

More Yarns



by

“STALKY”

Major-General L.C. DUNSTERVILLE

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MORE YARNS

By
"STALKY"

(MAJOR-GENERAL L. C. DUNSTERVILLE)

AUTHOR OF "STALKY'S REMINISCENCES" (10TH THOUSAND)

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PREFACE

IT would be idle to deny the literal truth of two of these stories, 'Ultra-altruism' and 'When the Commander-in-Chief went mad', but with these two exceptions the remainder may be accepted as pure fiction.

If a few of them may seem faintly reminiscent to a few old gentlemen of about my own age I must ask them to put it down to coincidence.

MORE YARNS

I

A REPENTANT SINNER

A YEAR after the War I happened to find myself in Algiers.

The day had been sweltering and I was weary and thirsty as I emerged from an exploration of the native town with its narrow and congested streets into the cooler and purer atmosphere of the Boulevards.

Algiers was distinctly 'out of season' and there were none of the gay parties of visitors who enliven the town in the winter months. Still, at this time of day, just after sunset, the cafes were doing good business and I despaired of finding a seat by myself, until at last I caught sight of a small unoccupied table—a two-seater—in a quiet corner of a small restaurant.

Here I sank into a chair and gave my order to the waiter, congratulating myself on my isolation. I had hardly done so, however, when another passer-by, pausing for a moment, spotted my table with one spare chair, and, to my dismay, walked straight up to it.

"May I have this seat if it's not engaged?" he asked in faultless English.

"Certainly, with pleasure," I untruthfully replied.

I love my fellow-countrymen and firmly believe that, taking an all-round average, there is nothing to equal them in the world. But I do not go to Algiers to meet Englishmen, I was not in a mood for talking, and the newcomer seemed likely to be expansive.

He was rather a weird-looking individual, and I couldn't place him at all—very poorly but cleanly dressed in the usual tropical outfit.

A line from one of the lurid books of adventure I had read as a schoolboy flitted through my mind: "his features were bronzed by constant exposure to the powerful rays of a tropical sun." That description certainly fitted him with accuracy. He was of medium height, with wiry and well-set-up frame of a distinctly military type. His face had probably once been handsome, but a red scar down one cheek and a battered nose had given him a rather demonic expression, which, however, was a little softened by a pleasing mouth and

chin, and a carefully trained fair moustache just turning grey.

But having leisure to examine him more closely during our subsequent conversation, I saw that the most noteworthy feature was his right eye, which had a most remarkable splash of brown in the middle of its steel-blue.

Something in this eye and in his general expression seemed to touch a chord of memory. He reminded me of someone I knew well years ago, probably in subaltern days, but in any case it was someone I had quite forgotten.

His voice, too, seemed faintly reminiscent, but I was not making notes of these things at the time, they only occurred to me later when I was recalling the whole episode.

Although I was far from being in a conversational mood there was something about this strange fellow that rather attracted me, and I soon found myself listening with rapt attention to his rather disjointed sentences.

“Oh, yes. I’ve led a hard life. Women and drink and all that. Foreign Legion. Rather battered as you see. Got another one in the right leg, a bit stiff at times. But I get around all right, and it’s not for much longer, anyway.”

I tried by indirect means to get some idea as to who he was and how he came to be in the Foreign Legion, but he skilfully parried all my efforts in this direction. He had evidently no desire to disclose his identity, on the contrary he seemed very determined to conceal it, so I gave up the attempt.

“Ever been in India?” he asked abruptly.

“Yes. I am in the 20th Punjabis—on a year’s leave,” I replied.

“Good place India. Went out there years ago as a globe-trotter. Had a ripping time; knew a splendid lot of good fellows. Northern India, you know. Punjab and frontier.”

I remembered also many happy episodes of the winter he spoke of, and we were soon plunged into an animated exchange of do-you-remembers.

Suddenly two things struck me.

The first was that this globe-trotter had acquired a wonderful knowledge of men and places and events in a very short time, and the second was that in his reminiscences he was covering a period of several years, which was rather odd for a man who professed to have made only one short visit. I had no time, however, to dwell on this during our breathless and absorbing chat over old times.

“Do you remember a fellow called Shalcombe in one of the Indian Lancer regiments?” he asked.

“Good old Shalcombe. One of my best pals.”

“Is he alive still?”

“Yes, he came through the War all right.”

“Thank God,” he commented.

A peculiar remark. Why this fervent ‘thank God’ for this passing acquaintance of so many years ago.

Much to my regret our conversation was brought to an abrupt conclusion at this point by my friend who, accepting a final apéritif, explained that he was due somewhere in five minutes’ time.

“Well, cheerio, and the best of luck, old boy,” he said as he raised his glass to his lips.

Once more a chord of memory was struck. ‘Old boy’ not usually addressed to a chance acquaintance.

“Look here, you haven’t told me your name yet. Dine with me to-night. I want some more talk over old times, and you interest me enormously.”

“Sorry. Can’t dine. My name you’ll find recorded in the rolls of the Foreign Legion. Carl Hochveld. Here’s my card.”

“By the way,” he added, “before we part, and we are not likely to meet again, I want to ask you to do something for me. You say you’re leaving for home to-morrow. What ship and what time?”

I told him the name of my ship and the hour of sailing, ten o’clock.

“Righto. I’ll see you on board before she sails.” He held out his hand, which I grasped with a sort of feeling that it was not for the first time, and then turned on his heel and was gone.

Next morning, August 12th, having boarded my ship and tucked away my belongings, I took up my position near the gangway hoping that my intriguing friend of yesterday would turn up early enough to give us time for a further interchange of reminiscences and perhaps let fall some clue to his real identity. I was not at all impressed by the name Carl Hochveld, which was obviously self-bestowed to suit the rolls of the Foreign Legion.

I was disappointed, however. No Carl Hochveld appeared, and punctually at 10 a.m. the ship slipped from her moorings and stood out to sea. I went

below to arrange my things in my cabin with my mind entirely absorbed with the problem of this fellow's identity.

The more I thought over things the more I was convinced that he was a man I had known intimately—that peculiar splash of colour in his right eye, who on earth did that recall from the days of long ago?

Why, of course, like a flash of lightning remembrance came to me at last. Charlie Heckfield. Good Lord! Charlie Heckfield.

Fancy my not seeing through the thinly-veiled disguise of Carl Hochveld.

What memories that name called up. Days of sport and horse-racing, nights of drinking and gambling. How many good fellows of those hectic days went to the wall. And Charlie, one of the best of them, swindling his best friends. Most of us had transactions rather near the line, but only Charlie was guilty of that worst of all offences for a soldier, 'stealing goods the property of a comrade'.

Then I sat and mused over the past. Was it really I: that other fellow I remembered as a gay and reckless subaltern? What days those were. The blood flowed hot in one's veins and we lived lives that thought not of the morrow. Recalling about thirty names of my boon companions, I could only tick off six as having survived. Jenkins was killed by a bear, Thomson knifed by a Ghazi on the Peshawur railway station, one of the best (no names mentioned) went under with drink, four were killed in frontier expeditions, all these still in the early days; the Great War accounted for most of the rest.

Then I ran over in my mind the sequence of events that had led up to the disappearance from our midst of that good-looking rogue Heckfield. One does occasionally meet men of that type—excellent good fellows with many fine qualities, but quite unable to run straight. Men of good family and good education, but born crooks.

I recalled every step of the tragi-comedy. The whole affair was as clear as crystal in my mind though it all happened thirty years ago and had completely dropped out of my mind, only to be brought to life again by this incredible coincidence of meeting old Heckfield once more in the flesh.

I could have kicked myself for my failure to recognize him. The slash on his cheek and the distortion of that shapely nose were of course a fairly complete disguise, but the sound of his voice was unaltered, his manner of speaking, and that peculiar eye with the odd splash of colour in it, that gave him one of his many nicknames 'Splosh-eye', would certainly have revealed him to me if he had only accepted my invitation to dine that night.

I will try to explain now the rather complicated series of frauds perpetrated by Charlie Heckfield just previous to his disappearance from our midst—a detailed record of his many iniquities up to that date which never came to light could obviously only be written by the villain himself. I would reckon that they would run to about six volumes and would make good reading—or bad, according to your point of view.

We were stationed together in the cantonments of an important city, Chandipur, in India. Horse-racing or rather pony-racing was the order of the day, and nearly every subaltern in either British or Indian regiments owned and trained at least one screw that he felt sure was a Derby winner.

Settling day was a hard time for most of us. A few lucky ones were able to appeal to soft-hearted parents, the rest of us went to the Hindu moneylender who gave us what we needed at sixty per cent interest.

Heckfield knew a good deal about horses and often backed a winner. It is possible that he was not the only man on the Indian turf who made a ‘coup’ now and then by ‘arranging’ that the horse he backed should be a winner. It can be done, you know.

But he staked recklessly, and was always head over ears in debt.

In August 1899 he confided to me that he was pretty near the end of his tether—wanted me to back a bill for him, but I had to refuse. I had already been let down once over a similar transaction and wasn’t taking any more risks.

As regards what happened later it is impossible for me to remember exact dates, but it is necessary to have dates as without them it would be hard to follow the tortuous windings of these nefarious transactions, so I must insert approximate ones.

On September 1st I rode home with Heckfield after a very hot game of polo, and he told me that things were looking very black. Debts on every side, money owing to tradesmen and loans from the bazar, no prospect of any help from home. If he sent in his papers that wouldn’t help the matter. Perhaps he’d make a bolt for it and start a new life in some other quarter of the globe.

“I hate letting anyone down,” I remember his saying, “but what the devil can one do if one owes money and has no money and no wealthy father to square the account? I can never pay what I owe, I’d better get out.”

About a week later he met me with a smiling face and without giving me any details told me that ‘something’ had happened and that things were going to be all right.

As a matter of fact things were as wrong as they could be at that moment and he must have already begun to prepare for his flight—his jaunty demeanour was part of the plot, a device to keep the rest of us from being at all suspicious.

Shalcombe of the ———th Bengal Cavalry shared a bungalow with Heckfield, and on going to Kashmir on two months' leave in July had left one of his ponies in his care, with permission to use her for polo or do anything he liked except race.

Faced with empty pockets and the necessity for immediate flight, Heckfield reluctantly decided to sell his friend's pony, get away with the proceeds, and I am certain he intended to refund the money almost immediately. That 'refunding' always seems so easy to people like that, but it never comes off. Still, to have merely had that intention rather palliates the offence, at any rate to the conscience of the offender.

What Heckfield succeeded in doing was, in brief, that he sold the mare by advertisement, got her full price by auction sale, and collected the money a third time by means of a raffle.

As he is not able to tell his own story I must try and imagine and explain to you with a full knowledge of his affairs how one thing led to another.

He meant originally to 'raise the wind' temporarily by selling this horse to a stranger, refunding the money later and getting the horse back to its owner—only a temporary loan, in fact.

From what I knew of his character—and no one knew him more intimately than I—I should say that he never actually intended to do anything dishonest according to his peculiarly elastic conscience. But I admit that his point of view was not quite a normal one. He always had at the back of his mind that vision of some glorious day when tons of money would come from somewhere and he would 'refund' everything.

I think that perhaps almost the only sign of foolishness in his clear brain was the absurd fallacy that anyone who 'was in the know' could make money (not as a bookmaker) out of betting on horses.

The difficulty in selling his friend's horse was that it could obviously not be done locally, and an advertisement in the papers would soon be spotted by interested parties. So he wrote to a friend in far-distant Purighat and got him to put up a notice in his club. The price he asked was Rs. 600, at which figure the animal, assuming soundness, was quite a good buy. On September 8th he got a letter from a man named Wilder in the P.W.D. offering to buy the animal if he

would send vet.'s certificate. This he had foreseen and was able to do.

He had calculated that Rs. 600 in cash added to other small sums he could raise in various ways would provide him with sufficient funds to pay his way to somewhere out of India and leave him a small sum to start his new life on.

But on the very day that he received this offer of purchase he found himself cornered with regard to an overdue I.O.U. which he was compelled to redeem, a painful transaction that upset all his plans and left him Rs. 1000 short of his needed sum.

Obviously the only thing to do was to get the money out of this fellow Wilder without sending the horse, and then sell it again elsewhere—a plan that needed a good deal of thinking out.

He wrote accordingly a very nice letter to the man in Purighat stating that he was arranging for a horse-box and would despatch the animal on the 12th, but as everything was fair and above-board and he had the vet.'s certificate of soundness, would he kindly send his cheque at once. He was leaving for home on the P. and O. sailing on the 14th and wanted to settle up his accounts before leaving. The good-hearted purchaser complied with this request and forwarded his cheque for Rs. 600.

Heckfield then got two days' leave on September 10th to the small and not far distant cantonment of Malkabad, where he ran his raffle—to be drawn on September 14th—and raked in Rs. 500.

Then on September 11th he railed the horse to Kalinagar where an auction was advertised for the 12th, and sold it by auction, realizing Rs. 520, and left it in the hands of the new purchaser, a Mr. Sonderby.

He felt grieved at having to leave the nice mare with a stranger and not to have the chance of selling her again, but unfortunately purchasers at auction sales want the goods delivered on the spot, and Florrie was duly handed over.

On returning to Chandipur the same night he was horrified to find a wire waiting for him in which Shalcombe notified him that he was returning on the 14th-15th. Time was getting short, in any case, and risks increasing, and matters beginning to get too complicated even for his astute criminal brain.

On September 13th he got ten days' leave, and wired the same day to agents in Bombay booking a passage on the outgoing mail steamer on the 14th, and from that time till now there had been no trace of him.

Very soon after his departure the fat was in the fire. Shalcombe returned from leave and people began to ask questions. Heckfield was wired to at an

address he had given when proceeding on leave to return at once. No reply being received, the police were called in and very soon partially unravelled the tangled skein of his iniquities. His wire to the agents for passage in the P. and O. gave a good clue, but it turned out to be a useless one as they stated that he never paid for a passage and, unless under a false name, did not sail by that steamer.

The possibility of the false name seemed a fair clue. Telegraphic demands for an inquiry on board on the arrival of the steamer at Aden were complied with, but the officials drew a blank, and in the end it had to be admitted that the villain had disappeared without leaving any trace at all.

What he probably did was to take a tramp steamer to some small port out of India where he could tranship and reach some further destination. It would not have been difficult in those days to make a private arrangement with the skipper of such a ship and get smuggled on board without attracting any attention.

That was the end of Heckfield as far as he was personally concerned, but it was not the end of the business as regards the several victims.

This, then, is how the whole affair culminated.

When Shalcombe returned from leave on September 15th and found that Heckfield had gone on ten days' leave and taken his pony with him, he was first of all mystified and then suspicious. On September 16th he heard news of his horse having been sold at Kalinagar on the 12th. He went there without delay and had no difficulty in tracing the purchaser, Mr. Sonderby.

Mr. Sonderby was at the railway station seeing his recent purchase into a horse-box when the infuriated owner turned up, and a memorable scene took place which almost ended in a free fight, much to the amusement of the native onlookers.

Sonderby eventually agreed, under protest, to allow Shalcombe to remove his horse, the financial side of the transaction to be made a legal matter later on unless some agreement could be come to.

Wilder then joined in the scramble, writing furious letters from Purighat, and the whole thing was no end of a muddle. In the end I think Shalcombe kept his horse and the other two lost their money.

A knock at my cabin door interrupted my reverie, and my steward handed me a bulky envelope with the purser's compliments.

I lost no time in tearing open the outer cover, and found that it contained

several enclosures and a packet of five and one-pound notes. Firstly, there was this letter to myself:

“DEAR BLOBBS,

For that is the only name you were ever called by in those good old days that are gone—I’ve had a dullish time for many a long day, but to-day has quite cheered me up.

I am writing this in my dirty little room before I turn in so as to have it ready for you in the morning.

It is about four hours since we sat at that table in the restaurant talking over old times. You silly old ass. Fancy not spotting who I was—even though it is nearly thirty years since we last met, and even though my once Grecian nose has been turned into a *retroussé*.

Do you think it was by accident that I took a seat at your table to-day? I’ve been looking out for some days for someone—even possibly a stranger—to pass these papers on to, and then suddenly I caught sight of your ugly but pleasing features. I knew you in a moment. No mistaking that unusually high forehead and that peculiar-shaped mouth of yours—hope I don’t hurt your feelings. Obviously sent for me by Providence—the only man who could properly carry out my wishes, knowing all parties concerned.

I’m not going even now to tell you who Carl Hochveld was—the papers I send will make that pretty clear to you.

Please, like a good fellow, do what you can to put things straight for me.

We shall certainly never meet again, and it will be no earthly use your trying any philanthropic stunt—to rescue-the-fallen sort of idea.

I am, as you may have guessed from the look of my clothes, quite down and out. I have struggled for more than a year to collect the little money I am sending you. Don’t shed a tear over it. I do not like sympathy. I did it because it was a pleasure to me, and now I can pass on with clean hands.

I’m a drug-taker, you know. A dirty sort of trick, but I learnt the habit out here and don’t want to get out of it. I know it is beastly, and when I’m without the drug I feel degraded. But when I get my dose—ah, my boy, then I can tell you life’s worth living.

As I have literally not a copper left and no prospects of ever getting

any now that I am no longer in the Legion, it will be clear to you that life is not going to be worth living, and I am not going to try and make it so. So that's that.

Good-bye, old boy. You've kept respectable and I haven't, but you were born lucky. We both lived the same life with the same temptations. At the critical moment your guardian angel just pushed you on to the right track, and as I never had a guardian angel I took the wrong one. But I've had some fun out of life, and now that I've been able to square this little matter I can drop out quietly without any regrets."

Among the other enclosures the first was a very crumpled list of ticket-holders in a raffle dated 1889:

"Chestnut country-bred mare 'Florrie', 14 hands, 6 years, absolutely sound. Gymkhana winner and handy polo pony. Veterinary certificate of age and soundness.

100 tickets at Rs. 5 each.

Property of C. Heckfield."

The next was a letter addressed to G. Wilder, formerly of the Public Works Department, India.

"DEAR SIR,

Thirty years ago I robbed you of Rs. 600—about £40 in English money.

I'm glad to be able to send it back to you now. Sorry I can't run to compound interest. It was a mean trick to play and I'm sorry.

Yours truly,

C. HECKFIELD."

Then came a letter addressed to:

HUBERT SHALCOMBE,

Once of the Indian Cavalry, now probably Colonel or General.

"*Dear Hubs,*

Thirty years ago your best pal turned out to be a horse-thief.

He is sorry for doing a dirty trick like that, but we rather lived in

that sort of atmosphere, didn't we? Not that I remember your doing anything mean. I enclose £40, which is about what the mare was worth when I borrowed her. I never knew, by the way, whether you or that fellow Sonderby got the mare in the end. If you managed to get her back from him, this money will be owing to him, of course. It lies between you and him, and a charity. Please accept it, and don't cut me off your visiting list any more.

Yours ever,

HECKLER."

Attached to the raffle list was a note:

"I scooped Rs. 500 out of this raffle. Worth about £34.

If you can find out the addresses of any who are alive, return the money.

Hand the rest of the money to any charity.

C. HECKFIELD."

My first thought after finishing the perusal of the various documents was that my old friend had set me rather a hard task. It would be an easy matter to find out through the India Office if this fellow Wilder were still alive. Shalcombe had been badly wounded at Neuve-Chapelle, had gone on pension, and, like most old soldiers and sailors, was growing roses and cabbages somewhere in the West Country.

But that raffle list was a big order—thirty-five names altogether, a few I could put my finger on, but the majority would be among those who had passed on.

I had been very fond of Charlie Heckfield in the old days—he possessed so many good qualities in spite of his ineradicably 'crooked' tendencies, and I was glad that he should have made this really noble—even if rather belated—effort to put things straight.

If he intended going on these lines, I hoped he also intended to come home and take his place once more amongst us as a decent citizen. I felt sure I should be able to rout out some of his people who would help to put him on his legs again. In the meantime I thought the least I could do was to help in giving him this fresh start.

So I wired to the consul in Algiers giving him a description of Heckfield and guaranteeing funds for his immediate necessities, and I followed this up

with a letter enclosing one for Heckfield.

On reaching home I found a reply cable waiting for me:

“Carl Hochveld accidentally drowned in harbour here Aug. 12.”

II

ADMIRAL'S INSPECTION

ADMIRAL SIR GEORGE REECE, K.C.B., was an ideal Commander-in-Chief, loved and duly feared by the men under his command. He possessed all the qualities that go to make a good sailor, and that is saying a very great deal.

It seems impossible, however, for a human being to be 'great' in any capacity without having a few weaknesses to balance the account, and Sir George was no exception to this rule.

Prominent among his smaller failings was a rather absurd attention to minute details of drill and equipment. The slightest deviation from any course of procedure laid down, or the smallest deficiency in a ship's gear was sufficient to bring down the torrent of his wrath on the miserable offender.

So when the time for annual inspection was approaching a feeling of nervous apprehension pervaded the fleet, and men who had fought in the Battle of Jutland without the quiver of an eyelash began to feel a weakness in the knees which was quite out of proportion to the risks involved, but is inexplicably common, both in the Navy and the Army, at such crises.

Captain Bolter, commanding H.M.S. *Thunderbolt*, contemplating the approaching ordeal, was seized with a severe attack of 'inspection fever' which, being notoriously infectious, soon spread through the wardroom and the gun-room to the occupants of the lower deck. The whole ship was quaking with an indefinable sense of some approaching doom.

Some ten days before the date notified for the Admiral's visit Captain Bolter proceeded to check through the latest regulations on the subject of equipment, and was pleased to find everything in order until his eye lit on a peculiar item in a list only recently received:

"Shove Wood!"

He chewed the end of his pencil as he ruminated: "Shove Wood? Shove Wood? What the devil's a Shove Wood?"

The item appeared to be of particular importance because this supplementary list was headed with the ominous words:

"The C.-in-C. will expect to see all these articles at his next inspection."

Captain Bolter sent for the Commander, and put the matter before him.

“Have we all the articles specified on this list?”

“I haven’t checked the list through yet, sir, but I will have it done at once.”

The Commander retired to carry out his investigations and returned in a short time to report that all items were correct except a ‘Shove Wood!’

Captain Bolter frowned. He was on the verge of confessing that he didn’t know what a Shove Wood was, but checked himself in time. He felt that he ought to know what this article was, and to betray his ignorance would be an undermining of his authority.

So he contented himself with saying: “Have a search made, and if it cannot be found it will be easy to have one made up in time for the inspection. Give the necessary orders to have this done.”

The Commander rather wanted to ask what a Shove Wood was but checked himself in time. He felt that he ought to know what this article was, and to betray his ignorance would bring down the vials of the Captain’s wrath on his head.

So he merely saluted and proceeded to carry out his instructions.

In this way the matter of this Shove Wood descended from grade to grade until it eventually reached bedrock in the shape of the Carpenter’s Mate. Each particular individual through whom the affair passed wanted to ask what a Shove Wood was, but each checked himself in time, fearing that a betrayal of his ignorance would expose him to the rage of a superior or the scorn of an inferior.

But with the Carpenter’s Mate, a solid and fearless type from Plymouth, it was a different matter. He feared neither rage nor scorn, but he had a reputation to maintain and he had an unbroken record of never being at a loss.

“There’s an item missing on this list,” said the Commissioned Shipwright. “A Shove Wood. It must have been omitted in the indent. The Admiral’s got to see it when he comes round. Just set to and get one made up.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” responded the carpenter. “I’ll have one made up. Just what was it you were asking for?”

“A Shove Wood.”

“Yes. A Shove Wood. I’ll see to it.”

On the withdrawal of the Commissioned Shipwright all hands in the carpenter’s shop took part in an honest discussion of the subject. No one

hesitated to admit that he hadn't the least idea what a 'Shove Wood' was.

"Sounds like something to shove wood with," said one.

"Of course it sounds like that. We don't want to know what it sounds like. We want to know what the hell it is."

"Well, just something to shove wood with."

"Gorblimy, mate, you're the one for bright ideas. If you want to shove wood, where would you shove it on board ship? Overboard? A lot of b——y use that would be. And if you want to shove wood, you just shove it. Don't want to make an apparatus for that."

Not much benefit was derived from this rather negative discussion, but the Carpenter's Mate's reputation was at stake and he was not to be baffled.

After a great deal of scratchings of the head and profound meditation he got out his pencil and a bit of paper and began to evolve plans for the construction of such an implement as a person might employ for the shoving of wood, assuming that for some unimaginable reason he did not want to use his hands and feet in the ordinary way.

The article was built to his design and duly approved on the day before the inspection.

It was something like a snow-plough on a small scale. A V-shaped bow flush with the deck, two handles aft like the handles of a wheelbarrow, and two small wooden rollers on the struts below' the handles.

When pushed in the ordinary way it glided smoothly over the deck and would certainly serve admirably to shove any wood that might lie in its path.

The Captain was informed that the article had been made up, and had intended to have a private look at it himself before the inspection so that he could pride himself on really knowing what a Shove Wood was, but it slipped his memory till the actual moment of the inspection when the Admiral was about to enter the regions that contained the equipment noted on list No. 4063A. He caught sight of it, however, the moment they came within range, and in response to his lifted eyebrow the Commander whispered, "That's the Shove Wood, sir."

The Admiral, making a minute inspection of each article in turn, found himself suddenly confronted with the infernal machine.

He almost staggered as his eye fell on it, and he gasped, "What the devil's that?"

“That, sir,” proudly responded Captain Bolter, “is a Shove Wood, sir.”

“A what?”

“A Shove Wood, sir. The next article on the list.”

The Admiral rather wanted to ask what a Shove Wood was but checked himself in time. He felt that he ought to know what this article was, and to betray his ignorance would be an undermining of his authority.

So he bluffed the matter by pretending an intimate acquaintance with Shove Woods.

“Are you satisfied with it, Captain Bolter? Does it work all right?”

“Only recently received, sir. Not yet taken into use.”

“Well, I’ve seen better ones in my time. These new patterns are not as good as the old. If not satisfactory send in a report.”

“Yes, sir.”

The inspection being satisfactorily concluded, both Admiral Sir George Reece and Captain Bolter found themselves haunted with the spectre of this weird implement, and their minds were tortured with the failure to answer the question, “What the devil is a Shove Wood for?”

The mail received two days later elucidated the mystery.

At precisely the same moment the Admiral and the Captain each opened an official envelope which contained a small printed slip:

ERRATA

List No. 4063A.

Item 35.

For “Shove Wood 1.”

Read “Shovel Wooden 1.”

III

GENERAL'S INSPECTION

(In India, a long time ago)

CHARACTERS:

BRIGADIER-GENERAL F. SANDERMAN.

A well-built and energetic-looking man of about fifty years of age. Was promoted to the command of a brigade three months ago.

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SMITH.

Commanding an Indian Infantry regiment. Inclined to be stout, and a little fussy. Very conscientious. This is his first inspection since taking over command.

He is a little nervous, and most anxious to secure a good report for himself and the regiment. He has a fixed idea that every General has some fad, and the only way to get a good report is to play up to that fad.

MAJOR BROWN.

Company Commander. Very smart and well-turned-out. A good soldier, but preferring any form of sport to regimental work.

AN ADJUTANT.

Knows all about everything, and sometimes a little too much. Is inclined to regard the regiment as his private property.

A QUARTERMASTER.

Does his best at his work, but makes no effort to disguise his dislike for stores, clothing, and sanitation.

SUBEDAR-MAJOR WALI MAHOMED.

A fine old soldier with a noble war record and not much education. Like all Subedar-Majors, an ultra-conservative.

TIME: *A week before the inspection.*

THE GENERAL thinks to himself:

“I’ve got to inspect the Umpteenth Punjabis on Wednesday . . . my first inspection.

I don’t like inspections and they don’t seem much use. I see the regiment every day, and I know pretty well what their standard of efficiency is. But it’s got to be done. Having been so often inspected myself I ought to know pretty well all about it; and there’s nothing I don’t know about the command of a battalion. But one has to display an intelligent interest by questions and comments, and I daresay I am not very good at that. Anyway, I pride myself on being a commonsense man with no fads. I have no desire to trip the C.O. up, so it ought to be pretty plain sailing.

But now I come to think of it, I’ve been deluged with letters from Army Headquarters since I took over command, on the subject of smartening up the barracks of Indian regiments. I’d better see to this, though I admit that it’s a subject that leaves me rather cold. . . .”

COLONEL SMITH thinks to himself:

“There’s that beastly inspection next week. I wonder what sort of a fellow old Sanderman is. These Generals always have fads of some sort. I wish I knew what his ‘kink’ is. Is it musketry, I wonder? Or smart turn-out? Or sanitation? Or what? . . .”

THE DAY OF THE INSPECTION

Brigadier-General Sanderman inspects the men on parade while the band plays ‘Meet me by moonlight alone’. As he looks at the men and notes their general appearance and turn-out he wonders why the band nearly always plays that silly old tune with such inappropriate words.

The inspection pursues its normal course. The General has only one idea in his mind, “To get on with the job, and make general notes on efficiency.”

The Colonel and his officers have only one thought in their minds, “What’s his line? How is he going to try to trip us up?”

Major Brown drills his company very well, but is a little ‘distract’. He is wondering if he can ask for three days’ shooting leave as soon as the inspection is over.

The Adjutant shows his recruits and musketry appliances.

The Quartermaster displays his stores, about which he knows very little.

The General is not at all interested in stores but feels it is his duty to ask some questions.

G.O.C. (to QUARTERMASTER):

“That greatcoat cloth looks good stuff. Where do you get it from?”

Q.M.:

“That cloth, sir?” (*Pauses and looks helplessly at the Quartermaster Havildar. Then recklessly:*) “We get that from Cawnpore, sir.”

G.O.C.(*noting conspicuous label at the end of the bale—Messrs. J. Wilkinson, London:*)

“Excellent material for Cawnpore. Looks more like English make. What’s this label?”

Q.M.(*taken aback:*)

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry, sir. This is another lot. The Cawnpore stuff is over there. This is from Wilkinson’s.”

Several more questions are put, and the Quartermaster flounders deeper and deeper.

The General passes on, reflecting that when he reluctantly held that thankless appointment in the days of his youth he had found it equally difficult to interest himself in the details of clothing.

Unfortunately, the Quartermaster cannot read the General’s thoughts, and he imagines that his career is ruined. He wishes that he had never come into the Indian Army. In the British service the Quartermastership is a life job held by a professional. He came into the Army to fight—not to count socks and issue bootlaces.

The inspection continues without anything further of special interest, and concludes with a visit to the lines.

Before dismissing Colonel Smith, the General suddenly remembers the note about ‘smartening up the lines’. He addresses the Colonel:

G.O.C.:

“By the way, Smith, I think you might try and improve the general appearance of your lines, they look rather dreary, don’t they?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Yes, sir. Perhaps they do. What do you suggest?”

G.O.C.(*rather nonplussed:*)

“Er—well, think for yourself. Anything to make the place look smarter—

more lively. Aren't your men fond of gardens? There's spare ground at each end of the lines. . . . Anyway, just do what you think best."

The General takes his departure. He is quite satisfied with what he has seen and two days later has forgotten all about the gardens and the smartening up of lines.

Colonel Smith, however, is a careful man, and enters in his pocket-book, among other items—"Notes for next inspection. G.O.C. is keen about gardens. Have this seen to."

He also speaks to the Subedar-Major about it. The S.-M. is not encouraging.

"It is an order," he says in reply to the Colonel's remarks, "and it shall be carried out. In the old days we used to teach the men to fix bayonets and charge. Now they shall learn to make gardens. It is the will of God."

A YEAR PASSES BY

General Sanderman is reminded by his Staff that he is to inspect the Umpteenth Punjabis on Tuesday next.

During the past year he has been deluged from Army Headquarters with treatises on sanitation, prevalence of flies and mosquitoes, and kindred subjects.

He has had so many letters on the subject that the study of the Art of War has been thrust into the background. The letters contain dire threats as to what will happen if things are not improved in this way, and the General's dreams are disturbed by nightmares connected with patent sanitary appliances and traps for catching flies.

The inspection proceeds on much the same lines as in the previous year. The band plays 'May blossom' instead of 'Meet me by moonlight alone'.

The Quartermaster spends several weeks prior to the inspection learning up the prices and general details of his stores, but this time the General entirely ignores them.

Colonel Smith feels less anxious than he did last year and looks forward to exhibiting his neat little gardens in front and rear of the lines.

He awaits a reference to this subject, but so far the General has not mentioned it, but, on the other hand, wants to know all about sanitary appliances and fly-traps.

G.O.C.:

“Show me some of your glazed earthenware receptacles.”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Yes, sir.” (*To the QUARTERMASTER*): “Get some of those things, please.”

After a pause the Q.M. reappears with two men carrying earthenware receptacles.

G.O.C.:

“Ah, those look all right. Where do you get them from? And how are they paid for? Are they local supply?”

Q.M. (*making a shot*):

“Yes, sir. Local supply. We pay for them out of the Regimental Fund, and recover the money on a Contingent Bill.”

G.O.C. (*turning over one of the pans with his stick*):

“I see they’re stamped R.P. That looks like Rawal Pindi. Hardly local supply, what?”

Q.M. (*guiltily*):

“No, sir. I was thinking of the lot we had before. These are from Rawal Pindi.”

G.O.C. (*to COLONEL SMITH*):

“Now let’s see your fly-traps.”

COLONEL SMITH (*to Q.M.*):

“Get a fly-trap to show the General.”

Q.M. (*saluting and withdrawing*):

“Yes, sir.”

The Q.M. summons his native assistants in despair, and ascertains that there are no fly-traps. He returns unhappily to report.

G.O.C.:

“No fly-traps. Why the devil have you not carried out the instructions of those recent memos. from Army Headquarters?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“I’m sorry, sir. The matter must have been overlooked. I’ll have it seen to at once. I can’t call to mind the instructions you refer to.”

G.O.C.:

“Oh, well you must get on to it at once. My Staff will give you notes of the correspondence. There is some sort of patent fly-trap you have to get made up in the regiment according to a design issued with the memo. A sort of wooden erection with a tray at the bottom and an open space of about an inch all round. You put some bait—bits of meat or something of that sort—on the tray. The flies get in by crawling, then they buzz around inside and can’t get out again. Sort of lobster-pot idea.”

Q.M.(*rapidly reviving*):

“I had forgotten for the moment, sir. We did have one of those made up as a pattern.”

G.O.C.:

“Let’s have a look at it then.”

The Q.M. orders his native assistant to get the article referred to. A heated conversation in Hindustani takes place.

G.O.C.(*impatiently*):

“Well, what does he say?”

Q.M.:

“He says it was put in B Company’s lines, and the first day it caught three flies. During the night it got knocked over and smashed and the flies escaped. He thinks that probably wild cats or dogs were attracted by the bait.”

G.O.C.(*to himself*):

“This seems to be rather a rotten waste of time, but we’ve got to try and be serious about it.” (*Aloud to COLONEL SMITH*): “All right, Smith, let’s get on now. But you must pay more attention to these H.Q. memos. Have those traps made up at once and let me have a report on them next month.”

The inspecting party move on through the lines. Colonel Smith’s heart beats fast as they turn the corner at the end and the General is confronted with the results of regimental horticultural operations. He awaits

commendation, but the General's look conveys condemnation.

G.O.C.:

“What the devil's this? I don't remember all this greenery last year.”

COLONEL SMITH:

“No, sir. This is D Company's garden. We only started it after last inspection.”

G.O.C.:

“But what a mad idea! What the deuce are you thinking of? Setting up breeding grounds for mosquitoes in face of all those recent memos. about destruction of larvae. Get rid of them at once, please.”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Certainly, sir. But it was your own suggestion. You told me at your last inspection to do something of this sort.”

G.O.C.:

“Oh, did I? Yes, I seem to remember something about it. They were keen then about beautifying the lines. Now they're on to sanitation. So just switch off horticulture, and see to those earthenware pans, and fly-traps and things, or there'll be the deuce to pay.”

The General completes his inspection and rides off with his Staff. He is of the opinion that Colonel Smith is a keen soldier although a little careless in carrying out suggestions from higher authorities. A month later he has forgotten the fly-traps.

Not so, however, Colonel Smith, who has entered up in his notebook under the heading, “Notes for next inspection”: “G.O.C. is very keen about earthenware pans, fly-traps, etc. Must have this seen to.”

He talks to the Subedar-Major about it. Wali Mahomed is delighted to hear that the gardens are to be abolished, but dismayed to hear about the sanitary schemes.

He says, “If it is the General's order that we are to catch flies we shall try to do so. But the more you catch the more will come. We didn't worry about these things in the old days. As for those earthenware pans, that will be interesting for the regimental sweepers. Times change, and all these things are doubtless decreed by Fate.”

A YEAR PASSES BY

Colonel Smith has spent the last twelve months conscientiously carrying out the terms of his instructions contained in many notifications with specifications from Headquarters. The lines are full of fly-traps and other ingenious sanitary devices, and there is nothing the Quartermaster does not now know about glazed earthenware pans, Mark I and II and Mark I*.

The gardens have been allowed to dry up. During the past year Brigadier-General Sanderman has been kept busy with correspondence from Army Headquarters dealing with the subject of musketry appliances.

The Annual Inspection of the Umpteenth Punjabis takes place as usual.

Drill and manœuvre pass off satisfactorily. The General inspects the recruits.

G.O.C.:

“Fine-looking lads, Smith. Your adjutant should be proud of them. Let him show me a junior squad at musketry, with a few men at aiming drill.”

COLONEL SMITH (*to* ADJUTANT):

“Let the General see a squad at musketry instruction.”

ADJUTANT:

“Very good, sir.”

He proceeds with the instruction, and details six recruits for aiming drill. They arrange their rifles in the usual way on tripods and sandbags.

G.O.C.:

“Is that all you have in the way of aiming apparatus?”

ADJUTANT:

“Yes, sir.”

G.O.C. (*to* COLONEL SMITH):

“What about those aiming dodges suggested in memos. from Headquarters?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Do you mean the patent iron tripods issued from the arsenal for checking aim?”

G.O.C.:

“Of course not. Those are as old as the hills and I don’t think much of them. No, I mean a whole lot of new jims. I can’t call them all to mind at the moment. But they laid great stress on the abolition of the sandbag and tripod. The idea, I think, was to have a box filled with sand and a large wooden ball with a spring clip to catch the rifle. You put the rifle in the clip and press the ball into the sand so that in adjusting his aim the recruit can easily move the rifle, and the ball moves with it and retains its position. Surely you haven’t entirely ignored these instructions?”

COLONEL SMITH (*feeling even more dazed after the GENERAL’S description than before*):

“No, sir. I haven’t ignored them, but we haven’t yet been able to have all the things made up. It shall be seen to without delay.”

More discussion ensues on the same subject, and the General moves off to inspect the lines.

Here Colonel Smith feels quite at home. So far from feeling anxious, he is only too eager to win the General’s praises by a display of his sanitary appliances.

The General enters A Company’s lines.

G.O.C.(to COLONEL SMITH):

“The lines look very neat and clean, but you oughtn’t to leave those wooden crates standing about. I should make it a rule not to have anything that is not in accordance with regulations.

I see dozens of these things everywhere. What the devil are they for?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Those are the patent fly-traps, sir.”

G.O.C.:

“Fly-traps? What a crazy idea. Are they a patent invention of your own?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Oh no, sir. Those are the ones you ordered us to have made up last year.”

G.O.C.(*aghast*):

“I ordered you to have made up? You must be dreaming, Smith. I never invented a fly-trap in my life and am never likely to.”

COLONEL SMITH:

“I didn’t mean that they were your invention, sir, but you certainly did give me the order to have them made up in accordance with some instructions from Army Headquarters.”

A STAFF OFFICER (*intervening*):

“Yes, sir. There was a lot of correspondence about them last year, and a Brigade Order was issued.”

G.O.C.(*apologetically*):

“Sorry, Smith. The matter had gone out of my mind. I remember all about them now. Do you find them satisfactory?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“No, sir. Not at all. They catch a few flies, but they are very much in the way, and there don’t seem to be any fewer flies in the lines.”

G.O.C.:

“What does your Medical Officer think?”

MEDICAL OFFICER:

“They are quite an ingenious invention, sir, and catch quite a lot of flies. But all the same, they tend if anything to increase the number of flies in the lines. Flies seem to have some way of passing on the news when food is plentiful, and the bait in these traps causes quite a large influx of flies that would otherwise never have entered the lines.”

G.O.C.(*fretfully*):

“Well, let’s get on.”

The party moves on.

A visit is paid to the Quartermaster’s Stores, outside which stands the Quartermaster proudly displaying several rows of glazed earthenware pans. He is prepared to answer any question as to place of origin, method of manufacture, and price per dozen. The General, however, refuses to be drawn, and contents himself with glaring at the Quartermaster. He has a sort

of suspicion that his leg is being pulled.

