mr. Clark's sculls.

And in the evening he would visit the "Flag and Pennant" inn, or such other tavern as might be extending its hospitality to Mr. Tridge or Mr. Clark, and here he would laboriously contrive desultory conversation with one or other of them until doors had to be closed, when his way would strangely coincide with the

homeward path of that gentleman of the twain in whose society closing-time had found him.

But never a word was there spoken of an idol of any sort. Twice or thrice Mr. Sinnett had broached Imperialism as a topic of conversation, being thus enabled to allude to India in a natural, unforced way. But mention of that empire had instantly caused both Mr. Tridge and Mr. Clark to look suspicious and markedly avoid any development of the subject, so that Mr. Sinnett had to travel warily back, by way of Canada and Australia and New Zealand, to shallower waters.

And, for their part, Mr. Tridge and Mr. Clark bore the partiality of Mr. Sinnett for their society with nothing but a nice air of gratitude for patronage. Not once did either of them make allusion to that recent evening when they had shown him something of the inner side of their confidence. And Mr. Sinnett was glad that this should be so, for clearly, he argued, it showed that the conversations had had no abiding place in their memories. Wherefore, then, he cultivated their company, waiting for a chance word to swell the bulk of his secret information and give him assistance in turning this knowledge to his own profit.

"Ever seen a cat waiting outside a mouse-'ole? That's 'im!" Mr. Clark privately reported to Mr. Horace Dobb.

"A bit of waiting don't do no 'arm," said Mr. Dobb, sagaciously. "The more time 'e spends the less 'e'll like to think that it might 'ave been wasted."

So that it was not till one evening in the middle of the following week that Mr. Sinnett was thrilled by a further unwinding of the spool of adventure.

On that night, neither Mr. Clark nor Mr. Tridge

were to be discovered in accustomed haunts, and Mr. Sinnett, fearful of this coincidence, went from hostelry to hostelry in feverish search. Returning to the "Royal William Hotel" for a second time, he again questioned the billiard-marker.

"No, Mr. Tridge ain't been in here yet, sir," Mr. Lock replied. "In fact, I was just wondering whether you'd come across him anywhere. There's been some one inquiring very eager after him since you was here a hour ago."

"Who was it—that ferryman?"

"No, sir; a dark gentleman."

"A—a nigger?" exclaimed Mr. Sinnett.

"Well, yes; except that he was dressed quite respectable," acquiesced Mr. Lock. "Oh, very respectable indeed. He looked as if he might be pretty well off at home."

"Did he say he wanted to see Tridge important?"

"Very important, so he said, sir. He said something about only just having managed to find out where he was, and about a boat sailing back almost immediate."

"Um-m-m," commented Mr. Sinnett, and thoughtfully began to stroke his chin. "Did he—did the nigger say where he was stopping, or anything like that?"

"No, sir. I told him where Mr. Tridge lodged, and——"

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that!"

"No, sir? Why not?"

"Oh, because——"

Mr. Sinnett, without furnishing the explanation, stopped short, for Mr. Tridge had just entered the room. Conspicuously bandaged was Mr. Tridge's right hand, and a huge asterisk of sticking-plaster decorated his left cheek.

“’Ad a bit of a haccident,” he returned, evasively, when Mr. Sinnett asked a surprised question. “Cut meself.”

“How?” further inquired Mr. Sinnett.

“With a knife,” said Mr. Tridge.

“Whatever was you a-doing of, sir?” asked Mr. Lock.

“What the devil’s that got to do with you?” roared Mr. Tridge. “You shut up and mind your own business!”

“Sorry, sir,” humbly apologized Mr. Lock. “By the way, sir, there was a dark gent inquiring for you.”

“I know,” said Mr. Tridge, curtly. “I met ’im!”

And now the door opened, and the visage of Mr. Clark stared round it. Vengeful and gloating was the stout ferryman’s face, and he nodded with malevolent satisfaction at Mr. Tridge.

“Ah, ’e told me ’e ’ad!” he cried. “Good luck to ’im!”

“You get out!” shouted Mr. Tridge, passionately. “Else I’ll serve you like I did ’im!”

“Pooh, ’e was only shamming!” retorted Mr. Clark. “’E got up again and walked away soon as you’d gone.”

“Well, shut up, anyway!” ordered Mr. Tridge, with a warning scowl. “Don’t you think you’ve said more than enough already?”

“Them?” said Mr. Clark, glancing carelessly at Mr. Sinnett and Mr. Lock. “They don’t know nothing.”

“Oh, well, ’e didn’t get it, anyway!” declared Mr. Tridge.

“’E’ll get it all right in the end,” prophesied Mr. Clark, darkly. “You mightn’t get off so lucky next time.”

"'E'll never get it," stated Mr. Tridge, with dour confidence.

"Not if you deals fair by me," said Mr. Clark. "P'r'aps he won't, then, not against the two of us."

"I've told you I ain't sharing, once and for all!" bellowed Mr. Tridge.

"All right!" growled Mr. Clark. "You'll be sorry. I could tell you something if I liked. Made *me* sit up when I 'eard it, anyway. Look 'ere, I give you fair warning—in future it's either to be me and you, or me and 'im! Take your choice. Anyway, after what I've learnt to-night, I'm going to be *in* it, some-
'ow!"

"Nothing doing!" announced Mr. Tridge, stoutly.

"All right," said Mr. Clark, in the most sinister fashion. "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

He withdrew. Mr. Tridge began to whistle a little flatly, as though unaware of the absorbed gaze bent upon him by the other two men present.

"Reminds me—letter to post!" ejaculated Mr. Sinnett, suddenly; and followed after Mr. Clark, in a state of the keenest excitement.

Mr. Clark had proceeded but as far as the tap-room of the "Royal William," and here Mr. Sinnett unostentatiously took up a strategic position in the chair next to him. For some while Mr. Clark displayed an introspective moodiness, sipping at his refreshment and nodding his head with the same grim air of determination.

But presently he turned towards Mr. Sinnett, and, after eyeing him cautiously, addressed him in the gruff tones of one determined to check any unnecessary extension of talk.

"'Ow much is hemeralds worth?" he asked.