The inspection is concluded.

Colonel Smith talks things over with the Subedar-Major.

Wali Mahomed thinks that if they are to have all these new inventions it is doubtless the will of God. "I've been a marksman all my life," he adds, "and I learnt to aim well enough off a sandbag and tripod. But I daresay the recruits of the present day need something different. Things are always changing." He then gives the Colonel half an hour's talk on the subject of the 'good old days' and the deterioration of everything in the present days. But he piously reiterates that after all it must be God's will.

A YEAR PASSES BY

As the date of the inspection draws near, Colonel Smith wonders to himself, "What will he be at this time? We've had regimental gardens, sanitary insanities, and musketry appliances. This year I suppose will be precision of drill, bayonet fighting, or the new attack formation. I wish I knew."

The inspection takes place. Everything is quite satisfactory. In spite of the shortcomings in the matter of smartening up the lines, the entrapping of flies, provision of glazed earthenware pans, and the latest fad of the School of Musketry there is no doubt that the battalion is thoroughly smart and efficient.

This year the General seems to take a languid and enforced interest in the regimental accounts. The books are produced for examination. Among others an account of the Regimental Fund. This seems to interest the General.

G.O.C.(to COLONEL SMITH):

"Where does this fund get its income from?"

COLONEL SMITH:

"It's mostly derived from odds and ends. Sums that are acquired in various ways that do not render them liable to re-credit to Government. Such, for instance, as fines from regimental followers, interest on sums lent out to men of the regiment under certain guarantees, interest on regimental money deposited during periods of active service, and so on."

G.O.C.:

"And how do you use the fund?"

COLONEL SMITH:

“It is spent on anything for the good of the men. The provision of night lanterns in the lines, things of that sort.”

G.O.C.:

“A very good and useful fund. I wonder you don’t take more care of it, Smith. You oughtn’t to let a fund like that run down. Yet I see the balance credit to-day is about a thousand rupees less than it was four years ago. What have you been doing with it?”

COLONEL SMITH:

“Well, sir, among other items, we lost about two hundred over the regimental gardens. A little more than that over those fly-traps—you remember? Part of the cost of their construction was disallowed by the Pay people, under some footnote to some correction to some regulation. The same thing applies to the glazed earthenware pans which you may call to mind? And then we had a lot of musketry appliances made up, the cost of which was non-accountable owing to our not having noticed some correction to some footnote to some other regulation. So all these expenses had to be met out of the Regimental Fund.”

G.O.C.(*feeling a little guilty*):

“Well, don’t look at me as if I were the man responsible. You can’t run an army without discipline, and discipline entails obedience to orders, and orders are orders. You may have lost a thousand rupees out of the Regimental Fund, but you’ve obeyed orders, and that’s all that matters. I shall make a note of it in the inspection report.”

The inspection is concluded.

Colonel Smith talks over things with Subedar-Major, who says:

“Well, Sahib, I shall soon be going on pension. I can’t keep pace with these new ideas.”

For the first time in his life he omits the formula of every pious Mahomedan, ‘It is God’s will.’

Perhaps the gardens and the fly-traps and all the other innovations have sown the seeds of doubt in his mind.

Perhaps he is trying how it sounds if the pronoun and the verb are transposed:

'Is it God's will?'

IV

THREE MAHOMEDAN PARABLES

THESE quaint stories were related to me many years ago in India by my faithful bearer Pir Mahomed, and they have always stuck in my memory as splendid examples of the art of parable.

Pir Mahomed was a deeply religious man and spent most of his time when he should have been occupied with my work in reading the Koran. This he did seated on the ground with legs crossed and the holy book on a small wooden stand before him. As he read in a deep monotone he swayed himself slowly backwards and forwards, emitting a sound like the buzzing of a gigantic bumblebee. He admitted to me that he understood very little of the Arabic text, but in all Eastern religions the mere reading from a holy book brings merit.

On stifling evenings of the Indian hot weather I used to sit in a long chair under the punkah in my verandah, and when he seemed in the mood for it I let Pir Mahomed squat by my side and guide my thoughts into the paths of virtue.

The three parables I recount are of course not original, they are known to most Mahomedans and may have their exact counterparts in Christian versions, but as I have never come across them myself I set them down here in the style in which Pir Mahomed narrated them.

I

“There is only one God.”

A certain nobleman had a large retinue of servants amongst whom were three especial favourites—an English Christian, a Pathan Mahomedan, and a pious Hindu.

The nobleman himself was a devout follower of the Prophet, but like Akbar, the Great Mogul, he was extremely broad-minded, and it pleased him to have these three good men of varying religions as his personal attendants.

He yearned to teach them the lesson he had learnt himself, that, however diverse may be the methods of worship, there is only one God, and there can be no other.

The three men could not speak each other's language, but, after years of service together, had succeeded in making themselves mutually intelligible on general matters connected with their various duties. The nobleman could speak all their languages fluently.

One hot summer's day, feeling in a particularly kindly mood, the nobleman thought he would refresh his humble servitors with a present of fruit.

So he sent for them, and addressing each man in his own language, said: "I wish to give you a treat in the shape of some fruit. You shall choose what you most desire, but must agree together as I will only give you one kind of fruit. Retire now and consult. When you have agreed, let me know your choice."

The three servitors retired into an adjoining room, while the nobleman sat listening to the hum of their voices. In a short time the voices began to grow louder and louder, and it soon became evident that the three men were engaged in a violent altercation.

With a view of ascertaining the cause of strife and of restoring peace to the belligerents, the nobleman rose and entered the apartment into which the three servitors had been ordered to retire.

He found them engaged in a terrific combat. The Mahomedan was belabouring the Hindu, the Hindu was beating the Christian, and the Christian was endeavouring to strangle the Mahomedan.

On the entrance of their master, the three servitors ceased their pummelling and stood shamefacedly before him with downcast eyes.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"We can't agree about the choice of fruit," said the Mahomedan. "I want a 'Hinduana' and nothing else. The others want something else."

"I want a water-melon," said the Englishman, "and I'll take nothing else."

"And I," said the Hindu, "desire a 'Tarbuz'. It's the only fruit I like."

"Now," said the nobleman, "see how silly you all are. A water-melon is a water-melon, and a Hinduana is a water-melon, and a Tarbuz is a water-melon. You are all after the same thing and fighting with each other because you are too stupid to realize that it is the same thing. You shall have a plentiful store of water-melons, and as you eat them try to realize that the one God is like that—called by many names, and worshipped in many ways, but always One and Indivisible."

II

“We get what we deserve.”

A holy man lived in a certain city. He was renowned for his piety. He said his prayers without fail according to the Mahomedan custom five times a day and was assiduous in his attendance at the services in the mosque. He was very rich and subscribed to all the local charities. In fact we may say that he fulfilled all his religious duties to the letter.

“To the letter,” yes, but “to the spirit” no.

In business he was grasping, and not very honest. He was a hard master and cruel in his treatment of subordinates. He extracted the last farthing from his debtors, and had those who could not pay cast into prison.

But his religious duties he never neglected, and he had every reason to believe that the Almighty must be very pleased with him. He felt that when his time came to die, he could pass over with full confidence in the certain hope of a reward for his services to God while in this world.

Now there was, in the same city, a humble fakir. The word ‘fakir’ means ‘poor’, and this fellow was poor indeed. He lived entirely on alms bestowed by the charitable, and the charitable were not very generous.

It is meritorious to give alms to beggars, but the word ‘alms’ covers the whole range of the coinage, and citizens who lost no opportunity of bestowing alms (especially when others were looking) generally confined their gifts to the smallest coin of the realm, fifty of which would barely suffice to pay for a simple meal of bread and sweetmeats.

So the fakir did not make a fat thing out of it.

On most days he had barely enough to pay for his simple food, but now and then some kindly fellow would hand him a really respectable sum which would have lasted him for several days if carefully hoarded.

But instead of hoarding it, he went round the town, and found people even poorer than himself, and shared it with them. And by night time it was all gone and he started the next day as poor as ever.

He generally said his prayers in the usual way five times a day, but for one reason or another he sometimes skipped one of the appointed times. And he didn’t go very often to the mosque, and he never went out of his way to flatter the mullah. But he worshipped God in his heart and lost no occasion of helping his neighbours, and doing what he could to cheer up the downhearted.

In the course of the day he wandered through all the bazars, but his regular place of business was just outside the door of the holy rich man's palace. And when the rich man came out, he used to give a friendly nod to the fakir, and bestow on him a sum equivalent to about half a farthing.

Now the time came when the holy man was seized with a fatal illness, and as he lay on his death-bed he bade farewell to his mourning relatives with complete composure. He had no qualms about the future world; he would go, beyond doubt, to Paradise.

And he was not mistaken. No sooner had the breath left his body than he felt himself borne aloft on wings and in a short time found himself in the abode of the blessed.

Arrived inside the gates he was told to wait until an angel could be sent to guide him to his place of residence.

While awaiting the arrival of his guide he had leisure to survey the scene before him. The landscape was extraordinarily beautiful, and under groves of nodding palms, by streams of crystal water, he could see the various types of residences prepared for the faithful.

One particular building attracted his attention. It was built of blocks of crystal, inset with amethyst and various precious stones, and the doors and paving stones were of pure gold. It was evidently unoccupied and the holy man wondered if it were to be his. "Quite likely," he murmured to himself, "I don't see many other residences here which the Almighty would be likely to bestow on me. I am pretty certain that this is the beautiful palace prepared for my reception."

He cast his eye over the remaining buildings, of which several thousand were in view, but none were so beautiful as the one he had set his heart on, many were quite ordinary houses, and some were little better than mud hovels built of sun-dried bricks and plastered with mud—dreadful little places to find in Paradise.

Presently the angel arrived and offered to conduct him to his dwelling.

To his delight they headed straight for the beautiful palace of crystal. "I was quite right in my conjecture," he thought to himself. "How happy I shall be in that princely abode."

But just as they reached the entrance to the palace the angel turned aside and led him past several other inferior but still 'desirable' residences, towards the group of mud huts he had just been contemplating with disgust.

Arrived before the meanest of these the angel stopped and pointed.

“What do you mean?” asked the holy man.

“Your allotted residence,” was the brief reply.

With bitter rage and mortification in his heart the holy man was about to say something to the angel that would have entailed his casting out from the abode of the blessed, but he luckily checked himself in time and contented himself with asking:

“What is the meaning of this? Am I who have always lived in luxury in the world below to be rewarded for my numerous acts of piety with such a miserable dwelling in Paradise?”

“Yes,” replied the angel, “that is so. Outward acts of religion and piety secure the bare entrance into Paradise and form the foundations of all these buildings which you see. The foundations of this little mud hut of yours are all that could be desired. The superstructure is provided by good acts inspired by a love of God, outside the sphere of religious formalities.”

“Then may I ask,” indignantly inquired the holy man, “for whom that beautiful palace of crystal and gold is destined?”

The angel answered: “That is for the fakir who stood daily at your door.”

“Still I cannot understand,” wailed the holy man, “why so noble a residence for him and so mean a one for me. You might have been kinder to me I think, considering that the Almighty knows the sort of life I have been accustomed to.”

“It is not for us to choose,” was the soft answer. “I am truly sorry for you. But our builders are only allowed to use the materials you send us from below during your earthly lives. These are the materials you yourself have provided for us—we always hoped you would begin to understand, and send us something better, but you never did—and those are the materials the poor old fakir sent us.”

III

“Blessed are the Meek.”

About three thousand years before the birth of the Holy Prophet there lived at the foot of God’s Holy Mountain a very pious and devout old man.

He was most scrupulous in his attention to all details of religious observance and was renowned throughout the land for his piety and devotion. He was a shining light to all his fellows, and he knew it, and was very pleased about it. And if you didn't know it, he told you, so that you should know.

He was so very religious that he came eventually to regard himself as almost on speaking terms with God. He knew Moses, at any rate, and his life and conduct met with the approval and commendation of that great man.

One morning as he was engaged in his early devotions he saw Moses approaching in the distance and, ceasing his prayers, he hastened to meet him and make his customary obeisance.

Moses informed him, in response to his inquiry, that he was about to ascend the mountain to have his periodical audience of the Almighty, and to put certain terrestrial matters before Him.

Hearing this the devout old man craved a boon.

“What do you wish?” asked Moses.

“Simply this, great prophet,” replied the old man, “I would know what reward the good God has for me in the world to come. I have been a faithful servant, as He well knows, and as I grow old I realize that the time cannot be far off when I shall leave this vale of tears for the happier realms above. It would set my mind at rest and render my declining years more peaceful if I could be sure that a place was reserved for me in that blessed abode.”

“Certainly,” replied Moses, “a most reasonable request. I shall be most happy to lay it before the Almighty, though I cannot promise that He will grant your wish. These things are generally regarded as belonging to the hidden mysteries, and are not usually divulged to ordinary mortals. Still He may make an exception for you. Rest assured that I will make a strong representation of your case, which is no more than you deserve.”

So saying, Moses bade farewell and continued his arduous climb up the steep and rocky ascent.

Halfway up the hill the Prophet paused to rest and wipe the perspiration from his brow, and he had no sooner settled himself beneath the shade of a stately cedar tree than his ear was assailed by the twittering of a shepherd's pipe—a moment later a young goatherd made his appearance before him and bowed low in reverence to the great lawgiver.

“Humble greeting to our Holy Prophet,” murmured the young goatherd.

“And a greeting to you, young man of ill repute,” returned the Prophet.

“Ill repute that for once does not lie, your Reverence,” replied the young man. “I’m afraid I’m a bad lot. I try to keep straight, but I find it very hard, and the good resolutions I make don’t last very long.”

“I hear a great deal of your evil tendencies, my son,” continued the Prophet. “I hear of amorous escapades with young shepherdesses in the valley below, and of drinking bouts with fellow goatherds, and I hear nothing of your attention to your devotions. Are these things true?”

“Only too true, most reverend sir,” confessed the young man. “I love the girls—I can’t help it. They rather like me, you know. It would be easier if that were not so. And I love a skinful of good wine, and I don’t seem to be able to spare much time for my devotions. I am guilty of all these sins, may God forgive me. I’m afraid I’m a very bad lot.”

Moses gazed austerely at the smiling criminal as he said: “It is possible, but not probable, that you may be forgiven. Give up the girls, and give up the wine, and all may yet be well.”

“I’m afraid that’s more than I can promise,” replied the sinner. “I don’t know how it is, but I suppose I was born this way. I wish I were like the holy man at the foot of the hill, but he’s that and I’m this, and I suppose God made us both in our particular ways. He wanted that old man to be a saint, and He didn’t want me to be, so there he is and here am I. I don’t understand these things but I reckon only a few of us were meant to be saints, and as for my sins, I acknowledge them and I truly believe in God and in a merciful God—perhaps He won’t be too hard on me when the time comes.”

“Unrepentant young villain,” Moses stormed at him, “there’s no forgiveness for such as you,” and he rose to his feet to continue his upward climb.

“I am truly sorry that I am so bad, but I may get better some day,” said the goatherd in apologetic tones. “Is your Reverence ascending the mountain to confer with the Almighty? If that is so, may such a miserable sinner humbly beg a favour?”

“What is your wish?”

“When you reach the Divine Presence and have received from Him the guidance you seek, would you kindly ask Him what fate is prepared for me in the next world?”

“For you, blasphemer and evil-doer?” roared the Prophet, “how dare you make such a presumptuous request?”

“Never mind. I know I’m wicked, and God knows it too. But we’re all His children and I do beg of you to do what I ask.”

Without giving a final assent or dissent, Moses turned to pursue his climb, and the weightier matters that occupied his thoughts soon put all recollection of the dissolute goatherd out of his mind.

Arrived at the summit of the mountain, he was admitted to the Divine Presence, and received the counsel he sought.

At the close of the communication the Prophet asked, and obtained, permission to prefer a request.

“The devout man who lives at the foot of the mountain, humbly begs that he may be informed of the fate that awaits him in the next world.”

In response to the request the sky grew dark, then there was a burst of thunder, the clouds were rent in twain, and through the open space the Prophet saw a vision of a beautiful mansion standing in green pastures watered by streams of milk and honey. Then the space closed and the clouds cleared away.

Making a deep reverence, Moses was preparing to depart when he heard the voice of the Almighty asking if the holy man was the only one who had made such a request.

Then he remembered the goatherd, and, with many apologies, made a similar petition on his behalf.

Again the black clouds gathered and were rent, and in the open space the Prophet saw a dreadful lake of burning brimstone that filled his soul with horror.

Now taking his final leave Moses was accompanied for a short distance on the downward path by an angel, with whom he conversed.

They discussed the two visions that had just been revealed to the Prophet, and the latter dwelt on the dreadful prospect of the second vision.

The angel left him a little later, and at parting said: “Remember that those two visions refer to things as they are at this present moment. Whether the prospects remain the same for the two individuals in the actual hour of death is a matter that is entirely settled by their conduct from day to day. I think you might warn both of the mortals of this.”

After parting with the angel, Moses proceeded leisurely on the downward path, and a little more than halfway down he was confronted by the flippant goatherd, who, after making due obeisance, inquired if he had any answer to

give to his question.

“I have indeed,” solemnly replied the Prophet. “I will tell you exactly what happened. But remember, I warned you that it would be wiser not to ask. So convinced was I of the futility of your request that it entirely slipped my mind, and I was actually about to withdraw from the Divine Presence, when He called me back and asked me if there was nothing I had forgotten. Then I remembered, and I put your request before Him. In reply I was vouchsafed a vision of your terrible doom. A lake of brimstone, boiling and seething with horrid blue flames, into which the wicked are cast—not to die, but to linger in torment for ever. Such, young man, is the prospect that lies before you.”

As Moses ceased speaking, he was astonished to see the effect of his words on the goatherd. He had expected to see a poor repentant wretch cowering before him, instead of which he saw the young man’s face beaming with exultant smiles as he leaped into the air and bounded over the rocks and shouting the praises of Jehovah, apparently in an ecstasy of joy.

He thought it wise to make the matter clearer, so he repeated: “I’m afraid you didn’t quite understand me, child of Satan. I don’t think you realize the terrible doom that lies before you—to be boiled for ever in a seething lake of brimstone fire.”

“Oh, but I understand thoroughly,” replied the young man, continuing his ecstatic leaps and praises to Jehovah.

“Then why this strange behaviour?”

“I’ll explain,” said the goatherd, ceasing for a moment from his demonstrations of joy. “That I should be boiled for ever in a brimstone lake seems only right and fitting. I’ve done a lot of naughty things, and I suppose I’ll have to pay for them. I could have guessed all that without troubling you to ask. But the astounding thing that God should have remembered me when even you forgot me, overwhelms me with joy. Don’t you see what that shows me? That however evil a man may be he still remains one of God’s children. I never thought of that before, nor did you. I thought I was a child of Satan, as you unkindly called me just now. But I’m not, you see, I’m one of God’s children after all,” and as he finished speaking he leaped over a neighbouring bush and disappeared round a rocky corner in search of his goats, still vociferating the praises of Jehovah—the Just, the Merciful, and the Father of All.

Descending the mountain, musing over the extraordinary behaviour of the young man, Moses soon reached the abode of the devout old man, who was standing at his door eagerly awaiting the return of the Prophet with an answer to his inquiry.

“For you,” said Moses, “a beautiful palace is prepared in a wonderful grove of trees bearing every imaginable blossom and fruit. The palace is surrounded with verdant pastures, watered by streams of milk and honey.”

A pleased expression showed itself on the old man’s countenance, but there was nothing approaching ecstasy, nor even of surprise, as he commented:

“How beautiful. You almost describe what I had myself expected. That is just about what I felt sure the Almighty would bestow on me as a reward of my long life of devotion and piety. I won’t say I have earned it, but honestly I do think I have merited something of the sort. And the walls? Did you notice? Were they of Jasper and Chalcedony?”

“I hardly noticed. I think they were just ordinary walls.”

“H’m. . . . And the door, was it of Gold?”

“No, just some beautiful wood.”

“H’m. . . . Only ordinary wood?”

Noticing a tinge of disappointment in the old man’s voice Moses comforted him by saying: “The angel, by the way, told me to impress upon you that this was to-day’s arrangement and was not to be regarded as permanent. Changes may occur as time goes on.”

“Ah,” responded the devout man. “I see. I’ll double my devotions henceforth, and then I’ll get the walls of Chalcedony and Jasper, and the doors of Gold.”

“Perhaps,” said the Prophet as he took his leave.

A year later a terrible storm burst over the lower slopes of the mountain, and both the devout old man and the thoughtless goatherd were swept into eternity.

At the Judgment-seat the pious ancient proudly confronted his Creator, while the poor goatherd stood trembling beside him in an attitude of deep humility.

Then with a peal of thunder the judgment went forth, and the old man was thrown into the lake of ever-burning brimstone, while the goatherd was conducted by a band of angels to the beautiful abode in the grove of trees watered by streams of milk and honey.

V PRICKING A BLADDER

THIRTY years ago Hong-Kong was a gay little place, as it no doubt is still. From a soldier's point of view there were many amenities that rendered it quite a desirable station for a year or two.

At the time of this story a well-known regiment was in garrison on the island, and the officers, taking full advantage of the social gaieties, were very popular with the residents.

To join the regiment on transfer arrived one morning Lieutenant Crampton-Jones, a smiling, good-looking young fellow who had already some two years' service to his credit, and who regarded himself in consequence as quite the old soldier.

Crampton-Jones was a good lad with a few failings, of which a tendency to self-satisfaction and boasting was perhaps the worst.

He was met on arrival by the Adjutant, Lieutenant Walford, who, like the good fellow he was, went out of his way to make the newcomer feel at ease. It was not long before Walford experienced something like a sensation of being snubbed, so completely was the new arrival 'at ease', having needed no extraneous help to induce that pleasing frame of mind.

Introduced to the other officers in mess, young Crampton-Jones was soon thoroughly at home in his new surroundings, and was voted quite a decent sort of chap with a little touch of bumptiousness that time and circumstances would doubtless cure. Time and circumstances, enlisting the aid of a few bright spirits, made no delay in getting to work, and this story is a brief account of how the cure was effected.

The unpleasant trait in young Crampton-Jones' character was not long in forcing itself on the attention of his brother officers.

Referring to the social gaieties of the town, Captain Robinson gave him sound advice as to the various addresses where it might be a good thing to leave a card, and added:

"People here are very nice and do a lot of entertaining. But, of course, it takes time to get to know them. I will take you round with me occasionally, if you care about it."

“Thanks awfully, Robinson. I would like to go round with you any time. But as a matter of fact, I expect my name is pretty well known here. My father was on the legislative council some years ago and was a notable figure in Hong-Kong society. I expect there will be a good many who remember him.”

“Tut, tut,” murmured Robinson to himself, “this young cub will want putting in his place.”

So many references were made during the next month by the latest joined subaltern to the fame of his father, and his own consequent claim to recognition by the *élite* of Hong-Kong society, that the regiment began to get a little tired of it.

“We’ve been good to him, and let him off easily up to now, forgiving the faults of a newcomer,” said the Adjutant to a group of officers assembled in the ante-room after lunch, “but the time has come when steps must be seriously taken. Robinson and myself have thought of a plan and will undertake the task if none of you will interfere. All we ask of you others is that you will not take the matter into your own hands, that you will not short-circuit the whole thing by losing your temper the next time he comes that ‘father’s reputation’ stunt over you, and that you will carry out any directions we may give. We shall need only the help of one of the ladies to assist us in correspondence. For the present we have only one instruction, but a very important one, to issue. It is this. We always post our letters in the mess post-box on the writing-table. See that young Crampton-Jones never posts his anywhere else.”

On the next morning at the breakfast-table the following dialogue took place between two officers seated one on either side of young Jones:

“Another of my letters has gone astray. What an infernal nuisance. It’s time we made a complaint.”

“Where did you post it?”

“In the pillar-box outside the Hong-Kong Bank.”

“Idiot. You know we found years ago that no letter was safe unless posted in the regimental box on the writing-table. The mess servants empty it, and it is taken direct to the Post Office, so that nothing can go wrong. Serves you right if you take the risk of posting in the town.”

Young Crampton-Jones was naturally deeply interested in this conversation and was promptly regaled with a series of dreadful examples of what had happened to people stupid enough to neglect the advice as to the posting of letters. He registered a mental vow never to do anything so foolish himself.

About this time his brother officers' solicitude about his getting in touch with friends of the family became so marked that he almost suspected that his leg was being pulled, and it was painful to have to reply invariably in the negative.

"Funny that none of them have come around to drop a card on you," remarked Captain Swindon; "your name was in the paper in large print on the day after your arrival, and a reference was made to your father's services. Perhaps they've had a look at you and retired in dismay—you may be unconsciously repulsive."

One morning, however, the spell was at last broken. An impressive-looking envelope, addressed in a lady's handwriting, was noticed at breakfast-time in Crampton-Jones' rack.

When the latter entered, he clutched eagerly at the letter, which he noticed was a local one bearing the Hong-Kong postmark, and sitting down at the table, tore open the cover and read the following:

"THE OAKS,
KOWLIANG ROAD,
THE PEAK.
Thursday.

DEAR MR. CRAMPTON-JONES,

My husband and myself are old friends of your father's, and were, like many others who remember his genial ways, delighted to hear of his son's arrival in our midst.

We are looking forward very much to making your acquaintance, but just at present we have no date free.

What about Sunday supper though? Would that suit you?

We go to the evening service always, and you might meet us at the door afterwards. I will look out for you as we come out. If you just hold your handkerchief in your hand, I shall know it is you.

George has been too frightfully busy or he would have been round to the mess to look you up.

Kindest regards, and *do* come if you can.

Yours sincerely,
Bessie Ware.

P.S. I suggest this meeting because you would never find your way

up here—we live at the very end of everything.”

As young ‘Cramjo’ absorbed the contents of this epistle his cheeks were suffused with a warm blush of triumph which did not escape the eyes of the other occupants of the table, who seemed to take an unanimous interest in the young man’s correspondence.

After breakfast he seated himself at the writing-table and proceeded to reply to Mrs. Ware’s kind invitation, not noticing that a brother officer was mounting guard over him, and not aware that this officer had orders to see that the reply was posted nowhere else but in the mess letter-box.

There was no need to be anxious on this head, and the letter, duly directed and stamped, was dropped into the box, to be removed as soon as Cramjo’s back was turned by the Adjutant Walford, better known to his friends as ‘Slasher’ owing to his prowess with the sword on many occasions at assaults-at-arms.

Contrary to all rules of etiquette, the Slasher tore open the envelope and, assembling the committee, read to them the following neatly worded communication:

“DEAR MRS. WARE,

I was delighted to get your note, and will be very glad to meet you after church on Sunday evening.

Yours sincerely,

WILBUR CRAMPTON-JONES”

“Now,” said the Slasher, “the only orders necessary to issue at this juncture are regarding a ‘supervisor’ for the forthcoming incident. Scratton is detailed to attend the service unnoticed by our friend, and report on events.”

“I don’t quite like this job,” said Scratton, “but I’ll do what I’m told. Seems a little like spying, you know.”

“Rot, my dear boy,” retorted the Slasher, “it’s nothing of the sort. It’s only a touch of education we’re giving him, and the blighter deserves a little something, doesn’t he, after all his indecent bleating about his family reputation. After we’ve done with him that trait of snobbishness will disappear from his character for ever, and he will thereafter shine forth as the perfect little gentleman. And we don’t want you to spy. You are just to see that he does attend and does what he is told to do.”

Sunday came, and on that evening the church received an addition of two

members to the normal congregation.

One was Mr. Crampton-Jones, who seated himself well up on the north side, and the other Mr. Scratton, who took his place several rows back on the south side.

It is not possible for a parson to scrutinize each member of his congregation, even if he wished to do so. If the Rev. C. Forbes had noticed the two new worshippers he would have observed that the one on the north side was eagerly scanning the faces of all ladies within reach of his glance, and would have made the mental comment that this was merely the normal trick of male glances. Then he would have seen the gaze of the south side man fixed unswervingly on the back of the north side man's head, from which he would doubtless gather that the former was a detective waiting for the conclusion of the service to arrest his man.

The service over, young Crampton-Jones made his way rapidly to the exit, clutching in his right hand a large silk handkerchief. Arrived in the open air, he stood expectantly a little on one side, eagerly scanning the faces of the ladies emerging from the porch.

Can this be she?

No, she passes by. Perhaps his handkerchief is not prominent enough. He holds it out almost with the air of a suppliant.

Is this the lady? Yes. A smile. Of recognition? No. She turns her head and passes by. The smile was only at noticing a quaint young man holding out a handkerchief as if offering it for sale.

Dear, dear. This is nervous work. There can't be many left. Ah, there she is.

A tall lady glances in his direction. He takes a step forward with extended hand. But no. She passes on. And now the church is empty and they are closing the doors. Heavens, what a rotten show. What's he done wrong? This is the church, and this is the time—but where is the lady?

Having delayed till any further chance of success had become quite out of the question, young Crampton-Jones sadly turned his footsteps homewards, his mind filled with bitter reflections on the stupidity of females—not to be trusted, any of them, in large things or small. Making him look such a fool before the others, as he would now have to return to supper in the mess, whereas he had told everyone that he was out for the whole evening.

Nothing for it, however, but to face the music.

His entry was greeted with a surprised query from the mess president. "Hullo, I thought you warned out!"

"Yes, but I changed my mind. Thought I'd sooner feed at home after all."

Later in the evening he succeeded in manœuvring the Slasher into a quiet corner of the ante-room with a view of getting a little indirect information concerning his new-found friends.

Beginning nonchalantly with a few remarks on Hong Kong society in general, ingeniously contrived to prevent the Slasher from realizing the tremendous importance of the information he was seeking, Cramjo discreetly led the conversation to a point where he thought he might safely put his question.

"Apropos," he said, with regard to a subject that was not at all apropos. "Do you know the Wares? My old governor told me he had some friends of that name here (*lie*)."

In the half-second's pause before replying, the quick-minded Slasher realized the enormous importance of creating a lot of Wares in case of trouble arising later.

"Wares? Oh, rather. Lots of 'em. Which do you mean? There's old Binny Ware, who's something to do with the harbour works. And J. S. Ware, who's an engineer; and Tom Ware, who broke his leg at polo last year."

"I think the one I mean is George Ware, whose wife's name is Bessie."

"What, good old George! Splendid fellow, quite a big bug in the commercial world—going to be Sir George pretty soon. Charming wife, too. The best hostess in the island. And they have some ripping kids."

"I think I'll try and get round and drop a card on them to-morrow, if you know where they live."

"Nothing doing, dear boy. Impossible to find their place without a guide. They live in the Kowliang Road, which is not a road at all. Just a sort of private path down the other side of the Peak. They always pilot their guests there for a first visit. Better drop them a line if you want to get in touch with them."

"Thanks, I think I will," responded Cramjo, who left shortly afterwards to turn in and ruminate over the events of the day, while the Slasher hastily summoned a meeting of the committee to discuss the next step.

The disappointed diner got to bed early, but not to sleep. His mind was

busily engaged concocting alternative polite letters to his would-have-been hostess containing thinly veiled reproaches, and it was not till the early hours of the morning that he finally fell into a deep and refreshing slumber.

At Slasher's committee meeting Scratton was congratulated on his patient attention to duty which enabled him to report circumstantially that Cramjo had waited solemnly, handkerchief in hand, at the west door of the church, and had never budged from that position.

This information gave the Slasher the cue for a soothing explanation of the fiasco, contained in a letter from Bessie Ware which reached young Crampton-Jones in the afternoon just as he was about to seat himself at the writing-table with a view to giving vent to his long-suppressed indignation.

“THE OAKS,
KOWLIANG ROAD,
THE PEAK.
Sunday.”

MY DEAR MR. CRAMPTON-JONES,

We have just got home from church, and I write without delay to let you know how *very* disappointed we were not to meet you as I hoped we had arranged.

What can have become of you? I hope you are not ill.

We waited and waited until the last people had come out, but no signs of anyone waiting with handkerchief in hand.

I expect you will be writing to tell us what happened, and when I hear from you we will be able to make better arrangements for meeting next time.

Yours very sincerely,

BESSIE WARE.

P.S. It struck me just this minute that you may have waited at the west door and we always come out at the north door. I forgot all about there being two doors. If this is what happened I shall never forgive myself for my stupidity.”

“Stupidity,” muttered Cramjo to himself as he prepared to pen a brief reply, “that’s a mild term for such blithering idiotic damfoolishness.”

Then it occurred to him that the foolishness might have been partly on his side—why hadn’t he thought of the other door? Certainly the door he came out

at was the principal one, but all churches have more than one exit. This reflection soothed the bitterness of his feelings, and he replied magnanimously with an admission that he felt he ought to share the blame.

There was no long pause before the arrival of the second invitation, which was contained in the following letter:

“THE OAKS,
KOWLIANG ROAD.
Wednesday.”

DEAR MR. CRAMPTON-JONES,

I wonder if you have forgiven me over that church meeting business?

You will be able to tell me that you have done so if you will join our picnic party on Friday next.

We are taking the children and a few cheery friends out to Stonecutter’s Island in our little steam-launch.

Start at 2.15 from the jetty just by your mess. You cannot mistake the jetty as it is marked in big letters, TONG-WONG SHIPPING CO., and you are not likely to have any other people arriving with a pack of children, so you will know us. The steam-launch has a polished brass funnel and varnished wood hull (no paint). These directions will, I hope, make our meeting quite certain this time.

Looking forward very much to that occasion.

Yours very sincerely,
BESSIE WARE.”

Having written a polite note of acceptance, young Crampton-Jones looked forward with eager anticipation to the long-deferred meeting with these charming people.

Behold him then a little before the appointed hour, on the appointed day, at the appointed place. No chance of error this time. The wharf was marked in big letters, TONG-WONG SHIPPING CO. There was a little launch with steam up, polished brass funnel, varnished wood hull. But further on there was another, and further still a third. Stupid of Mrs. Ware not to realize that that was a sort of sealed pattern for steam-launches.

However, that didn’t matter twopence, there could be no confusion when the party arrived.

Dressed in his smartest blue suit with a rather dainty bow tie, young Cramjo impatiently paced the wharf, watch in hand, unaware of the scrutiny of several malicious brother officers gazing from the first-floor window of a neighbouring establishment.

As the smart young man strode up and down before the entrance to the wharf Scratton was seized with a tender feeling of remorse.

“Poor little devil! What a consummate ass we are making of him. He’s had quite enough of this rotten foolery. I’m off to break the sad news to him and stop the show.”

Forcibly restrained from putting his words into action, Scratton was held down in a chair while the Slasher thus addressed him:

“Blessings on your tender little heart, Scratchy. Don’t pride yourself too much on it, it’s not a monopoly. Our hearts are quite as tender as yours. But stern duty has to be done, and this bumptious kid has by no means learnt his lesson yet. Listen while I tell you what the young cub said to me last night. We were talking about these Wares, and I suggested that you probably knew them, to which he replied that he had gathered that they were *not the sort of people who knew everybody*. A nasty one for you, Scratchy m’lad.”

Stung by this fearful insult and with a heart turned to stone, Scratchy posted himself at the window to gloat over the miserable victim, who could now (2.30 p.m.) be seen striding fretfully up and down, watch in hand, before the entrance to the jetty.

A carriage drove up and came to a stand close by. From it emerged a lady and two children. Cramjo advanced with beating heart.

But alas, the lady without a glance in his direction walked slowly and deliberately away from the wharf.

Up till nearly three o’clock the wretched youth remained at his post, then, abandoning all hope, turned on his heel and with raging heart returned to the mess and flung himself into a chair, seeking consolation in the imbibing of a large whisky-and-soda.

What a fool of a woman. What the devil had happened now? He had carried out his instructions to the full. He would write while his blood was still hot and tell her what he thought of her.

Moving towards the writing-table with murder in his heart, his eye fell on an envelope protruding from his rack.

Hastily snatching it, he read in the well-known handwriting:

Urgent. To be delivered by hand before 12 noon.

H. CRAMPTON-JONES, ESQRE.,

Officers' Mess,

——th Regiment.

It was the work of a second to tear open the envelope and to proceed to a perusal of the contents. This is the letter:

“THE OAKS,
Friday.”

DEAR MR. CRAMPTON-JONES,

I am sending this note off to you post-haste by hand so that it may arrive in time to let you know that to-day's picnic is off. Such terrible bad luck.

My eldest boy, Jacky, came out all over spots yesterday, and when the doctor came this morning he pronounced the poor child to be suffering from small-pox. Such a calamity. We are naturally very anxious for the dear boy, and I am most annoyed at being obliged to write you to again postponing our meeting. We are, of course, all of us in quarantine until the doctor releases us. I will write again and let you know how things go, unless they stop my writing for fear of infection.

With renewed regrets and kindest regards,

Yours very sincerely,

BESSIE WARE.

P.S. When we can fix up another date we must make a certainty of it. I am ashamed to think of all the trouble we have put you to. Can you forgive us?”

Well, there's nothing to be done and no one to blame, mused the disappointed lad. Curses on that Chinese coolie's head who dawdled *en route* and delayed delivery of the letter that would have saved him from wasting a whole afternoon. He would let the Wares know all about it, and he hoped the swine would catch it hot.

A meeting of the committee was held on the following day. One member suggested that young Cramjo had had enough and they should close up proceedings. To this Scratton urged the strongest objection, he thought the lesson was not half rubbed in yet. Finally it was suggested and agreed that it was high time the husband should come on the scene and take his part in the plot.

Two days later Crampton-Jones received a letter signed G. H. Ware inviting him to dine at the Club on Wednesday next at 8 p.m.

The writer added: "You will be glad to know that Jacky is not in any danger. It was a false alarm—some sort of rash or pimples that the doctor fancied might be small-pox, and thank God it wasn't. So we are not infected, and you run no risk of germs from me.

I shall probably be at the Club before you and will have no difficulty in spotting you. If necessary, please tell the porter to send for me."

The invitation was gladly accepted, though not without forebodings. So many disasters seemed to occur with these Ware people—Cramjo was really getting tired of it. However, nothing was likely to go wrong this time.

Captain Robinson, who was on the committee of the Club, was detailed to see that the Club steward and the porter were primed to answer, "He's not come in yet" if an inquiry were made for Mr. Ware, and further events were left to take care of themselves.

Arriving at the Club punctually at 8 p.m. with an excellent appetite and anticipating a pleasant evening with a friend of the family, Cramjo glanced around to see if there were any signs of his host, sat down in the lounge, and looked at the papers for a minute or two.

Then back into the hall where several newcomers passed him by without a glance. Then back into the lounge. Then back into the hall. Hang unpunctuality, it's 8.20 now. Better ask the hall porter. "Mr. Ware not come in yet" was not a consoling piece of information.

Then more pacing backwards and forwards between lounge and hall, finally ending at 8.35 p.m. in a paroxysm of rage.

Confound these infernal Wares, one might almost think they were pulling his leg.

Old Ware might be a big-bug in the commercial world, but he'd have to be shown that an Army officer has to be treated with respect.

His mind seething with these fierce denunciations, sentences framing themselves in his brain too punctuated with purple adjectives to be set down here, Crampton-Jones returned to the mess, where he got little consolation out of a cold supper and a bottle of Beaune, and shortly afterwards betook himself to bed.

Sleep was a long time coming, his mind refusing all suggestion of repose till it had concocted a real stinging letter that these rotten people—Bessie and

George—were to get next day.

At breakfast-time, however, his feelings were a little soothed by the receipt of a frightfully apologetic letter from Bessie Ware, who explained that “George had a dreadful accident on his way down to the Club last night. The wheel came off his rickshaw and he hit his head on a stone. Was brought home here nearly unconscious and is now in bed; will be in the doctor’s hands for some time, I’m afraid.

It really is quite terrifying the way Fate always intervenes to prevent our meeting, but I am determined to put an end to this silly state of affairs.

You positively must lunch with us on Saturday next at 1 p.m. I expect George will be up by then.

To make everything quite certain this time I will call for you myself at the mess about 12 noon and will guide you personally to our abode.”

Rather mollified by this note and feeling really a little sorry for Mr. Ware, Crampton-Jones seated himself at the writing-table with a view to accepting the invitation. But before he put pen to paper a sudden revulsion came over his feelings, and he proceeded to bite the end of the pen while he mused over the events of the last three weeks. Really it all seemed incredible. Here he was corresponding with this woman and her husband, accepting invitations, running about here, there, and everywhere in his best suit of clothes, and all for what? I ask you?

Never even set eyes on them yet. It was all too ridiculous—one would think they were not real people, and the whole thing a series of jokes. No, he would not go to their infernal house, he would no longer submit to be the shuttlecock bounced here and there by the battledore of a malicious fate. Enough.

So instead of acceptance he wrote this note:

“DEAR MRS. WARE,

It is very good of you to give me another chance of meeting you and to take all the trouble of coming to pick me up in the town.

Please forgive me if I refuse your kind invitation. A sort of fatality seems to hang over me and bring down some catastrophe every time I try to meet you.

I really cannot undertake any further adventures, I am quite worn out. If I were not assured in many ways of the reality of your existence I might almost have thought that I was the victim of a practical joke!

What I mean is this: You have asked me to lunch on Saturday. Today is Thursday, and this very afternoon I am going to break the spell by finding my way to your abode and paying my respects in the usual way.

I know that you are very out of the way, but after all, Hong-Kong is not a very large area, the Peak is not inaccessible, and I shall hope to be with you as soon as this letter, or earlier. Even if I do not find you in, it will be at least some pleasure to locate your house.

Yours sincerely,

H. CRAMPTON-JONES.”

Having sealed and addressed the letter he shoved it absent-mindedly in his pocket.

For once no member of the committee was standing by to give a further warning as to the inadvisability of posting letters elsewhere than in the mess letter-box.

The result was that when he sallied forth a little later on his quest for Mrs. Ware’s abode he carried the fateful missive with him.

Before setting out he had the sense to examine a large-scale map of the island, in which occupation he was interrupted by the entrance of Captain Robinson, who, immediately scenting danger, proceeded to offer his assistance.

“Looking for anything in particular, Cramjo?”

“I was just trying to find Kowliang Road.”

“I know it. It’s up at the Peak somewhere. Lemme see. I’ll find it on the map for you.”

A prolonged search of the map, however, revealed no Kowliang Road.

“I expect there is no such road in the island. Where d’you get the notion from?” asked Robinson.

“Oh, there’s no doubt of the existence of the road. I know people who live there and have corresponded with them for some time.”

“Ah well, then I’ll tell you what. There’s been a recent extension of the residential area at the Peak, and it is certain to be one of the new roads. No good your trying to find it.”

“That’s all tommy-rot. I am as a matter of fact just going off to find it. I

shall take a rickshaw as far as it will go and do the rest of the journey on foot, but one thing is certain and that is that I shall eventually find Kowliang Road. So long.”

No sooner was Cramjo out of the room than Robinson darted to the letter-box to abstract Mrs. Ware’s correspondence, and was horrified to find it empty. However, it was probable that another member of the committee had previously captured the letter. But consternation reigned later in the day when it was found that the acceptance of Mrs. Ware’s invitation was not to be found. Yet it must have been written. The wretched youth had ignored their careful instructions and posted the letter in the town.

Well, after all, perhaps it was just as well. The letter would come back through the Dead Letter Office and that would bring the whole matter to a satisfactory conclusion. The joke was lasting too long, and it was unanimously decided that the committee should be dissolved and no further action taken.

Meanwhile Crampton-Jones pursued his quest, not forgetting, as he passed through the town, to post his reply to Mrs. Ware.

Arrived at the Peak, he explored the entire neighbourhood without discovering the road he sought. He interviewed a Sikh policeman on duty.

“Kowliang Road, Sahib? No. No road that name up here.”

“Oh, but there is, you know. KOWLIANG ROAD,” he bellowed in anger. “Do you know this part well?”

“Yes, Sahib. Since ten years. There is no Kowliang Road here.”

Fools these policemen are. However, I daresay it is, as they suggest, a new road and not yet well known. Here comes a white man, he’ll be able to tell me.

“Kowliang Road? Kowliang? Never heard of it. There’s no such road. Kowloon Road you mean, and that’s in the lower town.”

“Oh, not at all. I mean Kowliang Road, the Peak.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Been here for years and never heard of it. I know all the new extension part and it is certainly not there.”

After many such heart-breaking failures the disappointed explorer returned to the town, angry and weary.

Well, these Wares could go to the devil for all he cared. He’d had enough of it. Fed up to the teeth. Making one feel such a fool. If only his brother officers got to know of all these misadventures what a joke they’d make of it. He’d never be allowed to hear the last of it. Better keep it dark.

At mess, however, he had to admit in reply to Robinson's inquiry that he had not found Kowliang Road. "A fool of a Sikh policeman up there even didn't know it. I shall report him. First duty for a policeman is to know the local geography. By Jove, yes, I'll run the fellow in. Who does one write to about the police?"

No one helped him much on that subject except that the Slasher voiced the general opinion that it would be silly to write in about it, better leave things alone.

The situation was becoming absurd. The jokers were tired of the joke, but the victim was as fresh as a lark and determined to prolong the joke on his own—in fact to pull his own leg.

On Saturday Crampton-Jones made no effort to see if perchance Mrs. Ware would be looking for him at noon. She would have got his reply, and even if she hadn't and were to keep the appointment and wait in vain—well, let her. It seemed rather ungallant, but perhaps it would do her no harm to learn what it was like waiting for people who never came.

Two days later, opening his letters at the breakfast-table, young Cramjo suddenly threw down one with the exclamation:

"Well, this beats all. Dead Letter Office. Idiots."

"What's the matter?" inquired his neighbour.

"What's the matter? Why here's a letter of mine addressed to people I know quite well and with whom I have often corresponded returned through the Dead Letter Office. I'll go straight down to the Post Office and have the Postmaster's blood."

That very afternoon Lieutenant Crampton-Jones visited the Post Office and asked to see the Postmaster regarding a complaint. The Postmaster was in bed with fever, but he was received by his assistant, a smiling and intelligent Bengali Babu.

"Yes, sir," said the latter. "I know all about this case. The matter was referred to me. It is a quite simple affair. There is no road in Hong-Kong called Kowliang Road, and there is no name B. Ware in the list of residents, and we know no house called The Oaks."

"But you must be mad. I have during the past month received several letters from this person at this address in answer to letters from me which that person had obviously received through you. I shall report the matter to higher authority."

After mess that evening Cramjo was still fuming, appealing for sympathy to his brother officers.

“This absolutely rotten Post Office. Here are people I know quite well writing letters to me and answering my letters. Then all of a sudden the Post Office turns round and says—no such people, no such house, no such road! By George, I’ll make them sit up before I’ve done with them. That silly old smiling Babu, telling me ‘All is quite in order, sir.’ I rather expect he’ll wear another sort of smile when the authorities take action on the letter I’m going to write to them.”

While he continued to expose the iniquities and shortcomings of the local Post Office, a letter in a lady’s handwriting, unstamped and obviously sent by hand, was quietly inserted in Cramjo’s rack.

As soon as he was notified that this had been done, Captain Robinson turned to leave the mess, and saying good night remarked:

“By the way, Cramjo, there’s a note for you, I see, in your rack.”

Crampton-Jones rose from his chair and took the letter. So excited was he at the sight of that familiar, and now almost hated, handwriting, that his hand actually trembled as he sank back into his chair and tore open the cover.

And he did not even notice that he was now alone in the room. The others had betaken themselves quietly to bed.

This is what he read:

“THE OAKS,
KOWLIANG ROAD,
THE PEAK.
Monday.

MY DEAREST MR. CRAMPTON-JONES,

Forgive my addressing you in the superlative, but during the last few weeks we seem to have become so near to each other in spite of our failure to meet that you are very dear indeed to me. And though we can never possibly meet, you will always remain my dearest memory.

The simple truth of the matter is that I do not exist in any material form, I am purely spiritual. Do you see what I mean?

If you do not, I will go one point further before I disappear for ever from your ken.

Take the name of my house—The Oaks. That is not its real name. It

was misnamed in that way by my husband who has a distressing habit of dropping his h's. Re-insert the 'h' and read out loud my name with initial only, and you will have unmistakable clues to my identity.

Yours for the very last time,

B. WARE.”

VI

MR. DROPMAN VISITS PARIS

DROPMAN is our village grocer—student of humanity in his leisure hours.

No great scholar, but filled with a desire to balance lack of education by observing the facts of daily life—not a bad line to take for a man who has little time and no inclination for reading.

A cheap trip to Paris having been recently advertised, enabling subscribers to spend four days in the gay city, Mr. Dropman, with two village associates, Pogson the plumber and Morton the baker, decided to avail himself of the opportunity of a more intimate knowledge of our neighbours across the Channel.

“Of course, I don’t pretend,” he said, “that a man can really get to know another nation in the space of four days; still, I shall know more about them than I did before, and it will be first-hand knowledge, and I shall know more at least than others who have never been to France.”

So you see he started out in a very fair and reasonable frame of mind.

“I can’t speak a word of the language,” he told me, “except a few words I picked up from my nephew who was in the War. ‘Napoo’ for ‘there isn’t any’, ‘oh’ for ‘water’, ‘san-fairy-ann’ for ‘no matter’, and ‘toodle-oo’ for ‘both’. They sound silly sort of words, but I expect they’re just sort of soldier’s slang and not real French.”

A week later I met old Dropman on his return from the grand tour and found him eager to give me his impressions of France and the French. I encouraged him to proceed, and the following is roughly the gist of his recital:

“I like the French, I must say, but it is a little disappointing to find foreigners so like ourselves in most ways. I never saw the ‘mounseer’ of the funny pictures; bar here and there a little difference in workmen’s clothes, they might mostly be taken for Englishmen. Only when they talk—and they do talk a terrible lot—they rather wave their arms about and snap their fingers in each other’s faces. And when they want something to drink they like to take it sitting in chairs on the pavement—a silly custom, I thought, blocking the road for pedestrians.

Being myself, as you know, a local preacher, I was chiefly interested in

regarding these people from the point of view of religion and morals, and, though four days is a very short space of time in which to form conclusions in such deep matters, I think I got to know something about the national character in these respects.

I was not such a fool as to try the language. Pogson had a little book with sentences in it, but they seldom seemed to fit in with what we wanted. When he did succeed in finding one that suited our case the man he spoke to only stared at him in silence. He worked off one of them fairly successfully on a waiter, but the waiter answered back in very good English, so the effort was wasted.

As regards myself, I merely used my ears and eyes. Hearing, I must say, helped me very little—never heard such a lot of cackle in my life, it's hard to believe they understand each other.

On this point I developed what I believe to be a sound theory, and that is that the reason for their silly gesticulations is that without them they would not understand each other. If a Frenchman kept his hands in his pockets, like an Englishman, while he was talking, the other fellow wouldn't understand half what he said, so when he says 'up', he raises his hand, and when he says 'down', he lowers it, and the other fellow at once grasps 'up' or 'down' as the case may be. Something on the lines of the deaf-and-dumb alphabet. Don't you think there may be something in the idea?"

"Why yes, Mr. Dropman," I replied. "I think you are probably right as to the origin of gesticulation. But I'm sorry you didn't take any other notes of the language. Before you go next time you must learn up a little and be more prepared."

"No. I shall never go again. Not even if there's a tunnel. England is good enough for me, and though I found the French people very nice and ingratiating, I am no use to them and they are no use to me.

The little first-hand knowledge I have gained of them will last me the rest of my life, and I don't expect I should know much more about them, even if I lived among them for a year. At the age of sixty, you see, a man gets hard-set and doesn't pick up much in the way of new ideas."

"Didn't you get any more tips about the language?" I asked, fearing that he might cut short the recital of his adventures.

"Not much. I was rather pleased to see how many English words they use—words I was able, of course, to read and understand in shop-signs and advertisements. I felt it was a great tribute to the English race.

They have taken our words for ‘opera’, ‘telegraph’, ‘telephone’, ‘chocolate’, and ‘beer’, but they don’t seem to have mastered the spelling quite correctly. They drop the ‘e’ out of chocolate, and they put an ‘e’ on the end of cigar, and beer they spell all anyhow.

I was surprised at their not having words of their own for these things, but if they take ours they might as well spell them right.’

I agreed, but suggested that the words might have a common origin, or that possibly we might have taken them from the French, and it might be we who were mis-spelling.

“No, sir. I quite satisfied myself on that point. They are good English words that you will find in any English dictionary.”

“Well, Mr. Dropman, I suppose you must be right if you have the dictionary behind you. Did you find anything else to interest you?”

“Oh yes. As I said, I tried to get some idea of the people from the religious and moral point of view, but religion is a deep subject, and my time was short. Moreover, the French are Roman Catholics and all their ways differ from ours.

We attended a service with our guide in the principal church which they call the Maddlin. I was glad to be able to do that as my nephew told me that the Maddlin itself was one of the sights of Paris.

The church was very full, from which it seems that the French are a religious people, but, my word, they do pass the plate round pretty fast.

In our chapel, as you know, we only have one collection, and on special occasions we ask for a ‘silver’ collection, and it’s astonishing the number of threepenny pieces we get. Well now, here in this Maddlin church you won’t believe me when I tell you that they lifted six collections in ten minutes—six collections lifted in ten minutes! A fact, I assure you, and no exaggeration.

We’d soon get new cushions in our chapel if we could run things like that, but,” he added, with a sorrowful shake of the head, “our people wouldn’t stand it, they’d walk out.”

“No, I expect it would thin the congregation a bit. I should probably be the first to walk out. However, I quite agree with you that people who will submit to six collections in ten minutes must be pretty fierce in their religion. Did you manage to make any notes about morals?”

“Morals I got quite a good idea of, and came to the same conclusion as in religion. The French are supposed to be an irreligious people. I maintain the contrary. With the Maddlin church filled to overflowing, and a congregation

that will allow six collections to be lifted in ten minutes, I think I can fairly say that the French are a religious people. Now as to morals I have the same sort of feeling.

Over here in England we always seem to regard the French as an immoral lot. No one would dare to let a Frenchman loose in his family, and French women have even a worse reputation—it seems to me a great libel on that race. Of books I cannot speak, I am told they're very bad, but most of our books nowadays are what you might call 'a bit thick', and I don't see how the French could beat them.

Of Frenchmen's morals I know nothing, but I'm prepared to believe anything of men who get so excited about trifles. Of French women, however, I can speak from experience. I can tell you that they are highly moral, having been an actual eye-witness of the following incident.

On our boat crossing over to Havre was a very nice and good-looking French lady who spoke a little English. We got into conversation with her over some matter of chairs and rugs, and all three got very friendly with her. I must admit that I was very much taken with her myself, but I am a married man and I hope I know my place. I am not one to presume. Still, I will say that I felt I should have liked to get to know her better if there had not been three of us. Morton was the one who got the snub—a good fellow but always a bit uppish—and well he deserved it.

In the course of our talk we found that Madame was going to Paris and actually going to the same hotel as ourselves. On hearing this Morton, without consulting either of us, invited her to go to a cinema with him that evening, and what do you think she answered?

She switched off on to French and said, as far as we could gather, that she would be delighted to *faire la noce* with him. Pogson looked up *noce* in his little book and found it meant marriage. She must have meant that she would only spend the evening with Morton if his intentions were ultimately matrimonial—a nasty snub for a man who was already married!

I thought it a very noble retort from a truly moral woman, and I expect you'll agree that this incident entitles me to say that French women are not immoral—all honour to the ladies of France!"

VII

BURGLARY IN THE BALKANS

THE time was long ago, before the Great War, and it was a small Balkan State, and the King's name was, as usual, Rudolf, and he wore the sealed-pattern uniform of the Blue Hungarian Band with a lovely white plume in his busby, and a fur collar to his silver-braided tunic, which was always half on and half off as if he had not had time to finish his dressing. He didn't like wearing these clothes, but his people expected it of him, and he liked to please them.

And lots of other royalties used to visit King Rudolf in his wonderful old mediæval palace. Even some of the big ones came sometimes because he was a good fellow, the scenery magnificent, and everything was old-world and quaint. And even if your slumbers were sometimes disturbed by a sharp tweek from some small nocturnal intruder, it was worth enduring such minor discomforts to taste the glories of the royal cellar.

And such visits often entailed an exchange of gifts. King Rudolf XXXIV had quantities of them—some he had received himself, but the greater part came to him from his ancestors when he ascended the throne, just two years ago.

And he was often called on to lay foundation stones, or to visit towns and hospitals. And on such occasions he was presented with silver trowels, silver keys, and illuminated addresses enclosed in caskets that looked like gold, and other baubles of that nature.

And as his ancestors had lived the same sort of lives before him, the Palace was quite encumbered with these unattractive objects and royal gifts.

King Rudolf, being a shrewd man, wanted to burn all the illuminated addresses and melt down their caskets to see if they were really gold or not, and to take a hammer and smash all the outrageous vases and such things that were among the collection. But all he could manage was a vase or two which he bumped into accidentally. He got rid of a fair number in this way, but could not do much because the Court Chamberlain's eye was always on him—or the Comptroller of the Royal Household, or some superfluous person like that.

He unburdened himself one morning at breakfast to his Royal Consort, the beautiful Queen Natalie. Breakfast was the only meal they were allowed in

strict privacy and so it was their only chance in the twenty-four hours of being real people.

“It is becoming unendurable, Natasha, this living in a museum. There’s nothing in this palace that appeals to me in any way, not a single article of furniture that is in the least way attractive. Can’t kings have anything of their own? I’d gladly burn the place down if I dared, to get rid of the whole lot, and start fresh, just you and me choosing furniture and odds-and-ends for ourselves like ordinary happy mortals.”

“Yes, I wish we could. But I’m afraid it can’t be done. And if we did burn the place down we are so hard up we’d have to start furnishing on the new system, and it would be hateful to have it all delivered in a plain van and have to pay instalments. No, it can’t be done.”

“Well, I’ll do something desperate one of these days. Meantime I’ll see if some of the Royal Household can advise me in the matter. We might get rid of some of the worst lumber in some discreet way, don’t you think?”

“Not a bad idea, Rudy, but you’d have to be very cautious. There’d be a revolution if the people only suspected for half a moment that their King was contemplating such a sacrilege.”

“Yes, it will have to be thought out carefully. Bother this Royal Household. They’re just as much a nuisance as the rotten old furniture and stuff, and even more impossible to get rid of. You and I could run this place delightfully with a decent staff of ordinary servants if we could only sack our officials and do things ourselves.

Now who are these people who enchain us, and which of them could possibly give sensible advice in the matter?

We have among the principal officers the Comptroller of the Household, the Keeper of the Privy Purse (not a weighty task), the Lord High Steward, the Keeper of the Great Seal, the Lord High Constable (we should have to watch him), the Grand Master of the Hunt (good old Peter, he’d burn the place down for us like a shot), the Master of the Revels, the Grand Carver, and the Grand Cup-bearer. Any of that lot got any sense do you think? And to be trusted?”

“Certainly Peter has sense, and Stanislas the Master of the Revels, and Ludovic the Grand Carver, and Nicolas the Grand Cup-bearer. But all these good fellows are no use to us, they hunt and revel, carve, and bear cups very nicely, but they have otherwise no power or influence in our Household. I’m afraid that the Comptroller, that drivelling old dotard Count Otto von Bildheim, is the only one who has any say in the matter, and he is a dreadful

old fossil and would oppose anything in the nature of a change.”

“Well, I’ll take the first opportunity of broaching the subject tactfully when I get a chance.

I’m afraid our short hour of freedom is over, and we must set about our royal tasks. I haven’t seen to-day’s programme yet, but I know it’s full of things I don’t want to do. I hope our two ‘agenda’ will allow us to lunch together, but I doubt it. *Au revoir* then.”

King Rudolf rose with knitted brows and proceeded to interview the equerry who was waiting in the library to inform his royal master of the events proposed for the day.

After a short consultation the King dismissed his equerry and proceeded to his robing-room to prepare for the first item on the programme, a visit of inspection to the new Town Hall—an event that did not promise much amusement.

Passing through the State reception-room he was filled with real royal rage on noticing displayed in the most prominent position an enormous pair of Satsuma vases, mounted in gilt metal. He might have loved these vases if they had been real old Satsuma as he was rather a lover of old porcelain, but these were outrageous and abominable modern reproductions.

They had been the very first things to inspire him with the determination of revolt. He had even dared to give direct orders without consulting any court official that they were to be permanently located in one of the guest-rooms so that they might never offend his eye again. Now he really must show some strength of character and let the Household feel that he was not only capable of giving an order but of seeing it obeyed.

These fierce reflections were cut short by the entry of old Count Otto—rather an opportune arrival, as the Comptroller of the Royal Household seemed to be the very man to address on the subject.

“I see these horrible old vases have been brought out again, Count. I had explained that I never wished to see them again. Please remove them and have them destroyed.”

“With all due respect, your Majesty. Impossible.”

“Impossible, Count? Strange language to address to a monarch.”

“True, Sire. Yet the only word to fit the case. I was aware of the fact that your Majesty disliked those vases, and as a loyal and dutiful subject I have seen that your orders for concealment were duly carried out. But perhaps your

Majesty does not for the moment remember that to-day you receive a visit from your maternal uncle, the ruler of a neighbouring state, powerful and not too friendly.

Those vases were a gift from him to your Majesty's grandfather when your uncle the King Carlovitch returned as a young man from a visit to the East. They are the first things he will look for to-day, and if he sees them his heart will glow with affection for his nephew and the people over whom he rules. If he does not see them things may go hard with us in our future unavoidable dealings with his powerful kingdom.

So I ordered them to be put in full view, knowing quite well that your Majesty would sanction my action and subordinate your own private taste to the dictates of diplomacy."

"I see, Count. You are quite right. You are always right," meekly responded Rudolf, "but after this visit is over I must insist on their destruction."

"That I'm afraid, Sire, will be difficult. They are on the list, and once things are on the list they cannot be dealt with except by order of the State Assembly."

"Bother the State Assembly. They may try to coerce me, but they cannot control the forces of nature, or what the insurance companies I believe call an Act of God.

Invent a cyclone or something and record them as smashed in that."

"I am afraid it might be difficult to secure credence for the occurrence of a cyclone in an inner chamber. I think your Majesty must realize that nothing can be done."

"But is the ruling monarch, then, to have less freedom than any of his subjects?"

"Your Majesty is young, or you would realize that that is actually the fact of the case."

"In spite of my youth, Count, the truth had begun to dawn on me. Who invented this idea of a 'Constitutional' monarchy? Oh for the good old Middle Ages when Kings were Kings and monarchs ruled by Divine Right."

"Kings were not free even then, though they seemed to be, and often thought themselves so. No leaders, royal or otherwise, can ever be free, they are enchained by their followers. The least fettered high official in the world at the present day is perhaps the Prime Minister or party leader in any country,

who may sometimes be a pseudo-autocratic ruler. But none of these people can ever do what they like any more than royalty. They just have to do what their followers wish them to, and pretend that it is what they themselves wish.”

“But surely these fortunate commoners in high places can have the courage of their own convictions?”

“Not at all. That is a courage they never possess, or if they do they have to smother it. You see, a man becomes a leader on a certain set of doctrines and they are set irrevocably for all time.

But he would not have been a leader if he had not been a clever man, and a man who possesses any sort of intellect must progress in a sort of evolutionary way. What he thinks to-day is modified or perhaps even entirely annulled by the riper thoughts of to-morrow. In this way a private individual goes through life on an ascending ladder of mental progress, but no progress is possible for a ‘leader’. His followers have his original tenets chiselled on a block of granite, and every time he opens his mouth to give them the benefit of his latest thought they pull him down and show him the block of granite, and say, ‘You thought like that once. You must go on thinking like that till you die.’ So you see even he, Sire, has no freedom.”

“But I cannot see why a sensible fellow like I am cannot achieve some measure of freedom in spite of my royal descent.

For better or for worse the whole world has taken up the banner of democracy. Help me, Count, to be a democratic King. I long to exchange the Royal Purple for the tweed coat of democracy. Can’t I get free in this way?”

“By no means, your Majesty. A truly democratic people like those over whom you rule would hate any such loss of dignity on your part. The more intensely democratic people imagine themselves to be the more they worship aristocracy and royalty. It is human nature.”

“Well, I do not derive much comfort from your words, Count,” said the young monarch as he turned to leave the room, “but time is flying and I must prepare myself for the fray.”

As he proceeded to don a garb suitable to the forthcoming function he wondered why he had wasted so much time listening to that old footler. The idea of a ruling monarch having to submit to a long rigmarole of a lecture from one of the Royal Household—even so venerable a one as the Comptroller—was rather ridiculous. But the old man had evidently long been wanting to get it off his chest and it did no harm.

On this day His Majesty’s loyal subjects noticed an unusual solemnity in

his demeanour which augured well for the future; he had hitherto enjoyed a reputation for irresponsibility, and they were glad to see signs of development of the more serious side of his character.

But what they mistook for solemnity was in reality perplexity. Through all the pomp and splendour of the various functions that he graced with his presence, King Rudolf was haunted with visions of those atrocious vases, and his mind was entirely employed in evolving plans for their removal or destruction.

As the wise Comptroller had foretold, the old King Carlovitch had been delighted to see these treasures displayed so prominently. He had arrived in a bad humour that boded ill for the ensuing transaction of diplomatic affairs, but from the moment that his eyes had rested on his precious vases his ill-humour had given place to a warm geniality which would undoubtedly influence His Majesty in the impending discussions.

“Wonderful specimens of Japanese art at its best, my boy,” said the old man as he beamed across the dining-table at his nephew. “I’m glad to see that they are duly appreciated. It was a real pleasure to me to present them to your grandfather, but it was a very great sacrifice. I have never ceased to long for them myself.”

What a chance for Rudolf. He was not slow to seize the opportunity.

“We do indeed treasure them, you may be sure. But I sometimes think them rather lost in our small palace. I’ve often thought that you really ought to have them back. Do, my dear uncle, let me have the pleasure of restoring them to you.”

“Never. Much as I covet those beautiful things, the idea of reclaiming a gift is odious to me. Your suggestion is a kind and noble one, but I could not for a moment acquiesce in such a surrender. They are yours, and yours they shall remain.”

The spark of hope that had been kindled in Rudolf’s breast died down at the old man’s words. It was obviously useless to press the subject, and he allowed it to drop.

But go those vases should by hook or by crook. All Rudolf’s and Natalie’s hatred of their general collection of lumber had now become concentrated on these miserable specimens of the potter’s art, and they spent much of their time evolving plans that on consideration were found to be impossible.

A visit from a young cousin brought the topic once more to the fore.

Prince Serge Molinsky came in the autumn for a week's hunting. He was a sprightly young fellow of about twenty-three years of age, who resided in the small castle of Westerburg, some twenty miles distant from the royal residence. He had always been an intimate friend of King Rudolf, the two having been brought up together in the royal household under the care of the late Queen.

Snugly ensconced in comfortable arm-chairs in the smoking-room—the only room of real comfort in the palace—the two would sit up till the small hours of the morning discussing the day's sport and recalling amusing incidents of boyhood.

“How's old Otto getting on?” asked the young Prince on the evening of his arrival. “Been worrying you lately with Court etiquette and so on?”

“My dear boy, that old man is intolerable. He cramps my style at every turn. And the worst of it is, I know he's right—I have nothing to counter with. Take the case now of the ‘art treasures’ and historic souvenirs which infest this miserable old museum in which I am condemned to live.

I want to get rid of the lot and make the palace into a decent habitation, but he won't let me touch a single piece. And I simply acquiesce. It can't be done.”

Rudolf was glad to have the opportunity of unburdening himself of the load on his mind, and he gave a lengthy description of some of the most offensive things in his collection.

The problem appeared to Prince Serge to be a very simple one.

“Burn the whole place down,” he suggested.

“All very well to say, burn the place down. But it's not so easy to do that. Have you ever tried to set a house on fire? Not so easy as it looks, I expect. Then the risk of being caught. Fancy the King being surprised in the act of setting his palace alight!

And I certainly should be caught. You have no idea how these royal households are run. One has the feeling of being perpetually spied upon. I believe old Otto tells off various minor officials to keep watch over me day and night and report to him. It would be most unpleasant if I were surprised by a Groom-in-waiting or a Gentleman-usher wandering about in my pyjamas in the small hours of the morning sprinkling paraffin on the furniture and floor of the state apartments. I should look ridiculous.

And there's another thing you haven't thought of. If we burnt this old place down, the State has not enough money to build another. Besides, as far as that

goes, I rather like the old building.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“My good fellow, that is what I want you to do. I have racked my brains in vain, and I see no solution to this hideous problem.”

Two nights after this heart-to-heart talk, when the friends were once more sipping their grog in the smoking-room, Prince Serge announced that he had found a solution.

“Quite the easiest thing in the world,” he said. “I have a reputation throughout your Majesty’s realm for travelling with an inordinate amount of luggage. Here I am on a week’s visit, and I have at least seven enormous trunks with me. I never have less. Ask me for ten days a little later on and I’ll bring a dozen trunks. Then on the night before my departure we’ll get up and stuff all the worst of your specimens into my trunks, and I will leave at dawn next day before the ‘robbery’ has been discovered. I have two trunks that would exactly fit your nice Satsuma vases. I’m afraid the trick can only be played once, and it would need fifty repetitions before you were cleaned out, but with a dozen trunks we could do a great deal, and at the least reduce the inflammation.”

“Splendid, my dear fellow. You’re a genius! Twelve trunks would carry off not only those obscene Satsumas, but quite a lot of minor monstrosities and nearly all of the illuminated addresses.

But let us consider the problem calmly. It’s not so easy as it looks. In the first place, if you arrive with your trunks full, where are you going to put the stuff you bring with you when you fill them with my stuff? If you bring them empty and take them away weighing like lead I rather think the people who handled them would have some sort of suspicion.”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of that. Well, I’ve an idea. Sandbags. I’ll fill them with sandbags up to a normal weight, and we can empty the sand out of the windows at night. If there’s a decent breeze it will blow about all over the place and no one will notice it.”

“Not a bad idea. But I’m not so sure about people not noticing it. Twelve trunk-loads of sand, you know, would make a small Sahara. However, it’ll do if we can’t think of anything better.”

“Then your Majesty must foresee some plausible explanation of the disappearance of the articles. Obviously, burglars. There could be no other explanation. So we must think out some dodge to make it look as if thieves had

gained an entrance during the night, and so on.”

“Serge, my friend, you’re a genius. We’ll pull this thing off on the first opportunity. You are the man I want as Comptroller of the Royal Household, and you shall have that appointment the day old Otto departs, but I’m afraid he looks like lasting a long time.”

“I thank your Majesty, and will remind you of your promise when the time comes.”

With minds full of the great plot and the devising of methods, the King and his guest sought their bedchambers.

The next two months were spent in perfecting their plans, and a great many letters passed between the Castle of Westerborg and the royal palace, letters which appeared to be of absorbing interest and which were immediately consigned to the flames after perusal.

In March of the following year Prince Serge arrived at the palace on his promised visit which was to last ten days.

It really was outrageous the amount of luggage he brought with him—twelve huge and heavy trunks.

The King chaffingly protested in the presence of Count Otto.

“Look at this fellow, Count. Don’t you think he overdoes it? We are accustomed to see him arrive with half a dozen, but this time he seems to have doubled the number. What a silly trick it is, you can’t need all that amount of clothes.”

“I am sorry, your Majesty, and I admit it is rather a silly trick of mine carrying about so much stuff with me, but I find that if I cut things down the things cut out turn out to be the ones most needed, and I hate not to have the correct costume for each event.

Your Majesty, too, graciously insists on my accompanying the royal party on all the numerous state occasions, each of which necessitates a different rig-out.”

“All right, Serge. I was only joking, but don’t do it again.”

It is a fortunate thing that in the Balkans the custom does not obtain of asking a guest for his keys on arrival in order that his boxes may be duly opened and the contents placed so that he can never find what he wants. The sight of neat rows of small sandbags might have rather puzzled the royal valets. Prince Serge brought his own man with him—a faithful follower named

Jakowsky who could be trusted, and to whom a rough outline of the plot had been confided.

The two conspirators passed the ten days happily with hunting and shooting, dinners and dancing, and every night when the rest of the party had retired to rest they spent an hour or so chatting in the smoking-room and perfecting their plans for the great 'coup'.

At last the fateful night arrived. Prince Serge had faked up an excuse that necessitated his leaving the palace at the unearthly hour of 7.30 a.m.

At midnight the monarch and his boon companion were chatting merrily in the smoking-room.

At 1 a.m. they began to get to work. An examination of the various apartments was first made, to be sure that none of the household officials or servants were on the prowl. No trusting that old ogre Otto, he was quite capable of putting sentries in the interior of the palace if he had only suspected what was afoot.

King Rudolf was ostensibly showing his guest the various rooms and displaying their artistic treasures.

The coast appeared to be quite clear, and their next task was to empty the sand out of the sandbags. This was easily done from several windows in the hope of spreading the sand about sufficiently to render it less noticeable. There was a panic for a moment when a sentry suddenly appeared on the walk beneath—Rudolf seized his friend's arm just in time to prevent him from pouring the sand on to the man's head. Then another alarm when Serge almost let a whole bag slip, but just saved it at the last moment.

This would have been a catastrophe, it would have been difficult to get out unobserved and retrieve the bag, and if left lying where it was it would certainly have given the show away.

When the sand was all emptied, the King led the way to the various rooms which contained the royal souvenirs which he disliked most, and they were rapidly removed and carried upstairs to be packed.

The famous Satsuma vases, of course, headed the procession, and it was not without a feeling of guilt something akin to murder that Rudolf helped to carry the corpse-like forms of old King Carlovitch's treasures.

Then came masses of illuminated addresses—beautiful parchment scrolls mostly presented to his father, and silver trowels and silver keys.

“Your share of the plunder can be the silver trowels and keys, old boy.

Melt them down and make what you can out of them—a well-earned fee,” said the King as he handed them over; “the illuminated addresses you must carefully burn yourself, don’t trust anyone else to do it. It would be frightful if fragments of them were discovered.”

By 3 a.m. the task was completed. It only remained to descend by the private staircase and unbolt the small door leading into the courtyard. This duty the King himself performed, taking care to remove his shoes and descend in his stockinged feet. The studious perusal of a complete series of detective stories had impressed upon him the advisability of this precaution.

Having carried out this final operation, he returned and bade good night to Serge, apologising for not being able to get up at daybreak to see him off.

At 8 a.m. he was roused by an attendant, who brought him his usual early morning cup of tea, and who informed him, in response to his inquiry, that the Prince had got away punctually at 7.30.

After smoking a cigarette and smiling to himself over the events of the last few hours, Rudolf rose and began to set leisurely about his usual toilet operations. Half an hour later, on emerging from a refreshing bath, he was confronted by a very flurried court official, who in a state of breathless excitement asked if His Majesty could see the Comptroller of the Household at once on a matter of urgent business.

“Certainly not,” he replied, “am I never to have any peace? I never attend to business until after breakfast. What on earth has happened? Is the palace on fire? Or has someone declared war on us?”

“No, your Majesty. But they say there’s been a burglary last night and the palace has been ransacked.”

“Good Lord, you don’t say so. Then I’m afraid I must bow to circumstances. Let the Comptroller of the Household be admitted.”

In a few minutes the venerable Count appeared, his features twitching and his long white beard trembling with agitation.

“A burglary, your Majesty. Very mysterious. The police have been communicated with, and will be here I hope by now. I was only informed of the occurrence half an hour ago and have not yet had time to ascertain the extent of your loss. Those priceless Satsuma vases have gone, but I remember that your Majesty was not particularly attached to them and will not perhaps regret their loss. It appears also that the thieves broke into the record room—the whole place is in confusion, and it seems probable that innumerable souvenirs of considerable historic value have been removed. But I will inform

your Majesty later of the exact extent of the depredations. It is quite astounding how it can have happened, but your Majesty may rest assured that the malefactors will be brought to book without delay. Our special detective service has taken the matter up and is now making its investigations.”

“But, Count,” interposed His Majesty, “you astound me. Here am I in a strongly-built palace, with doors and windows carefully barred at night, surrounded with watchful servitors, and guarded outside by a cordon of my picked Life Guards, and you tell me that some ordinary burglar has succeeded in outwitting all this vigilance, and has ruthlessly deprived me of the pick of my invaluable art treasures! I cannot believe my ears.”

“It is so, however. I have just stated the bare facts, and now, with your Majesty’s permission, I will proceed to assist the detective staff in their investigations.”

King Rudolf, having signified his acquiescence, the Count withdrew, leaving his royal master to complete his toilet in peace.

At about eleven o’clock the King was asked if he would graciously condescend to receive the head of the Detective Force, and permission being accorded, Chief Detective Boroslav was introduced into the royal presence.

With his usual affability the King signed to Boroslav to be seated, and the latter, having availed himself of the invitation to make himself quite at his ease, proceeded to read from his notes a brief record of facts so far elicited.

First of all he produced a rough list of missing articles, begging His Majesty to remain calm during the painful recital. With jaw firmly set and with hands nervously grasping the arms of his chair, King Rudolf prepared himself for the shock.

The Chief Detective was not aware, like the Comptroller of the Household, of the royal loathing for the Satsuma vases, and he was therefore not surprised when the King palpably winced as they were read out as the first item on the list of missing property.

“An irretrievable loss, your Majesty,” commented the detective, “but leave it to us. We will get them all back.”

“Not if I know it,” murmured Rudolf to himself.

The perusal of the list completed, the detective proceeded to deal with the subject of clues.

“First and foremost,” he declared, “the thief or thieves obtained admittance through the small door connecting with the private staircase, and the surprising

thing is that this door was not forced but appeared to have been opened from the inside. Most unaccountable. A searching inquiry is being held among the Court servants.”

Beyond this he had nothing of importance to report, but promised to return soon after midday with further information.

Soon after noon he was again admitted to the royal presence and made a further report which was to the effect that he had to admit himself so far entirely baffled. Small heaps of sand had been found beneath the windows of the smoking-room, the King’s bedroom, and the guest-chamber. He attached some importance to these, regarding them as signs of an endeavour on the part of the thieves to cover up their tracks. The sand was being subjected to a microscopical research in the State Laboratory, and they would shortly know its place of origin (here the King gave a visible start). Also there were footprints on the staircase which were being subjected to a similar process.

A further report in the late afternoon announced that the sand undoubtedly came from the river Golatz in the vicinity of Westerburg. The footprints were unmistakably those of Count Otto. It was, of course, inconceivable that he could have been in any way connected with the affair—he would use the staircase daily in the performance of his normal duties.

Finally, six soldiers of the guard had been thrown into prison and were being subjected to a searching inquiry because their homes were in the vicinity of Westerburg, and twenty-five civilians of various categories had been arrested on suspicion.

A telegram arrived in the evening from Uncle Carlovitch sympathizing profoundly with the loss, especially that of the irreplaceable Satsuma vases.

During the next few days King Rudolf XXXIV found his time very fully occupied in receiving deputations from numerous corporations and societies who desired to condole with His Majesty on the loss of his treasures, and to assure him that all the citizens were resolved to leave no stone unturned to bring the malefactors to justice and to secure the restoration of the stolen property.

The various spokesmen were deeply moved to notice that at the mention of the famous Satsuma vases His Majesty unobtrusively wiped his eyes.

After a week of painstaking and searching inquiry the State Detective Department could only render a negative report of no progress. It was indeed a baffling problem, and the Chief Detective asked for a further interview with the King.

“It seems certain to me,” said the official, “that the property must be concealed somewhere within the limits of the State. Our frontiers are well watched, and the thieves could not pass without detection. Has your Majesty no sort of suspicion that might serve us as a guide for our further investigations?”

“None at all, I’m afraid. It would seem from the matter of that open door that the thieves must have been in collusion with someone in the palace. Yet there is no one employed here on whom I would not stake my reputation. The entire staff, including the menial establishment, are absolutely beyond suspicion.

It seems odd that I am the only person who could have opened that door and left it open.

I cannot recall the minor events of that night very clearly to mind. It is possible that I might have opened that door myself, yet, on the other hand, I am quite positive that I never left the palace that night.”

“Well, Sire, I must admit that for the present we see no solution of the problem, and little can be done unless we light upon some new clue.”

“What about that Westerburg sand?” asked the King in an unaccountably anxious tone that escaped the observation of the detective. “Won’t that lead to anything?”

“No, your Majesty. I am afraid not. The sand is certainly identical with the Westerburg variety, but we have since found almost similar sand in other places. We have had a prolonged interview with Prince Serge, who displayed a deep interest in the matter but could throw no light on the case. But your Majesty will doubtless have heard from him.”

“Yes, I heard only this morning. He referred to the case, and said that he thought the identification of the sand was extraordinarily interesting, but that he felt sure that none of the Westerburg people could have had a hand in the outrage.”

Serge’s letter had, of course, been consigned to the flames immediately after perusal. It would have interested the detective considerably if he had been able to read the following extract:

“I’m haunted by those horrible vases. I thought I’d dump them in the river at night, but I find this place is being closely watched night and day, I daren’t make a move. They’ll have to stay here for a bit until the excitement dies down.”

King Rudolf had good reason to feel annoyed at the extreme pertinacity of the State Detective Department. It was most unusual. As a rule they contented themselves with a dilatory investigation of obviously false clues and then let the matter drop, that is to say they placed it on the office file marked 'for further action' and there left it to mature. But on this occasion, when a successful issue of their labours was least to be desired, they displayed a most abominable pertinacity.