“Emeralds?” fluttered Mr. Sinnett. “Emeralds?” He paused to strive for greater self-control.

“That’s what I said,” observed Mr. Clark, surlily. “Hemeralds. You know, them green stones.”

“It—it depends.”

“I see,” said Mr. Clark, and pointedly turned his shoulder to Mr. Sinnett.

“How—how big are they?” ventured Mr. Sinnett.

“Both of ’em are a pretty fair size,” said Mr. Clark. “But it don’t matter. I—I was only just wondering. See?”

He brought his back even more deliberately into Mr. Sinnett’s cognizance, and the conversation ended. And, a few minutes after, he quitted the room with so ungenial an air that Mr. Sinnett had not the courage to accompany him. And he found Mr. Tridge was gone from the billiard-room, so that there was nothing left for Mr. Sinnett to do but to retire home to spend a night of fitful slumber.

Early next morning did he enter the Magnolia Toilet Saloon, drawn thither by an irresistible desire to keep abreast of every development in this affair which so tantalizingly suggested personal profit without indicating the means thereto.

“Morning, sir!” said Mr. Tridge.

“Morning!” returned Mr. Sinnett. “I just looked in to see how those wounds of yours are getting on.”

“Oh, they’re all right,” said Mr. Tridge; and added, in the casual tones of heroism, “Matter of fact, it was a bit of a scrap. And, what’s more, I ’ad another one after I left you last evening. Only, of course, I don’t want you to talk about ’em. It won’t do this ’ere saloon no good.”

“And—and the second scrap?”

"Ah, that was in my lodgings! When I got 'ome," narrated Mr. Tridge, "I see my window open. Indoors I goes, very quiet. Blest if they wasn't trying to burgle me!"

"Burgle you? Who was?"

"Why, that—oh, just a couple of chaps. I 'it out at 'em, and they closed with me. In the end," concluded Mr. Tridge, modestly, "they was both glad enough to jump out of the window."

"Well, well!" breathed Mr. Sinnett.

Mr. Tridge smiled, and then broke into chuckles.

"It's rather a joke," he said. "I don't mind telling you something, if you promise you won't repeat it."

"Oh, I promise!" cried Mr. Sinnett, readily.

"Well, they was after something that wasn't there at all! Mind you, they *thought* it was! It was something I'd 'ad for a long time, and they was very anxious to get it. Many and many a try the'd 'ad for it. But I wouldn't let 'em 'ave it. The first scrap last night—that was one of their hattempts. Any one might think it worth 'undreds of pounds, the way they keeps on trying. But it ain't."

"Isn't it?" asked Mr. Sinnett, in strained tones.

"Only as a curiosity. It's vallyble, far as that goes. Anyway, I 'ad no difficulty in getting twelve quid for it last night."

"You—you've sold it?" cried Mr. Sinnett.

"I 'ave. After that first scrap last night, I got so sick about 'aving to bother about its being safe always that I just took and sold it. Not to *them*, of course, I wouldn't give in to *them*. I sold it to Dobb, in Fore Street. 'E see at once that it was a genuine curiosity, and 'e didn't 'aggle a bit."

For several long seconds Mr. Sinnett stared at Mr. Tridge. Then, with a start, he purchased a superfluous stick of shaving-soap, and wandered from the premises.

Scarce had he gone twenty yards when he found himself accosted by Mr. Peter Lock.

"Just the very gent I was 'oping to see!" said Mr. Peter Lock, exhibiting suppressed excitement. "There's something a bit queer afoot, sir, what I'd like to talk over with you. You know about that row Mr. Tridge 'ad with the ferryman last night. At least, I think it's something to do with that."

"We can talk in here," said Mr. Sinnett; and drew Mr. Lock into the "Bunch o' Grapes."

"Mind you, sir, I don't take no responsibility," said Mr. Lock. "But it's queer. That Indian gent come into the billiard-room not half an hour ago. He said he'd arranged to meet Clark, the ferryman, there at noon, but he found he must get back to London by the eleven-eleven train this morning. And so he gave me a note to hand to him."

"Well?"

"Well, sir, he said something about advising Clark to lay low after last night. He said he'd forgot to put that in the note, and asked me to mention it to Clark. Remembered it just as he was going, he did, and come back to tell me. Well, now, sir, I don't want to get mixed up in no fishy cases. If you remember what them two was saying to each other last night——"

"Open the note," directed Mr. Sinnett.

"Just what I was thinking, sir. That's why I wanted to see you, because you was there and know as much about it as I do. If there's any risk, I don't mean to be in it at all."

"Quite so," said Mr. Sinnett. "Open the note and make sure."

With a certain trembling eagerness, Mr. Sinnett watched Mr. Lock draw an envelope from his pocket.

"You can easily put it in a new envelope," said Mr. Sinnett, as Mr. Lock began to stare perplexedly at the flap.

"I never thought of that," said Mr. Lock, and at once tore open the missive. It was very short.

"I am at 17, Somerset Terrace, Poplar, till to-morrow. Ten my boat sails, but letters there will be forwarded me. Keep to our bargain. Do not forget that I am prepared to pay a higher price than anyone else for it."

"Strange," murmured Mr. Lock.

"Seventeen, Somerset Terrace, Poplar," muttered Mr. Sinnett. "Seventeen, Somer——"

"Do you think there's anything in the address, sir?" asked Mr. Lock, curiously.

"If you take my advice," said Mr. Sinnett, impressively, "you'll burn that note and say no more about it."

"I think that would be safest," agreed Mr. Lock, and, striking a match, ignited the missive in the fireplace.

"Well, I must be going," said Mr. Sinnett, coming to a sudden briskness; and, settling the score, he hastened away.

Five minutes later he was in the presence of Mr. Horace Dobb. Permission to glance round the stock had been met with suave and smiling acquiescence, and almost immediately Mr. Sinnett, with false calm, was inquiring the price of a small idol.

"That?" said Mr. Dobb. "Oh, I'd let you have that

for twenty pounds. Genuine curiosity, that is, sir. I dare say it's worth a lot more, but I want to make you a customer. Ah, *that* won't be on my shelves long, for all I only bought it last night. Always getting inquiries for genuine foreign idols, I am. That's the only one I've got in my shop at present. There's a lot of connoshers of them things about."