The six soldiers and the twenty-five civilians languishing in durance vile also weighed rather heavily on the royal conscience. In their case direct action was the only possible solution. They must be immediately released, in spite of the protests of old Count Otto and the detectives. The King would give no reason for his certitude of their innocence, but gave a peremptory order for their release. As regards the soldiers of the guard, he said—with more truth than his hearers realized—that no blame could possibly be attributed to them. If there were any blame he must bear it on his own shoulders, as he alone appeared to be responsible for the open door. He also decreed a grant of a month's pay to each man as compensation for wrongful confinement—an action without precedent in the Balkans.

He gave the same explanation to the agent of the Insurance Company who called to ascertain the probable extent of his claim.

"The Company are fully prepared to accept their responsibility, your Majesty," said the young man, "and would be glad if the Comptroller would furnish them with a detail of losses."

"The losses are trifling," was the royal reply, "and I shall claim nothing."

"But the famous Satsuma vases?"

"Ah, there you touch me in a weak spot. But their value was chiefly sentimental, which is outside the terms of your contract. No money payment can ever give them back to me."

The agent did not continue to press the matter, being only too pleased to get credit from his firm for what they would consider his clever handling of the case. Perhaps a portion of the sum that they had expected to be called upon to pay might fall to him as a bonus.

Count Otto was enraged at his master's attitude—refusing a goodly sum of money when the Privy Purse was almost empty—but the citizens, when the Insurance Company notified His Majesty's refusal to accept payment, applauded the disinterested nobility of their royal master.

In a month's time the excitement began to die down, and the two

conspirators were beginning to breathe more freely, when a fresh individual appeared on the scene to fan the dying spark into a blaze once more.

One morning Count Otto asked leave to introduce a young man, by name Friedrich Krause, to His Majesty. It appeared that this young man had ideas on the subject of the occurrence. He was the son of a most respected burgher, and had the reputation of being abnormally astute and intelligent. He was not likely to be of much use, but his desire to be received in audience by the King was backed by the Burgomaster and other prominent officials of the town. For this reason the Count hoped that he would be received.

King Rudolf did not at all like the idea of this amateur detective turning up just when things were quietening down so nicely, but it was obvious that he could hardly refuse to see the young man.

Friedrich Krause was therefore admitted to the royal presence, and in response to the King's inquiry as to the nature of his business replied:

"I am certain, your Majesty, that if I am accorded full powers I shall be able to lay my hands on the thief within a fortnight's time."

His Majesty shuddered slightly as he commented: "Dear me. Splendid. You will earn my undying gratitude."

The young man murmured a few words of thanks and began to outline his course of procedure, which gave the harassed monarch time to think out his best course of procedure.

Obviously the thing to do was to find out what line this abominable little upstart was going to work on and then it would be easy to counter him.

"Tell me, my dear young fellow," said the King in his most genial and condescending tones, "what new clues do you possess, and how do you propose to set to work?"

"I am sure your Majesty will forgive me if I do not give direct answers to those questions," he replied. "There are very good reasons why it would be best not to divulge the exact nature of my plans, but I may say quite definitely that I have no new clues, and I intend to work on the only one that already exists, and that is the Westerburg sand."

"But our Detective Department has already abandoned that clue."

"Pardon me, Sire, but I have made a deep and close study of the detective literature of the day, and I find it is always the amateur detective that triumphs, and it will be so in this case."

After a few more words the King motioned with a wave of the hand for his visitor to withdraw, not, however, before ordering him to report daily at the palace as the King was equally convinced of his eventual success and wished to hear details of progress.

“Bumptious little bounder,” commented Rudolf after the young man’s withdrawal. “I’ll have to get someone to push him in a well if he gets too near the right line, and he’s not far off it now.”

The next day he received a letter from Serge in which he said:

“Nasty little fellow called Krause keeps nosing round here. I told my fellows to warn him off, but he showed papers according royal permission. What is your Majesty’s game? All will be discovered if this little pest is given a free hand to poke around in my castle.”

Two days later young Krause said to His Majesty in the course of his daily report: “Everything points to Westerburg Castle. It is beyond a doubt that the culprit is to be found among the Prince’s retinue.”

Things were warming up with a vengeance, and King Rudolf cursed the day when he allowed this venomous little reptile to interfere with his private affairs. However, it would be impossible to stop the course of events now without creating a scandal. One thing, however, must be done, and that was to stop any idea of what was going on from reaching the ears of outsiders. He therefore made it very plain to young Krause that if a single word or hint of the steps that were being taken reached any ears but his own, perpetual banishment with loss of civil rights would ensue.

“I quite see your Majesty’s point of view,” said the young man, “and will be careful to obey my orders to the letter. I can well understand,” he added—rather maliciously thought Rudolf—“your Majesty’s desire that none but yourself shall be made aware of the criminal’s identity when once I have run him to earth, and the trail is very hot now.”

On the very next day little Krause again visited Westerburg, where he was accorded a long interview with Prince Serge.

Two days later the King received two important letters. One was from Krause stating that he had drawn an absolute blank, the Westerburg sand had proved an entirely false clue. He was convinced that the mystery would never be solved. So heartbroken was he at his failure that he entirely abjured the amateur detective business for ever. Moreover, as Prince Serge had kindly offered him the appointment of land steward, which he had accepted, the absorbing nature of his future employment would leave him no leisure for

detective investigations.

The other was from Prince Serge, in which he said: “I have had to make the little blighter my land steward on a salary of £1000 a year, and I trust your Majesty will share the cost with me as my present man, whom I shall most reluctantly have to sack, gets only £200 a year. . . .”

To this King Rudolf replied in a long letter, of which the following is an interesting extract:

“. . . You expect £500 a year from me, dear Serge, knowing the state of the Privy Purse as well as I do? All I can say is, the *mail* is very *black*.

Old Count Otto dislikes you very heartily, and was much annoyed with me this morning when I informed him that I would overlook the claims of some forty applicants and appoint you to the vacant post of Keeper of the Royal Kennels at a salary of £500 a year. . . .”

VIII

A MEAN HOUND

BERTIE LAFFERTON was both a villain and a bounder, unlike the villain of melodrama in that he had no redeeming points.

He was one of His Majesty's bad bargains—so obviously a bad bargain that people wondered how His Majesty had managed to put up with him for the six years of service which he now reckoned to his 'credit'.

He belonged to a type that is fortunately rare in the British Army, which has a happy knack of purging the evil out of bad young men and making them into quite decent fellows, or, if they are incorrigible, getting rid of them.

How Bertie had escaped both reformation and extinction during these six years is rather a mystery, but it was probably due to his rapid change from one unit to another. When things were getting too hot for him, he managed to arrange some move or transfer which deferred his fate, each Commanding Officer being glad to get rid of him and to leave the unpleasant task of dealing with his case to the other fellow.

He had now been serving for two years with the 10th Punjabis under the command of Lieut.-Colonel G. Mandiford, and was once more getting near to the end of his tether.

Mandiford was a sprightly bachelor, a great sportsman, and an excellent C.O. He was a fair-minded man, and had done his best from the day of Lafferton's arrival to overcome his instinctive dislike of the young man. But the matter was no longer one of likes and dislikes, it was a simple question of efficiency, and Colonel Mandiford had no hesitation in reporting on him as follows:

"Is ill-mannered and takes no interest in any form of sport or games—most unpopular with both officers and men, and is entirely lacking in the qualities of a leader. Bad at drill and ignorant of tactics. I consider that his further retention in the Army is not desirable."

The General Officer Commanding the Brigade endorsed these remarks, and, as nobody had a word to say in favour of this unpleasant young man, he was warned that steps would be taken to secure his removal from the Service, unless he voluntarily applied to resign.

Choosing the lesser of two evils, he accepted the latter alternative, but begged for three months' leave home to enable him to settle his affairs and prospect for a new opening in life. The leave was granted, and he booked a passage on the P. and O. s.s. *Malabar*, due to sail in a fortnight's time.

He hoped that during these three months' leave something might happen that would put things right, and the affair would blow over, and he also thought he might take legal advice as to whether he could be made to resign without an actual charge under the Army Act being brought against him. He liked life in the Army, and did not dislike being disliked, so he had no intention of quitting if it could possibly be avoided.

Packing up his traps on a September morning, he left for Bombay a day ahead of time, intending to have a look round that famous town before leaving India.

He had no sooner left on the train to Bombay than Colonel Mandiford received a cable from his lawyers at home: "Referring letter Aug. 12. Estate case to be settled Oct. 15. Your presence indispensable."

By a frantic use of the telegraph he succeeded in getting short leave sanctioned at once, and wired to his agents in Bombay to secure a passage on the outgoing mail.

"What an infernal nuisance," he said to his Adjutant. "That horrid young blighter will be on board. I hoped I had set eyes on him for the last time."

"It is rather rotten luck, sir," replied the Adjutant, "but I'd sooner be you than him. He'll take good care to keep out of your way."

"Will he? I don't think. He's got the hide of a rhinoceros, and is as mean as a skunk. I shouldn't at all wonder if he weren't to make up to me. I can imagine his saving my life in some way involving no risk to himself, and then suggesting that we might let bygones be bygones. He's a tricky little beast, and his mere presence on board will spoil the whole trip as far as I am concerned."

On the day of sailing Lafferton got on board early to settle down and make himself comfortable in his cabin. He found that he had been allotted a single-berth cabin, No. 20, with Mr. and Mrs. Nutcombe in a double-berth on one side of him and a Captain Oswary in another single-berth, No. 21, on the other side. The Nutcombes he had never heard of, but he remembered Oswary of the —th Bengal Lancers—a rather stupid fellow with an appalling stammer.

Having undone most of his kit and got things fairly shipshape he went up on deck to take stock of those passengers who had already arrived, and to see if there was anyone he knew among those now arriving by the Punjab Mail.

Foremost among these he noticed with unpleasant surprise the figure of his C.O. He could hardly believe his eyes. What could have happened to take him home at a moment's notice like this?

Colonel Mandiford's heart sank within him as he found himself, immediately on stepping off the gangway, literally 'piped on board' by the effusive young fellow, who already displayed a cheerful willingness to let bygones be bygones.

Bertie greeted his C.O. with a military salute and a hearty welcome. "What a surprise, Colonel. You going home on leave too? Nothing wrong at home I hope?"

"Nothing wrong at all, thank you," replied the Colonel, "but I had a cable about some urgent business." He hurried past Bertie to find his way to his berth.

"Confounded cheek," he muttered to himself. "Greeting me like that as if we were old friends. However, poor devil, I daresay it was the best thing for him to do. I hope he'll have the sense to keep out of my way. I can't snub him too much; it would be unfair to give him away to other people. They'll soon find him out for themselves."

And sure enough the others did seem to find him out without much delay. Lafferton was an excellent card-player and made quite a good thing out of it. For the first few days at sea he was popular with the card-players in the smoking-room and in some peculiar way he had already begun to be known as 'Bertie'.

It is a very helpful thing in life to be spoken of by a Christian name, and still more helpful when the name is abbreviated. It paves the way to a desirable familiarity.

In a short time, however, Bertie's popularity in the card-room began to wane. There was something about him—no one quite knew what—that put people off. It wasn't altogether the fact that he betted freely and was extraordinarily lucky, and it wasn't only his rather offensive familiarity, but for some reason or another men seemed to feel that Bertie was a 'wrong-un'.

Outside the card-room he did not shine. Compelled to take part in the usual run of board-ship games, he proved himself a duffer, a sulky partner, and a bad loser.

He had one gift, however. He was a very good dancer, and girls eagerly accepted him for a partner, but they dropped him like a hot cake after one or two trials. No one explained exactly what was the matter, but one girl was

heard to say, "I'll never dance with that man again. He's a beast."

Those were the days before the War, when dancers ticked up their engagements on programmes, and Bertie received many a snub from ladies of his choice when he asked for a dance. "I'm so sorry, but my programme is full."

The prettiest woman on board was Mrs. Nutcombe, the wife of his next-door neighbour, and Lafferton enjoyed a dance or two with her, when she, too, turned on the cold tap. And she turned it on with a vengeance. Three men were standing round her with their programmes in their hands when Lafferton walked up and asked for a dance.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lafferton, my programme is quite full," and without a second's pause she turned to the other three and said in a very distinct voice, "You may each have one dance. My programme is quite empty, but I have to keep two for my husband, and I've made several promises to others."

Bertie turned away with rage in his heart. "I'll get even with you, my lady, before the end of the trip," he muttered to himself. "We'll see if a jealous husband can't be made to take a hand in this little game."

Nutcombe was certainly a jealous husband, as all husbands with pretty wives must be if they are not fools, but he was not silly about it, and he loved his wife too much to believe that her many flirtations were other than quite innocent affairs.

And she thoroughly enjoyed a little flirting, but she adored George, and never dreamed of betraying the trust he had in her. She wasn't built that way.

Handsome Colonel Mandiford was soon at her feet, and before he knew where he was he was head-over-ears in love with her. She admired and liked him very much, and enjoyed dancing and sitting out with him, but she was not 'in love' with him, and was rather terrified when one evening, in the seclusion of a quiet corner of the deck, he poured out his love for her before she could stop him. She liked to think it was 'before she could stop him', but that could hardly be the actual fact as his impassioned declaration lasted for several minutes, and when she did stop him she guiltily realized that she had been rather enjoying it.

"You must not talk like that. Please let go my hand. I like you very much indeed, but you must promise never to make love to me again in such an outrageous way or I will never dance with you or speak to you again" was the long and breathless sentence with which she gave him his dismissal.

"Darling . . ." he began.

“Don’t dare to call me darling.”

“Well, dear lady,” he continued, “I accept your decision. I’ll promise to behave, but don’t be cruel to me. I can’t unlove you, but I’ll promise to keep my feelings boxed up in future.”

They returned to the dance and he handed her over to her next partner while he went off to the smoking-room to seek the solace of disappointed lovers—a strong whisky-and-soda. So easily do we drop from the sublime to the ridiculous.

During the next few days Mandiford was in a terrible state of distraction and despair. He turned the matter over in his mind and spent many sleepless nights considering problems based on ‘if’ and ‘if’ and ‘if’. If he had only met her before she married that ass Nutcombe? If he had not been such a fool as to fall in love with a married woman? If she weren’t already married, or if she didn’t love her nonentity of a husband, all would be fairly plain sailing, but as things were it was all the deuce of a puzzle.

He sought another opportunity of seeing her alone—ideal opportunities of that nature are easy to find on board ship. It was a wonderful night, with a full moon, and the dark blue canopy of heaven studded with stars that sparkled like diamonds—a perfect night for romance and foolishness. She was considerably attracted by her handsome lover, but she really did love her husband, and had no intention of doing anything silly. She poured a douche of icy water on his frantic pleadings by offering to be a sister to him.

“A sister, good God,” he groaned. “I don’t want a sister. I want you, my beloved, as queen of my heart!”

This was getting altogether too melodramatic for her, and she put an end to a situation that was becoming quite intolerable by slipping from his grasp and seeking safety in the seclusion of her cabin.

They had left Port Said behind them now and would be in Marseilles in two days’ time.

The weather was rough, and Mrs. Nutcombe gave out that she was suffering from sea-sickness and was seldom visible on deck.

Colonel Mandiford found no opportunity of renewing his sentimental appeals, and the day before they were due to arrive in Marseilles—his very last chance of seeing her alone—he was bowled over by an attack of malaria and unable to leave his cabin.

Frantic with the desire to make one last appeal, he was unwise enough to write her a note, which he sent by the hand of his cabin steward, after warning him of the necessity for extreme caution.

The steward, who was an old hand at these banal intrigues of board-ship life, found a suitable opportunity of handing the note to Mrs. Nutcombe, who was reclining on the starboard side in a deck-chair sipping her afternoon tea while her husband was taking part in a game of deck quoits on the port side.

She opened the note, read its contents, and rolled it up in her handkerchief. Her first impulse had been to tear it up and throw it overboard, but the usual fascination of naughty things prevailed and she decided to keep the note to read again in the privacy of her cabin.

Meanwhile she reflected on its contents. It was shameful of Colonel Mandiford to address a virtuous married woman in this way, and he had no business to expose her to the terrible risk of his written declaration of passion falling into her husband's hands.

And he wrote as if she actually shared his passion. In fact, so carried away was he by his feelings at the time of writing that his pen ran away with him and the result was that anyone reading the letter could only come to the conclusion that they were a guilty couple, whereas they were nothing of the sort. A flirtation is enjoyable and permissible, but at a certain point there is a risk of it becoming something very much more serious. She was glad on the whole that they would part to-morrow and would probably never meet again. He had to get off at Marseilles and travel post-haste to London by the P. and O. Special, while she and her husband were continuing the journey by sea.

But the thought of parting was not untinged with regret. He really was an adorable lover, and she could no longer conceal from herself that she was terribly in love with him; she would be careful never to let him know that.

With her mind filled with thoughts of this nature, she rose from her chair and sauntered in the direction of her cabin, nodding to her husband, whom she passed chatting with a group of men.

She reached the door of her cabin just as Lafferton, who had decided to dress early for dinner, reached his. He smiled at her, but she passed him without recognition and closed the door of her cabin with rather a slam in his face.

As the door banged, Lafferton turned to enter his cabin, when his eye fell on a little crumpled note that lay on the deck, having apparently been dropped there by the haughty lady.

Without a moment's hesitation he stooped down and grabbed it, retiring with his prize into his cabin. The thought had flashed through his mind that notes dropped by pretty ladies on board ship might contain something compromising, and if his conjecture were right he would get his revenge out of the disdainful beauty.

In the meantime Mrs. Nutcombe had discovered her tragic loss as soon as she had closed her door. Her heart almost stopped beating as she realized what a fool she had been not to destroy the note at once. But she must have dropped it just outside the door because she remembered distinctly feeling it in her handkerchief up to that point, and it was probably in fumbling for the door-handle that the loss had occurred.

She rushed to the door and opened it and was horrified to find no trace of the missing note. Then she remembered that horrid Mr. Lafferton had been there just as she closed her door. Could he have seen it and picked it up? He was a nasty fellow, but could an officer in His Majesty's service sink to a vile act of meanness like that?

She knocked at his door and he opened it at once.

"So sorry to disturb you, Mr. Lafferton, but I dropped a note outside my door just now. Did you happen to see anything of it?"

"No. I didn't see anything."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite. Couldn't make a mistake about a thing like that, you know," he responded with a grin as she withdrew.

She walked back along the deck to where she had been sitting, gazing wildly in every corner, but, failing to find any trace of the paper, returned to her cabin, where she threw herself into a chair and burst into floods of tears. Then she suddenly pulled herself together. This was a real crisis in her life and something had got to be done. If George came in now and found her like this what would he think and what could she say?

So she stopped her tears and hastily began to remove all traces of her late agony of mind, but she knew she would find it hard not to show signs of the horrible fear that was driving her distracted.

Meantime in No. 20 Bertie was chuckling to himself as he read the contents of the note. His worst enemies delivered bound into his hands; what inconceivable good fortune!

He had hoped that he might have lit on something that would enable him to

tame the haughty beauty who spurned him, perhaps also give him a chance of making things unpleasant for the husband whom he also had good reason to hate. Nutcombe had hinted quite openly that he cheated at cards, and he'd like to get his own back out of him, d——n him.

But that he should get the whip-hand of his own supercilious C.O. was far beyond his wildest dreams. Yet here they were, all three, figuratively prostrate before him.

That little note would enable him to bully his Colonel, or make any terms he liked with the lady, or destroy for ever the peace of mind of her husband; and perhaps with a little thought he might evolve a scheme that would bowl over all three of them.

The Colonel was, of course, the first for him to approach, and as time was short he determined to make a frontal attack. He accordingly locked the note carefully away in his despatch-box and then proceeded to beard the lion in his den.

Colonel Mandiford was lying in his berth cursing his fate at being knocked out like this at a time when every moment was precious. He had determined, in spite of a high temperature, to disregard the doctor's orders and get up after dinner to have a last interview with his loved one. His reveries were interrupted by a sharp knock on the door, and in response to his "Come in", he was astonished to see the features of a man he loathed the sight of.

Bertie lost no time in coming to the point. He would have liked to play with Mandiford as a cat plays with a mouse, but time was so cursed short he must forego that rare pleasure and get to business at once.

Colonel Mandiford almost sprang from his berth as Bertie's first words fell on his ear, but the latter checked him with a gesture. "Steady, Colonel, if you don't take this calmly you'll bust the whole show and the fat will be in the fire with a vengeance. The reputation of a lady is at stake, and I must make it clear to you that unless you listen quietly to what I have to say I'll stop talking to you and turn my energies on to destroying her reputation—a pretty easy task."

"You infernal blackguard," said the Colonel as he sank back on to his pillow. "Go on. I'll keep quiet."

"All right. Now we can talk. I'll put the matter briefly, and make things as clear as I can. My possession of this love-letter addressed in your handwriting to Mrs. Nutcombe puts her and her husband and yourself all into my hands. I'd like to strike at all three of you, but I can't see my way to that. If I make a bargain with any one of you I'll have to let the other two off. So I have decided

to take you for my first shot. Don't look at me like that. You look like a tiger preparing to spring on a goat, but as a matter of fact I am the tiger this time and you are very much the goat, ha, ha!

I can read your thoughts. Fever has made you weak, and you're wondering if you could leap from your bunk, knock me down, and get hold of the letter. But you can put that thought out of your mind. I'm not such a fool as to bring that important document here with me into the tiger's den. It is locked up with my other valuables in the purser's safe.

Now I'll put my terms before you. They are simple enough.

I want you to give me in half an hour's time a letter addressed to the Adjutant saying that you have got to know me better on board and that you were quite mistaken in your estimate of my character. You wish your last report of me to be cancelled, and you are drafting another to be substituted for it. This letter must be written in such terms as will convey the impression that I am rather a fine young fellow and a distinct acquisition to the Service. If you will do that I will return you the note, which will mean, I'm sorry to say, my letting the spiteful little lady off, but that's a revenge I must forego. My personal interests and my livelihood come first, and I don't want to be kicked out of the Army.

You're a man of honour and I can trust you. I am not a man of honour and you can't trust me. So we'll arrange the exchange of documents thus. I will give you back your letter first, and when you have satisfied yourself that it's all correct you can give me my documents worded as I have suggested. To make sure of the wording of your letter I have just jotted down two or three sentences on this piece of paper, which must without any alteration form part of your letter. Do you agree?"

"No," thundered the Colonel. "You d——d scoundrel. I'll never agree to be the victim of such a mean trick. I'll shoot you, my lad, and shoot myself as well, sooner than write the degrading rubbish you suggest."

"One moment, Colonel," was Bertie's calm reply. "You do get heated so easily, and let your ideas run away with you. Shooting me and yourself, what good would that do? It wouldn't clear the lady's character, which I'm sure is your chief desire. The naughty little letter would still be snugly lying among my things, and would certainly be read out to the amusement of the jurors at the inquest. No, no, these tragic methods are never any use, they only make things worse."

The Colonel sank back on his pillow as he groaned: "All right. I'm beaten. I agree. Tell the steward to bring me some paper and I'll have the stuff you

want written, ready for you in half an hour.”

Bertie returned to his cabin with a seraphic smile adorning his unpleasing features. He had more than half an hour before him in which to dress for dinner, and he sat down to ponder over his future course of action.

In the meantime his neighbour Captain Oswary, in cabin No. 21, was busily engaged in sorting out his wardrobe with a view to packing for departure from Marseilles to-morrow by the P. and O. Special.

Among other things that he decided to discard was an old pair of dress trousers. He thought his cabin steward might like them, so he rang the bell, and when the steward appeared in answer to his summons he held out the trousers, saying:

“W-w-would these b-b-b-be any use to you, St-t-teward?”

“Thank you, sir,” replied the steward, who took the trousers rather with the air of one looking a gift-horse in the mouth.

Having put most of his kit in order, Oswary proceeded to the bathroom to enjoy a cold tub before dressing for dinner.

On his return to his cabin he was enraged to find that the steward had declined his gift and returned the trousers to him. There they were, lying neatly folded on his pillow.

“What infernal cheek,” he muttered to himself. “Supercilious sort of bloke. I thought he rather sniffed at them. If he didn’t want them he could have given them away to someone else, but just to return them in this way is infernal cheek. However, if he doesn’t want them he needn’t have them.”

During this time Bertie in No. 20 had been leisurely dressing for dinner. He had enjoyed reading the Colonel’s amorous epistle over again—it really was a fine piece of poetical prose. Good enough to make the divorce court a certainty, if he could only have vented his spite by using it in that way.

He thrust it into his trousers pocket, where it would be handy to produce when he visited the Colonel’s cabin before dinner to exchange documents.

With his thoughts concentrated on the evolving of some further scheme by which he might make capital out of the valuable information in his possession, he proceeded to put on his braces when he found a button missing. He exchanged his trousers for a pair of pyjamas and rang the bell for the steward. On the man’s answering the bell, he gave him the trousers and asked him to get the button sewn on without delay.

Then he lolled back in his chair, gloating over his triumph. It had been as good as a play to see old Mandiford's face. Silly ass. He wished he could see the Adjutant's face when he read the letter that was just going to be sent to him—it would puzzle him a bit.

He let his thoughts run on in this way until he noticed that it was getting near dinner-time and the steward had not yet returned with his trousers. He thought he'd amuse himself by just running through that note again, he hated to think that he would have to part with that precious document in a few minutes' time.

Then he suddenly realized he had left it in the pocket of his trousers. What a rotten thing to do; supposing the steward found it, or it got lost. He rang the bell with frantic haste, and the steward appeared without delay, but also without the trousers.

"Isn't that button sewn on yet?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Haven't you had the trousers back yet?"

Lafferton's heart was beginning to sink with apprehension as he replied:

"No. What did you do with them?"

"I gave them to the stewardess. I'll go and find her."

The steward left to pursue his inquiries while Bertie remained a prey to the most agonizing fears.

In a few moments the steward returned.

"I'm afraid she made a mistake in your number, sir; she says she sewed the button on and put the trousers back folded up on the pillow. But she put them in No. 21 instead of 20."

Leaping from his chair, Bertie rushed to No. 21 and rapped loudly on the door.

"Come in," said Captain Oswary.

"Oh, I say, Oswary. Sorry to bother you. They've put my dress-trousers in your cabin in mistake for mine."

"Haven't s-s-seen them," replied Oswary.

Lafferton was by now feeling sick with suspense, as he told the steward to summon the stewardess.

The good lady arrived and explained with apologies that she had mistaken the number of Bertie's cabin and had certainly placed the trousers on No. 21's

pillow.

Light commenced to dawn on Captain Oswary, and he began with a stammer that nearly drove Bertie mad, to explain all about it.

“W-w-were those t-t-trousers yours, Lafferton?”

“Yes, yes, man; where are they?”

“I’m awfully s-s-s-sorry,” continued Oswary with an increased stammer. “I’m really f-f-frightfully s-s-sorry. I th-thought they were m-m-mine.”

“Well, all right, man,” yelled Bertie. “Where are they? I’m getting late for dinner.”

The stammer increased to a maddening extent as Oswary replied:

“I th-th-th-threw them overboard.”

IX

A VERY MIXED BAG

ONCE knew a man who shot at a snipe and killed an elephant. At least, he said he did. When I objected that snipe and elephants were not usually seen together, he retorted that they often were—in a country like Assam, and it was in Assam that the affair happened.

There was a marsh on the edge of the forest. The snipe was in the marsh and the elephant was screened by a tree alongside.

He fired at the snipe and killed it. The report of his gun was followed by a deafening roar from the forest. Hastening to investigate these sounds of agony, he found an elephant in the act of expiring behind the tree. One pellet from his cartridge had hit the monster in the eye and penetrated to the brain, causing almost instantaneous death. “An astounding fluke,” he said, “and I can hardly ask people to believe it, but it’s true.”

Well, this story is like that, but more worthy of your belief.

2nd Lieutenant Roberts came out from home to join his regiment, the Royal Blankshire Fusiliers, in Northern India.

Like all young subalterns arriving in the East, he had brought a gun with him, and was pining to prove his skill on the game birds for which India is famous. But, being a new arrival, he was not quite certain what were game birds and what were not. The only warning he got on setting out by himself on the second day after his arrival was not to shoot peacocks because they were sacred.

On his return with the trophies of the chase he was met by Shalcombe, a subaltern of two years’ service, who inspected his bag.

Among other nondescript birds, Shalcombe found a specimen of the yellow-beaked hawk that is always to be found outside villages and cantonments in India. This bird has degenerated from the proud position of a bird of prey to that of scavenger, and although it does not belong to the vulture tribe its habits are those of the vulture and not of the hawk. It is known among soldiers in barracks as the Shy-hawk owing to its timid and retiring nature.

“What did you shoot that for?” he asked. “You didn’t think it was a game bird, did you?”

his career, still he had a duty to perform, and he could not allow his private feelings to interfere with his conception of that duty. Perhaps an ample apology might be accepted, and if one were submitted he would be glad to forward it for consideration by higher authority.

On this the poor terrified youth wrote a fulsome apology, which he found pinned up next morning on the mess notice board, together with copies of the whole previous correspondence. Realizing that he had been the victim of a practical joke, he had the sense to see that there was nothing to do but to join in the general laugh, and it was unanimously agreed that he took the rather nasty blow in a very sporting way.

Shalcombe and he soon became fast friends, but Roberts was bound to confess that the joke had left a sore place that would not be healed until he got even with the perpetrator.

“Of course, I was a silly young ass to be taken in like that, but I’ll never forgive you, Shalcombe,” he said. “I give you fair warning that I will do my best to square the account. One of these days I’ll make you wish you had never been born.”

That is the worst of practical jokes, they are like blood feuds—unending. You bring off a highly successful leg-pull and thereafter live in a state of terror as to what trick the victim is going to play off on you. Then when you, in your turn, have been caught, you spend weeks and months of elaborate scheming in order to bring about the downfall of your adversary.

Roberts remained on with his regiment for two years without finding a suitable opportunity for revenge. He was then transferred to the Indian Army, and left to join a regiment in the small hill-station of Kalapahar.

On leaving, he took a tender farewell of Shalcombe and gave him a final warning. “I haven’t forgotten my revenge, old boy. You’ll get it in the neck some day. I shall have no peace of mind till I have made you look as big an ass as you made me.”

Arrived in his new station, Roberts soon settled down and found his time very fully occupied with work and sport—learning new languages, and getting to know his men.

For the first year he wrote occasionally to Shalcombe, but the correspondence ceased after that—subalterns haven’t much time to waste in writing letters to each other.

From this time the friendship dropped, as far as outer demonstration went. They never met and were never likely to. But the desire for vengeance

smouldered unceasingly in Roberts' breast. He felt sure they would meet again some day, and he would make his old pal look as ridiculous as he had been made to look over the Shy-hawk business.

Now and then he would think over little schemes to himself, but he could get no satisfaction out of this as circumstances alone could suggest the actual nature of the leg-pull. He barred all forms consisting solely of correspondence. He himself had been caught that way. But a joke is hardly a joke when it's too easy, and jokes based on fictitious correspondence are poor things in themselves. No, he wanted something better than that—something involving action and not merely words. He would give Shalcombe, when the time came, something not just as good as he got but a darned sight better.

He was very popular in his new regiment, and his C.O., Lieut.-Colonel Bishop, regarded him as quite an acquisition. He had got to know the men in a very short time, spoke their language, and joined with distinction in all their games.

Brigadier-General Goldene, who came to inspect the battalion in the cold weather, paid great attention to the young officers, and was particularly struck with Roberts, who was now in charge of the machine-gun section.

Most Generals have slogans of sorts, and Goldene's was a very simple one—so simple that it would be hardly worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that his reiteration of it was quite a joke among the officers of the brigade. It was just this: "Know your job. Do it thoroughly."

Watching the machine-guns at work, he said to Colonel Bishop: "That young fellow knows his job, and does it thoroughly," and he used the same words in speaking of him in the Annual Inspection Report.

When a fellow didn't know his job, or didn't do it thoroughly, the General had no slogan to fall back on, but he had a command of language that was calculated to make the offender realize his offence, while teaching him some new expressions of vituperation and words that would make an interesting addition to his vocabulary. He was a peppery little man, but he lived up to his own slogan and was quite good at his job.

About two years after his arrival in Kalapahar, Roberts heard one day that a fellow called Shalcombe of the Royal Blankshire Fusiliers was coming up to inspect the Physical Training squads in a week's time. He heard the news from Smith of the Mountain Battery, with whom Shalcombe was to stay.

He thought it odd that Shalcombe should not have written to him, he would have been delighted to put him up, but it was a long time since they had heard

of each other, and Shalcombe had probably forgotten his existence.

By Jove, he'd soon make him remember! Here at last was the opportunity he had so long and patiently waited for—his enemy delivered into his hands.

The question was, what to do? In a matter of this sort one aims at causing the maximum of annoyance and rage with the minimum of malice. It is very easy to invent malicious tricks, but the unmalicious kind are extremely difficult to arrange.

The great thing was that Shalcombe had apparently forgotten his existence; that would make it easy to catch him off his guard. But what on earth was he to do; what sort of a trap was he to prepare for his foe? And one has to be careful not to be hoist with one's own petard.

Several days passed and Roberts had evolved no scheme that adequately fulfilled his desire for long-deferred vengeance.

Three days only remained, when he overheard a conversation between Lieut.-Colonel Franley, the senior medical officer, and Johnson, the regimental doctor, that suggested a scheme fraught with splendid possibilities.

The S.M.O. was referring to a recent order concerning measures for the segregation and disinfection of people entering a non-infected area from a plague district.

"It quite went out of my mind," said the S.M.O. "I don't believe in precautions of this nature against plague. But I have got to carry out orders, and something must eventually be done. I suppose all arrivals at Bandwara ought to be disinfected before they are allowed to come up to us. In any case, there's no hurry about it. We are not likely to be inspected for a month or two."

"A bit risky, sir," replied the young officer, "if anyone does chance along. They might want to know why steps have not been taken."

"Perhaps you're right, Johnson," said the S.M.O. "I'm afraid I'm setting you a very bad example. I don't believe in the necessity or the efficacy of these precautions, and that has made me rather slack in carrying out my orders. We'll work out a scheme and get all in going order by next week."

This dull conversation provided Roberts with the solution of his problem—amusement without malice. Eureka! Shalcombe should be disinfected. Shalcombe should be asphyxiated and drugged, and he, Roberts, would be the expert to compound the drugs whose noisome fumes should penetrate into every pore of Shalcombe's noxious hide and render him totally unfit to enter

into the society of decent human beings.

He regretted that his education had been purely classical, but in its earliest stages he had enjoyed peeps into the mysterious world of chemistry, and he now endeavoured to recall the memories of those early days. There was some stuff with a most appalling smell. He remembered procuring a little in a phial from the laboratory and spreading consternation in class by dropping some of it on the floor. The master had got very angry about it and said they were a very nasty lot of boys. What was its name? Something to do with sulphur. Yes, it came back quite clearly to him now—sulphuretted hydrogen, H_2S . If that could only be procured it would be a magnificent foundation for the combination of poisonous odours with which he would impregnate his hated rival.

No time must be lost in perfecting his scheme. To-day was Monday, the Inspector of Physical Training was due to arrive on Thursday—he'd give him some training in Physics!

If the S.M.O. chose to be slack in carrying out his duties, Roberts would gladly do the job for him, and with a thoroughness that even General Goldene would approve.

On Tuesday he got two days' shooting leave and proceeded to Bandwara to prepare the ground.

Bandwara was the terminus of the small branch line that connected up with the main line and brought passengers and goods for Kalapahar, which was a six-mile ascent from the railway station. It was only a small village but, being the railway terminus, possessed a post and telegraph office, a police station, and a dak bungalow.

The dak bungalow in India is a rest-house for travellers, provided by Government. It consists of three or four plainly furnished rooms and is in charge of a 'Khansamah', who keeps the accounts of fees collected from travellers and provides food as may be required.

Roberts had by now sketched out in his mind the scheme that was to entrap Shalcombe.

He would warn the dak-bungalow Khansamah that a room must be set apart by orders of Government for the purpose of disinfecting travellers arriving from plague-infected areas. This would arouse no suspicions in the mind of the Khansamah, who was accustomed to vagaries of this sort on the part of the 'sirkar'.

His Mahomedan servant, Khuda Bux, who spoke English, would have to

be trained to play the part of a native hospital assistant. This would not be at all difficult as Khuda Bux was rather by way of being a bit of a wag himself.

Khuda Bux would meet the train in which Shalcombe was to arrive, he would bring to his notice various official pronouncements on the subject of plague precautions, and would conduct him to the lethal chamber.

If Shalcombe resisted, the game was up. But with nothing to arouse his suspicions the betting was 100 to 1 against his doing this.

It would be necessary for Khuda Bux to identify Shalcombe, in case there was more than one officer arriving by that train. There was hardly any risk of that, however, as no white man ever came to Kalapahar except on duty, and there was nothing to bring anybody there at that time of year. But just to avoid any risk, he made it clear to his assistant that Shalcombe was fair and very tall and if in uniform would be wearing a helmet with a red-and-blue badge on it.

Then there was the task of selecting the chemicals that would do the disinfecting. Roberts' mind ran riot on this subject, but of all the dreadful things that suggested themselves to him none seemed to excel the possibilities of his old friend H₂S. He decided, therefore, to arrange for the fumigation on a basis of sulphuretted hydrogen and asafœtida, a little plain sulphur and a few other simple ingredients, which ought to produce such a stench as the world had never known before.

The torture was to be progressive, and Khuda Bux was instructed to commence with only a slight pinch of sulphur. A little asafœtida was to be let loose half an hour after, and the H₂S a quarter of an hour later. Khuda Bux was an old friend of the Khansamah's and could easily persuade him not to give him away if trouble occurred later. After releasing the H₂S Khuda Bux was to flee, returning with all haste to Kalapahar.

Having thoroughly trained his assistant in the part he was to play, Roberts had now to procure the H₂S and to concoct the official documents that would be needed. He managed to procure a small quantity of the chemical from a subordinate in charge of medical stores without exciting suspicion, and then set to work on the literary side of his task.

At about 7 a.m. on Thursday morning Brigadier-General Goldene was walking up and down the platform of Hasanpur railway station with Norman Jenner, his Staff Captain. Hasanpur is the station on the main line where passengers for Kalapahar change into the Bandwara branch line train.

The General was in a cheerful mood. "I'm glad I decided to make this trip

to Kalapahar,” he said, “it just fills up the blank day I had in my programme, owing to the Chief of the Staff cancelling his visit.”

“Yes, sir. It fits in very well,” responded the Staff Captain. “I wonder if Colonel Bishop is shaking in his shoes. Most C.O.’s get the wind up when the General pays a surprise visit.”

“Oh, no. Bishop wouldn’t do that, I know. He’s an excellent C.O. and we understand each other very well. He knows that there are one or two things I have to see into. You sent him that wire, I hope, telling him to carry on with regimental duties and parades in the usual way?”

“Yes, sir. It went late last night, they will get it this morning.”

“Good. Who’s this young fellow coming towards us? Looks as if he were waiting for our train.”

Shalcombe had just emerged from the refreshment-room where he had been having a cup of tea. He was coming down the platform from which the Bandwara train started, when he caught sight of the General. Passing him, on his way to his carriage, he saluted. The General returned his salute, and asked him what he was going to Kalapahar for.

“I am going up to inspect the Physical Training squads,” replied Shalcombe.

“Splendid,” said the General, “nothing could fit better into my programme. I’ve got to make a report on Physical Training, and I’ll come and see you at work.”

The train was now ready to start, and the three officers took their seats in the one and only first-class compartment. The General was delighted to have run across a P.T. expert, and spent most of the time on the two-hour journey in eliciting information and opinions on various points. He made the mental comment that Shalcombe knew his job and did it thoroughly.

Arrived at Bandwara, the three officers alighted from the train. Shalcombe was at once approached by Khuda Bux, who handed him various documents, introducing himself:

“Hospital-Assistant Ahmedullah, Sahib, in charge of plague precautions at Bandwara.”

“What the deuce is all this?” muttered Shalcombe as he ran his eye over the various documents.

The first one was from the Station Staff Office of Kalapahar, and read as

follows:

“Travellers arriving at Bandwara for Kalapahar from plague-infected areas will only be allowed to proceed to the latter station after undergoing the process of fumigation specified in Punjab Government Notification No. 3641 C of September 29th, 1912. Native travellers will be arranged for in the serai. European travellers will proceed to the dak bungalow, where a room has been set apart for the purpose. The process of fumigation will be superintended by Hospital-Assistant Ahmedullah under instructions from the S.M.O.”

“Damn nonsense,” said Shalcombe, shoving the papers back at Khuda Bux. “I’m blown if you’re going to fumigate me. I haven’t come from a plague-infected area.”

“Where Sahib coming from?” inquired Khuda Bux.

“From Lahore.”

“Lahore worst infected area, Sahib. Please come to dak bungalow.”

“D——d if I will; go to blazes,” shouted Shalcombe.

“What’s all the trouble?” inquired the General, who had been attracted by the sounds of altercation.

“This infernal fellow wants to fumigate me,” said Shalcombe. “It’s all bunkum and I’ve told him so.”

“Let me see the documents,” said the General as he took them from Khuda Bux.

He ran his eye over them and pronounced his decision.

“The thing seems all right, and I’m afraid we shall all have to submit to this unpleasant process. I remember there have been some rather special orders recently issued about disinfection, but this is the first time I’ve run up against them. The S.M.O. of Kalapahar is a pretty smart fellow and seems to have lost no time in carrying out the instructions. Well, babu,” he added, turning to Khuda Bux, “lead on. We’ll get this thing over as soon as possible. How long does it take?”

“It takes one hour, Sahib,” replied Khuda Bux, whose liver had turned to water at the thought that the General was to be caught in his master’s trap. There would be dreadful trouble over this. The General must be eliminated at all costs.

“Senior Medical Officer telling me, Sahib, Generals and Staffs not to be fumigated.”

“Rot. He never said anything of the sort,” retorted the General, “that’s just your Oriental politeness. Can’t Generals carry microbes just as well as other fellows? But, of course, I’ll gladly go through with it. I think these precautions are most necessary, and am only too pleased to see them properly enforced.”

Seeing no loophole for escape, but murmuring a prayer to Allah, Khuda Bux led the way to the dak bungalow, where the party were greeted by the Khansamah on arrival.

After giving orders for breakfast in an hour’s time the three officers were shown into a large room provided with the usual furniture of dak bungalows: a wooden bedstead, four upright chairs, and two long cane chairs with leg-rests. A door led into the bathroom in which Khuda Bux had prepared his vile decoctions.

Khuda Bux had now to make a great decision. The unexpected appearance of the General and his Staff Captain had entirely spoiled the whole thing. He had looked forward to the joke of fumigating Shalcombe; he knew that young officers were in the habit of playing practical jokes of this sort on each other. But he had never heard of its being done to a General.

He might simply run away and leave the whole affair to fizzle out. But even that would save neither him nor his master—they’d be caught, anyway.

And if he confessed to the General? Would that do any good? Judging from the Sahib’s stern features it probably would not. And he would certainly get run in and sent to prison. He knew there was a crime called ‘impersonation’. He had every reason to know it. His family were living comfortably on the proceeds of three pensions payable to long-deceased relatives—all done by impersonation. And an uncle of his had been found out at the same game and was now in prison.

So if he was to run the risk of prison in any case he might just as well carry on and pursue the matter to its conclusion.

Having made this decision, he lit up a little of the sulphur and milder ingredients, whose fumes soon penetrated to the inner room.

“Not too bad after all,” commented the General as a whiff of sulphur and bazar tobacco reached his nostrils. “You wouldn’t think a slight odour like that would kill a microbe, would you?”

Conversation began to flag, and the three patients occupied themselves with reading.

Punctually at the end of the half-hour Khuda Bux, with the end of his

turban wrapped over his mouth to save him from the deadly fumes, entered the bathroom and let loose the asafœtida, while adding a little extra sulphur and some shavings of goats' horns to the burning pan.

A convenient draught was blowing from the bathroom into the inner room and the fresh fumes soon found their way to the throats and noses of the occupants. The General was the first to break the silence.

"Here, I say, dammit. What's that fellow been up to? He's been stoking up the stuff and added a fresh stink.

What's the time, Jenner, aren't we about through by now?"

"Only one minute left, sir," replied the Staff Captain without even glancing at his watch.

"Liar," replied the General. "I knew you'd lie to escape this purgatory. I took the time myself because I realized you were not to be trusted. We've got twenty-five minutes left, and I mean to stick it out. My motto is, 'If you do a thing at all, do it well', and as this hound of a hospital assistant couldn't really keep us in if we chose to break out, we are more or less on our honour. We have to set an example."

"Quite so, sir. How are you getting on?" he asked, turning to Shalcombe.

"I am feeling absolutely rotten," was the reply, "half-suffocated, and I think I'm going to be sick. Why the deuce can't these miserable doctors invent fumes that are less like a mixture of hell and sewers?"

Silence again.

At the end of the forty-five minutes Khuda Bux entered the bathroom for the last time, emptied the contents of his phial of H₂S on the floor, and fled for ever from the scene.

Hardly a moment elapsed before the beastly odour reached the General's nose.

"Good God!" he ejaculated. "This is beyond a joke. What the hell has that d——d fellow let loose on us now? I believe the swine keeps increasing the dose and adding fresh stinks."

Shalcombe rose unsteadily from his chair and saluted the General.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but I can't——" Without completing the sentence he burst open the door and rushed from the room, flinging himself into a long chair in the verandah. His face was green, and beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

“Confound that fellow,” grunted the General. “There are still ten minutes to go, and we must stick it out. You’ll ask him later what he meant by breaking away like that.”

Two minutes later the Staff Captain began to turn yellow about the gills. Like Shalcombe, he rose and saluted and fled from the room with an unfinished sentence on his lips.

The brave old hero was left alone to inhale the foetid stench that poured in from the bathroom. But even though deserted by his Staff, no thought of surrender occurred to his heroic mind. The full period of sixty minutes had elapsed before he tottered from the room and collapsed into one of the verandah chairs, drawing deep breaths of fresh air into his lungs and fanning himself with his handkerchief.

“Phew!” he groaned. “What a hell of a stink. I believe another minute would have done me in. I must speak to the S.M.O. about this. It can’t be necessary to give people such concentrated essence of beastliness.”

Jenner was now sufficiently revived to be able to carry out the General’s order to find the hospital assistant and bring him to him. He returned in a few minutes to report that no one seemed to know where he had gone.

The Khansamah was sent for, and he informed the General that the babu had gone away twenty minutes ago—probably gone to the serai; he would send for him and bring him if he could be found.

But in the end it transpired that he really could not be found, and this is not surprising as Khuda Bux was by now some five miles up the road on a fast-trotting pony.

Brigadier-General Goldene with his Staff Captain and the P.T. inspecting officer arrived in Kalapahar shortly before noon. Goldene was a tough old bird and had quite recovered from his recent nauseating experiences. The two younger officers were still looking and feeling rather uncomfortable.

The first person the General wanted to see was the S.M.O.

Lieut.-Colonel Franley trembled in his shoes when he heard the dread summons. His guilty conscience immediately suggested what it was about. That infernal disinfection business! Why had he been so slack about it? What beastly luck that the G.O.C. should turn up just now. In a week’s time everything would have been in going order. As it was he was ‘for it’.

Putting a bold face on the matter, he walked up to General Goldene and

saluted.

“Morning, Franley,” said the General with a friendly smile. “Hope you’re fit. It’s more than I am after your filthy fumigating. Good God, man, what do you use to get such stenches? And why should the public have to submit to being literally poisoned by your malodorous compounds?”

Franley smiled a sickly smile as he replied, “Yes, sir,” which seemed to mean nothing. His mind was in a whirl. What on earth was the General talking about? The only thing to do was to take a non-committal line, say nothing, listen to the old man, and answer in monosyllables. Perhaps in this way he might get some clue to the mystery.

The General continued, “Yes, sir? What do you mean by ‘yes, sir’? Yes what? I suppose you mean that you really do think a fumigation can’t be efficacious unless it stinks like ten thousand devils. Well, yours was the limit, there’s no doubt about that. But what I wanted to say was that I was very pleased with your smart attention to orders. The plague is increasing everywhere, and I daresay these new orders will result in checking its spread.

Your arrangements at Bandwara are most thorough, and you’ve got ahead of everyone else. I’ve never been fumigated before, and, by God, I don’t want to be again.”

After a few more remarks and inquiries the General rode on, leaving the S.M.O. limp with bewilderment. The whole thing was like a nightmare to him. He had entirely neglected all the arrangements he was supposed to have made, and here was the General congratulating him on his strict attention to orders. Something must have happened, but what? Perhaps one of the junior medical officers had taken it on himself to start things going. D——d cheek if it were so. Still, perhaps it was just as well.

Roberts had been out since daybreak practising hill warfare with his company. He returned about half an hour before lunch, chuckling to himself over the prospect of meeting a fuming and fumigated friend and adversary.

He knew that Shalcombe would be busy with the squads till some time after midday, and he went out of his way to ride past the lines with a view of catching him as soon as the parade was dismissed.

He was just in the nick of time to spot him riding out from the lines towards the mess.

“Hallo, Blinkers old boy!” he shouted. “You’re looking as fat and ugly as ever. Two years since we last met, but you don’t alter, except perhaps a little

for the worse.”

“By Jove!” replied Shalcombe, “the bonny boy who shot the golden eagle! The shooter of Shy-hawks! Well, Bobby, my lad, I’m glad to see you again. Quite forgot you lived up in these parts. Been doing any more execution lately among the feathered tribe?”

After the usual interchange of chaff Roberts, who was longing to hear how the ‘affair’ had gone off, moved ostentatiously to the windward side of Shalcombe, holding his handkerchief to his nose.

“What the deuce are you playing at?” asked Shalcombe.

“Oh, nothing particular. But you won’t mind my saying that you do smell like the dickens!”

“Bar trying to be funny, m’lad, and I’ll tell you just why I smell. I admit I do, and you would stink as bad if you had been through what I’ve been through.

Curse your S.M.O. I have been spending a whole hour inhaling the vilest stenches by way of killing plague microbes that I am supposed to have brought with me from Lahore.”

Roberts would have liked to have drawn him out, but he had had his joke; it had evidently been a brilliant success, and it would be kinder to bring matters to a close.

“Do you remember,” he asked, “my shooting that splendid specimen of a Shy-hawk and getting into trouble with the Inspector of Indian Hawkeries? Well, that Inspector was a lousy fellow and badly needed fumigating. So I arranged it for him. No need to go to the S.M.O., I did it all myself: invented all the stinks, and laid the little trap into which the Inspector of Indian Hawkeries so unsuspectingly stepped, and from which he emerged smelling even worse than one of the birds he was paid to protect. Now perhaps we can call quits!”

The above explanation was well sprinkled with ‘hearty guffaws’ and ‘loud ha-ha’s’ that have been omitted to make it readable.

As Roberts concluded, Shalcombe suddenly became quite serious.

“I say, Bobby, old boy. I admit you’ve scored heavily and I’ll mark you up a winner till I get in the next blow, but I’m not so sure that you aren’t going to lose your commission over this little affair. It was all very well filling me up with all those stinks, but do you realize the G.O.C. is paying a surprise visit to Kalapahar and he got caught in the same trap? By Gad, there’ll be wigs on the

green when he runs you to earth.”

Roberts’ teeth literally chattered in his head as he asked: “Bar sells. Was the General really fumigated with you?”

“Solemn truth. You’ve only one chance of escape. The old man took it without a wince, and was really quite pleased with the S.M.O. about it. Get on to the S.M.O. and see if you can’t square things up somehow. If you can’t, then I’m afraid you’ll find yourself up for a court-martial.”

Lieut.-Colonel Franley was in his bungalow changing into mufti before going over to lunch in the mess when Roberts galloped into the compound, flung the reins over his pony’s neck, and ran up the steps into the verandah.

“Sorry to bother you, Colonel. Frightfully urgent. Can I speak to you for a minute?”

“Certainly,” replied the S.M.O., wondering what on earth it was all about.

“It’s about the disinfecting business at Bandwara,” gasped Roberts.

“By Jove, we’re going to get an explanation of that now, are we? Well, sit down and have a peg to pull you together before you start—you look as if you were going to have a fit.”

Franley motioned Roberts to a chair and listened with delighted chuckles to a detailed account of the villainous escapade. Roberts ended with an appeal to the S.M.O.

“For God’s sake, Colonel, don’t give it away. Can’t you make out that it was all done in the orthodox way by your orders?”

“Why, of course I can,” he replied, “you needn’t fret about that. The General has already been patting me on the back about it. I hadn’t the least idea what the old man was talking about. I ought to be very grateful to you.

I don’t think there is any need for either of us to tell any lies about it—I haven’t said a word myself, though I suppose I am a liar by implication. But you run the risk of getting into a nasty mess and so do I, so we’ll hang together.”

“Well, Colonel, I don’t quite like the idea of ‘hanging’ one way or another, but it is going to be a pretty near thing for both of us. It’s a tremendous piece of luck for me that I’ve managed to rope you in, too—nobody would suspect an officer of your seniority of playing a dirty trick like that.”

“Talking of dirty tricks reminds me. The General is very keen to know

what the mixture was—he's bound to ask me again about it. What filthy compounds did you put into your devil's brew?"

"Oh, just anything that came to hand. Mostly sulphur, bazar tobacco, sulphuretted hydrogen, asafœtida, and thin shavings of goats' horns."

"Good Lord, man. What a nasty mind you must have. Do you know you could really have made them ill with the stench of all that muck?"

Roberts left the S.M.O.'s bungalow with a light heart. There seemed no possibility of the G.O.C. ever getting to know that the fumigation was not a genuine one, and there was the joy of having encompassed a horrible revenge on Shalcombe.

Lieut.-Colonel Franley wasted no time in setting up an orthodox establishment at Bandwara so that General Goldene should have no reason to suspect anything on his way through to-morrow.

Only one further incident occurred to disturb the equanimity of the culprit, and that took place during dinner in the mess that evening.

Roberts was sitting opposite to the General, with his servant standing in accordance with the usual Indian custom behind his chair.

Suddenly he noticed the General glaring over his head and realized that the focus of his gaze must be his trusty Khuda Bux, who had carried out the fumigating operations at Bandwara that morning.

He felt that he had been an idiot not to have thought of the risk of identification.

When the servants were out of the room General Goldene leant across the table and said to him:

"Do you always have hospital assistants to wait on you at table?"

Roberts took a tremendous pull at himself and asked with admirable sang-froid: "What do you mean, sir?"

"Why, that fellow behind your chair is the exact image of the blighter who poisoned us this morning, I'd almost swear he's the same man. But of course he couldn't be."

"Hardly, sir, but I think these Punjabi Mahomedans are often very like one another," replied Roberts, cursing his stupidity in having brought Khuda Bux to mess. He sent a hurried message by the mess servant to tell Khuda Bux to go back to the bungalow at once.

General Goldene left on the following morning, and noted with approval

the perfection of the S.M.O.'s arrangements for plague precautions at Bandwara.

He visited the dak bungalow, the scene of yesterday's revolting episode, and as he passed through the room in which they had inhaled those devastating fumes he turned to his Staff Captain and said:

"Colonel Franley is an A1 fellow. Knows his job, and does it thoroughly," and then, as a reminiscent whiff of the odour of yesterday was gently wafted in through the open door of the bathroom, he added in an apologetic undertone, as if ashamed of going back on his slogan: "but, by Gad, in this case I think he was a d——d sight too thorough."

X

PUBLICITY

He longed for it, he yearned for it.
O how he yearned!
He stroved for it, he grovelled for it.
O how he grovelled!
Then one day IT came. Glorious day.
O how he revelled in it!

I

THENCEFORTH when he glanced at the illustrated pages of the daily papers, as often as not he saw a picture of himself.

And when it was so he was very pleased.

And when he entered a restaurant to lunch or dine, people stopped eating and pointed at him with their forks, saying, "That's him."

And he liked this very much indeed.

And rows of charming school-girls asked for his autograph, and he gave it with a kindly smile.

It was heavenly to think that just writing one's name like that should elicit blushes and murmurs of thanks from pretty girls.

And when he stepped out from anywhere on to the street, his ears were gladdened with the music of clicking cameras.

Oh, it all tickled him to death.

II

But after a year or two it began to pall.

His natural modesty asserted itself and he felt unclothed and indecent before the public gaze. All these people continually pointing at him and snapshotting him got on his nerves.

His soul revolted, and he began to loathe Publicity.

At least, he thought he did. He didn't, really.

III

So he fled from it and hid himself in a far-distant land where no one knew him.

There were no pictures of him in the daily papers, not one.

No people pointed him out in restaurants. They didn't know who he was and didn't want to know.

No school-girls asked him for his autograph though he always had his fountain-pen handy.

No cameras clicked when he stepped out into the street.

It was heavenly. This calm, this privacy, this repose.

But was it?

IV

After a time the calm and solitude began to get on his nerves.

It was rather nice that no one should know, or want to know, who one was. But people like that, after all, must be silly asses, and it is not pleasant to live among silly asses.

And though Publicity was rather boring it was better than extinction.

And if the recognition of his personality possessed a charm for many people, as it seemed to do, was it right to deny that pleasure to so many?

V

So he went back into the limelight.

Or at least he went in its direction.

But during his absence it had developed a curious will-o'-the-wisp trick.

Whenever he moved towards it to enjoy once more the warmth of its rays it dodged a little to one side or the other, and he could never get into the centre of the focus.

He strove and he grovelled, but Publicity had gone.

It never came back.

He forced himself on people, saying, "Let me introduce myself. I am . . ."

And instead of admiring looks of recognition, people merely said, "Oh, really!" and turned away.

Then he found that life without Publicity was not life.

The fire went out of his eyes, the blood ran cold in his veins, the breath went out of his lungs, and the life went out of his heart. In fact, he expired.

They found his corpse at daybreak on the Thames Embankment, and as they could find no marks of identification on his underclothing they buried him in a grave marked:

UNKNOWN.

XI

ULTRA-ALTRUISM

A GRUESOME TALE OF THE CANNIBAL ISLANDS

THERE is certainly a good deal to be said for cannibalism but I am not going to say it, being quite convinced that there is much more to be said against it, and it is an unpleasant topic to dwell on.

Still, as this story lightly impinges on that subject, we must just consider it for a moment.

At the first glance it is obvious that there are two great divisions of the practice. The first is the killing of human beings for the sake of food, and the second is the eating of human beings who may have been killed in one way or another, as a simple matter of food economy.

No civilized person is going to advocate the former, but the latter is at any rate deserving of some consideration.

I have heard the matter discussed on various occasions, and I have noticed that all fat men are, so to speak, anti-cannibalistic, while among the lean ones one does sometimes almost detect a justification, or even an advocacy, for the practice.

I gladly turn from this unpleasant theme and leave it to the reader to pursue it for himself, or not, while we get on with the story.

Once upon a time there lived, in a quiet Devonshire village, a much respected and well-to-do couple who had a family consisting of three daughters.

The eldest girl was named Dorothy, shortened to Doddy, the second Daffodil or Daffy, and the third Denise or Denny.

When Doddy was twenty-one years of age the parents died and the three girls were left orphans. As they inherited a comfortable house and ample means, the death of their parents made little change in their mode of life and they continued to live together in the old home.

Doddy, the eldest, was dark and handsome and remarkably attractive. Her

tastes were sporting, and her time was entirely absorbed in hunting, shooting, and fishing. Daffy, now nineteen years old, was also a brunette, demure and charming, with a roving eye that ill accorded with her demure demeanour. The local newspaper described her as “a sweet and winsome Devonian lass”.

She occupied her time mostly in the garden and the carpenter’s shop.

Denny, sweet seventeen, was of quite a gipsy type of beauty—fascinating and adorable, but scorning the adoration of the fascinated. Her amusements were chiefly confined to the house and garden. In the house she displayed a mania for polishing articles that did not want to be polished, and in the garden she cultivated the acquaintance of noxious insects, whose habits she studied in a most fearless manner.

The three sisters loved each other dearly, but in spite of their mutual affection, quarrels were not infrequent.

The truth of the matter is that these three girls, notwithstanding their undeniable charm and their love for each other, were, like most of us, eaten up with selfishness. That is to say that although each loved the other two with undying affection, she loved herself very much more.

If you had told them this they would have been very surprised, but it was so.

The great misfortune was that they all liked the same things. Had their tastes been fairly diverse, like those of Jack Sprat and his wife, the stream of their lives might have flowed on for ever unruffled, but it was lashed to fury day by day and hour by hour, by the continual clash of their desires.

At breakfast Doddy liked the brown crust off the new loaf, and so did Daffy, and so did Denny. All three liked the lean of bacon and rejected the fat.

At dinner Doddy liked all the little crisp brown bits off the corners of the joint, and so did Daffy and Denny.

And so on throughout the day, at meals, at work or play all three always wanted the same thing, and squabbles were incessant.

Doddy was perhaps the most selfish of the three, and asserted her right to first choice as being the eldest.

Denny put in a similar claim as being the youngest.

Daffy being neither the one nor the other fell between two stools, but made up for it by quietly pinching the tit-bits she wanted while the other two were arguing.

Things went on like this, each day being spent in quarrels and recriminations, until life became well-nigh unendurable.

Then came the Fairy Queen and with one touch of her magic wand, brought peace and contentment to the divided household.

The Fairy Queen came in the peculiar disguise of a young curate recently appointed to assist the old vicar in the performance of his duties.

This young man was young enough to preach a sermon on the text, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", which severely shocked the regular churchgoers by hinting that probably none of them had ever given this fundamental principle of Christianity a trial. He spoke very plainly, saying, "Although I am a young man, I have had considerable experience of Christian communities, and I can honestly say that I have never seen this doctrine practised except by rare and isolated individuals. I hope that some, at least, of you, will leave this church to-day resolved to put this precept into practice."

Now Doddy, Daffy, and Denny, were in church that day, and listened attentively to the sermon. The simple words spoken with real feeling by the young preacher smote each of their hearts with equal force. Each left the church oppressed with a load of guilt, confessing the sin of selfishness, and firmly resolved to try and overcome it.

From that day an entire change came over the household. Squabbles ceased, or if they continued they did so on quite a new line. In the old days it was a matter of, "I want that", "So do I", "I'll have it", "No you shan't"; now it was changed to, "Here's a nice bit for you", "No, you take it", "I won't", "You shall".

Never had three mortals in the history of the world been so completely reformed as the three pretty sisters. Each vied with the other in an effort to excel in self-denial. Doddy, who had been the worst, now became the best. To such a degree did she carry her spirit of reformation that she never touched anything she liked, deriving all her pleasure from yielding the tit-bits to the others.

She suddenly discovered that it was nicer to hear Daffy crunching up a crisp crust, than to eat it herself, and she actually began to take a pleasure in eating all the fat off the bacon (though it almost made her sick), so that Denny could get an extra share of the lean.

The two younger sisters developed the same tendencies though in a less degree, and the result was that most of the nice crusts and tiddly bits off the joint were left uneaten, while all three ate the crumb of the bread and the

gristle and nasty bits of the meat.

In this way complete harmony reigned in the household, and no more loving and self-denying family existed on the face of the earth.

Even in their love affairs altruism found its way.

It may be taken for granted that three such charming and attractive girls were not without their train of adorers, but no one of them ever seemed to reach the stage of being 'head-over-ears' in love with any of the nice eligible young men.

Doddy was getting near that point with a good-looking aspirant when she found that Daffy was attracted in the same direction. Then Doddy nobly gave him up to Daffy, who, however, insisted on giving him back to Doddy, so that neither hooked the fish in the end.

A little later the same thing occurred between Daffy and Denny. Daffy had made a choice when she found Denny struck with her young man, so she unhesitatingly gave him up to Denny who promptly returned him to Daffy who passed him back again. Meantime the young man, who could have been happy with either, left the village in despair, and that affair was ended.

Eventually, however, the three sisters found three young men whom they favoured and whom the other two did not favour.

Doddy was first with Charles, whom Daffy and Denny thought a nonentity. He was an officer in the mercantile marine. Daffy adored John who was a commercial traveller in whom Doddy and Denny could see no points. Denny loved Henry, a gentleman at large, who left Doddy and Daffy quite cold.

It was arranged therefore that Doddy should marry her Charles, Daffy her John, and Denny her Henry.

Then came the question of the old home, equally beloved by all three of the girls. Each of them hated the idea of leaving the old place, but it was certain that three married couples could not live in it together. So Doddy resigned her claim in favour of Daffy or Denny, and Daffy resigned her claim in favour of Doddy or Denny, and Denny resigned her claim in favour of Doddy or Daffy.

In the end Doddy thought she would make the great sacrifice, so she discharged her Charles saying: "I love you very much, and always shall. But I will never marry you." And Daffy and Denny, determined not to be outdone, made similar announcements to their bewildered lovers. The young men departed, and the three sisters lived once more in peace.

Thus things went on for the space of ten quiet, blissful years. None of the

three ever had anything they wanted to have for fear the others might want it. The competition in altruism was fierce, but Doddy was admittedly the winner.

About this time the three sisters began to suffer from minor ailments which the doctor advised could only be cured by a complete change, and he recommended a long sea voyage.

His advice was accepted with alacrity, maps were consulted, travel agents written to, and eventually it was decided to make a trip round the world.

The route finally agreed upon was through Canada to Vancouver and thence to Honolulu and via Samoa to Australia, from which point further plans would be made for the return journey to Europe. Owing to an extraordinary rise in some shares they had invested in, funds were ample and the sisters looked forward with eagerness to the great adventure.

They sailed from England in the early spring and reached Vancouver without incident. There is no need to dwell on this part of their journey which was uniformly delightful, the enjoyment being only very slightly marred by minor altercations due to the determination of each sister to see that one of the others should always have the best berth, or the most comfortable seat.

In Vancouver they had the good fortune to find a pleasure cruise about to start for Honolulu and the Fiji Islands. Three berths only remained and these they immediately secured.

The voyage as far as Honolulu was enjoyable but uneventful. They made many friends on board, the weather was fine, and they thoroughly enjoyed the various entertainments got up for the amusement of the passengers. From Honolulu the ship sailed for Samoa, and everyone looked forward to the thrill of crossing the Equator.

But alas, this was a thrill with which their ill-fated ship would fail to provide them.

A violent storm arose when they were some fifty miles south of Christmas Island. The sea, lashed by a furious gale, ran mountains high, and in the midst of the hurricane the steering-gear failed and the ship was at the mercy of the elements. On the second day of the storm the bridge was smashed and the Captain carried overboard, and shortly afterwards the vessel was hurled upon a reef.

A small island was visible about two miles away, and the crew determined to make for this. The ship was being pounded to pieces and would probably be completely broken up in an hour's time. All the ship's boats had been destroyed, but two rafts were available, and on these the crew decided to make

an attempt to reach the shore. Haste was obviously necessary, but there was no sign of panic, and, every effort was made to accommodate the passengers, precedence being, as usual, accorded to ladies.

Our three ladies, however, hesitated so long in boarding the raft that they were left to the last, and were still trying to persuade each other to be the first to leave the ship, when a huge wave tore the raft from the ship's side and the sisters found themselves alone on the wreck.

Clinging together on the poop which was now the only part of the vessel not swept by the raging sea, they watched the fate of the two rafts which were flung on to some rocks near by, all the occupants being thrown into the sea and drowned before their eyes.

During all this trying period their courage had not deserted them, and the mind of each was absorbed by thoughts of how to rescue the other two.

Contrary to the expectation of the sailors the ship did not entirely break up, and when the storm suddenly subsided an hour later they found themselves quite safely perched on the stern high out of the water. It now seemed quite feasible to reach the neighbouring island.

A raft was easily constructed, and broken planks served for oars and paddles. A search in the portion of the ship still above water resulted in the finding of some boxes of provisions, ship biscuits, and bully beef, so, stocking the raft with these and the few tools they could lay their hands on, they set out over the calm sea for the island.

With a current helping them they were not long in getting within a short distance of land, and a pause was made before making an attempt to beach the raft. The island appeared to be quite uninhabited, but savages, possibly cannibals, might be hidden among the rocks.

Nothing, however, appearing in sight, it was determined to run the raft ashore in a small protected inlet, and in a short time the three sisters found themselves, to their inexpressible relief, on dry land. The provisions and tools were landed, the raft hauled up as far as possible, and made fast.

These tasks accomplished the ladies set out to explore, an undertaking which was soon completed, as the island proved to be only about a mile in length, half a mile across, and entirely barren. In a rocky basin at the highest point was a large pool of fresh water, filled by the torrential rains that had accompanied the late storm.

Having completed the exploration they sat down to review the situation. Provisions were checked and apportioned in minimum rations that would last

them exactly thirty days. Allowing for a good deal of evaporation the water supply should hold out for a similar period. So there was nothing to do but to sit and wait and hope that within a month some ship would pass their way and rescue them.

It was a slender hope as there seemed nothing likely to attract a vessel in this direction, but it was all they could look for, so the first thing to do was to rig up a distress signal—some white material attached to one of their oars. This done they proceeded to eat their first meal of bully beef and biscuit—not bad food when you’re very hungry—and from this point succeeded a wearisome procession of endless days, hope long-deferred making the three hearts very sick.

Altruism began to be very boring, but they stuck to it nobly. At each meal the conversation always took the same form, each trying to make the other accept a morsel of her ration.

“Do have a bit of this, I can’t eat any more.” “No thanks. I have more than I want. I wish you’d have this bit of biscuit, I can’t manage it.”

The stoutest spirits are, however, liable to break down under too severe a strain, and it was with feelings of genuine dismay that the two younger sisters noticed a remarkable falling away on the part of Doddy. Her altruism dwindled to vanishing point, and after the fifteenth day both Daffy and Denny observed with horror that, so far from offering them any of her food, she actually was inclined to take more than her share. When either of them said: “Do have a bit of mine”, instead of replying as formerly: “No. You have a bit of mine”, she greedily pounced on it and ate it.

Their slender provisions only just sufficed to keep them from actual starvation, and in the early days, Doddy with her skill in angling was often able to supplement the meal with a fish. Now, when she went fishing by herself, she would come back empty-handed and say that she had had no sport, whereas they could see fish-scales adhering to her mouth and chin and knew that some tasty morsel had been secretly devoured unshared. It was terrible, but Daffy and Denny held their tongues and refrained from accusations and recriminations, although as they grew thinner day by day, Doddy got fatter and fatter. It was odious and disgusting.

Time dragged its weary length so slowly along that they seemed to have been years on the island, and soon fell into a state of apathy, living a purely animal life of eating and sleeping. The hope of a passing ship had died away, and a lingering death by starvation seemed inevitable.

They would not have even known how long a time had elapsed since they

were cast ashore if it had not been for Doddy, who managed to keep a brief diary which was little more than just a record of passing days. She had a pen, paper she found on the beach and carefully dried, and ink she improvised out of various compounds washed up from the wreck.

Conversation flagged—there was so little to talk about—but their limited notions of geography often offered an interesting topic. Where were they? What civilized place was anywhere near? What route might bring a passing ship their way?

Putting together the scraps of information they had gleaned while on board ship, and adding their combined knowledge of geography, they came to the conclusion that they were not far from Christmas Island which was almost on the Equator and was probably inhabited by white people, and that ships trading to that island or to Fiji and Samoa might pass this way. That was all they could hope for.

Then Doddy suggested that the Cannibal Islands were somewhere near—they were in the Pacific Ocean anyway—and that brought up the topic of cannibalism. All three spoke of it in terms of loathing and disgust, but, as the topic appealed sub-consciously to the hunger that was gnawing at them, it recurred from day to day, and gradually it appeared that there might be two points of view. To kill a person in order to eat them was a terrible thing, but if a person was already killed and you were starving, how would the matter present itself then?

As time progressed and the discussion was renewed daily, the younger sisters noted with growing horror that Doddy was actually constituting herself an advocate of this dreadful course. Denny was fiercely anti-cannibalistic, and Daffy was halfway, philosophic, and non-committal, contenting herself with listening to the other two.

“I really cannot see,” said Doddy, “why people faced as we are with death by starvation, should not make use of any fair means to prolong their lives. I wouldn’t like to eat you or Daffy, but under circumstances I think I could do it. I should hate to waste you.”

“Your ideas are disgusting,” retorted Denny. “I think you must be going mad.”

“That’s just it, my dear. I am mad, and so are both of you. But it is a very sane sort of madness always produced by starvation. A desire to continue life by all fair means, untrammelled by laws or codes of civilization.”

After this Daffy and Denny began to feel very uncomfortable when they

found Doddy's eye fixed on them at meal times. But Denny took comfort in the reflection that they were now so nearly skeletons that they would hardly tempt a professional cannibal. Whereas Doddy? It almost made your mouth water to look at her—growing fatter day by day, stealing their rations and gorging herself secretly on fish—really she did almost induce thoughts of cannibalism. And it would serve her right to be eaten after all her meanness about the fish. Daffy and Denny had tried day after day but were quite unable to land the smallest catch, they lacked the skill of Doddy the trained fisher, who, in spite of her denials, was obviously a successful angler.

Oh how wearily the time passed. Starvation had produced such a state of apathy that they had entirely ceased keeping a look-out for passing vessels, and had stupidly chosen for their home a small hollow from which no view was obtainable.

By the thirtieth day all hope had gone. The rations should all have been consumed by now, but Daffy and Denny had saved little secret hoards which would suffice to keep all three of them alive for another day or two. In the late afternoon of this day Doddy occupied herself very busily with writing and later informed her sisters that she was going for a stroll. "Nasty greedy creature," they both exclaimed. "Gone to catch a fish and eat it in secret."

But Doddy had no intention of catching a fish, her purpose was quite otherwise. She walked deliberately to the edge of the highest cliff at the north end of the island and after depositing her cloak in a prominent position flung herself over to be dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

Daffy and Denny grew anxious as darkness descended and there were no signs of Doddy returning.

"I suppose we must try and crawl round and look for her," said Daffy, "she has probably fallen and sprained her ankle."

As she rose to set out on the search her eye lighted on a piece of paper addressed to her in Doddy's handwriting.

She tore it open and in the waning light deciphered the rather roughly-scribbled contents which ran as follows:—

"MY DEAREST SISTERS,

Writing is difficult and I will be brief. I am about to throw myself over the cliff at the north end of the island. My death will be instantaneous and I shall not suffer any pain. You will find my body

just below the spot I will mark with my cloak. It is for you to eat. I have deliberately fattened myself up for this purpose by eating more than my share of the food. It was a gamble. If we had been saved I should have scored by having escaped the pangs of hunger from which you have both suffered. As we have not been saved I give you back the stolen rations in this form. Don't be silly about it but just take the food prepared for you.

I see no reason why I should not taste very nice. My last will is that you shall eat me, it is my last fervent request and you dare not refuse it.

Good-bye, my dearest sisters; I feel sure you will both be saved in the end.

Your loving sister,
DODDY."

As Daffy concluded the reading aloud of the letter, both sisters burst into tears.

"Dear sweet unselfish Doddy," moaned Denny, "and to think that all the time that we were reviling her for her greediness she was deliberately preparing this supreme act of unselfishness."

"She was truly wonderful," said Daffy, "and it is dreadful to think that her sacrifice was in vain. We cannot eat her."

"And why not, I ask you?" retorted Denny; "after thirty days' starvation I view the matter from quite a different standpoint. I now see that the subject we so often discussed in the early days of our struggles can only really be dealt with by people who have suffered in this way. To the overfed people in ordinary life the idea is most repugnant. Starve them for thirty days and nine out of ten of them would be most willing cannibals."

"You will never persuade me," replied her sister. "I will not make myself a cannibal—odious word."

"But consider her last will and testament, dearie," insisted Denny. "Have we any right to fail in carrying out her wishes, especially as she was our eldest sister. Is all her sacrifice to be in vain?"

"I admit that I am very hungry, and that my mouth is watering at the prospect, but my final and irrevocable decision is that I will not do what she asks. It is just one of those things that are not done. We might both be easily tempted, I'm afraid, so I propose that we just stay where we are and do not even search for her body.

We have no more food. Let us just lie quietly here and die like respectable Christians.”

This was obviously the wisest and simplest thing to do, and it was not very difficult. Clasped in each other’s arms, the two sisters soon fell into a deep slumber.

II

In a rather ramshackle little hotel in the seaport of Suva in the Fiji Islands, Mr. Venaby was eating his evening meal. He was a handsome fellow thirty-five years of age, with fair hair and brown eyes, and the expression of a man who is nursing some secret sorrow.

What the sorrow was due to none could say as he was what is called a highly successful man. He had been engaged during the last eight years in the banana and copra trade between Fiji and New Zealand, and was now making his last trip, returning to the old homeland with quite a considerable fortune.

He was anxious to visit Christmas Island on the trip home, with a view to inquiring into the question of phosphates—a side line of his business that he hoped to develop later when he was settled in England. Only very few ships touch at Christmas Island and his stay in Suva had been unduly prolonged.

Halfway through his meal, his reverie was interrupted by the entrance of a tall dark stranger, evidently an Englishman, who took his seat at a small table facing him and proceeded to give orders for dinner.

He liked the look of the newcomer and was yearning for an interchange of views on life and trade and business with some intelligent person, but unfortunately Englishmen don’t talk to each other without extreme provocation, and there was nothing apparently to provoke them.

Glancing up, however, a little later in the meal, and catching sight of the stranger’s face, now more clearly visible by the light of a lamp, it suddenly dawned upon him that he had seen the man before. After a searching scrutiny he convinced himself that he was not mistaken, so he rose from his seat and, advancing towards the other man’s table with outstretched hand, exclaimed:

“Yeandle, for all I’m worth.”

“By George, Venaby, fancy meeting you after all these years.”

Tables were rearranged and the two friends were soon busy exchanging recollections of the good old days.

Yeandle, who had no profession and whose income enabled him to indulge his whim for travel and exploration, had recently been wandering about the unknown and inhospitable lands of Northern Australia. He had had a hard time and been rather knocked out by fever, and was now returning to England to get himself fit for a proposed shooting trip in West Africa.

“How are you going on from here?” asked Venaby.

“That’s just the difficulty. I don’t want an ordinary liner. I thought I’d just hang around here, and have a look at these fascinating islands until I can get some old cargo boat to deliver me in Canada or U.S.A. I’m not in a hurry and don’t mind how long I wait.”

“I’m waiting for just that sort of thing myself. I want a ship that will be calling at Christmas Island, and that is not easy to get.”

“By Jove! Splendid idea. We’ll go together. It would suit me down to the ground.”

“Righto, then, you can potter around the islands here, and I’ll let you know when I can fix up things.”

After a prolonged and animated discussion of events connected with their earlier years, which lasted till the small hours of the morning, the two friends retired to rest.

On the following morning Yeandle started out to see what was to be seen, while Venaby hung around the port in the faint hope of finding a ship that would take him to his out-of-the-way island. Three days later his energies were rewarded. He was introduced to the skipper of a small steamer that was proceeding via Christmas Island to San Francisco, and had no difficulty in fixing up passages for Yeandle and himself, especially as, by a curious coincidence, the skipper also proved to be known to both of them, connected with those happy days which had formed the chief topic of conversation on the first night of his meeting with Yeandle.

It was almost too good to believe, three old friends meeting in this way in this far-off corner of the world, but, funnily enough, people who have been in such places know that such coincidences are frequent.

Belford, a man rather older than Venaby, had been running cargo boats in the South Pacific for the last eight years, and had done so well that he was now master-owner of the S.S. *Santiago*. He was happy in his profession, but rather

longing for a sight of his people at home and inclined to fall in with Venaby's idea that they should all make a streak for home from San Francisco.

In a week's time the *Santiago* was ready to sail, and she was soon under way with the cheerful trio on board. The weather was magnificent, the ship comfortable, and the three bachelor friends enjoyed the pleasantest trip of their lives. Many an hour they spent talking over old times and planning the good times they would have when they got home.

Pronounced women-haters, all three of them, it was delightful to feel that none of the fair sex could intrude upon them here. But as woman always forms the chief topic of conversation of self-styled woman-haters, the spiritual presence of the female sex was just as marked as the material absence, and many were the talks they had on the fickleness, unreliability, and perfidiousness of women.

"I was nearly caught, myself, once," said Belford.

"So was I," admitted Venaby.

"Likewise me," capped Yeandle.

On which each told the tale of his fortunate escape, and dwelt at length on the joy and freedom of a bachelor's life.

All went well with the voyage until the afternoon of the day which should bring them at nightfall to Christmas Island. They were steering a course quite close to a small rocky island within about fifty miles of their destination, when the skipper's afternoon nap was disturbed by a cessation of the machinery, and the Chief Engineer came to report a minor breakage which would take three or four hours to repair.

"Most exasperating," exclaimed the skipper. "I've got to get in to-night. For God's sake get on to it and finish the job as quickly as you can."

It was dull work sitting on deck with nothing to do and Yeandle's bent for exploration at once displayed itself.

"Lower a boat for us, Belford," he suggested, "and Venaby and I will go and explore the island."

"Righto, if you feel you'd like a row I'll lower a boat for you. But, although we're all pals, at sea I take command, and I forbid you to set foot on the island. One never knows, and I'm not taking any risks. Also, when I sound three blasts on the siren it will mean that I'm under way in exactly thirty minutes, and if you're not on board, I'll sail without you. I'm not joking and I really mean this seriously."