"Twenty pounds?" said Mr. Sinnett. "Why, man, I happen to know you only gave twelve for it!"

"Ah, I'd 'ave given more if 'e'd pressed me, but 'e seemed anxious to get rid of it. And, anyway, sir, I'd 'ave got twenty pounds easy enough for it yesterday afternoon, if I'd 'ad it. There was a Indian gentleman in 'ere hinquring if by any chance I 'ad any hidols. Particular keen 'e seemed to get one just like that. 'E might 'ave been——"

"Fifteen pounds," offered Mr. Sinnett.

And so it was; but even then, Mr. Dobb only yielded with professed reluctance to losing the chance of Mr. Sinnett as a regular patron thenceforward.

That same evening Mr. Clark, Mr. Tridge, and Mr. Lock foregathered in Mr. Dobb's parlour.

"Yes, I see 'im go," said Mr. Tridge. "'E'd got it in a portmanteau. Caught the two-twenty-one, 'e did. 'E'll be in London by now. Can't you fancy 'im getting more and more hexcited at that 'ouse, trying to hexplain to 'em that 'e wants to see a nigger they don't know nothing about? And 'e'll think they're trying to deceive 'im, and 'e'll tell 'em all the 'ole story, just to show 'e's telling the truth, and——"

"Oh, 'e'll be very hagitated," said Mr. Clark. "'E's that sort, I bet, when things goes sideways. Serve 'im right! Anyway, thanks for my share, 'Orace. I shall

be able to do a bit of slate-cleaning with it. By the way, what haddress did you send 'im looking for, Peter?"

"Seventeen, Somerset Terrace, Poplar. 'Orace told me to write down any old address I happened to think of, didn't you, 'Orace? And Seventeen, Somerset Terrace, come easiest to my mind. I don't know where I got it from."

"Seventeen, Somerset——" gasped Mr. Tridge and Mr. Clark, simultaneously.

"That's it."

"Then I can tell you where you got it!" shouted Mr. Tridge. "You come and see me and Sam Cark there many a time while we was lodging there, when the old 'Jane Gladys' was being repaired that time."

"Ah, of course, I remember now!" said Mr. Lock. "A nice, comfortable, homely place it was, too!"

"And you've sent Sinnett *there* to start questioning and arguing and hexplaining?" roared Mr. Tridge. "Why, Sam and me ran up a bill for the 'ole six weeks we stopped there, and then we skipped off without paying And *now*——"

EPISODE X

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM

THAT rising man of affairs, Mr. Horace Dobb, was setting out on his afternoon stroll—which is relatively equivalent to saying that Beau Nash had just appeared in the Pump Room at Bath, or that the Prince Regent had issued forth to sun himself on the Steine at Brighthelmstone.

For, whatever drab limitations the keeping of a second-hand shop might impose upon Mr. Dobb's wardrobe during the exigencies of the morning, the afternoon would almost invariably have the gratification of witnessing that gentleman's apotheosis. Then Mr. Dobb who spent his mornings in dragging bulky things about in the remote dustiness of his outhouse, or in cajoling and brow-beating clients across the counter, was as different from the Mr. Dobb of the afternoon as is the lowly grub from the full-winged butterfly.

Mr. Dobb, because he deemed that he owed a fitting publicity to his occupation and to his own personality, had taken the hours which intervene between dinner and tea, and had incorporated them into a general scheme for his glorification. Other business men might permit the searching post-meridian sunshine to illuminate frayed cuffs and shiny elbows, to exhibit symptoms of haste and heedlessness upon waistcoat fronts, to reveal circumstantial evidence with regard to linen collars. Such negligence of apparel had ceased to be any part of Mr. Dobb's policy.

Wherever the calls of his profession might lead him abroad after dinner, either to auction sales or to visits for private appraisement, to interviews for preliminary negotiation or merely to casual scoutings for opportunities of profit, Mr. Dobb's aim was to appear fresh and impeccably groomed and, as far as possible, aristocratic. Careful study of toilet and deportment, he was convinced, must inevitably bring him the pleasing reputation of being a leader of fashion, and, furthermore, could not but impress people with the desirability of dealing with so distinguished a person when they had rickety sofas and deficient clocks and old ironmongery to sell.

And so Mr. Dobb was sauntering forth in all his accustomed splendour. Upon his sleekly anointed hair there rested a soft felt hat of exceeding plushiness, with a tuft of strange feathers thrust into its band to hint at sporting prowess. A very high and very stiff collar encircled Mr. Dobb's throat, and upon a necktie of cheerful patterning there was pillowed a scarfpin conspicuously, like the headlight upon a locomotive. A shaggy tweed suit, of a hue which far o'erleapt snuff and only narrowly missed mustard, graced Mr. Dobb's frame, and his feet were encased in orange-coloured boots of a squeakiness surely without parallel.

And when the eye had become inured to these glories, returning powers of vision brought apprehension of a silver-mounted cane, of a buttonhole of geranium blooms, of a cigar, and a festooning watch-chain, and of the phenomena of tan gloves, not worn on the hands, but carried carelessly, as though their presence were due to a merest afterthought on the part of lazy luxury.

And thus, as it were, glossed and burnished and intensified, Mr. Dobb progressed down Fore Street. One

hand jauntily twirled the cane, the other hand not only had the distinction of flourishing the gloves in airy greeting of such neighbours as Mr. Dobb insisted should see him, but also was called on, from time to time, to assist in making great play with the cigar, a duty which it performed with many graceful twirls of the wrist.

And thus did Mr. Dobb arrive at the corner where Fore Street joins Bridge Street, and here he paused to gaze up and down the road. A fine sense of dominance permeated Mr. Dobb as he stood there, and the expression with which he viewed the amenities of the place was one nicely calculated to hover midway between languid interest and patrician disdain.

And then, as an ancient ewer may be rare and valuable ware in one moment and, in the next, be but so much broken crockery, so in a twinkling was Mr. Dobb transformed from a proud autocrat to a quaking fugitive.

Gone was all trace of hauteur from his face, vanished completely was all swaggering complacency of manner. There was a hunted look in his eyes, and he had become limp and drooping and manifestly unstable at the knees.

And the whole change had happened in that trice which is occupied by the clash of two pairs of eyes meeting each other in a glance of recognition across a narrow thoroughfare.

“’Strewth!” breathed Mr. Dobb, aghast, and made a convulsive, clutching movement towards his hat, but checked his arm halfway. “’Strewth!” he said again, but even more emphatically; and then spun round on his heel and began to retrace his way along Fore Street at a pace in marked contrast to his previous gait.

Regardless of the ill-concealed amazement of acquaint-

ances, Mr. Dobb cantered wildly adown the pavement until he reached his abode, and here he breathlessly flung himself through the doorway, locking the portal behind him in a manner which clearly indicated panic. Mrs. Dobb, appearing in surprise from the back parlour, addressed a very natural question to her husband.

"Why——" he began, and then stopped and stared at his wife as though the situation had suddenly unfolded itself to exhibit a further cause for consternation.

And next he frenziedly unlocked the door and plucked the portal open, and plunged out again into the street. Glimpse of a figure in the distance served efficiently as spur, and Mr. Dobb raced wildly away in the opposite direction. Not until he had swerved round three successive corners did he feel emboldened to moderate his pace, and even then he travelled at something approximating a canter.

But at last he came to the region of the harbour, and reaching the "Flag and Pennant" shipway, he vigorously semaphored for the attendance of the ferryman stationed there. On his hasty arrival, that functionary found himself directed to take Mr. Dobb across the river with the utmost possible speed.

Mr. Samuel Clark, the ferryman, well used to the vagaries of his present patron and former shipmate of the "Jane Gladys," made no immediate comment, but assisted his passenger into the boat and began to transport him with commendable energy. Mr. Dobb, removing his high collar and thrusting it into his pocket, made the noises of one narrowly saved from suffocation, and gazed fearfully over his shoulder at the receding river bank.

"I—I—I ain't got the breath to hexplain now, Sam,"

he puffed, presently. "Put me down over there by the 'Red Lion,' and then go back and make up a yarn. And get some one to take your place. And then go and fetch Peter Lock and Joe Tridge, and bring 'em over yonder to me at once."

"Doings?" asked Mr. Clark, with the liveliest expectancy.

"Not 'alf!" was Mr. Dobb's reply. "Not 'alf!" he said again; and shivered perceptibly.

In face of this discouraging reply, Mr. Clark had not the hardihood to press for more explicit information. Ever one to concede that there was a wrong time and a right time to appeal to Mr. Dobb's confidence, the look on that gentleman's face warned him that this was indubitably one of the wrong times.

In pondering silence, therefore, did the plump and ancient ferryman bend his best efforts to conveying Mr. Dobb to the further side of the harbour, and when this had been achieved, he immediately put about to accord loyal and unquestioning fulfilment to the remainder of Mr. Dobb's instructions.

Well within the hour, Mr. Clark returned in convoy of Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock, and the three entered the presence of Mr. Dobb in the otherwise vacant tap-room of the "Red Lion."

Mr. Dobb had recovered some meed of his composure in the interval, but the rosiness of complexion induced by violent exercise had now faded to an ascetic pallor, and his eyes looked up dully from deep and dark circles. Evidence of his mental state was afforded by the fact that he was sitting on his ornate hat.

"Lummy, 'Orace, you *do* look upset!" observed Mr. Tridge, in concern.

"He looks real downright bad," asserted Mr. Lock.

"'E looks 'orrible," was Mr. Clark's contribution.

Mr. Dobb, gazing with lack-lustre eyes from one to the other of his old shipmates, shook his head forlornly and gave vent to a sigh of extraordinary duration.

"Why, 'e looks as if 'e'd seen a ghost," declared Mr. Tridge.

"I 'ave," said Mr. Dobb; "that's just what I 'ave seen. A ghost—a real live ghost!"

Mr. Tridge threw a startled glance at the empty tumbler standing before Mr. Dobb.

"No, it ain't that," said Mr. Dobb, comprehending. "That is only the third I've 'ad all day. It's a *real* ghost I've seen. A ghost from out of the past," he ended, with a fugitive gleam of pride in the quality of this phrase.

Mr. Lock, his head a little on one side, speculatively scrutinized this beholder of visions. Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock stared at each other in a baffled way, and privately intimated a mutual disbelief in the sanity of their friend.

"Boys," said Mr. Dobb, "she's 'ere."

"Which she?" cried Mr. Tridge, not without perturbation.

"'Oo do you *think*?" dallied Mr. Dobb.

"Not—not that widder woman from Teignmouth, that Mrs. Larstick?" queried Mr. Clark, shakily. "Not 'er? That I do 'ope. Don't say it's 'er?" he begged.

"N-n-n-nor y-y-y-yet th-th-th-that——" stammered Mr. Tridge, clearly lacking full control of his jaw.

"Why the dooce don't you say straight out, 'Orace?" asked Mr. Lock.

Mr. Dobb swallowed convulsively and steadied himself by taking a firm grip on the arms of his chair.

"It's—it's Looie Radling," he announced.

"Oh, 'er!" said Mr. Tridge, swiftly reassured. "Nice little bit of goods, too."

"Werry nice," agreed Mr. Clark, in equal relief. "It'll be a pleasure to meet 'er again."

Mr. Lock, smiling, readjusted the set of his necktie.

"But—but 'ave you forgot?" asked Mr. Dobb, incredulously. "Talking like that! 'Ave you forgot or what?"

"Forgot what?" returned Mr. Tridge.

"Why," Mr. Dobb replied, wretchedly, "I'm hengaged to that gal?"

"But 'ow can you be, 'Orace?" very reasonably contended Mr. Clark. "You're married to your missis, and she's a very 'ealthy-looking lady."

"I married my missis a bit sudden, about eight months ago, as you may remember," said Mr. Dobb.

"Oh, well, it wasn't in reason you could afford to miss the chance of owning a nice little shop like 'ers," pointed out Mr. Tridge, extenuatingly.