“Aye, aye, Captain,” responded Yeandle, “we’ll obey your orders.”

The boat was duly launched and the two explorers commenced their tour of inspection round the island. The dusk was falling as they rounded the northernmost point.

“Sorry old Belford forbade us to land. But let’s at any rate get in as close as we can,” said Yeandle. “Here’s a quaint little inlet; steer in and let’s have a look round.”

The boat took the course indicated and was soon within thirty yards of the shore. The cliffs rose abruptly before them with the water gently lapping at the base.

Suddenly Venaby, who had cast his glance upwards, wondering how high the cliff was, was astonished to see a large black object spring from the edge of the cliff and commence its downward course in a series of somersaults. He shouted to his companions:

“Heads there! Look out! Back away!”

The men had hardly begun to back-water when the black object fell into the sea with a resounding plump. One of the men seized a boat-hook and quickly drew the body to the side of the boat.

“By God, it’s a white woman!” he shouted. “And she’s dead, poor thing.”

The inanimate form of the poor female was hauled on board and all speed was made in returning to the ship which had now sounded her three blasts on the siren.

Woman-haters though they were, both Venaby and Yeandle were shocked by the thought of this lone female apparently seeking death in this romantic and tragic manner, and both felt that something must be done and done immediately. Was she dead? How did one find out? What did one do? Both were men of the world, accustomed to deal with crises, but here was a crisis that fairly baffled them.

Luckily one of the seamen seemed to know a good deal about it. They laid the inanimate form down in the stern of the boat while the man proceeded to restore respiration and shortly announced that she was undoubtedly alive.

Rowing with every ounce of their strength they reached the ship’s side in a very short time, and were soon on board with their burden.

“We’ve found a white woman,” gasped Yeandle to the skipper. “Jumped over the cliff into the sea. Thought she was dead, but she isn’t. Only

unconscious.”

“Good God!” muttered Belford, “what a how-de-do.” Then calling the first-mate, who was the only man on board with any knowledge of doctoring, he handed the inanimate form over to him with orders to report as soon as he could pronounce on the case.

The first-mate gave the necessary directions, and the lady was soon comfortably installed in a cabin, and the best medicine the mate knew of—a glass of brandy and water—duly administered. This had the immediate effect of partially restoring consciousness, and a feeble voice from the bed-clothes muttered in sepulchral tones: “Two sisters still on island. Save them.”

Bearing this astounding message the first-mate rushed to the Captain, who at once ordered the boat out again, and directed accommodation to be prepared for the expected passengers. Belford’s tender heart was beating hard in sympathy with those poor females, but he cursed them under his breath as an infernal nuisance. “Never get away from them,” he muttered, “always playing the devil with one’s plans. I shan’t make port to-night and shall lose a whole day over this job.”

In an hour’s time the boat returned, and two miserable creatures were helped on deck and guided to their cabins by kindly hands. The *Santiago* then proceeded on her course, berthed for twenty-four hours at Christmas Island, and then set sail for San Francisco.

By the third day none of the ladies had ventured out of their cabins and the curiosity of the three woman-haters was considerably aroused. The only man who knew anything about them was the first-mate who had been obliged to act in the capacity of doctor, and who seemed to enjoy his job thoroughly.

He reported that all three ladies were distinctly comely. They had been cast up on the island a month ago and were on the verge of starvation when their rescue was effected in the nick of time. The two younger sisters were very thin after their privations, but it was a peculiar thing that the elder sister, the one whom they first rescued, was nice and fat. The ladies hoped to appear on deck to-morrow after breakfast and thank in person their kind deliverers.

On the next morning at breakfast the skipper and his two friends appeared uncomfortable and nervous.

“I suppose we must see them, and pass the time of day, eh, what?” he queried.

“No need to thrust ourselves on them,” retorted Venaby, and Yeandle thought women were a nuisance. “Why not rail off part of the deck aft and let

them have it to themselves.”

“A good idea,” commented the skipper, “but it won’t do. We don’t want to be guilty of bad manners. In any case, as skipper, I’ve got to see them, and I’m not going to let you two get out of it.”

Now the truth of the matter is that these three men were consummate liars. They were all dying to see the ladies, especially since the mate had reported that they were comely.

So it was arranged that the three of them should place themselves in line on deck facing the companion from which the ladies would emerge. This scheme was agreed to and about 11 a.m. they took up their positions. Captain Belford on the right, Venaby in the middle, and Yeandle on the left.

After an uneasy wait of some minutes the ladies emerged.

No sooner had Doddy, who headed the procession, cast eyes on the skipper than she screamed: “Charles,” and fell fainting in his arms while he exclaimed: “Good heavens, it’s Doddy!”

Daffy was the next to emerge, and she had no sooner sighted Venaby than she demurely cast down her lustrous eyes, softly murmuring “John”, to which Venaby, in a voice broken with emotion, responded: “My own sweet Daffy!” as he sprang forward to clasp her in his arms.

Denny now came tumbling up the steps alarmed by the sounds that reached her ears, to find herself confronted with Yeandle. Mutual recognition was instantaneous and, whispering “Beloved Henry. At last!” she clasped her arms round his neck in a firm embrace, while he murmured in ecstatic response: “My darling Denny. My dream of bliss come true!”

This dramatic scene coming to an end, much to the disappointment of the crew who had gathered on the forecastle to see the fun, the Captain led the way with Doddy to the little saloon, and soon the three couples were telling each other of all the wonderful things that had happened since their sad parting of ten years ago. But the three sisters never to their dying day divulged the secret tragedy that had preceded their rescue.

No further adventure interrupted the remainder of the voyage, and San Francisco was reached only too soon. From San Francisco they lost no time in travelling to New York and thence to England.

A month later the little Devonshire village was enlivened by wedding peals from the old church, the great occasion being the triple marriage of the three pretty spinsters to the three confirmed bachelors.

After the ceremony was over Charles clasped his plump little bride in his arms and murmured in her ear:

“Oh darling, I love you so much. I could eat you.”

He was a little puzzled by the seriousness of her tone as she replied:

“Oh no, Charles. Promise me never to do that.”

XII

GHOSTS

I SAT beside my hostess at dinner in an Indian bungalow. She had come out two months ago to Chutneypore as the bride of Major Frank Gordon, and it was a pleasure to listen to her views on India—young women just out from home divide themselves into two categories, one lot finds everything charming and interesting and the other finds an Indian cantonment everything that is nasty and unpleasant.

Mrs. Gordon, I am glad to say, belonged to the cheerful group.

“I think the birds and half-tame squirrels are a perfect joy,” she said; “so far I’ve liked everything I’ve seen.”

“Yes,” I replied, “if you care about things like that you’ll find lots to interest you. But all the things are not very nice, you know. Scorpions and white ants will help to disenchant you.”

“How unkind of you to remind me of those horrid little beasts. I’d like to pretend that they weren’t there, but I can’t. One of the syces was stung by a scorpion the other day, the stables are full of them, and as for white ants, they have already eaten my smartest hat and my best pair of shoes.”

She turned to speak to the man on the other side of her and I found myself suddenly remembering events in this old bungalow. White ants recalled the time twenty years ago when I first occupied this room as a bedroom, and, leaving a lot of things untidily on the floor when I went to bed, I was horrified to find next morning that these desperate insects had practically destroyed everything during the night.

My little camp-bed used to be over in the corner where the sideboard now was—I could picture myself lying there with Viper, my faithful bull-terrier, stretched by my side.

Other memories came crowding fast on this one. At another time this was the regimental orderly-room. After that it was the Hughlets’ bungalow, and we had had riotous rehearsals for some amateur theatricals in this room.

Then tragedy. If my hostess were to turn round in her chair and stretch out her hand she would disturb Crawley’s ghost. Crawley shot himself, and when I was called in I found his dead body lying on his bed just where the end of the

dining-table now is. A good fellow Crawley, and the best of friends. If he had possessed a less romantic temperament he might have solved the problem some other way, though I don't quite see any line of action that would have made things any better. Six months married to a very beautiful girl whom he adored and who, I'm sure, adored him. Then in the hot weather came the inevitable separation.

He got her a pretty little bungalow in a very gay hill-station. One day he thought he would please her with a surprise visit. He reached the bungalow about midnight and came back here at once and shot himself.

He had scribbled a note to me, apologizing for the bother I would have over his affairs, and made very little reference to the cause of the trouble. His only comment was: "I might have shot her, or I might have shot him, or I might have shot them both. But why? Revenge? I don't want any revenge. If she's like that, she's like that, and no revenge alters that. In any case, I don't want to live. I've always been rather an idealist as regards women, and that of all women this particular one should shatter all my ideals—you'll understand, won't you, that to go on living was impossible.

I don't hate her, and I don't blame her. Perhaps I don't even blame him. These horrible catastrophes are things that just have to be, like cyclones or earthquakes. . . ."

Poor old Crawley, was he right or was he wrong?

"Very deep in thought, Colonel Young?" said my hostess, suddenly turning to me. "What do Colonels think about at dinner-parties, I wonder? Parades and manœuvres? Or do they turn off that tap when they go out to dine?"

"Oh, that tap is most decidedly turned off," I replied. "We don't bring 'shop' into ladies' society. No, I was seeing ghosts."

"How thrilling. Is this room haunted?"

"Very much so for me. It was my bedroom once."

"And you see the ghost of yourself?"

"Yes, Myself and others."

"Oh, but that is quite too delightful. It would be amusing to talk to one's own ghost—are you going to?"

"Well, hardly at the present moment, I think. I'm enjoying myself very much, and don't want to be bothered with ghosts."

But although I would not talk to them they were there, and when I had said

good night to the Gordons and found myself back in my own bachelor abode I threw myself down in a long chair and found the ghosts had followed me and were waiting by my side.

Crawley stood there, a smiling, good-looking fellow. I had a lot of questions to ask him, but he would answer none of them.

“What’s the good,” he said. “There are answers to all of your questions, but none within the limits of your human intelligence.”

The Hughlets appeared and we had little to say to each other; they used to be a cheery couple but we were never very great friends.

The amateur theatricals they had been running fifteen years ago were not a great success, but the rehearsals had been amusing—the performers always get more fun out of these shows than the audience.

Hughlet was a captain then, and had been married five years; both he and his wife had exaggerated opinions of their dramatic talents.

As they were getting up the piece they naturally selected for themselves the parts of hero and heroine, and then just collected anybody to fill up the blanks.

The show went off fairly well, all Hughlets’ friends applauded like mad when he or his wife was on the stage, but the remainder of the audience yawned a good deal.

They both had quite a decent idea of acting, but were not suited to the parts for which they had cast themselves.

After the show was over he asked me how it had gone.

“Oh, splendid,” I replied, untruthfully.

“What about my part, was I all right?”

“Simply A1, old boy.”

“My wife do all right?”

“Absolutely tophole.”

The cross-examination ought to have ended here. I had given the usual mendacious replies that amateurs expect from one—why not leave it at that?

But Hughlet was greedy for more superlatives. So, in reply to further questions, I let him have a string of all the most complimentary adjectives that came to my mind.

I got very tired of his perpetual demands for outspoken criticism.

“No, but really, old boy, what did you honestly think of our parts?”

“You were both of you as good as could be.”

“Yes, but I mean, as a candid critic, were we really all right?”

“My dear fellow, you were quite splendid.”

“No, but bar hurting my feelings, or anything of that sort of rot, do you really think we were quite a success?”

Driven to exasperation, and accepting his assurance that my criticism would not hurt his feelings, I thought it would perhaps be kinder to be a little more explicit, so I said:

“You both acted very well, but your parts suited neither of you. You were just Hughlet on the stage all the time and never Sir Guy de Montigny, the brave and handsome baronet: and your wife was charming as Sylvia Cracklethorpe, but did not in the least suggest the artless village maiden.”

That’s all I said. A very mild dose of disapproval. And he was asking for it, wasn’t he?

Neither of them ever spoke to me again.

Hughlet was killed a few years later in a scrap on the frontier, and his wife was killed in the Dharmsala earthquake.

As we had ceased to be on speaking terms when we last met I doubted whether the ghosts would speak now, but they were apparently willing to overlook my offence, and he greeted me with a reference to the theatricals.

“They were excellent fooling,” he said, “but we took ourselves too seriously. We were both hurt by your very harsh and unfriendly criticism.”

“Rot, old man,” I replied, “haven’t you learnt sense yet? I said you were both A1, splendid, tophole, as-good-as-the-London-stage; in fact, I practically told you that you were perfect, and that any fault there might be lay with the ‘parts’ and not the actors. What more did you want?”

“Well,” he answered, “I can give you back your own words, ‘haven’t you learnt sense yet?’ Amateur actors have to be fed with a diet of compliments only, one word of real criticism turns their honey to gall. The knowledge of this may be helpful to you in life, as the same principle applies to other things besides theatricals. Many a man has reached the highest point of his profession by a judicious use of honey and treacle. Stick to this advice and I prophecy a splendid future for you. Good-bye.”

The Hughlets vanished and I was confronted with my own ghost.

I remembered Mrs. Gordon's dining-room when it was the regimental office. Of all the interesting events connected with those days the one that came most clearly to my mind was a native officers' district court-martial of which I was superintending officer.

Native officers of the good old days were mostly men who had secured promotion from the ranks for good service in the field. They were a splendid lot of old soldiers, but their intelligence was chiefly limited to events connected with battlefields and parade grounds and the agricultural interests of their home lives; most of them were quite illiterate.

It can therefore be easily understood that when that particular court of justice entitled a 'Native Officers' District Court-martial' was held, it was necessary to appoint a British officer to guide the members through the intricacies of English military law and assist them in their deliberations.

No native officer ever attended these functions in a 'legal' frame of mind, because he was ignorant of law. There were only three frames of mind: dislike of the prisoner and a determination to convict; a liking for the prisoner and a resolve to acquit; or a complete indifference to the whole affair.

In this particular case the prisoner, Shah Zaman, a Sangu-Khel Shinwari from the Cabul side of the Khyber Pass, was accused of stealing a rifle. Certain evidence would be produced before the court, but the members did not regard 'evidence' as of any importance on either side, having no intention of believing a single word of any witness's statement on oath.

During the assembling of the court the members discussed the case freely until I asked for silence, and explained that it was not fair to pre-judge the case.

"All right, Sahib," said Subedar Moti Ram, "but we know he did steal the rifle, and I think he ought to get five years."

Proceedings commenced with the usual formalities, the charge-sheet duly signed and the charge read out to the prisoner.

The prisoner pleaded not guilty, and proceeded to enter into a long explanation which I had to stop, much to the annoyance of the native officers, who looked forward to a bit of an argument with him. I explained that that would all come later.

Evidence for the prosecution was taken, it was profuse and conclusive, the prisoner had no questions to ask in cross-examination. The evidence tended to

show that the prisoner was arrested by the police as he was endeavouring to cross the frontier in company with a well-known gang of rifle thieves who had altogether five rifles in their possession.

In his defence the prisoner said: "I did not steal the rifle. I found it lying about in the lines and meant to hand it in to store. But as I was going on leave next day and I have many enemies I thought I would take it home with me and bring it back afterwards."

"What a liar you are," commented Jemadar Ali Khan.

I had to rule Ali Khan 'out of order', much to his bewilderment. "You know he's telling lies, Sahib," he said.

It struck me these courts would be much more interesting if there were no superintending officer.

There was no evidence for the defence.

The court was closed to consider its finding. The finding was a unanimous one of 'not guilty'. This might surprise anyone who had not been to the East, but would be expected by those who had some knowledge of the Oriental mind.

"But, Subedar-Sahib," I protested to the senior native officer, "he was caught with the rifle on him, and in company with a well-known gang of rifle thieves."

"True, Sahib, then he must be guilty."

Whereupon a unanimous finding of 'Guilty'.

Then the court considered the question of punishment.

"Two months' imprisonment," suggested the junior member.

"What, only two months' imprisonment for this worst of all offences?" I asked; "do you really mean that, Jemadar-Sahib?"

"No, I meant two years."

Whereupon the court decided unanimously on two years' imprisonment and proceedings were closed.

The prisoner was a friend of mine, a very good fellow. In his own country a highway robber, in the regiment a chronic defaulter in peace-time but in war-time the best man in his company.

On his release from jail he came to see me before returning to his home across the frontier. He bore no malice.

“A Shinwari has to steal a rifle if he can, Sahib,” he said to me. “There’s nothing dishonourable in stealing a Government rifle, is there? They let me off lightly with two years, I had expected fifteen, and the time in prison wasn’t very bad. If I had stolen a rifle on the Afghan side I should have had my right hand cut off. Your Government are too soft. You’ll never stop rifle-stealing with two years’ imprisonment.”

Many other scenes connected with that room came to my mind, but my reflections were interrupted by my own ‘subaltern ghost’.

“Aren’t you going to speak to me?” he asked. “You’re a fine fellow now that you have risen to a command of a regiment, but you were once me, you know. Don’t give yourself airs.”

“Not at all, dear boy, you interest me enormously, and I was looking forward to a chat with you. I saw a good deal of you during Mrs. Gordon’s dinner, and you looked rather quaint lying on your little camp-bed in the corner there by the sideboard.”

“I expect I did look a little out of place,” replied the ghost, “but I knew that only you could see me. Well now, what have we to say to each other? Not much, I dare say. You don’t interest me particularly, and I expect you’ve pretty well forgotten me.”

“No. I haven’t forgotten you. I often shudder when I think of you.”

“Rot, you old prig! Was I so very bad and are you so very good?”

“Well, not quite that, perhaps. But honestly, I do consider myself a better fellow than you. More mature, you see. You were so very immature, weren’t you? In many ways, I think, your behaviour was disgraceful. Aren’t you sometimes rather ashamed of yourself?”

“Not a bit. I had a good deal of *joie de vivre* that you’ve lost.”

“No I haven’t, but it’s a different kind of *joie*, rather less dissipated, if I may say so. Look at yourself in the glass.”

“Look here, old man, you’re a Colonel, of course, but that is nothing to me. You have the d——d cheek to tell me to look in the glass—go and look at yourself. Getting distinctly bald, nasty puffy eyelids with rather goggly eyes, a reddish nose, and a complexion like a worn-out boot. You tell me to look in the glass?”

“Yes, I do. I’m a bit older than I was, and one does wear a bit, but I prefer my general appearance to yours, without going into details. Honestly, I don’t like the look of you.”

“Well, the feeling’s reciprocated. But, apart from faces which don’t matter, I was a better fellow than you. I spent whatever money I could get in riotous living, but I ‘lived’; you’re only ‘existing’. Moreover, you seem to have developed a pompous side to your character which is quite new to me. I suppose it’s part of the game of being a Colonel, but it makes you a frightful bore. Whatever I was I was never that.”

“Of course, you silly young ass, one must steady down a bit as one grows older. You were all right in your time, I’m all right in mine. What an idiot a Colonel would be if he had a subaltern’s mentality.”

“Oh, quite. These changes have to be, I know. I’m not blaming you, but just making clear to you that you’re a poor thing compared with what you were. Well, and how do you get on as a C.O.? Are you efficient? Are you keen? Or are you, like so many of the others, just a pension-server?”

“You can put your mind at rest on those two subjects. I’m a jolly sight keener than you ever were, ten times more efficient, and pension prospects have no charm for me.”

“That’s a good lad. I don’t want you to let me down in your old age because, after all, you know, I’m you, you’re me, and your credit’s mine.”

“I’m glad to know you take such an interest in me, and I suppose you’re right that we are one another, but somehow I don’t feel like that altogether. You are very strange to me, and it’s hard to believe I was ever you.”

“Hypocrite and humbug! You mean you want to draw a veil over the past. Silly old prig. What for? Was there anything about me to make you feel ashamed of owning the relationship? Do you want your present lot of subalterns to think that you were always an old fossil? You’ll waste your time if you try that game. They know as it is a darned sight more about me than they will ever want to know about you.”

“All right, keep calm. I’m not out to hurt your feelings. Let’s agree that things are best as they are. You were a jolly fine fellow, but I thank God I’m not you now. And I’m a decent sort of chap still, though I’m a C.O., but you may thank God you’re not me.”

“I do, most heartily,” replied the ghost. “I was the best of the two. You’ve progressed. You’ve learnt to behave, you’re all sorts of nice things, but you’re pompous and dull, and getting fat, and the sparkle has gone out of your eyes.”

“Don’t blame me for that, you young bounder, it was your infernal late nights that dulled that sparkle. By Jove, do you remember the night that fellow ran amok in the lines and shot Jemadar Asa Singh? That had been a pretty late

night, I remember, and your slumber was criminally heavy for a soldier. Your bearer said it took him five minutes to wake you.”

“Guilty, m’lord. But you’ll admit I got on to it pretty smart once I was up. A model soldier like you would be out of bed like a rocket, and then waste ten minutes thinking what to do.”

“Do you remember . . .” I began again.

“No, I don’t,” interrupted the ghost. “For God’s sake, dry up with your ‘do you remember?’ I don’t remember, and don’t want to. So that’s that.

Some day you’ll probably be a General if you continue to behave and, then you’ll retire and, like most of these dull old blokes, you’ll write your reminiscences. You can shove all your do-you-remembers into that; don’t bore me with them.”

“All right,” I said, assuming my most pompous and colonelish air to have a dig at my subaltern ghost. “I will note what you say and act upon it when the time comes. Good-bye. I’m never likely to be in that room again, and as you are only allowed to wander abroad under special circumstances we shall probably never meet again. I shan’t mind, shall you?”

“Not a bit, old boy,” he replied. “Frankly, you bore me to tears. One last word, when you write that book don’t give me away too much!”

XIII

STICKING TO FACTS

IT is very subduing, and doubtless very improving, to a romantic and imaginative temperament like mine, to be occasionally rebuffed by these lovers of hard and solid facts.

But it is very depressing.

Facts are dull things; surmises, imaginings, and exaggerations are surely the sauce of life.

If in speaking of a small crowd in the street I mention accurately the approximate number of individuals forming the group I leave my listener cold—so cold in fact that he may cease to be a listener. And I want him to listen.

So I speak of “surging masses of people”.

Then he begins to sit up and take notice.

In the newspapers of to-day if an old lady slips on a banana-skin it is described as an ‘amazing’ accident. If we have rather heavy rain it is a ‘cloudburst’, and if we have an occasional warm day it is a ‘heat-wave’.

Well, I am just like that.

So I find it rather hard to cope with these matter-of-fact fellows.

My friend Mackenzie of the Indian Police is one of them.

Not long ago I was wandering with him in the Western Ghats, the range of broken hills that run from north of Bombay down the west coast of India.

These hills, or mountains, are noted for their peculiar conformations, their outlines often resembling castles, forts, and gigantic pinnacles.

One very remarkable pinnacle that we noted was quite the most pointed piece of rock formation I have ever seen, looking in the distance as if it were a monstrous needle.

I said: “Look at that extraordinary point. What a shock it might give some bold mountaineer. Fatigued with an arduous climb, he flings himself down on reaching the top and finds himself impaled. What a tragic ending.”

To this Mackenzie replied:

“Oh no. Those sort of things deceive the eye. It would certainly not be as sharp as that. It is only an illusion due to the distance of the object. I expect that if you could climb it and reached the top you would find an ample space of some four or more square yards. I remember once . . .”

“Oh, shut up, you owl. You don’t imagine I’m such an ass as to believe that the blessed thing is as sharp as all that.”

“Well, then, why did you say so?”

“Oh, it was only a sudden outburst of my imagino-descriptive powers—quite a gift of mine.”

Mackenzie, who was in other ways quite a good fellow, proceeded to deliver a lecture on the subject of strict adherence to facts until I warned him that if he didn’t switch off on to some more lively subject I should proceed to physical violence with all the exaggeration of which my muscles were capable.

I am afraid this odious trait in his otherwise estimable character was responsible for the cooling and final breaking-off of our friendship.

The next fellow of the kind that I remember was an Indian friend of mine, Sundar Singh.

I tried to enliven the tedium of a long and weary march in pouring rain by working-off a well-known ‘catch’ on him.

I expect you know the old wheeze. You say to a fellow: “If you will answer the word ‘paper’ to each of three questions I ask you, I will give you this magnificent gold watch (or nickel silver, or anything else, if you don’t carry gold watches) which I show you here.”

The other man promptly agrees, whereupon you ask him two questions, to which he correctly replies ‘paper’ and gets his hand ready to receive the gold watch on giving his third reply.

For the third question you say: “Now I hold in one of my hands the gold watch which I am hoping to be able to give you, and in the other hand a piece of paper. I ask you finally, once and for all, will you take the gold watch or will you take the paper?”

Obviously, if he gives the correct reply of ‘paper’ he has fulfilled the conditions and should receive the gold watch. But on the other hand he has just refused the gold watch and asked for the paper instead of it. It seems to be the sort of case that would keep lawyers busy for a long time.

If he says “the gold watch” he is obviously out of the running because he

has not fulfilled the conditions. It is quite an amusing little trick if you haven't come across it before.

Sundar Singh did not find it amusing. He hadn't heard it before and he hasn't heard it yet, so he will never know how amusing it is.

Jokes of this sort are rather foreign to the Indian mind. Natives of India are quite capable of applying such principles to the real facts of life, and are quite as anxious as most people to get something for nothing, but this idea of trying to be funny with a series of assumptions does not appeal to them. Moreover Sundar Singh had no real hopes of getting that gold watch. He had known me for years. However, I was a Sahib, and a superior officer, and even without that, Oriental politeness is proverbial and would impel him to humour my whims.

So we started. I asked: "When you buy sweets in the bazaar, what do they wrap them up in?"

To which Sundar Singh countered with another question.

"What kind of sweets?"

"Doesn't matter what kind of sweets," I replied as I explained once more the conditions of the competition. "All you have to say is the word 'paper'."

"I see, Sahib. But they don't always wrap sweets up in paper. In Kashmir they use birch-bark, in the Punjab dried fig leaves. Then some they don't wrap up at all. Things like '*reories*' and '*ludhoo*' they put in your hand or your handkerchief. '*Jelabies*' are sticky—you have to have paper for those certainly."

Sundar Singh was inclined to be discursive, but that was an inherent failing of his kind. It amused him and it didn't worry me. The march was going to be a long one, so I let him ramble on till he reached a point where he said that parched '*gram*' with balls of '*gur*' (unrefined sugar) was the best emergency ration for a soldier. Then I thought it time to bring him back to the point. He didn't really want to get back to the point, his mind was running on sweetmeats and food generally, and he had no idea how funny it was all going to be when I got to my third question.

So I explained at length that it didn't matter in the least what sweets were really wrapped up in, the conditions he had to fulfil in order to claim the gold watch were merely that he should answer 'paper' to whatever question might be put to him. I then asked the question again and received the correct reply 'paper'.

This brought us to the second question. I waved my hand towards the Pir Panjal mountain range faintly visible on the horizon, and asked:

“What are those mountains made of?”

“Oh,” came the ready reply, “they are made of earth, rocks, and stones with trees growing on them.”

This was rather taking the edge off my appetite for fun, and I replied rather crossly:

“Of course they’re made of rocks and all that, but to get the gold watch you must say ‘paper’.”

“But they *are* made of rocks and stones.”

“Undoubtedly, but just say ‘paper’.”

Thus far proceedings went and no further. I gave up the attempt when Sundar Singh made the astounding declaration that nearly knocked me out of the saddle:

“Sahib, I cannot tell a lie.”

This, from a man who knew not the meaning of truth, who could win a championship in a race of liars, was a knockout blow, and I lay down while the referee counted ten.

I think this was a specially hard case. To be a matter-of-fact man is bad enough in the ordinary way, but when a confirmed liar suddenly takes to facts at the very moment when facts are the last thing needed, human nature reaches its limit of endurance.

My next encounter was with a hard-headed man from Yorkshire, by name Whistler, and the circumstances were somewhat similar.

Whistler was a decent sort of fellow of normal intelligence, a faithful reader of *Tit-Bits*, and a lover of statistics.

Again I propounded an entertaining ‘catch’ of an elementary arithmetical nature. The distance from New York to San Francisco is x miles. It takes a train exactly seven days to do the journey. One train starts every day at the same moment from either end. If you start in any train how many trains have you passed on arrival at the terminus?

I have forgotten the answer as I have permanently discarded this form of entertainment. It is, I think, either thirteen or fourteen, and the pleasure you derive from asking the question is in explaining to the thoughtless fellow who

replies without thinking ‘seven’, why there should be nearly double that number.

Whistler himself had just set some proposition of a similar nature, and I proposed to cap it with mine. He had switched off as usual on to his favourite subject of dogs, showing me the points of his prize-winning Labrador Retriever and annoyed with me because I had never heard of a Labrador Retriever, and didn’t believe there was such a breed.

I had great difficulty in working the conversation round again to the matter of arithmetical puzzles, and only succeeded in doing so by pretending a great interest in one he had just given us, and asking him to repeat it.

Then I started in with mine.

“The journey from New York to San Francisco takes seven days. . . .”

“Seven days! Good Lord, man! Seven days! Why, the ordinary expresses do it in half that time.”

“I know, I know. The exact time of the real journey is immaterial. This is an assumption. Assuming that . . .”

“You can’t start a sensible proposition by making a false assumption.”

“But you can. See here, let me get on with the thing and you’ll understand. Assuming then that the journey does take seven days, that is to say, if it did take seven days.”

“You’ve never been over there or you’d never make such a ridiculous assumption. Why, I was over in New York three months ago and did the journey myself. Capital trains, every comfort, and the speed is phenomenal.”

I listened patiently while he gave me a full description of the journey, and then resumed:

“Well. Very interesting I’m sure. I quite see that it doesn’t take seven days, but just put that out of your mind. Imagine that it does just for the purpose of this calculation. Now one train starts from either end every day. . . .”

“One train,” he laughed. “One train a day? Gee, you know a lot of the U.S.A., that land of hustle. It would made a cat laugh to hear your ideas of American railways.”

“But I’m not discussing American railways. This is just a puzzle. Let me get on with it, you’ll see in a minute what I’m driving at.”

“Shall I? I doubt it. First you talk of seven days for a four-day journey, then you talk of one train a day instead of a dozen.”

“Yes, but the actual time and the actual number of trains doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, doesn’t it? A mathematical puzzle in which times and numbers are immaterial? Will that be higher or lower mathematics? Well, let’s get on with it. I’m getting tired.”

“So am I. I have set this puzzle on many occasions to intelligent people, and they have found it quite interesting. But if you don’t know enough mathematics to understand the permissibility of assumptions then it’s really no use my going on. One must assume, among other things, some intelligence on the part of one’s listeners, and that again may be among the false assumptions that you object to.”

“Don’t worry about my intelligence, I had lots when you began talking, and it was bright and shining. Now it is perhaps justifiably a little dulled. However, get on with the thing.”

“Well then, just for a moment focus that previously bright and shining intelligence of yours on to this problem. For the third and last time I ask you to assume the time and the number of trains, and tell me, under those assumptions, how many trains you would pass if you travelled from New York to San Francisco?”

“Nobody knows what answer he is supposed to give to a question that is so full of suppositions. All I can say is, speaking from memory and experience, that you would pass about thirty-five or thirty-six trains.”

“But remember only one train a day starts from either end and it only takes seven days to cross. How on earth could you pass thirty-five or thirty-six trains?”

I thought it futile to prolong the debate when Whistler hurled at me the final retort:

“Because I’ve been there and I know.”

XIV

SHOOTING THE MOON

ANDREW CAMERON was a well-known character in the Indian Civil Service, and at the time of this story was holding the appointment of Assistant Superintendent of the Southern Shan States.

He was a good sportsman, with extremely simple tastes, which included a liking for tobacco and beer on rather a generous scale, and he was a deeply religious man. He did not go out of his way to impress his religious views on all-comers, but he certainly was imbued with the true missionary spirit, and it was a source of great unhappiness to him that the Shan people, amongst whom his lot was cast, should continue to worship false gods in spite of all the efforts made by Christian missionaries of various denominations.

It shocked him to think that over a million Shans had to be placed in the census returns under the heading of 'demonolaters' or 'spirit-worshippers'. The Shans are nominally 'Buddhist' by religion, but, like the Chinese, their Buddhism is simply a veneer over their real religion which consists of a worship of the forces of nature and the propitiation of evil spirits.

In his capacity as a Government official he was precluded from undertaking any open form of missionary work, but he lost no opportunity when chance occurred of demonstrating to the people the foolishness of their belief in demons. He often had occasion for such demonstrations, but they seemed to have no effect at all on the heathen population.

I first met him in our mess at Moulmein, where he was dining as the guest of 'Pongo' Meadows, a cheerful and capable subaltern. After dinner, he was holding forth on the delights of the Shan country and the charm of the Shan people, and ended up by inviting us both to come up and see the place next season.

We accepted the invitation with alacrity, and six months later we started off up the Salween river on our way to the Shan states, which lie on a plateau about 3000 feet above the sea, between that great river and the Irrawaddy. Everyone knows the Irrawaddy, but lots of people know nothing about the Salween, which runs parallel with it about 200 miles to the east, though the Salween is probably the bigger river of the two.

The reason for this is that the Irrawaddy is navigable for large flat-

bottomed steamers for 1000 miles from its mouth, whereas the Salween, flowing through the rocky gorges, is recorded as 'unnavigable'. That term, however, applies only to large steamers, as there are long stretches which can be negotiated at certain times of the year by steam-launches.

It was chiefly by this means of progress that we reached our destination about 300 miles from the river mouth, varying the monotony by occasional stretches on land when impassable rapids were encountered.

The later stages of our journey were accomplished in the Forest Officer's launch, and Cameron came down in the Government launch to meet us. The latter being too small to accommodate us all without making rather a tight squeeze, it was agreed that we should remain in our launch and follow him.

"I must get on ahead," he said, "as I have various odd jobs to do, and my launch is a good deal faster than your old tub. I shall have to pull up now and then, so you'll easily catch me up. We ought to get into camp about six o'clock."

He then left us, and we proceeded leisurely upstream in his wake and soon lost sight of him.

We both enjoyed the journey immensely. The river was in flood and our boat was running level with the tops of big trees which were literally festooned with orchids. The difficulty of navigation on the Salween is due to the fact that the river runs for practically all its length through deep and narrow gorges, where the rise and fall between highest and lowest watermark is as much as 80 feet.

It is interesting when the water is at its lowest to see large logs caught up in the boughs of trees 50 feet or more above one's head.

There were anxious moments when we got entangled in the upper branches of some gigantic tree and had some difficulty in extricating ourselves. A sudden fall of 10 feet with no later rise, which was quite a possible contingency, might have resulted in our launch being left in this way with us in it.

Steering was a difficult task, and every now and then we brushed against the branches of half-submerged trees, when masses of mauve-coloured orchids fell in profusion on to the deck of our little launch.

In the upper reaches of the river launches are not often to be seen, and as the Shans are nice cheerful people they don't like to miss the chance of greeting passers-by, so when we approached a clearing in the forest which indicated the proximity of a village the 'Serang', or captain of the launch,

sounded several shrill blasts on the whistle. On this the ladies of the neighbourhood came running down to the water's edge to wave to us and give us the Shan equivalent of a 'hurrah'.

All of them smoked clay pipes, and nearly all carried babies astride their hips, and they had to be very clever to run, and smoke, and carry a baby, and cheer, and wave all at the same time. How they managed it I don't quite know, but the difficulty of smoking and cheering was got over by letting the baby have a pull at the pipe for a moment, and it was amusing to see the infant's rage when the pipe was taken away from him again.

Everything went well till a little after midday, when to our consternation we reached a point where a large tributary flows into the main stream. Cameron was well ahead by this time, and we had not the least idea which of the two streams we ought to go up—in breadth they were about equal, and volume is impossible to judge when the depth is unknown.

We trusted entirely to the Serang in charge of the launch, surely he ought to know which was the main river. But he didn't. His mind didn't run to such things as 'main rivers' and 'tributaries', and he used local names which conveyed nothing to us. Apparently the Forest Officer in the course of his duties went up one branch as often as the other.

He asked us what he was to do, and we could only reply by repeating the question to him. It really was a serious dilemma.

There was nothing for it but to tie up at the point where the two streams met and wait till Cameron came back to find us, and that might not be till tomorrow, and we had only a light tiffin with us, sandwiches and some cold chicken—a dreadful prospect.

We remained tied up in this way till about 1.30, when Pongo, who was carefully watching a patch of smooth water at the junction of the streams, leaped up in a state of great excitement.

"Look," he cried, pointing to the patch of water. "We're saved, my boy. Saved."

"What's it all about?" I asked. "I see nothing."

"No, you don't, because there's nothing to see now. But I saw, and I tell you we're saved. Not for nothing was I brought up on Fenimore-Cooper's tales of scouting and stalking. I look for signs, and signs are given. Wait a bit and we'll get corroboration. Watch that smooth patch, don't take your eyes off it for a moment."

I watched carefully but saw nothing.

“There’s another, hurrah. Now we’re all right,” said Pongo.

“Another what?” I asked.

“Why, beer cork, idiot! I reckoned it was just after Andrew’s lunch-time, and I calculated that if he was up that stream he would unthinkingly send these little messengers of hope down to us. And I was right. I feel very proud of myself.”

“Yes, you are a genius in your very small way and a credit to your training,” I replied, “but perhaps it’s more fluke than cleverness. You happened to have guessed the right stream. Supposing you had watched the other, as you couldn’t watch both, then there would have been no beer corks to guide us.”

“Yes there would, you ass. Call yourself a soldier, and like most soldiers ignore the enormous value of ‘negative’ information. If no corks had come down this river, then Cameron would have been up the other one. That ought to be plain enough even to your dull intellect.”

I agreed that he was quite a brilliant young fellow, and we proceeded on our journey without further argument or incident. We caught up Cameron in the late afternoon, and the two boats reached camp at about six in the evening.

The Assistant Superintendent was on tour, and had pitched camp under a grove of trees not far from a large village.

The Ngwegunhum, or local chieftain, came to make his report soon after our arrival. He had nothing of particular interest to say, except that there would be an eclipse of the moon on the following night, and the day would have to be spent in preparing for this dire event.

“Another of the absurd superstitions these people cling to,” said Cameron to us. “It makes me mad to think that people, in other ways so intelligent, should believe all this rot about eclipses.”

“Most savages do,” I suggested.

“Savages, man! Are you suggesting that my Shans are savages?” He got quite heated about it. “Why, that’s just the point. Because savages believe that sort of humbug, and because these people are quite as far removed from savages as we are, that is just why it is so exasperating.

Let’s see what the Ngwegunhum has to say about it. Why do you make such a fuss about this eclipse?”

“Well, sir,” replied the chieftain, “I will explain. An eclipse is caused by an attempt being made by an evil spirit in the form of a dragon endeavouring to swallow the moon. If he succeeded, the world would come to an end. Therefore, at the time of the moon’s darkening we gather together under the guidance of our priests and carry out various ceremonies which make it impossible for the dragon to achieve his object, and the moon is saved.”

“But if you neglected these precautions?”

“Then undoubtedly the dragon would be successful.”

“Just try for once. Omit the ceremonies and I’ll guarantee nothing will happen.”

“No, sir. We dare not attempt that. If you were right and nothing happened it would be all right. But if you were wrong, what then? And we know that you are wrong, so we prefer, with your Honour’s permission, to carry out our ceremonies in the usual way.”

“Very good,” said Cameron, notifying that the interview was ended and the old man might depart. “Of course I would never interfere in any of your religious observances. Carry on as usual and save us all from disaster.”

The next day was occupied by the people in preparing for the great event. It was an anxious time for them, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, but the Shans are a peculiarly light-hearted people, and instead of going about with gloom and fear depicted on their countenances they were all quite smiling and happy—possibly due to the firmness of their faith. They were going to take the usual precautions, and so there could be no risk of a dragon being eventually successful.

An hour after dinner, as we sat sipping our whiskies-and-sodas, weird sounds floated on the breeze from the direction of the village.

“We’ll go down now,” suggested Cameron, “and see what these silly idiots are doing to frighten the dragon away.”

“I don’t quite see,” said Pongo, “how they can believe that this dragon is such a terrible monster and at the same time think that he can be intimidated by their banging of gongs and cymbals and the making of these silly noises.”

“No,” replied Cameron, “you don’t see, and you never will see. You’ve just got to take them as they are and leave it at that. To understand their train of thought you’d have to have their mentality.”

We found our way down to the scene of the pandemonium and were joined by the Ngwegunhum, who explained as best he could what was taking place.

The eclipse was just beginning, and the terrified people redoubled their clamour. As I looked at them I couldn't help wondering if they were really in the least terrified or if they were thoroughly enjoying themselves in 'making believe'.

"If it's noise that frightens the dragon away," said Cameron to the Chief, "why not get a gun and have a shot at the dragon?"