"Quite so," acquiesced Mr. Dobb. "Only—only I 'appened by chance to be hengaged to Looie Radling at the time. I'd been hengaged to 'er two months and more when I first met my missis."

"And stayed be'ind and got married to 'er by special licence and took up life ashore, while us other chaps went on in the 'Jane Gladys' the last month afore she was sold," recalled Mr. Tridge. "I remember now."

"Ah, I seem to remember something about you being engaged to a Miss Radling," admitted Mr. Lock. "Greenwich gal, ain't she?"

"Yes; and I remember 'er coming down to the boat to meet you the first time we went back there, and you wasn't with us no longer. Very surprised but quite

the lady she was," said Mr. Clark. "We told 'er you'd deserted or something."

"Anyway, she's tracked me down now," said Mr. Dobb; and made fretful gestures and noises for a while.

"Oh, well, you're married now, and there's an end of it," remarked Mr. Tridge, soothingly.

"That's just where you're wrong," complained Mr. Dobb. "Now Looie Radling's found me out there won't be a end to it. It'll be the start, not the end."

"Breach o' promise!" cried Mr. Tridge. "Of course, I 'adn't thought of that."

"'As she got any of your letters, though?" asked Mr. Clark, acutely.

"'Undreds!" groaned Mr. Dobb.

"She won't half get some damages out of you," prophesied Mr. Lock, cheerfully. "Having a business of your own now, and doing so well, they'll award her a real big sum. Three or four 'undred, I dare say," he hazarded, yawning carelessly.

"What?" screamed Mr. Dobb, in consternation. "Why, I can't lay 'ands on a quarter of that!"

"No, I don't suppose you can," agreed Mr. Lock. "But then I ain't the judge and jury. They won't believe you in court, you being so well known in Shorehaven. You'll have to sell up your business and go back to sea, and pay her the damages in instalments. Long, long years ahead from now you'll still be scrap- ing together to pay her——"

"Oh, shut up!" bellowed Mr. Dobb, rendered almost hysterical by contemplation of so doleful a prospect.

"Did she see you in *them* clothes, 'Orace?" asked Mr. Tridge. "Well, then, that's done it! She'll be after you like a porous-plaster for them damages. Gals don't get the chance of marrying himitation dooks every

day," he went on, a little maliciously. "And when they 'ave the chance and loses it——"

"Yes, if only she'd seen you in your shirt-sleeves and your old trowsis," put in Mr. Clark, "very likely she'd only 'ave thought 'good riddance to bad rubbish,' and thought no more about you."

"Ah, and that ain't all, neither," said Mr. Dobb, miserably. "What's going to 'appen when my missis 'ears about it? I shan't ever 'ear the last of it! If them two females was to meet——"

"There's men in your position 'ave drowneded themselves, 'Orace," remarked Mr. Tridge, tonelessly.

"That's about the only way out of it that *I* can see," observed Mr. Lock, with brutal frankness.

"I never did trust women!" vehemently cried aloud Mr. Dobb. "Never!"

"The great thing, I should say," mentioned Mr. Lock, "is to keep from kicking and struggling. Just keep quiet, and when you go down for the third time it'll be all over. I've heard say that it's really rather a pleasant feeling, once you get over your mouth being full of water."

Mr. Dobb, setting his palms on his knees, turned and stared coldly at Mr. Lock.

"Ah, I shall always remember how you're looking at me, 'Orace," said Mr. Lock, gently. "Sort of sad and mournful."

"I suppose," vouchsafed Mr. Clark, thoughtfully—"I suppose as you can't prove a hallybee, 'Orace? I done that once, and it come off all right, and we had the goose that very same night for supper."

"Something could be done," said Mr. Tridge. "I'm sure it could. Only, of course, it's 'ard thinking when you're thirsty."

"You think away! I'll see you ain't thirsty!" eagerly promised Mr. Dobb; and forthwith gave orders which appreciably increased sympathy for him in his tribulation.

"To begin with, you're sure she recognized you, 'Orace?" pressed Mr. Tridge.

"I see 'er regular jump at sight of me," asserted Mr. Dobb.

"P'r'aps," suggested Mr. Clark, "it was your clothes she saw."

"Next thing," continued Mr. Tridge, "what makes you think she's tracked you down special? It may be the biggest haccident 'er being 'ere and coming across you."

"Why, she may 'ave forgotten you," put forward Mr. Clark. "After all, it's eight months and more since you saw her last."

"Perhaps she's got married, too," said Mr. Lock, hopefully.

"Well, there, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Mr. Dobb, brightening. "Bit fickle it would be, though, wouldn't it?" he went on in accents slightly flavoured with disapproval.

"Seems to me," said Mr. Lock, "the best thing would be to find out just how the land lies. You're a pretty good hand at that sort of thing, Sam. Suppose you was to go over and look about, and see if you could see her and have a little chat with her?"

"That's it, Sam! You've got a nacheral gift of tact!" fawned Mr. Dobb. "You cut on back over to the town, and see if you can find 'er and learn what's in the wind."

"Right you are!" acquiesced Mr. Clark, very readily.

"I shall want a couple of bob to stand 'er a cup of tea and so forth, though. You can only get women really chatty when they're drinking tea. Better make it 'alf a crown, 'Orace, in case she fancies a bun or what-not."

A vivid light is thrown on the state of Mr. Dobb's mind when it is mentioned that, with no more demur than a sigh and a shake of the head, he dropped two shillings into Mr. Clark's extended palm, and silently added two threepenny pieces when that gentleman did not move at once.

"I'll be as quick as ever I can," promised Mr. Clark, in going. "'Ere," he sternly warned Mr. Dobb, "don't you go a-doing anything rash while I'm away, and give me all me trouble for nothing! Wait till I come back, at any rate!"

The envoy departed, and a couple of hours passed before his friends saw him again. Meanwhile, Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock had devoted the interval to the benevolent purpose of cheering up Mr. Dobb, and so successful had they been that Mr. Clark, on his return, stood awhile at the threshold of the "Red Lion" tap-room to listen in amazement to the careless mirth within.

For Mr. Dobb, fully persuaded by his companions that the encounter with Miss Radling did not necessarily presage evil, had become even more eloquent than they in voicing the folly of meeting trouble half-way. And now, drawing equally on reminiscence and invention, the three were exchanging diverting anecdotes concerning occasions when alarm had proved groundless. Mr. Tridge had just concluded a droll story about a cheese in a sack, a policeman, a runaway horse, and

himself, and Mr. Dobb and Mr. Lock were chuckling very heartily at the dénouement, when Mr. Clark thrust open the door of the tap-room.

"That's right, 'Orace!" he observed, significantly. "You laugh while you can!"

At these ill-omened words, the merriment faded abruptly, and Mr. Dobb was distinctly heard to groan.

"I've seed 'er," announced Mr. Clark; and advancing, patted Mr. Dobb thrice on the shoulder, very slowly and solemnly.

"Well, then," hotly cried Mr. Tridge, with due understanding of this action, "she's a mink! That's what she is—a mink!"

"You take my advice, 'Orace," recommended Mr. Clark. "Hostralia!"

There was a little wait while the quailing Mr. Dobb was sorrowfully regarded by his three friends, as though even now they were bidding him farewell on his departure to the Antipodes. Mr. Dobb gazed back, horror-struck, at each of his three companions in turn, and when his glance rested upon Mr. Lock, that gentleman rose and shook hands with him with a long and lingering clasp. And then Mr. Dobb shakily emptied each of the glasses on the table before him, and no one had the hardness of heart to bid him nay.

And next, Mr. Clark proceeded to narrate his interview with Miss Radling. He had found her, it transpired, in the High Street, and had at length managed to recall himself to her memory, a task which had been rendered a little protracted by the fact that Miss Radling gave but superficial attention to him at first, being more zealously employed in taking close heed of the faces of all male passers-by.

When, however, Miss Radling had recognized Mr. Clark as an old acquaintance of the "Jane Gladys" she had expressed the keenest satisfaction in meeting him, and had at once asked for the address of Mr. Horace Dobb.

Mr. Clark immediately professed ignorance of Mr. Dobb's whereabouts, but pretended to a vague belief that the late cook of the "Jane Gladys" was now somewhere in Scotland. Miss Radling promptly controverted this, stating with complete certainty that she had herself seen Mr. Dobb in Shorehaven during that very afternoon. She had also added, with sinister vehemence, that she intended to see Mr. Dobb again and again before she had finished with him.

"But—but—but what for?" interposed the miserable Mr. Dobb.

"Just what I says to her," responded Mr. Clark.

"'What for?' I says. And she says as 'ow you was hengaged to 'er, and you 'adn't wrote 'er a line for months. 'Though,' she says, 'the letters 'e wrote me before that is quite enough to do the trick. I've kept 'em all,' she says, 'and I'm going to get even with 'im some'ow. Either 'e's got to put the banns up or else I goes to the best lawyer in Shore'aven. I've found out, by chance, that 'Orace Dobb is living in these parts, and,' says she——"

"Now, 'ow the dooce did she find that out?" questioned Mr. Tridge, wrathfully.

"Wasn't the 'Raven' in 'arbour here a fortnight or so after you settled into your shop, 'Orace?" put forward Mr. Lock.

"It was!" bellowed Mr. Dobb. "Well, there's a nasty, low, mean, under'and, sneaking trick to——"

"Anyway," said Mr. Clark, "she 'asn't got your

correct address. She said she'd been looking all over the town for a shop with Dobb on it. And nacherally I didn't tell 'er that the board still showed your wife's name of Goffley. And she didn't know that you're married yet, neither."

"Can't you just see them 'Raven' chaps a-grinning when they fixed all this up for me?" growled Mr. Dobb.

"Did she seem sort of forgiving at all, Sam?" asked Mr. Lock.

"Oh, dear me, no!" returned Mr. Clark. "Quite the contrary, in fact. You oughter seen the way she folded 'er lips. A nice-spoken, pleasant-looking, lady-like gal like that, too! I was surprised 'ow sharp and determined she could be."

And now Mr. Clark, with considerable pride in his diplomacy, proceeded to speak of the clever foundations he had laid for an alibi. Insisting that Mr. Dobb was not within a hundred miles of Shorehaven, he had admitted to Miss Radling that the remaining members of the "Jane Gladys" crew now resided in the town. This, he suggested to her, might explain matters. Confusion of identity, he had reminded her, was of frequent occurrence among the mercantile marine.

"'But I see 'Orace with my very own eyes,' she says, and goes on to describe the very clothes you're wearing, 'Orace," continued Mr. Clark. "'Why,' says I, 'that just shows 'ow wrong you are! Them clothes is the clothes worn by Peter Lock on 'igh days and 'olidays,' I says."

Mr. Lock uttered an exclamation denoting surprise.

"Well, I chose you because you was always the dressy one on the 'Jane Gladys,' Peter," explained Mr. Clark. "'That there's Peter Lock in 'is Sunday clothes you saw,' I tells 'er, 'and you mistook 'im for 'Orace Dobb.

You've forgot what 'Orace looked like, and Peter Lock 'aving been on the 'Jane Gladys,' to your knowledge——”

“That's it, that's it?” approved Mr. Dobb. “I'll lend you these 'ere clothes, Peter, for a hour or two, if you takes care of 'em, and you can meet 'er in them and prove old Sam was right.”

“Anyway, you can *try* to,” said Mr. Clark, soberly. “I must say she didn't look altogether convinced, as it might be.”

But Mr. Dobb, already excitedly divesting himself of his coat and waistcoat was paying no heed. And Mr. Lock, delicately massaging the nape of his neck with a forefinger, was immersed in thought.

“Wait a bit!” he requested, coldly, at last. “Seems to me, if I don't help you now, 'Orace, you're in a tight corner?”

“Ah, I'm lucky to 'ave a true friend like you, Peter!” babbled Mr. Dobb. “Wonder if they've got a outhouse they can lend us for a few minutes?”

“And you've got a motto, too, ain't you, 'Orace?” went on Mr. Lock, in steely accents. “‘Strictly business’—that's what has been your motto ever since you went into your shop, ain't it? Oh, you've drove it home to us often enough when it's been convenient to you and ill-convenient to us. Well, *my* motto's going to be ‘strictly business’ now!” he ended, firmly.