The Ngwegunhum turned green with apprehension as he replied: "No, sir. That would be a terrible thing to do. Aiming at the dragon, we should hit the moon. The moon would fall down out of the sky, and the world would come to an end that way."

"Incredible superstition," said Cameron to us as the Chief moved away, "but at last I've got the chance I want. I won't kill the dragon, but I will kill this stupid sorcery."

His English-speaking Mahomedan bearer, Moghal Baz, had come down with us to see the show, and Cameron turned to him.

"You go fetch master's gun and two cartridge. Not let anyone see."

"Very good, sir," replied Moghal Baz as he hurried off to carry out his orders.

In ten minutes' time he returned, handing the gun wrapped up in a cloth to Cameron, who took it, removed the wrappings, and inserted a couple of cartridges.

"Now we'll see," he said, "what'll happen to the dragon and the moon."

Concealing the gun behind his back and directing us to cover him so as to prevent its being seen, he called to the Ngwegunhum, and we all moved together into the middle of the assembly.

Calling for a moment's silence, Cameron shouted out: "You think if one shoots with a gun at the dragon you will hit the moon and the moon will fall down." Then he brought the gun from behind his back and continued: "Now watch me. I'm going to shoot at the moon and, you will see, nothing will happen."

At these words a groan of horror and despair arose from the multitude, and the Chieftain moved towards Cameron in an almost threatening attitude. It was a ticklish moment, and it seemed to me that we might be in for a serious affair. Cameron, however, without a moment's hesitation pointed the gun at the moon and fired off both barrels.

The crowd, horrified at this sacrilegious act, threw themselves on their faces with their hands clasping the back of their necks to save them, if possible, from being struck by fragments of the falling moon.

For a minute or two they remained crouching in this attitude, the silence being only broken by an occasional moan or groan. Then first one, then another, ventured to peep nervously upwards to the sky, where the moon was seen shining as cheerfully as if nothing had happened.

Then the stentorian voice of the Assistant Superintendent was heard.

“Do you see that I have fired at the moon and that it is still there? Will you ever again believe nonsense of that sort? And as for this rubbish of a dragon swallowing the moon, the black mark on the moon is only the shadow of the earth you are standing on. Go home and think this over, and don’t believe in dragons any more.”

Then he turned round to us with a smile of triumph. “Let’s get back to camp now,” he said. “It’s been an amusing evening, and I’ve scotched one of their silly superstitions. I’ll get them to see sense some day.”

We wandered back to camp in the moonlight and soon afterwards turned in.

During the night the village priests and leaders held a solemn pow-wow. Of course, their belief in the dragon theory was quite unshaken, and they were almost a little disappointed that nothing had happened to the moon. The head priest, however, was able to offer satisfactory explanation on that point, and ended up by saying:

“You know how clever these white men are. In many ways they know more than we do. But not in the matter of eclipses. Did you ever hear of such stuff as he told us about the earth’s shadow falling on the moon? He can’t believe in a simple and obvious thing like a dragon, and he expects us to believe that the earth has a shadow. Shadows, we know, can only come in the bright light, and he seems to have invented a new sort of shadow that comes in the dark.”

The eloquence of the priest carried all before him, and the meeting broke up entirely convinced of the density of Cameron’s ignorance.

The next morning at breakfast Cameron was still beaming over his triumph, and enjoying going over with us the events of the previous evening. Moghal Baz entered with some correspondence which he handed to his master.

“Well, Moghal Baz,” said Cameron. “Last night you saw stupid tamāsha

about dragon swallows up moon. Have been to village this morning?”

“Yes, Sahib,” replied the bearer.

“What people say there; no more believe in dragon and moon?”

“No, Sahib, people say still believe same like before.”

“What! They no see I shoot moon and moon no fall?”

“Please, Sahib, they say master dam bad shot.”

XV

WHEN THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF WENT MAD

PEOPLE of about my age will remember the excitement caused some thirty years ago when the Commander-in-Chief in India suddenly went mad, and they will recall his tragic end. After being ‘certified’ as insane, he managed to break away from his attendants, and crossed the frontier into Swat wearing a green turban, under the impression that he was the Akhund of Swat. The Swatis accorded him the welcome they invariably bestow upon strangers, by shooting him dead.

Poor old fellow. Not such a bad end after all. Much better to be snuffed out like that than to eke out one’s later years as a ‘has been’.

Commander-in-Chief in India is the highest post in the British Empire—apart from salary and official precedence—and it must be a dreadful shock to come off the perch, and take one’s place on retirement as a humble citizen of the United Kingdom.

The events that led up to the tragedy have not hitherto been divulged to the public, and I propose now to throw some light on these occurrences, both because I think they will interest people in general and because I am sure they will serve as a warning to any officer now holding, or to officers who may later hold, that high appointment.

Where old General Sir Cuthbert Manderville went wrong was in stepping outside ‘the groove’. That is the one thing in the highest circles, both civil and military, that is *not done*.

The groove is a fairly wide one and admits of a certain amount of originality, but it remains a groove, and you’ve got to stick to it.

I was at the time holding the appointment of Assistant Military Secretary, for which I had been selected owing to my admittedly remarkable talents, and in this capacity I was naturally brought into close touch with events.

General Sir Cuthbert Manderville had been holding the appointment of C.-in-C. for two years before he began to show any signs of mental derangement, and during those two years he had behaved on the whole to the satisfaction of his Staff. He was a fine soldier, and an ardent sportsman, having in his earlier

days accounted for a record number of tigers. He enjoyed the heat of the Indian hot weather, and was not in the least afraid of the sun. He carried out his duties wearing the usual small forage cap at a time of year when the ordinary man was wearing the biggest sun-helmet he could find and not finding it big enough. One hour under an Indian sun in summer in a small cap would send most men to the cemetery, but it seemed to have no effect on old Manderville, and he was rather proud of it and liked to show off when occasion offered.

It was undoubtedly this silly ignoring of ordinary precautions that led to his undoing. The sun's rays had no effect on his general health, but they affected his brain.

The breakdown was so gradual that no one seemed to notice it at first. His ordinary behaviour remained quite normal up to the last, but the gradual increase in his 'original' methods of dealing with military affairs soon caused the senior officers of his Staff to wonder whether the old man was not going a bit dotty.

The first occasion when I had my suspicions aroused was when I was present during a conversation between him and General Boffin, the Adjutant-General, on the subject of the annual training of troops.

"It's all very well, Boffin," he said. "You're hidebound, tied up with the red-tape of tradition, and can't do things because they haven't been done before. I'm just the reverse, always willing to give a new idea a trial."

"I'm not so conservative as all that, sir," replied the Adjutant-General. "I'm quite prepared to give any reasonable novelty a run for its money, but I do rather draw the line at proposals that are neither more nor less than revolutionary."

"Oh, you think I'm a revolutionary do you? Well, perhaps I am. Anyway, I think our present training ladder is upside down and I want to put it right end up. What happens under the present system? A young soldier is taught to do something in a particular way by his section-commander, then the company-commander insists on another way of doing it, the battalion-commander corrects the company-commander and the young soldier is 'as-you-were', then the brigade-commander alters the method back again and Thomas Atkins is 'as-you-were-before-you-was', then comes the divisional-commander and reverses the process, and finally the army-commander comes back to the original idea, by which time Thomas Atkins doesn't know where he is, and no longer cares."

"Yes, sir, things may happen like that; there are faults in every system, but it seems to me impossible to put the matter right by reversing the whole

process and beginning training at the top.”

“Not a bit. We’ll just give my idea a trial and see how it works. Our training shall be progressive, just as it is now, but the progress shall be in a rational way. We’ll begin with Army manœuvres, then everyone will start by knowing just what the army-commander wants, instead of finding that out at the last moment, then the divisions will rub the same ideas into the brigades and the brigades into the battalions, then comes company-training, and throughout all this period Thomas Atkins has learnt one way and one way only of doing things. See?”

“Yes, sir, I see exactly what you mean, but, honestly, I don’t think your scheme would work, and as our training has to be carried out in accordance with the various manuals issued from the War Office, we have not the power to reverse the procedure laid down in the manuals.”

“Power be d——d,” grunted the C.-in-C. “We’ll do it first and apologise afterwards.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the A.-G. as he saluted and left the room.

A few days after this the Principal Medical Officer, General Weltram, was talking with the A.-G. in his office, and I heard the latter say:

“I don’t like the way the C.-in-C. is going on. I’m really afraid he’s going off his head. I wish you’d cure him of that silly trick of always wearing a small cap in the sun. It’s playing the mischief with him.”

“I’ll suggest it to him, certainly, but he’ll only laugh at me. I’ve mentioned it before and he says I’m ‘bound by tradition and red-tape’. I told him that the danger of the Indian sun was neither tradition nor red-tape, and he said that perhaps it wasn’t, but that I was both. I object to being snubbed like that.”

“But my dear Weltram, the matter is really getting serious. I shall soon have to ask you to ‘certify’ him as a lunatic.”

“Good Lord, man, is it as bad as all that? I hope not. If it came to the point I think it would be rather a tough job to undertake. What’s his particular line of madness?”

“Oh, he’s as mad as a hatter in a thousand small ways, and he grows worse from day to day. What do you think is the latest idea? To train the Army backwards. He wants to fly in the face of all the training manuals, and work training from the top downwards. Seems to me rather like building a house commencing with the roof.”

General Boffin explained in detail what the C.-in-C.’s idea was, and the

P.M.O. remarked:

“I can’t accept that as evidence of insanity, it seems to me rather the reverse. According to your own showing a soldier is now taught and untaught certain details of his work, whereas Manderville’s scheme would result in a fixed method being taught from start to finish. I’d rather like to see it tried.”

A few days after this I had to take some files to the Chief for his orders, and I had to wait with my papers as I found him engaged with the Adjutant-General.

After discussing various routine matters, the Chief said;

“By the way, Boffin. I want you to start a new branch in your office, or perhaps it would be more suitable for the Quarter master-General. A sort of ‘suggestion bureau’, but I’d leave it to you to invent a better name than that.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the A.-G. with a rather dazed look. “What exactly would the office be for? And what sanction would we get from the Pay people?”

“Oh the Pay question wouldn’t matter. We could run it without cost. Just one level-headed young officer sitting at a deal table surrounded with large wastepaper-baskets and one soldier-clerk to keep the correspondence register. The officer would receive no staff pay, you could choose some fellow who would be glad to do the job in the hopes of getting his foot later on the staff ladder.

As to the functions of the office, it would be to receive suggestions from any individual in the Army, from private soldier to Major-General.”

“But, sir, there is no need to create a new office for that. Under the present system any individual can put forward any suggestion through the usual channel.”

“Quite so. You’ve exactly hit it, Boffin. What a bureaucrat you are. You make me laugh with your ‘usual channel’. What is the ‘usual channel’? Just a sort of kitchen-sink down which all the bright ideas of our bright young people find their way into the main drain.

What happens when a private soldier has a ‘bright idea’—and I am certain many of them have? He asks to see his section-commander, who laughs at him or tells him to go to the devil. By persisting he will eventually be brought before his company-commander, who will think he’s mad, but will in the end bring him before the C.O., who if he doesn’t turn him down, as nine C.O.’s out of ten would, will pass on his suggestion to the brigade-major, and it will eventually reach the brigadier, who may, or may not, send it to the Division

and so on. If the bright idea fights its way through all this thicket of routine it may eventually be laid before me—if my tyrannical staff allow me to see it at all—some six months after the date of its birth.

Let us say that the original idea was expressed in two lines of writing—such as, ‘the studs on the front braces of the M. equipment should be twice the size of the present ones, which slip and come undone’.

Well by the time that sentence comes before me it is buried in a file of thirty pages of foolscap, with dozens of signatures and office stamps, and in its course it has involved some thirty or forty entries in various registers.

Now by my system, Private Jones has a bright idea on Monday morning. He writes it down and posts it and it reaches my ‘suggestion bureau’ on Tuesday, and if it’s any use I see it on Wednesday, and I either turn it down, or set the machinery in motion that may result in its adoption. Meantime the ‘file’ instead of being forty pages of foolscap is just the original slip of paper with three lines of writing, the initials of the suggestion-bureau officer and two or three words written by myself.”

“It sounds quite a good scheme, sir, but it is not feasible. To start on, you’d have all the wits and half-wits in the Army sending in suggestions by way of being funny, and cutting out these, you’d still find yourself snowed under with correspondence.”

“Oh no, Boffin. If anybody were snowed under it would be the staff-officer concerned, and he can shovel the snow into the large wastepaper-baskets I have told you to provide him with.

If he knew his job, I don’t think he’d have more than one paper a day to show me, and that wouldn’t worry me. In fact it would probably interest me more than the stuff you put before me.

You see, the point is this. The details of equipment are of vast importance to the men who wear the equipment, and no one but the wearer knows if anything is wrong. You and I may invent equipment but we don’t wear it. The private soldier who wears it may spot some weak point which can easily be put right. But under the present system he keeps his mouth shut.”

“Yes, sir. I agree that it would be better if the private soldier could give his opinion more freely, but I’m afraid it can’t be done. Your ‘suggestion bureau’ would not work.”

“And why not? Because old die-hards like yourself would smother it with your ‘never-been-done-before’ sort of attitude?”

“No, sir. We’d do our best to run any scheme you inaugurated, but the chief drawback to your idea is that it would be killed by ridicule. More than half the letters received would be attempts of individuals to be funny.”

“Yes, I’m quite certain of that. We’d have to think of some dodge of punishing these humorists. Most of the funny fellows would be young officers, and for these I would suggest that one of the rules under which you promulgate the scheme would deal with the punishment of such offenders. Say a week’s privilege leave cut for every suggestion that is manifestly impracticable, but still really funny, and a month’s leave docked for every funny suggestion that isn’t funny. One of the duties of the new staff-officer would be to show me all the really funny ones.

I don’t think the men would try that line so much as the officers, and it would, I admit, be very difficult to evolve a suitable punishment for comedians among the rank-and-file. But you just think it out, Boffin. I’m sure that the problem is not beyond your capacity.”

“Then do you really wish me to carry on with this business, sir?”

“Certainly, Boffin. I never meant anything more seriously in my life. Just get some orders drafted and let me have them to touch them up and we’ll have the whole thing going in a week’s time.”

General Boffin left the room and proceeded at once to the P.M.O.’s office. It was not at all difficult for me to invent some excuse that would take me there also. I knocked and entered and apologised for disturbing the P.M.O. when he was busy.

“Not a bit, my boy,” he replied. “Just sit down and wait a minute.”

This was just what I wanted, and I was able to hear the whole conversation between these two high officials.

“You must do something about it, Weltram,” said the A.-G. “You’ll have to put the old man in a straight-jacket next, I honestly believe he’s as mad as a hatter, and might become violent at any moment. What the deuce are we to do?”

“As I said before,” replied the P.M.O., “it’s a pretty tough job to certify the C.-in-C. as insane. That is distinctly one of the things that has ‘never-been-done-before’. What’s he been up to now?”

“He’s started inventing new branches of the headquarter offices, and wants me to set up a sort of office to receive suggestions direct from all ranks of the Army.”

“Well, that’s not absolutely a sign of insanity. Tell us about it.”

On this the A.-G. gave a full explanation of the C.-in-C.’s scheme, to which the P.M.O. replied: “I’m sorry, Boffin. I can’t see anything mad about this. On the contrary, it looks as if it were rather a sane idea.”

Baffled and miserable, General Boffin left the room, and I asked the P.M.O. one or two questions to justify my intrusion into his office.

A month later the suggestion bureau was in full swing with Captain Swiller seated at his little deal table carrying out his daily task of filling to the brim the enormous wastepaper-baskets by which he was surrounded.

Things turned out pretty well as the Chief had foretold. On an average, out of each day’s post, ninety-eight per cent contained drivel, one per cent ideas worthy of consideration, and one per cent efforts at being funny. The latter category almost ceased to exist at the end of three months, by which time four subalterns and two captains had had their leave docked.

Among the replies on which immediate action could be taken with beneficial results were several from private soldiers in each branch of the Army suggesting useful alterations in gear and equipment. This class did not as a whole abuse the privilege by trying to be funny, but a good many of them were funny without trying.

The tendency of private soldiers to deal with matters of discipline had to be sternly checked, but Captain Swiller wisely put most letters of this nature into the wastepaper-basket without showing them to anyone.

“I think the Sergeant-Major should be done away with,” wrote one man, “he’s only a big red-faced, foulmouthed bully, and he don’t seem to be much use to the regiment except to storm and swear at us poor privates.”

Another suggested that the canteen should be open all day long, and free beer served instead of tea to all who preferred it.

The officers provided some quite useful suggestions. One dealt with an improvement in the range-finder, another suggested a valuable simplification in the musketry return, another suggested the abolition of ‘swank’ spurs in mess uniform.

Captain Swiller was not quite certain whether the officer who suggested a patent saddle-attachment to prevent infantry mounted officers from falling off their horses on the *feu-de-joie* parade, was trying to be funny or not.

An officer in a cavalry regiment wrote: “The prevalence of flies in barracks has lately been referred to. It has been noted that flies are in the habit of

settling on articles of food which they pollute in eating. The obvious thing is to prevent them from eating articles of soldiers' diet. I enclose diagrams of a patent collar with sharp spikes protruding which could be fastened round the necks of flies rendering it impossible for them to reach the food with their mouths."

Swiller showed this to the Chief and suggested docking the offender a week's privilege leave.

"Make it a month," said the C.-in-C. "I've heard it before."

Captain Swiller was quite a success at his job, and in a short time the office was running quite well and had justified its existence.

In the meantime General Sir Cuthbert Manderville continued to ride about at midday in a small cap in the blazing rays of an August sun, and the wildness of his schemes grew more intense from day to day.

The situation was really becoming most trying for the principal staff-officers. What would the Chief do next?

How could they persuade the medical authorities to take action?

"This Pay business seems to me a rotten show," said the C.-in-C. one day to General Boffin with whom he was having his usual morning conference. "Look at the budget and see what an enormous amount these Pay fellows cost. If I want to pay out a million rupees to the Army I have to pay another million to these fellows to pay it. You could never run your private life like that. If I owe ten pounds in a shop, I pay a penny for the stamp on a cheque, and a penny for the postage and the amount is paid.

I don't get hold of a man and say here is ten pounds, I want you to take it to X to pay him what I owe him and here is ten pounds for you for carrying the money across."

"Oh, we've all got our knives into the Pay people, sir. But they seem to be a necessary evil, we couldn't do without them."

"I wonder. I know nothing about accounts, but it seems to me we could get rid of them, but I admit I'm not clever enough to evolve a scheme for doing without them. That's why I put it up to you, Boffin. You're a brainy sort of chap and if I supply the idea you might fill in the details, don't you think?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, but I most distinctly don't think."

"Why not, Boffin? Take a pull at yourself and try. You're cleverer than you realise. Think it over and let's have some scheme in a week's time, what?"

As a general line to go on I give you this suggestion. Take any unit for example—say a battalion of Native Infantry. Look through their pay rolls for the past ten years and strike an average. You'll find they cost say a quarter of a million rupees a year. Then put that amount to credit of the C.O. in quarterly sums and ask no further questions. Any complaints of injustice in the matter of pay would soon make themselves heard and would result in the immediate removal of the C.O. and so on—of course, you'd have to make a rather elaborate set of rules to meet the various cases that would arise; but that would be child's play to you."

"Don't you think the scheme would lead to a C.O. keeping his battalion permanently under strength so as to collar the pay of the missing men?"

"Not a bit. You'd have to watch that from his weekly 'Duty States', and you could make the monthly muster parade a stricter affair."

"I'm afraid, sir, that so far there is nothing new in your scheme. It has all been tried long ago and proved a hopeless failure. As for muster parade, we all remember the case of the C.O. who had to produce a thousand men, he only kept one hundred, and marched them ten times round and round the mustering officer till the latter had duly counted his thousand.

Then again, the case of a dishonest C.O. is not beyond the bounds of possibility. Referring to examples from the good old days before the Mutiny, we know that there was more than one case where the sepoy of a native regiment heated a brass cannon and seated their C.O. astride of it till he had promised to disburse their arrears of pay. I am certain that it is quite hopeless to try the experiment."

"Very well, Boffin, but just think it over. I can't help feeling there's something in it. My ideas are altogether too crude, but I am sure something can be done to reduce our enormous pay establishment by some sort of decentralization—paying out large sums of money in blocks to responsible individuals."

The A.-G. rose to take his leave and the Chief asked: "Where are you off to?"

"I am just going to the P.M.O.'s office," replied General Boffin. "I have a very urgent matter to talk over with him."

"May I come with you, sir," I asked, determined not to miss the interview that I knew would be interesting. "I have some papers for the P.M.O. and also one or two matters I have to ask you about."

"Very good. Come along. Good morning, sir."

We left the Chief seated at his table with wrinkled brow and an expression of annoyance on his face due to resentment at the pig-headed obstinacy of the Adjutant-General.

We found the P.M.O. in his office and General Boffin literally rushed at him.

“Now then, Weltram,” he said, “are you man enough to do your duty or not? The Chief was out all day yesterday in that ridiculous small hat of his and the result is that to-day he puts up to me the most preposterous scheme of upsetting the present pay system. I warn you that if you don’t take action at once and certify him as a mental defective or whatever your people call it—there will be the deuce to pay. Come on, man, pluck up your courage and get a move on.”

“What’s he been doing now?” calmly inquired the P.M.O.

“Why, d——n it, man, he’s just as mad as a hatter, and you must know it well enough by this time, but you’re a coward—afraid to do your duty.”

“Rot. I’ll do my duty right enough, and I don’t need to be told what my duty is. You say the Chief is insane. I say that so far as my observation goes, he isn’t. He won’t stop wearing that small hat, and the effect of the sun is beginning to tell on him. I agree that he is getting most peculiar in many ways, but insane? No, decidedly not! What is there insane about this new scheme of his?”

On this General Boffin gave a very detailed description of his recent interview with the C.-in-C. and ended up by saying: “If a man who talks like that isn’t mad, then all the rest of us must be. Come now, Weltram, be a man and admit that I’m right. Things are getting really frightfully serious and I warn you that when real trouble does occur I shall not hesitate to denounce you for failing to take action after my repeated warnings.”

“Nonsense, Boffin, you’re over-excited,” said the P.M.O. “I think this pay idea of his is a jolly good one though I agree with you it would be difficult to give effect to. It seems to me that the old man is frightfully sane.”

“Well, that beats me. If his wild schemes seem sane to you, you must be d——d well as mad as he is.”

He left the room spluttering with rage and leaving the P.M.O. quite calm.

A week after this the Chief had a new idea, and he gave the A.-G. the benefit of his views on a subject called ‘promotion and demotion’, by which the better officers went up and up, and the worse ones went down and down.

“I’d like really,” he said, “to institute a system of payment by results. As it is the good workman and the bad workman draw the same pay and get the same promotion. Eight years of ten hours good work a day make Jones a Captain, and eight years slack make Smith a Captain on the same day. It’s rotten, but one can’t escape from it.”

“No; all armies suffer from that,” replied General Boffin; “the only way to avoid it would be to place all matters of pay and promotion in the hands of the C.O., from whose decision there would be no appeal. But that, of course, is utterly impossible and would only lead to favouritism and worse abuses.”

“So many wrongs there are, that cannot be put right, and so many absurdities,” continued the Chief. “You and I are in many ways ‘absurdities’. Here we are full of honours, covered with medals, and plenty of pay. And what use is it all to us? In a year or two we’ll both be retired and our beautiful rows of medals and orders will find a resting-place in the family museum, in the bottom shelf of the china cupboard in the drawing-room, alongside of little Chinese gods, silver trinket boxes, and odd bits of jade and other things that our wives have collected during our wanderings. And a year or two later we’ll be dead, and meantime what fun do we get out of it all? Pretty uniforms, and glistening orders and medals attract the female gaze, but we who carry them around are little more than the figures in Madame Tussaud’s and the girls have long ceased to have a glance for us.”

“Oh, come, sir,” said General Boffin, puffing out his chest, “we’re not so bad as all that.”

“Yes, I think we are, but I’m not grouching about it. I was only thinking what a pity it is that these things can only come to us late in life, when they are really nothing to us. All men of our length of service occupy similar high positions and wear the same sort of decorations.

Think of what it would mean to a young subaltern of twenty-five years of age to find himself a K.C.B. with two rows of medals. He’d get full value out of them, wouldn’t he?”

The Adjutant-General, fearing that the Chief was about to evolve some absurd scheme for handing out medals and orders to young officers, made some excuse for changing the subject, and shortly afterwards left the room.

I followed him without a moment’s hesitation as I felt sure he would be on his way to the P.M.O.’s office, and I was not mistaken.

I entered the room with him and heard his cry of anguish as he literally wailed to the P.M.O.: “Weltram, you’ve got to do it, and do it now, or we’re

all in the soup. I can't stand it any longer. If I chuck up the A.-G.-ship my career is ruined, but I cannot continue to serve under a lunatic. What's he been talking to me about this morning, d'you think? Why, giving medals and K.C.B.'s to subalterns because they'd get so much more fun out of them than we do. Now, I ask you, is that or is that not sufficient for you to act on?"

"What do you mean?" asked the P.M.O.

"What do I mean? Why, what I've been telling you over and over again during the past six months. The Chief is raving mad, and it's your duty to say so. Come, now, strike while the iron's hot. I'll come with you and we'll go straight to his room and confront him."

"Wait a bit. Let's hear more about this new mania of his."

The Adjutant-General recounted the conversation he had just been having with the C.-in-C. and when he had finished the P.M.O. said:

"Sorry, Boffin, I really can't see that this man is mad. This later topic he has been discussing with you does sound a little like a bee in the bonnet, but he was only joking."

"Joking, was he? I tell you he was as serious as a judge, and to-morrow he'll be asking me to draw up some proposal that will give effect to his idea. As I said before, if you can't see the man is mad, you must be mad yourself. Do you still refuse to take action?"

"Absolutely," replied the P.M.O. "I think all his ideas are as sane as can be—a little peculiar perhaps, but a great deal of sanity in them. I do not for one moment think that he is out of his mind."

General Boffin left the room literally spluttering with rage.

About ten days after this when I was showing some files to the Commander-in-Chief, the Adjutant-General arrived and asked for orders on several matters.

The Chief made very sound and sensible remarks, and there was no sign of his suspected insanity until the subject of hospitals came up. On this the old man went off at a tangent. "What is wrong with all our hospitals, both in the Army and in civil life, is that they are run by doctors," he said.

"Is that a drawback?" asked the A.-G. "What are doctors for if not to run hospitals?"

"I see that, like most people, you've got the wrong idea. The proper function for doctors and nurses is to tend and cure the sick. The running of a

hospital is quite a separate function, don't you see?"

"No, sir. I confess I don't."

"Well, now, I'll explain the idea. It seems to me that the doctors must be hampered and distracted by having to bear the burden of the interior economy of a hospital, as well as their normal medical duties. They ought to be relieved of this. If you put an experienced non-medical man in charge of the interior economy, the medical staff would be relieved of this burden, and, what is more important still, the patient would feel that his point of view was being considered."

"Really, sir. I don't quite follow what you mean. Are you charging the entire medical staff with lack of consideration for their patients?"

"Not at all, Boffin. The doctors are splendid fellows, and so are the nurses; but to them the patients are just so many 'cases' considered from the purely medical point of view—it must be so. But to himself the patient is not only a 'case' but a frightfully interesting individual, and in that respect he gets no consideration at all."

"I see what you mean more or less. You think the patients need a little sympathy which they don't get. Someone to go round every now and then and give them a pat on the head and say a kindly word. It would be rather a rum sort of job—official sympathizer to the Station Hospital!"

"Not a bit, Boffin. You're trying to be funny, and I'm quite serious. I don't propose to supply official sympathy of that sort, but I just want to put in a man with no medical knowledge whatever, who will have certain powers to deal with matters not purely medical. I know what I'm talking about. When I was commanding a Division I rather went into these things and had up a lot of private soldiers who had been in hospital, to give me their views on the matter. I could give you a long list of simple little things that worry patients unnecessarily, but I need only mention now the custom of taking temperatures in the early morning, waking up a poor fellow who's only just fallen into a delightful sleep after a miserable night, to see what his temperature is."

"It seems to me that interference with that sort of thing would be interference with the medical side, sir. And who would you select for this appointment?"

"An intelligent private soldier who has himself done at least a month in hospital."

"A private soldier, sir?" said the A.-G. "Do you really mean a simple fellow from the ranks?"

“I do, Boffin. That’s exactly and precisely what I do mean. These ‘simple’ fellows, I find, have often a lot of sound commonsense that less simple people lack.”

“I understand now what you want, but you surely don’t mean to introduce any scheme of this sort. It is utterly impossible and unworkable and the doctors would revolt.”

“There you are again, Boffin. I always know the reply I’m going to get from you—‘it can’t be done’. But I say, it can be done and I’ll do it. Just think it over, please, and we’ll talk about it again to-morrow.”

The Adjutant-General was purple with rage, but, seeing the futility of further discussion, he took his leave.

Feeling sure that he would go at once to the P.M.O.’s office, and that there would be ‘wigs on the green’ when he had explained his errand, I made some excuse for following him, and entered General Weltram’s office with him.

The Principal Medical Officer was seated at his table perusing some document, as we entered.

“Now then, Weltram,” said the A.-G., “I’ve got some real news for you this time. Do you still persist in regarding the Chief as sane?”

“Absolutely, my dear fellow. As sane as you or I. Your definition of insanity is just the usual one—anyone is insane who thinks otherwise than I do. It won’t do. That’s not my definition at all. And as for the Chief’s sanity, why everything you’ve so far put before me to prove his insanity has had the exactly contrary effect. I like his bright ideas.”

“Do you? Well, I’ve brought you his brightest to-day. What do you think is his latest wheeze? He thinks the patients in hospitals do not receive proper attention as individuals—doctors regard them as merely ‘cases’. So he’s going to put in a sort of lay official who will run the hospital arrangements with more regard to patients as individuals.”

During this brief explanation I watched the P.M.O.’s complexion change from a fresh pink to a ruddy rose, then to a decided beetroot, and finally to a livid hue in which the shades of mauve, gamboge, and ultra-violet predominated. He looked perfectly ghastly.

“What do you say?” he stuttered.

“I say he’s going to put in a lay official—probably a private soldier—to run your hospitals for you.”

“Good God! The man’s mad, raving, staring, stark mad,” screamed the P.M.O. as he leaped from his seat. “Certify him? I should think I would. Just let me get at him. Tamper with the hospitals indeed. We’ll see about that.”

So the certificate was duly signed, and the latter end of poor Sir Cuthbert Manderville is known to you all.

A sad affair.

XVI BARGAINS

BARGAINS are nasty things.

I don't say that because I always get the worst of them, but it is an unshakable conclusion that I have come to after deep and prolonged consideration of the subject.

My dictionary describes a bargain in refined language as 'a favourable transaction' or 'an advantageous purchase', but a truer definition in modern parlance would be 'doing the other fellow down'. It is that, isn't it, when you come to look at the matter squarely in the face?

Bargaining with dealers is certainly fair game, because in their professional capacity they should know exactly what a thing is worth and are not likely to let you have it for less than the value at which they estimate it.

But most of the bargains we make are with the non-dealer class, and a good many of them are rather mean affairs if you come to examine them.

"Do you see that old oak bureau over there? I got that for £2, worth at least £15."

"Where did you get it?"

"At the Pickerings' auction sale last week."

Well now, the fact is that the two Miss Pickerings, elderly sisters who lived in a small country house, had, owing to some loss of money, to sell up their things and move into cheap lodgings in the town.

Their sale was not well advertised and things were sold dirt cheap. My friend had got, as he said, a splendid bargain, becoming the possessor of an article he valued at £15 on payment of £2.

But in his place I am sure that the thought of those two poor old ladies would have kept me awake at night. Still, I daresay these apparent injustices are simply things that have to be. I admit that I see no way out of them. To refrain from buying the oak bureau at £2 would only mean that someone else would get it, and to send the old ladies an anonymous present of £13 would be quixotic—one couldn't get through life that way. So we must just leave things as they are.

Bargaining, as a matter of fact, seems to be as inherent in human nature as gambling, to which it is distantly related. You cannot go through life under modern social conditions without bargaining and gambling, however much you may preach against both.

The idea of a bargain is, I suppose, that a seller who wants £10 for an article demands £15. The prospective buyer suggests £5, whereupon an agreement is made for £10. This pleases the seller as he has got the price he wanted, and it pleases the buyer who feels that he has been a clever fellow to get £5 off the price.

To be a successful dealer in this class of transaction demands a capacity for thought-reading. To be a successful buyer you must emit waves of false thought that baffle the dealer.

My thoughts are as genuine as can be and as clear as crystal. This is no great tribute to the honesty of my nature because I really do try as hard as I can to falsify my thought-waves.

When my friend Walter wishes to purchase something he emits rays that indicate his loathing for the article in question. When I want to buy anything the thought frames itself in my mind like a flash of lightning, "I must have that whatever it costs," and the dealer reads at once, "He will buy this, whatever price I ask," and I am done for.

My friend Walter says untruthfully, "I don't want it. Wouldn't take it as a gift," and walks away, whereupon the dealer runs after him and begs him to take the article at any price.

I imitate his method and say, "I don't want it. Wouldn't take it as a gift," and walk away. I listen anxiously for the sound of pattering footsteps behind me, but I hear none. I glance back and see the dealer moving in the opposite direction as if he had completely forgotten me. How is this?

The thing that I cannot learn is how to beat the other fellow 'down', I find that my efforts in that direction generally beat him 'up'.

I will give an instance of this, and would be glad if anyone would inform me what I did wrong. As far as I can see, I applied all Walter's rules which in his case always result in halving the price of the thing he wants.

I was returning to India from leave home and at Aden we took on a lot of Indian deck passengers. Among these I noticed a fat Hindu wearing two rings—a ruby and a pearl. The two rings looked rather out of place on his chubby brown fingers, and I guessed that he was carrying them in that ostentatious way in the hopes of attracting a would-be purchaser.

I was quite right. As I passed him on my morning walk round the deck he salaamed and asked me if I would like to buy a ring. I had been very much struck with the ruby from the moment my eye first fell on it, and I had made up my mind to buy it. As, however, I started with the usual lies by saying that I didn't want either ring, and seemed to be complying implicitly with all the rules connected with deceit of this nature, I want to know how that fat Hindu managed to become instantaneously aware of the fact that I coveted that ruby ring and meant to have it. That he was so aware future events distinctly proved.

I took the ring in my hand and spoke disparagingly of it. Then I gave it back and said I didn't want it, but other people in the saloon might like it. What was he asking for it?

"Twenty pounds, Sahib," he replied. "It's worth a good deal more, but I am in need of cash for the moment."

"Ridiculous price," I countered. "I could get a ring like that anywhere in Bombay for £5."

"No, Sahib. That ring would cost you £30 in Bombay. Take it, Sahib, and show it to your friends in the saloon and ask them if it's not a genuine stone, and a beauty."

I took the ring and showed it round among the other passengers, who admired it and thought it would be quite a good buy for £15.

I then returned it to the owner with a few more lies—why can't one run these bargains without lying?—adding that no one thought much of the ring, and I did not want it, but if he were really in need of the cash I would give him £10 for it.

So far I seemed to have done nothing wrong. These are the recognized steps in a bargain. He says £20, I say £10, then he gives it to me for £15.

But it wouldn't work in my case. He just ignored my offer, replaced the ring on his finger, and gazed placidly out to sea.

So I left him to return to the saloon. I sauntered slowly so as to give him time to run after me—he was very fat—but the silly fellow never moved. I listened eagerly, like a mother expecting a lost child, for the sound of those pattering footsteps, but patter came there none.

I looked back and saw, to my annoyance, that he was still gazing out over the sea with the air of one whose mind was far removed from the sordid transactions of the ring market.

"Well," I thought, "he doesn't seem to know the rules of this game. I've

done my bit, why doesn't he do his? I'm sure he would if it were any fellow but me."

Having quite set my heart on the ring I was naturally annoyed at his apathy. I was longing to return and continue the discussion with him, but I felt that the first advance should be from him. So for two whole days I curbed my impatience. I let him see me from afar off, but I made not the slightest effort to move in his direction or to renew the negotiations. This was clearly calculated to bring him to his senses.

Still, while I held aloof he held aloofer. I gave him plenty of chances of coming up to me with an acceptance of my offer, but as he never budged from his comfortable corner on the deck I thought at last that if I merely walked round that way he would buck up and implore me to take the ring.

So I sauntered by him several times, but he took no notice whatsoever of me, continuing his irritating gaze out over the sea, as if absorbed in philosophic meditation.

On the third day it was more than I could stand so I determined to break the ice.

"Have you sold that ring yet?"

"No, Sahib."

"Does nobody want to buy it, then?"

"Oh, plenty of people want to buy it but I keep it for your honour."

That was nice of the old man though probably not true. I continued:

"But I don't want the ring either."

"I think your honour would like the ring. Very good bargain."

Conversation continued for some time on these lines. My repeated lies were quite in vain, the wily dealer saw through them all. I recognized, therefore, the futility of further pretence and, tired of the foolish game, I decided to take the ring and give the old man his price.

As a last effort I said:

"Look here, you wanted £20 for that ring and I bid £10. Then I offered £15. I don't want the ring particularly, but it's a pretty stone and I'll give you £18 for it."

"No, Sahib," he calmly replied, "I made a mistake with my first offer. Some of my friends here have had a good look at the stone since and say it is a

beauty of the first water. I shall be sorry to part with it, but you can have it for £22.”

And £22 I had to pay for a ring that I could have got for £2 less three days ago. Without the bother of all this silly lying and bargaining.

The old Hindu thought-reader smiled as he pocketed my money and we parted the best of friends.

I don't always come off quite so badly in a bargain as that. Sometimes I do fairly well. Without estimating the exact value of a thing, I agree to myself that I would be willing to pay up to a certain sum for it, and if I get it for less than that sum I am quite pleased.

One always has odious friends, however, who damp that sort of pleasure. “What! You gave a fiver for that? I got a better one for thirty shillings last month.”

Dealing with shops in England one is saved this disagreeable necessity for haggling, but that is not always the case abroad.

In Belgium I had an English friend who was a great smoker and consumed such an enormous amount of matches that his match bill was quite an important item in his budget, so he had to be careful as to the price he paid. Dealing with a small grocer's shop, he found the proprietor not unwilling to bargain. The price he asked for a bundle of matches was two francs. My friend bravely suggested one franc fifty centimes, and the shopkeeper eventually accepted one franc eighty.

The same comedy was repeated each time he visited the shop, until a bright idea struck him. He cut out all the haggling by just walking into the shop, asking for a bundle of matches, placing the exact sum of one franc eighty centimes on the counter and walking out of the shop without further parley.

He continued to do this for a whole year, when he entered by chance another shop to buy his matches and the proprietor only asked one franc sixty centimes.

On his next visit to the original shop he taxed the shopkeeper with overcharging him. “Not at all,” responded the smiling old man. “You fixed the price yourself. The cost of matches fell a year ago. I have been selling them ever since for one franc fifty a packet. But as you always put down one franc eighty and never waited for change I didn't bother about it. The real price, you know, is never an absolutely fixed one.”

In the East fixed prices do not exist, and every article has to be purchased

by haggling—a great nuisance when you’re in a hurry. But the East is never in a hurry.

Indians who visit London for the first time are apt to cause some amusement in this regard. An Indian friend of mine who came to London to serve as Orderly Officer to the King told me that nothing surprised him so much as this strict adherence to a fixed price—it seemed to take all the joy out of life to him.

The first rule of bargaining is that the seller should describe the article as ‘magnificent’, while the purchaser states that he considers it ‘trash’.

Turabaz pursued this method in one of the large shops in London which he entered to purchase a silk handkerchief. He inquired the price and was told eight shillings, whereupon he offered five, which made the young man behind the counter smile as he observed, “We have only one price. It is a very beautiful handkerchief.”

“It is a nasty rag of a handkerchief that I could hardly bring myself to use, but I’ll give you six shillings for it,” was Turabaz’s reply. Eventually the interpreter who accompanied the party made matters clear, and the handkerchief was purchased for eight shillings without any further insults being hurled at the shop-assistant’s head.

China is undoubtedly the paradise of hagglers, and when it comes to the purchase of curios, or old porcelain, only an expert dare tackle the adventure.

A friend of mine who was in Pekin with me after the Boxer War thought he ought to send something interesting home to his wife. He decided on a piece of porcelain, and was much attracted by a green celadon plate of undoubted antiquity. He asked the price and the owner suggested ten dollars. “Ten dollars!” exclaimed my friend, who really thought it was quite a cheap buy, but knew that one ought always to haggle. “It is not worth more than one.”