“Meaning?” invited Mr. Dobb, ceasing to struggle with a bootlace.

“Meaning I don't *borrow* clothes from nobody to help 'em out of trouble. See? If you want me to help you, you've got to *give* me that rig-out. See? Otherwise I shouldn't dream of putting it on for a single moment.”

Mr. Dobb agitatedly stigmatized this as blackmail and robbery, and Mr. Lock quite unemotionally agreed with him in this view, but declined to be affected by it. Mr. Tridge and Mr. Clark, with eyes that glistened admiringly on Mr. Lock, said that, to them, it seemed a very fair bargain.

Ten minutes later Mr. Dobb and Mr. Lock made an exchange of vesture in an outhouse. Mr. Dobb somewhat huffily declined to agree with Mr. Tridge and Mr. Clark in their openly expressed opinion that Mr. Lock looked a *real* toff in the hirsute garments.

"I'll stroll along with Peter and 'ave a look for Miss Radling," said Mr. Tridge, as the quartet took their places in the ferry-boat. "I'll be able to back him up by saying you don't live anywhere in these parts. As for you, you'd better stay at 'ome while she's in the town, 'Orace."

"Stay at 'ome? I'm going straight to bed," declared Mr. Dobb, "and I ain't coming down again till the coast is quite clear, neither!"

"That's right," said Mr. Tridge. "You leave it to me and Peter. We'll convince 'er all right."

That same evening Mr. Dobb lay fretfully in bed, suffering from a vague ailment which, he averred, was not serious enough to demand a doctor, but too serious to permit of Mrs. Dobb's ministrations as a nurse. In these circumstances, two visitors who called to see Mr. Dobb were about to be sent away by his wife, when Mr. Dobb, who happened to be standing at his open bedroom door, gave orders that they should ascend to his apartment.

"Well," he asked, breathlessly, as Mr. Tridge and Mr. Lock entered, "'ave you convinced 'er? Is she gone?"

"No, she ain't," said Mr. Tridge, regretfully. "She's looking for a situation in the town. And, do you know, I don't believe she quite took in what we told 'er about mistaking Peter for you. I believe she's sharper than we think."

"But you've *got* to make 'er believe it!" wrathfully snapped Mr. Dobb.

"I doubt if she's the sort you can *make* do anything," said Mr. Lock.

"A most determined young person," said Mr. Tridge. "When she makes up 'er mind, I should say——"

"She ain't half bitter against you, 'Orace," remarked Mr. Lock. "You ought to hear the things she said about you! What was that bit she told us about the bag of sweets, Joe?"

"I don't want to 'ear about sweets!" exclaimed Mr. Dobb, impatiently. "I want to 'ear about 'er plans!"

"Well, she *said* she was going to try for two 'undred and fifty," replied Mr. Tridge. "Soon as ever she knew where to find you, she said, she was coming round to——"

Mr. Dobb, in an excess of nervous depression, dived beneath the bedclothes, moaning faintly.

"This I will say," maintained Mr. Lock. "Them chaps on the 'Raven' have gone a bit beyond a joke this time. Well, so-long, 'Orace! Keep smiling!"

"We'll do our best for you," promised Mr. Tridge. "We'll keep on telling 'er she was mistook this afternoon."

"You keep on letting 'er see you in them clothes, Peter, till she sees she's wrong," directed Mr. Dobb, reappearing.

"I'm going to meet her to-morrow afternoon in them,"

replied Mr. Lock. "I'm going to help her look for you."

"'Ere!" croaked Mr. Dobb, in alarm; and then, at sight of Mr. Lock's humorous eyelid, he smiled wanly. "You're a artful one, Peter!" he stated.

"I am!" agreed Mr. Lock; and followed Mr. Tridge down the stairs.

Next evening, when Mr. Lock again called to report progress, Mr. Dobb was still clinging to the sanctuary of bed.

"Well, you ain't found me yet, then?" he asked, with effort to be cheerful.

"Not yet," admitted Mr. Lock, grinning. "We've been looking all over the place for you, too!"

"Ain't she losing 'eart yet?"

"I can't say she is," returned Mr. Lock, sorrowfully. "It only seems to make 'er firmer in mind. If you only knew how the soles of my feet was aching!"

"She still thinks I'm about, eh?"

"She's sure of it. She says she ain't going to give up looking for you till she's found you, if it takes ten years!"

"There's hobstinicy!" growled Mr. Dobb, dashed.

"One thing, she ain't going to find you as long as I'm helping her to look," said Mr. Lock. "So it'll be a long job, anyway."

"Thank you for nothing! I suppose you fancies yourself, walking about in all them la-de-da clothes with a attractive young female?" harshly suggested Mr. Dobb.

"I do," said Mr. Lock.

"I—I wonder, Peter," remarked Mr. Dobb, sitting up suddenly and striving to sound casual—"I wonder you don't take up with 'er yourself!"

"Can't afford it, for one thing," said Mr. Lock, quietly.

"Walking about in a suit of clothes you've 'ad give to you don't cost much," contended Mr. Dobb.

"Ah, but you can't set up a home on a suit of clothes!" pointed out Mr. Lock, regretfully; and then he laughed quite merrily. "Why, I hardly know the young lady, either!"

"A nice, pretty, well-spoken girl she is, too!" said Mr. Dobb. "Make any man a good wife, she would. I tell you straight, if I wasn't married——"

"I must say, I can't make out how you had the heart to do it, 'Orace," observed Mr. Lock.

"Neither can I, now! Serves me right! I—I couldn't ever be really worthy of 'er. A nice, smart, good-looking young fellow, that's 'oo she deserves for a 'usband. A young fellow just like *you*, Peter," he ended softly.

"Me? Oh, I dunno!" murmured Mr. Lock, in confused modesty.

"Well, I do!" cried Mr. Dobb. "You take my advice, my boy, and go in and win!"

"And leave everything nice and clear for you, eh?" asked Mr. Lock.

"I—I wasn't thinking about myself," said Mr. Dobb. "I ain't so selfish as all that, Peter."

"Anyway, what's the good of talking?" demanded Mr. Lock, irritably. "I can't afford to set up house-keeping. Where am I to get the furniture from for a start off?"

"Why, you can run up a bill with me!" quickly proffered Mr. Dobb.

"That ain't my idea, starting married life in debt."

"Well, I—I might give you a few things as a wedding present. Jugs and so on."

"Mind you, I wouldn't mind taking up with her," said Mr. Lock. "Looie—Miss Radling—she's just my sort, and I don't mind admitting that I've thought a lot about her since I met her yesterday. But——"

"And—and to think that you was a 'ardy British mariner once!" urgently cried Mr. Dobb. "You go in and win!"

"I reckon it'll cost me all of fifty quid to set up a home," said Mr. Lock, gazing squarely at Mr. Dobb.

For a long time Mr. Dobb defiantly held Mr. Lock's regard, and then he glanced away.

"And, after all," added Mr. Lock, softly, "it'll come cheaper for *you*, 'Orace."

"I see what you're after!" rasped Mr. Dobb. "Call that friendship?"

"No," said Mr. Lock, honestly, "I don't! I'm a sort of pupil of yours, 'Orace, and I calls it 'strictly business'! However, we were only *talking*, after all. Good-night, old sport, and sleep well!"

Two days elapsed. Mr. Dobb, attaining sufficient convalescence, had left his couch and spent most of his time behind his window curtain, watching the traffic of the street in considerable trepidation. And whenever the shop-bell jangled Mr. Dobb crept silently to the head of the stairs and stood there to listen with bated breath till persuaded that there was no cause for alarm.

Mr. Lock had not visited him once during those two days, and the only news he had derived of that gentleman was from Mr. Tridge, who, paying a brief visit, let fall the information that Mr. Lock and Miss Radling had been observed together at a *matinée* performance at the local kinema theatre.

Mrs. Dobb had just locked the little shop for the night, and Mr. Dobb, upstairs, was feeling a consequent measure of relief, when the private bell rang. Mr. Dobb, as though pulled by the same wire, at once listened at the top of the stairs. Hearing only the voices of his wife and Mr. Lock, Mr. Dobb summoned the callers upstairs.

"Thought you'd like to know," said Mr. Lock, entering the room and carefully closing the door, "me and Looie have fixed it all up this very afternoon."

"No!" cried Mr. Dobb, joyously. "Well, there's quick work!"

"I see I was wrong now to suggest about that fifty quid to you, 'Orace," said Mr. Lock, penitently.

"Don't mention it!" begged Mr. Dobb. "I never give it another thought."

"Yes, I know now I was wrong," repeated Mr. Lock. "Looie pointed it out to me soon as ever I told 'er."

"Ah, a nice, sensible, right-minded girl!"

"Yes; as she says, if we wants money to set up house-keeping with, let's wait till after——"

"After what?" asked Mr. Dobb, as Mr. Lock stopped.

"Why, till after she's got her breach of promise damages out of you. She reckons on at least a hundred and fifty."

"But—but now she's hengaged to *you* she's got no claim on *me*!"

"They'll only have *your* word at the court that she's hengaged to me, 'Orace. We ain't told no one else yet," observed Mr. Lock, happily. "By the way, I'm bringing her round to see you to-morrow."

"She'll never get a hundred and fifty pounds out of *me*!"

"No; but she'll have a jolly good try to! In any

case, I bet she don't get less than a clear fifty, so we shan't be no worse off," said Mr. Lock. "And on the other hand, your missis——"

Mr. Dobb, with his hands clasped at the back of that garment he euphemistically described as a dressing-gown, stalked moodily about the bedroom for a few moments. The voice of Mrs. Dobb, engaged in a trifling dispute with a neighbour, came shrilly up to him and he shivered.

"All right, I'm beat!" he yielded. "Talk about nourishing a viper!"

"I'll call round to-morrow morning and go to the bank with you, 'Orace," said Mr. Lock.

And it was so.

In rather less than six weeks' time the wedding of Mr. Peter Lock and Miss Louise Radling was solemnized. The occurrence is still remembered in Shorehaven, very largely on account of the extreme height and niggardly circumference of Mr. Samuel Clark's top-hat, and for the remarkable exhibition of agility given by the best man, Mr. Joseph Tridge, out in the High Street, towards the close of the festivities.

Mr. Horace Dobb, an old friend of the bridegroom and bride, attended the ceremony, in company with Mrs. Horace Dobb. Many people subsequently expressed the opinion that Mr. Dobb took the affair far too seriously for a mere guest.

It was just before Mr. and Mrs. Peter Lock were setting forth on their honeymoon that the newly fledged husband summoned Mr. Dobb aside.

"You must be sure to come and see us in our little 'ome when we come back, 'Orace," said Mr. Lock, fondly. "I'm sure no one's got a better right among our pals to sit on them tables and chairs——"

"All right!" growled Mr. Dobb. "Don't rub it in!"

"I just want to tell you something, though. You know that motto of yours what you've got painted on a board hanging in your shop? 'Strictly business,' it says, don't it? Well, mottoes is like curses—they come home to roost sometimes!"

"Meaning?" loftily queried Mr. Dobb.

"Why, I felt so sorry for Looie when she come down to the old 'Jane Gladys' to ask for you, and you'd jilted her, that I—I got sort of writing to her to cheer her up; and before long we got engaged. Oh, four or five months ago it must have been, though we didn't tell anybody! You see, I'd got an idea up my sleeve, and I was only waiting till my wages was raised."

"Then—then—then really she was hengaged to *you* when she come to Shore'aven?" queried Mr. Dobb, in a stifled voice.

"She was. Why, it was *me* who managed the whole thing. It was me who wrote and told her to come to Shore'aven. It was me who told her what to say to Sam and Joe."

"You—you—you——" breathed Mr. Dobb, irately; and then became aware of the approach of Mrs. Dobb. "You mind you don't miss your train," he finished, lamely.

Late that same evening Mr. Dobb took a small lettered board off a nail in his shop. In grim silence he surveyed its legend of "Strictly Business!" . . .

Mrs. Dobb, coming down next morning to light the kitchen fire, found that self-same panel, neatly chopped into very small pieces, lying ready to her hand in the fender.



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