“Take it for a dollar, sir,” said the Chinaman with a grin as he fairly pushed it into my friend’s arms.

“Well, that’s a pretty good bargain,” thought the purchaser as he left the shop.

A rival dealer across the road spotted him leaving the shop with his treasure and at once rushed across to him carrying a pile of similar plates. “Ten for one dollar,” he shouted.

My friend only wanted one so he refused the offer and proceeded on his way rather less pleased than he had been with his skill in bargaining.

Once more I return to myself and give a final example of my own misfortunes. The scene is in the Nasim Bagh, beside the Dal Lake in Kashmir, a favourite camping-ground in spring.

Some ten families have taken up their abode in tents here. Our tent is about the middle.

The camp is visited once a day by a man from the bazar who sells cakes. We like his cakes and always buy them at twelve annas a pound. Talking over house-keeping expenses with neighbours on the right and left, my wife finds that they only pay eleven annas.

So the next time the cake man turns up she says, "Eleven annas a pound." To which he replies, "No, Memsahib, twelve annas." She repeats firmly, "Eleven annas is the proper price." And he replies equally firmly, "Twelve annas, Memsahib." To which she once more retorts, "Eleven annas."

Then what do you think the cake man does? Why, he just quietly shuts up his tin box and walks away without another word, leaving us cakeless.

This incident is beyond my powers of explanation. Why sell cake at eleven annas a pound to others and insist on twelve annas a pound from us? I can only suppose that we have a specially innocent or idiotic look. I can think of no solution that is complimentary to ourselves. Two mugs!

XVII

THE BEATIFICATION OF SANDY MACNAB

There are men both great and wise who hold that in a future state
Dumb creatures we have cherished here below
Will give us joyous greeting when we pass the Golden Gate.
Is it folly? Yet I hope it may be so.

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

DAWN in September in a small cantonment on the Indo-Afghan frontier. The hot weather is almost over but the days are still stifling. The gradual change of summer to autumn is only noticeable in the freshness in the gentle breeze that blows in the early morning before the rising of the sun. This is the hour of deep and refreshing slumber for man and beast.

Willoughby, Adjutant of the 10th Punjabis, is sleeping under a mosquito curtain in the verandah of his bungalow, dreaming happy dreams of the old homeland.

At the foot of his bed lies Sandy Macnab, curled up on his little wooden bedstead—Sandy Macnab, a Highland terrier of not too pure a breed, known all up and down the frontier as a dog of human intelligence and more than human fidelity.

Sandy was born in barracks at Aldershot and came into Willoughby's possession a few days after he had joined his regiment there just nine years ago. Many lively and risky episodes had marked the flight of those years, during which master and dog had never been separated.

Sandy was getting old for a dog now, and resented being left at home when master was out riding, but he knew that he was not allowed on parade and comforted himself by pretending to believe that all these rides were in connection with parades. But it was a shallow pretence because he well knew the difference between uniform and mufti. Still, even in mufti it might be polo, and dogs are not wanted on the polo ground.

Suddenly the stillness of the morning air was broken by a shrill bugle call. Sandy was the first to hear it. He sat up with one ear cocked. He was not clever enough to know the meaning of bugle calls, but he knew they were connected with events, and he knew that this call, sounded even before the reveille, had to

do with something unusual.

So he trotted over to the bed and put his two paws on the pillow. The slight movement was sufficient to arouse the sleeper, who proceeded to stretch and yawn, but soon sat up in bed very wideawake as his ears caught the sound of the regimental call, followed by the ‘Officers come and be d——d’.

“Hullo, Sandy old boy,” he exclaimed as he tumbled out of bed, “what’s in the wind now? Going to be some fun for you and me as likely as not.”

A few minutes sufficed for Willoughby to fling himself into his uniform, and by the time he had buckled on his sword-belt his faithful syce was standing with his charger saddled before the verandah.

Arrived at the C.O.’s bungalow, he was pleased to find himself the first, but the others were not slow to follow, and in a short time all were assembled.

“Immediate mobilization. March at once for Babaristan” was the order transmitted without delay to the Indian ranks in their lines, and then the Colonel proceeded to put the situation before his officers.

The Badbo tribe had been giving trouble to Government for the last two years. They had latterly been unusually active in raiding villages on our side of the frontier, carrying off two fat Hindu moneylenders for ransom. This last affair was still under discussion between the tribal leaders and the Politicals, and as the discussion seemed likely to prove abortive there appeared to be no alternative to an ultimatum, which, however, the Government of India were, as usual, unwilling to issue.

Matters had now been brought to a head by a fresh incident, and the ultimatum had already been despatched.

Major Parden, the Political Officer detailed to meet the tribes on behalf of Government, had proceeded with a small escort to Dotoi some miles across the border three days ago, and news had been received last night that he had been murdered by the tribesmen.

Pending a reply to the ultimatum, the brigade were being despatched at once in order that by the time the reply was received they might be duly assembled on the actual frontier line ready to march if necessary on Dotoi.

Two days later, the Badbos having rejected the Government’s terms, the brigade crossed the frontier and marched on Dotoi.

There was practically no opposition to their advance. Frontier warfare is carried out in accordance with unwritten rules which are always faithfully observed by both sides, and the first tribal rule is, ‘Let them come in’. This is

sound tactics and sound policy. The troops do no harm to anyone not actually opposing them, and they pay high prices for whatever supplies they take from the villages.

Meantime, the young bloods of the tribe get a lot of fun potting into camp at night and following the troops by day with a view to despatching to the next world any reckless individual who may stray from the line of march.

Then it is as good as a show to watch the well-trained troops putting out picquets from the advance guard as the main body moves forward on its daily march.

As with the main advance, so with the picquets. The rule is, 'Let them come'. The picquet must in the end rejoin the column, and the tribesmen—many of whom are old soldiers trained in our Army—know exactly when that will be. They have only to watch the approach of the rearguard in the valley below, and when they see it getting about level with the picquet they put cartridges in their rifles and adjust their sights.

What fun potting at the soldiers as they scamper down the hill! Now and then they bowl one of them over, but as often as not they get bowled over themselves.

In their excitement they forget that the sepoy are old hands at the game and the tribesmen often find themselves in the position of stalkers being stalked. And then there's that disconcerting thing called 'covering fire'. Instead of just leaving it to them and the picquet, a third party takes a hand in the game, opening fire on the sniping tribesmen from a flank. Most unpleasant to get a bullet in your ear when all your attention is absorbed by the enemy in front, but on the whole it's great sport.

And, just as the time has to come when the picquets must retire, so there must come a time when the main column will retire, and that's the moment to make it hot for the troops.

There is one other standing dish in these operations and that is the 'Night Attack', which is really an attack just before dawn.

It is frequently contemplated, but is so difficult to organize that it seldom comes off, and when it does come off it is seldom a success for the tribes.

The enthusiasm of the tribes is aroused by an appeal to religious fanaticism coupled with the prospect of unlimited loot, and the whole undertaking must of course be organized by the Mullah, who guides them in matters of religion. Very astute in many matters, these tribesmen are great simpletons when it comes to a question of religion.

The Mullah addresses them, dwelling on the merits of the Mahomedan religion and the rewards that will be bestowed in Paradise on all who take part in the destruction of infidels. He then points out that the Government forces are composed of Christian unbelievers, dogs of Hindus—idol worshippers, and if there are any Mahomedans among them they are renegades and traitors and therefore to be considered as no better than infidels.

Finally, he produces his trump card: “All who say their last prayer in due form and repeat the Creed before moving off to assault will be immune from the enemy’s bullets during the attack.” Who would not be brave under such circumstances? And brave they are indeed.

Cautiously creeping up to within charging distance, with rifles slung and sword in hand, the fanatics fall into the first trap. One of them stumbles across a piece of string and in some peculiar way a huge mound of straw is set on fire. At the same moment a picquet gives the alarm, in another minute the troops will be at their alarm posts, not a second can be lost. With wild yells and invocations to Allah the howling mass of tribesmen bears down upon the camp. Just as they start their rush, however, the ever-ready guns of the mountain battery fire off a few rounds of star-shell and the weird scene is illuminated by the falling globes of fire, and by the time the first wave of fanatics reaches the parapet the troops are in their positions receiving the attackers with a steady rifle fire.

Up to this point I have described events that are typical of any night attack.

We now come to the particular one in which the 10th Punjabis, together with the rest of the Babaristan Brigade, were involved about a week after their arrival in Dotoi.

The attack was organized and led by that famous fire-brand known as the Alikhel Mullah, and success for the tribesmen seemed not only possible but probable, for, at the moment when the fanatics were within charging distance of the troops, a certain amount of confusion prevailed in the camp.

Some units had moved in a wrong direction in the dark, causing gaps in the line. Through these the exultant tribesmen burst, charging down the centre of the camp and putting to death all who came in their path. With the slightest sign of panic the tribesmen would now have won the day, but there was no panic.

Lost units recovered themselves, gaps were filled up, and the brave fellows who had penetrated to the centre of the camp were now themselves prisoners.

With the first streak of dawn the attackers realized that the attempt had

failed, and a hurried withdrawal took place, pursued by the Indian cavalry who had been waiting for their chance.

Assembled in the evening to discuss their failure, the surviving tribesmen angrily reproached the Mullah. "You have betrayed us," said one. "You said the bullets would not kill us, and look at the dead we have left behind," grumbled another; but Mullahs are not often at a loss in argument, and tribesmen have very simple minds. So the Alikhel Mullah answered somewhat in this strain:

"Truly, my brothers, I said that all who said their prayers in due form, and repeated the Creed, would not be harmed by the enemy's bullets. Did you all do as I told you?"

"We did."

"And did you not escape death as I promised you?"

"We did."

Certainly the Mullah's argument held good so far, but what about their comrades who were killed?

"Oh, those!" replied the Mullah in response to an inquiry. "How can we be sure that they said their prayers and repeated the Creed? The fact that the charm worked all right with you who fulfilled the conditions makes me feel pretty sure that it failed in their case because they had not."

"True, we had not thought of that."

"And then again," continued the Mullah, "Allah promised immunity *in the attack*. If you could examine the bodies of your fallen comrades you would find that most of them were killed from behind *in the retirement*."

Finally, he closed the discussion with an unchallengeable argument in support of his claim to supernatural powers.

"Can you doubt the Divine protection that watched over you as you moved to the attack? The troops opened fire on you with their murderous artillery, and what happened? Why, the shells that should have spread havoc among your ranks were, by the grace of Allah, transformed into shining balls of light to guide you to victory. And victory was yours had it not been for the presence of some doubting and unclean spirits among you whose evil influence nullified the Divine assistance. I say no more of them as they are now among the dead."

The great majority of his listeners were entirely convinced. Why, it was all as clear as daylight. Why hadn't they thought of that before?

But here and there were one or two doubting spirits who were not satisfied and who would have liked to put more questions. Chief among these was Ali Baz, a young fellow who had served three years in a Punjab regiment and whose two brothers had been killed in the attack.

He was not at all convinced by the Mullah's arguments, and was especially riled by that unkind reference to the dead. As, however, the vast majority of the clan were clearly on the side of the Mullah he thought it best to keep his mouth shut for the present, while vowing future vengeance on the pious old fraud.

He confided later to a friend that that stuff about turning the bullets into balls of light was all rot. Those shells were especially prepared for that purpose by the Sirkar to give light to their own troops—he had seen them demonstrated on more than one occasion while he was serving in the ranks.

It was dangerous to do or say much at the present moment when the Mullah's influence was still unshaken, but Ali Baz mentally registered the deaths of his two brothers on the debit side of his blood-feud account, and determined to balance the account on the first favourable opportunity.

In the Brigade camp the troops were engaged in straightening things up after the confusion caused by the events of last night.

The tribesmen had taken heavy toll of the small force. The native ranks had suffered severely, and among the white officers seven had been killed and four wounded.

And there was one death that found no place on the official casualty returns.

Sandy Macnab had gone to his last rest with a bullet through his head. Willoughby found him lying just beside his tent when he returned at midday from the pursuit.

There was a strict order, 'No dogs in camp', but a very special exception had been made for Sandy, who was a favourite with every man in the Brigade.

It was with a very real heartache that Willoughby picked up the poor little corpse and laid it on a blanket at the door of his tent. He had lost good friends among the human casualties, was it an absurd sentiment that made him place Sandy Macnab almost in the same category?

The problem now was how to lay Sandy fittingly to rest. The idea of a dog funeral was too babyish and grotesque, but on the other hand it was odious to think of that loving and faithful little beast being merely destroyed as 'rubbish'

with the remainder of the camp litter.

He decided eventually to bury him at a spot some half a mile from camp on the bank of the big nullah that ran across the small stony plain on which the Brigade were encamped.

He selected a site beneath a small thorny acacia, such a site as is usual in the case of holy men on the frontier.

He dug the little grave himself, assisted only by Lafferton, a brother subaltern who had shared Sandy's affection in rather a marked degree, as Sandy was not one to bestow 'marked' affection very easily. He was quite nice to everyone, but he knew his place and had his doggish pride of reserve.

After their failure in the night attack above described the Badbos were in a chastened mood and signified in a short time their acceptance of the Government's conditions.

One of these conditions was the temporary occupation by troops of the Dotoi area while a detailed survey of the surrounding country was being made.

And so it came about that the 10th Punjabis were fated to remain for two whole years in that desolate spot.

Willoughby paid frequent visits to Sandy's grave, amusing himself by piling up over it any quaint-looking stones he found, and adding a headstone of some sort of slate on which he had chipped out with a chisel the letters R.I.P. He would have liked to have added Sandy Macnab's name and age, but he was not good at carving. Moreover, the idea struck him that unless he made the grave look seriously Mahomedan the tribesmen would defile it the moment the Brigade left the valley.

So he tied small strips of coloured rag on to the twigs of the acacia and added little decorative touches suitable to the last resting-place of a faithful follower of the Prophet.

When the time came for the regiment to return to India the tomb had already assumed a mature and respectable aspect, such a grave as might have been accorded to any devout Mahomedan buried at that spot at any time within the last fifty years.

About two months before the regiment left on its return march to cantonments trouble broke out between the two sections of the Badbos. This is the usual custom of the tribes. When not at loggerheads with the Government,

the various sections fight among themselves. And if by a rare chance the sections are at peace then the individuals make up for lost time in the prosecution of their private feuds, which are by mutual agreement held in abeyance when tribal troubles are engaging their attention.

The Ali Khel section of the Badbos to which the Alikhel Mullah belonged occupied the land on the north side of the big nullah, and the Wali Khels maintained their rights on the south side, that is on the same side as the Brigade camp.

In order to prevent the risk of the troops becoming involved in these tribal fights, in which Government was in no way concerned, no tribesmen were allowed within a range of one mile from camp. This was a fortunate thing for Sandy's grave in its early days. It would certainly have been discovered and desecrated. Now it was so neatly matured that Willoughby hoped that if it were discovered the tribesmen would pay no attention to it, regarding it as the tomb of some unknown person in whom they took no interest.

During the inter-tribal fighting the Alikhel Mullah took a prominent part, not that he cared much about the cause of quarrel, but because he had his prestige to maintain.

It was necessary just now to be very careful of his prestige as he was most anxious to promote himself to the dignity of 'Pir Sahib'. The title of Pir Sahib—denoting a hereditary saint—is obviously one that cannot legitimately be 'bestowed' either by oneself or by others, but in most cases there is not much inquiry into genealogy, and if you can only get a few of your disciples to address you and speak of you by that title the infection will spread, and in a very short time you may find yourself generally spoken of as the 'Pir Sahib'.

On a certain day there was a cloudburst higher up the valley and the big nullah, which was usually almost dry, was suddenly converted into a raging torrent.

On the evening of that day the Alikhel Mullah took a walk, unaccompanied, on the bank of the nullah. It had occurred to him that this sudden flood might be turned to account. The Wali Khels would regard the stream as unfordable, as indeed it appeared to be, and become careless in their security; then, perhaps, a safe way for the Ali Khels to cross and surprise the Wali Khels might be found further upstream.

Wandering on and pondering over this scheme, he suddenly became aware that he was being followed, and turning to see who was behind him, was confronted with the stern gaze of Ali Baz.

Now ever since the night of the great attack that failed Ali Baz had been laying for the old man. To carry out a blood feud neatly one must have unlimited patience, and Ali Baz had quietly waited for twenty-two weary months, knowing full well that the time would come, and here at last the chance presented itself, a chance that he was certainly not going to miss.

Ali Baz was a powerfully built fellow and the Pir Sahib was small but wiry; in an unarmed contest there would be no doubt of the winner. And the deed must be done without arms because of the holy man's reputation, in fact the Alikhel Mullah's death must be made to look like an accident.

After the usual greetings the Mullah asked: "Why have you followed me in this way?"

"To protect you from a chance attack by any of those Wali Khel fellows," was the ready reply.

The Pir Sahib did not like Ali Baz and was not at all pleased to have his company, but the latter had never given any hint of the hatred that burned in his breast, and the old man had no particular reason to be suspicious. So the two conversed together and the Mullah gave the young man a rough idea of what was in his mind.

"Truly a stroke of genius," responded Ali Baz. "By the Beard of the Prophet, you are right. We'll find the way across and surprise those dogs of Wali Khels this very night. See here," he continued, "right below where we stand the broken water indicates a possible line of ford. If you approve I will descend and inspect the place more narrowly."

The Alikhel Mullah approached the edge to observe the suggested passage when he felt himself seized from behind and flung out over the raging torrent, into which he fell, striking his head on a rock as he did so and being whirled away to his death in the muddy waters of the Dotoi stream.

Ali Baz returned smiling to his village, and on the following day took part in an animated discussion as to what could have happened to the Pir Sahib. As none of the Badbos were ever able to unravel the mystery of his disappearance it is as well to state here that his body was carried down the torrent as far as its junction with the Gomal river, which was also in flood. It was eventually washed up on the edge of a barren plain on our side of the frontier and eaten by jackals.

Many and various were the surmises as to what had become of the holy man. Some maintained that he had been miraculously caught up to heaven, others that he had been kidnapped by agents of the Indian Government; but

one man, who spoke the truth but was not at once believed, said that he most distinctly saw the body of the Mullah being carried down the torrent the evening before. He was quite positive of the fact, the clothing being quite unmistakable.

In the end the truth prevailed, a most unusual thing in the East, and the solution was accepted that the Mullah had accidentally fallen into the stream and been drowned. Search was made for the body and inquiries made of dwellers lower down the stream but no trace whatsoever could be found.

With the mysterious disappearance of the Alikhel Mullah the feud between the two sections of the Badbos was patched up, for the time being, and comparative harmony reigned once more between the Ali Khels and the Wali Khels.

A short time after the sad disappearance of the Alikhel Mullah the 10th Punjabis received their orders for return to cantonments.

On the evening before the day of departure Willoughby visited Sandy Macnab's tomb for the last time and added a final decorative touch in the shape of a small green flag on a slender bamboo shaft which he tied on to the topmost branch of the small acacia tree.

Marching down the valley with the column on the following day the regiment passed close by Sandy's grave, and Willoughby turned in his saddle to wave a last farewell and to admire the little green flag that fluttered bravely in the breeze above the tomb.

There was a sigh of relief in the Dotoi valley as the last of the infidels disappeared from sight, but among the faithful were not a few who contemplated with regret the collapse of their lucrative little businesses of selling milk and eggs and other articles of local produce at top prices to the Government troops.

At first Sandy Macnab's tomb attracted little attention, it was in an out-of-the-way spot and was not near any of the usual paths. But by degrees first one and then another began to notice the grave. Boys out grazing goats came upon it and mentioned it parenthetically when speaking of the day's events.

"Close to the holy man's tomb," said young Afzul in reply to a question by his father.

"What holy man's tomb?" queried his father.

"The one a mile down the valley on the bank of the nullah."

“There is no grave there.”

“But there is. I pass it every day when I go out with the goats.”

Mir Akbar thought it worth while to investigate.

“Very peculiar,” he muttered to himself as he stood regarding the grave. “The boy was quite right. Here is the tomb without doubt, and it is surely that of a holy man. And it has the appearance of having been here a long time. But I am certain there never was a tomb here. I must ask our Mullah about it.”

Others had also by now noticed the grave and the affair began to be a good deal discussed.

The principal Mullah of the Wali Khels talked it over with the Mullah of the Ali Khels, who had stepped into the Pir Sahib’s shoes, and a sort of general meeting was held at which the matter was thoroughly discussed.

One old greybeard maintained that it was the tomb of his uncle who had been knifed by an assassin fifty years ago. He himself had visited the grave frequently up to the time of the beginning of the late troubles. The grave had certainly been there for a hundred years.

“You are a liar,” said the Walikhel Mullah, “and a stupid one. If your uncle was knifed fifty years ago his grave cannot have been there for a hundred years.”

The old man collapsed. He wasn’t really a liar, he was just letting his senile fancy roam, and demonstrating the way in which most of these legends of holy men find their origin.

“I think it is probably the grave of one of the Mahomedans serving with the Indian troops,” suggested another.

“That it certainly is not,” decided the Mullah. “The Indian Government are known to be generous and impartial in all religious matters, but they would not go so far as to erect a special tomb of this sort for any of their Mahomedan servants. Besides, they had, as we all know, a special burying ground on the other side of their camp.”

Then the young man who had seen the body of the Pir Sahib carried down the river on that fateful evening made a suggestion.

“The tomb is exactly opposite the very spot where the body of the Pir Sahib disappeared from my sight. Could anyone have found the body and buried it there?”

No, it was obvious that none of the tribesmen could have carried out the

burial at a spot that was within the prohibited area. It was equally obvious that the soldiers would not have done it. The affair was more mysterious than ever.

A brilliant idea struck the Walikhel Mullah. It was a miraculous burial. Of course it was. How blind he had been not to see it before. The body of the Pir Sahib had rested on the rocks below and had been fittingly buried by angel hands. The suggestion appealed to the other Mullah and both decided to promulgate the decision. The tomb was undoubtedly that of the Pir Sahib, buried in a miraculous manner.

The idea was favourably accepted by both sections of the Badbos, and worship immediately began at the newly discovered shrine.

It was altogether a splendid affair. The Badbos had long suffered from a feeling of inferiority as regarded their neighbours the Badzats. The latter possessed the tomb of a famous saint, and the former had longed for something of a similar nature.

They had often considered the advisability of asking a holy man to come and dwell among them, then murdering him in order to have a real saint's tomb at which they might beg for favours. But this was too old a Pathan trick, the holy men saw through their intentions and 'regretted that, owing to pressure of business, they found themselves unable, etc.'

And now they found themselves possessed of a real shrine their joy was unbounded.

During the next five years many miracles were performed by Sandy Macnab. Childless women rejoiced their masters' hearts by producing male offspring, failing sight was restored to normal, cripples discarded their sticks.

The fame went forth throughout the land, and even some of the Badzats came down to try their luck, and frankly admitted that Sandy Macnab was more dependable than their own patron.

A custodian was appointed. Offerings at the shrine soon amounted to a respectable sum, and the Walikhel Mullah found himself enjoying a comfortable income.

So far all was well, but a feeling of dissatisfaction was growing in the breasts of the Ali Khels. The tomb was certainly in the territory of the Wali Khels, but the occupant of the tomb was their man. The Pir Sahib was the Alikhel Mullah, so why should the Walikhel Mullah reap all the profits?

It was decided to discuss the matter openly, but the meeting, and several subsequent meetings, proved abortive.

The Alikhel Mullah privately proposed that he and the Walikhel Mullah should go halves in the takings, to which the latter unhesitatingly replied, "Not if I know it."

Agreement proving impossible, and both sides becoming heated, the old feud was renewed and war between the Ali Khels and the Wali Khels was again declared.

The trouble continued for many months and seemed likely to last for years, there was no prospect of either side permanently establishing an ascendancy.

The thought that the tomb of their beloved Pir was in the hands of the rival section filled the breasts of the Ali Khels with rage and hatred. It was not only the loss of the income they minded but the fact of an Ali Khel saint lying on Wali Khel ground.

The only decent solution of the problem occurred to the Alikhel Mullah as he appreciated the situation to himself on the evening of a day when his feelings had been particularly embittered by taunts flung at him from the opposite bank of the nullah.

The saint's tomb must be removed by stealth to its proper resting-place on Ali Khel ground, and the Mullah laid his plans accordingly.

The grave lay to the east of the principal Wali Khel village. A night attack was made on the west side of the village, and while this was in progress a small party were sent to raid the tomb.

With unconscious irony the Mullah selected Ali Baz to command this party—the same Ali Baz who had promoted the living Pir to heavenly honours.

The Pathan mind is peculiar in these matters and Ali Baz was an assiduous worshipper at the saint's tomb. And the saint had done him many good turns. The fact that Ali Baz had foully murdered him seemed to cause no resentment in the breast of the saint, and no compunction in that of the suppliant. Their relations were of a most friendly nature.

The operation was completely successful. The custodian of the shrine was knocked on the head. The fatigue party with picks and shovels removed the stones that covered the grave, and were then ordered to stand aside while Ali Baz with one selected companion proceeded to the sacred task of disinterring the corpse. A large box had been brought for the reception of the relics.

After grubbing in the hard ground for half an hour—the skeleton was at last revealed. The skeleton of a dog!

Ali Baz barely succeeded in stifling the yell of disappointed rage that rose

to his lips, and hastily placed his hand over the mouth of his companion who displayed a similar tendency. He had the finest asset of a successful general, the rare gift of making an instantaneous decision. In one instant there flashed through his mind the realization that he was faced with two alternatives. The first was to drop the whole business and make the Wali Khels the laughing-stock of the whole frontier for having worshipped at the tomb of a dog, the second was to say nothing about the matter, but to put the bones of Sandy Macnab in the box, together with a few stones as make-weight, and carry on as if everything were all right.

He decided on the latter course of action, and Sandy soon found himself conveyed to the land of the Ali Khels.

Ali Baz's first action was to draw the Mullah aside and make a full confession to him.

"But this is a terrible sacrilege," replied the Mullah. "Can I bring myself to allow worship at the tomb of a dog?"

"I think you can," answered Ali Baz, "if you look at the facts of the case. For live years, the faithful have asked favours at this tomb and have got them, whatever was inside the grave. Why deprive them of a continuation of these favours? And then there is the income! It would be a pity to lose that.

And finally not to have a saint's tomb at all after all these years of struggling. How could we explain it to the Badzats? Why, they'd never stop laughing at us."

"I agree," said the Mullah, "it is a dreadful thing, but Allah will forgive me. We have got to have a saint's tomb somehow or another, and we shall be glad of the income derived from the offerings of the pious."

Ali Baz was delighted at the Mullah's decision. He had no qualms at all himself, on the subject. "After all," he said to himself, "that old Alikhel Mullah was no better than a dog."

Moreover in sharing the guilty secret with the Mullah he foresaw unlimited opportunities of future blackmail. The little dog would bring him in a good deal more than any real saint would.

So the remains of poor little Sandy Macnab were buried for the second time, the actual operations being carried out by the Mullah, Ali Baz, and the helper who had assisted at the disinterment.

As it is a well-known peculiarity of Mahomedan saints to grow after death, Sandy was now accorded a grave nine feet long, and a stately edifice worthy of

being described as a ‘Mausoleum’ was built above the grave.

The fury of the Wali Khels was unbounded when they found out the meaning of the night attack, and realized that they had been robbed of their saint. The feud was renewed with increased vigour, but the general result was favourable to the Ali Khels, and after another year of desultory fighting a pact of peace was once more made.

The Wali Khels accepted things as they were and made no further effort to retransfer the Pir Sahib’s bones to their bank of the river—they rested content with a fair share of the pecuniary benefits resulting from the ownership of the tomb.

Sixteen years later Brigadier-General Willoughby found himself back on the frontier, commanding the Babaristan Brigade.

The Badbo tribe had behaved very well for many years and had now quite submitted to the influence of the Government of India while, of course, retaining their old tribal laws and customs.

A question of the delimitation of the imaginary frontier-line between India and Afghanistan, which ran through the territory of the Badbo tribe, necessitated a visit to Dotoi.

General Willoughby and the Political Officer, with their respective Staffs, arrived at Dotoi on a cold December evening and pitched their camp on the old Brigade site. Next morning, after interviewing the Chiefs, they rode round the neighbourhood while Willoughby recounted the details of the night attack of twenty years ago.

“My little dog, Sandy Macnab, was among the casualties of that night, poor little chap. The best dog that ever was. I buried him somewhere just about where we are now, but I can’t be sure of the exact spot.”

They rode on a little further, when the General’s eye was caught by a weather-beaten and stunted acacia. “That’s just about where it was,” he said, and approaching nearer added: “By Jove, it is the very place. And as I expected they would do, they have dug up the grave and thrown Sandy’s dust to the four winds.” And he pointed to the hollow in the ground which was unmistakably in the nature of an empty grave.

In the afternoon they paid a visit to the holy shrine on the Ali Khel side of the nullah and were received by the Mullah.

“What a gorgeous affair,” said the General. “I can’t remember a shrine like

this when I was here before. Whose is it?”

“It is the shrine of the Pir Sahib, the Alikhel Mullah who was drowned and miraculously buried on the Wali Khel bank and later fittingly transferred to this side.”

Both the General and the Political Officer appearing interested the Mullah recited the events in detail, ending up by pointing out the small acacia under which Sandy Macnab had been buried, and saying: “Beneath that tree is the exact spot where the remains of the Pir Sahib were buried.”

General Willoughby smiled to himself as he followed the custodian to the foot of the shrine. Sandy Macnab had now increased in length from nine to twelve feet, and the tomb was indeed an imposing affair—it was hardly possible to believe that a little Highland terrier was really lying oppressed beneath that solid mass of masonry.

On closer investigation, all doubt was put to an end, as the General’s eye fell on a small slab of slate on which were roughly inscribed the letters R.I.P.

He thought he would like to hear the Mullah’s explanation of this unusual decoration for the tomb of a Mahomedan saint, so he inquired: “That stone with inscription. What is the meaning of it?”

“That is part of the miracle,” replied the Mullah. “The letters are English letters, which read from right to left as Persian and Arabic letters are, give the word

‘PIR.’ ”

XVIII

THE RETIRED COMEDIAN

TWO years after the War the old Major-General retired from the Indian Army and came home to renew his acquaintance with the land of his birth and with his neglected family. It was suggested that he should settle down quietly in some English village, but the idea did not appeal to him—he had good health and plenty of vigour and the joy of living—so he started off on a ten months' exploration of Europe, from which he derived both profit and amusement.

At the end of that prolonged tour, he came to the conclusion that old age was creeping on and he must have some decent place to die in—one can live anywhere but dying is not so simple, it is so unpleasant and disturbing for the other guests if one dies in a cheap 'pension' abroad—so he bought a pretty little place in a very remote spot on the coast of his beloved West of England and started to grow roses and weed lawns in the approved manner of retired naval and military officers.

Although he was getting on in life, he was still hale and hearty, and he had no signs of that intimidating aspect that retired Major-Generals of the Indian Army are supposed to wear. In fact, he was, take him all round, quite a pleasant and genial old fellow, and he had no difficulty in maintaining friendly relations with his neighbours.

He was not often in a bad temper, and on normal occasions his expletives were of the mildest sort, seldom going beyond 'tut-tut' or 'blow' or 'confound the thing'; but when a heavy weight dropped on his favourite corn, or when he found his orchard had been pillaged by village lads, he had a sort of 'throw-back' to the language of early days, and then it was quite dreadful to listen to him. This was very shocking to his neighbours because he had recently accepted a position on the Church Council, and many of them felt sorry that they had voted for him.

He was supposed to have some remote connection with the most popular and widely-known book of schoolboy escapades, or at least it was believed that the principal character in that series of stories was based upon his own character as a boy.

When people made favourable comments on these stories, he was

frightfully pleased to half-admit that there was some truth in the supposition, but when people said that the boy in the book was an unmitigated little scoundrel, he was apt to deny the relationship.

Whether he admitted or denied, however, mattered little—he was universally accepted as being literally that particular character. In vain he protested that the book was pure fiction, and that any connection he had with it was quite remote and indefinite, the public in general insisted that he was that character, and, moreover, they insisted on his living up to it.

He found it sometimes rather hard, at the age of sixty-five, not to disappoint people who expected to find in him the incarnation of all the youthful devilry of their popular hero—they wanted him to be bright, and sparkling, and humorous, and crafty, when he was feeling dull, and flat, and cross, and liverish.

When he caught little boys stealing the best apples out of his orchard, he wanted to give them a good smacking, but he was supposed to treat it all as a huge joke. “Just the sort of thing, General, that you used to do as a boy. How it must remind you of old times”, was what his neighbours said.

When he was the victim of some silly and quite unamusing practical joke, his friends said, “How that sort of thing must appeal to you, bringing back the memories of riotous boyhood.”

And this annoyed him very much, because quite apart from fiction and as a matter of positive fact, he always had the idea that his practical jokes had at least the merit of being amusing, and often distinctly clever and well thought-out.

And then to look amused when he tripped up over a piece of string stretched across the path and to be told it was “just the sort of joke that would appeal to you”, was almost more than he could bear.

It is a very trying thing to have to live up to a character in fiction.

Besides all this he was a father of a family, and sons and daughters don't always behave as they should. When he was called upon to administer household justice, he found himself unnerved by the reproachful glances of the offenders, who, without uttering a word, conveyed quite distinctly the suggestion that Satan was acting unfairly in rebuking Sin.

And his wife was just as bad. Whenever he adopted a pose of judicial severity she spoilt the whole effect by saying:

“Remember what you were like yourself when you were a boy.”

It was no good arguing with her. He pointed out that even if his behaviour in childhood had not been beyond reproach, still he was either clever enough to avoid detection, or if detected he didn't whine when punishment was meted out.

He soon realized that commanding a family is a much tougher job than commanding a Brigade.

It was not only his own family who harassed him, but all the nieces and nephews, and even the children of his neighbours.

It was not altogether a pleasant surprise when his wife announced the impending visit of a niece and a nephew. "Emily is going with George to Italy and has asked us to take in Violet and Jack for part of their summer holidays. It will be nice to have them down here for a bit, they are quite decent children and they'll be no trouble. They'll spend most of their time on the beach."

"Oh, of course, we've got to have them," he replied. "One can't refuse shelter to one's own sister's children, and I remember I rather took a fancy to them when I last saw them a couple of years ago, though I thought Violet a little priggish."

"Yes, but I'm very fond of both of them," she said, "and, in spite of all your grumbling, you know you love children, and as none of ours will be at home then, it will be cheerful to have them in the house. They won't be much bother, Violet is fifteen and Jack is thirteen, so they are pretty well able to look after themselves."

The two children duly arrived and threw themselves with ecstasy into the arms of their uncle and aunt—especially uncle, whose task it would be to keep them from being dull. They had always been told that he was 'so amusing and so original', and they were dying to test his powers of amusement and originality.

They were a little disappointed at the lack of originality in his greeting which was simple: "Hallo, Violet and Jack. Glad you've come. Had a nice journey?"

The newcomers soon settled down into a sort of holiday routine. It was quite true that the old General was fond of children, and he was delighted to have these two nice young people in the house. They gave very little trouble and spent most of their time on the beach.

For the first few days they were a little awed by uncle's rather gruff manner, but it didn't take them long to discover that that was all put on, and they very soon reached that stage of familiarity which breeds contempt. From

that time forth ‘uncle’ began to lead a rather harassed life.

It was distinctly trying to his temper to get into bed and find a live crab tickling his toes, but he took it very well and merely contented himself with carrying out reprisals that showed he had not quite forgotten his ‘originality’.

This was all rather amusing, but this sort of thing soon becomes a vendetta and the tone is always ‘crescendo’.

On rainy days when they were confined to the house the children expected to be amused, and uncle had every now and then to lock himself up in his den to secure a moment’s peace.

Luckily both Violet and Jack were fond of reading, and the General had a liberal supply of P. G. Wodehouse and Edgar Wallace that they found very absorbing, but Violet was sentimental and wanted poetry.

“Poetry?” said the General. “Certainly, my dear. Your aunt has a complete set of Ella Wheeler Wilcox.”

“Oh, thank you so much, uncle,” replied the precocious infant, “but I’ve had some and I don’t like it a bit. Have you a Byron?”

“Yes, of course I have, but I think you’d find him too difficult at your age. Come and look round the library.”

They found books to suit their respective tastes, and being gently pushed out of the library, peace reigned once more in the house.

The month that the niece and nephew were to stay had nearly passed away and things had gone off so far very well. The ‘vendetta’ continued spasmodically, and the children found out that uncle was quite a knowing old bird and not half as old as he pretended to be.

Harmony reigned as a rule, but there were bound to be, every now and then, minor points of discord.

Violet and Jack went off by themselves one day on a picnic, and returned in the evening in a horrid mess. They had been reading *Stalky and Co.*, and had attempted a little cattle-driving on a neighbouring farm on the lines of De Vitre’s exploit with Old Vidley’s cows.

It had been apparently a silly little effort and had ended in complete failure. They had had a rotten time but had enjoyed the excitement of a chase, and had ended up by falling into a pool of liquid manure draining from the muck-heap in the farmyard. They were both in a horrible state.

“Nasty little beasts,” said the General, “you smell abominably. Go away and write me a poem on ‘Two Little Stinkers’. You’ll find lots of rhymes for ‘stink’ and ‘stinkers’, and you’ll need them all.”

“It’s horrid of you, uncle,” said Violet, “to say we smell. We can’t help that, it was the fortune of war. We’re going to have hot baths now and we’ll be all right after that.”

“I doubt it,” said the General, “that sort of stink gets into the skin. You are what is called ‘impregnated’, filthy little beasts.”

On the next day the farmer came to complain and the General had solemnly to arraign the two malefactors on a charge of trespass and general misbehaviour. They were very penitent, but he couldn’t help rubbing a little salt into their wounds.

“Just stand a little further away, Violet,” he said, “and you, Jack, still further. Really you do smell most unpleasant.”

“We don’t,” said Violet, “we scrubbed ourselves with Sunlight soap and we’re quite all right.”

“Sunlight’s no use,” retorted the uncle. “Monkey Brand is what you want, and you’ll need that for a whole week. Phew! Run along for goodness’ sake and open the window before you go.”

He didn’t want to run a joke to death and soon dropped any further allusion to the incident.

One morning, four days before the date fixed for the children’s departure, the General was completing his toilet, standing before his mirror and arranging his tie. He was sorry to think that these amusing children would soon be leaving them. As his mind ran on this topic his nostrils were suddenly assailed by a peculiar and unpleasant odour. He took no particular notice of it, but contented himself with opening his window wide, top and bottom. The room wanted airing.

He went down to breakfast and thought no more of it during the day.

Dressing for dinner that night, the smell was stronger and most unpleasant. The next morning it was unbearable. He asked his wife to express an opinion.

“It’s perfectly frightful, George,” she said, “the drains must have gone wrong.”

“There are no drains in my dressing-room.”

“No, but I mean, the house-drains generally.”

“Nonsense, in that case the whole house would smell.”

“Well, don’t bother about it, dear. I’ll send for a man and get him to look round. It will be easily put right.”

After breakfast the two children were messing about in the garden when they heard their aunt tell the gardener to go into the village and fetch Walford the plumber to come and see what was wrong with the drains.

Violet was suddenly seized with remorse—poor old uncle and aunt, what a fuss there was going to be. Perhaps she and Jack had better confess. But it really was a huge success, and it was rather fun to see the uncle tearing his hair.

Before she could take any action, however, a motor-car came up the drive, and they were hailed with wild shouts of “Come on, Vi, come on, Jack. We’re off with Dad on a glorious bust.” A riotous gang of infants leaped from the car, while Tom Westbury, who was the ‘Dad’ in question, shook hands with his cousin.

“We heard Vi and Jack were staying with you, Mary,” he said, “and we thought we’d run round and take them off your hands for the day. We’re out on the spree and we’d like to have them along, and I’m sure you and the General must be pretty well fed up with them by this time.”

“Don’t be rude,” said Violet, “we’ll be delighted to give you the pleasure of our company, but no one is fed up with us. We’ll see if we can feed you up.”

In a few moments the car was dashing down the drive bearing away the two culprits, whose thoughts were entirely diverted from the impending tragedy.

Soon after they had gone, the plumber arrived and was called in to investigate the matter of the smell.

He was shown into the General’s dressing-room where the odour would have knocked him down if he hadn’t been a plumber.

“I know what it is, sir,” he said after poking round a bit. “The big pipe that leads to the septic tank runs just outside your window here, under the pathway. Something’s gone wrong with it. I’ll get a couple of men round and have it seen to at once.”

“But the smell is in the room, man, and not outside,” said the General.

“Yes, I know, sir. Seems like that. These sort of smells find their way

through the joists of the flooring into the rooms,” replied the plumber, “and if you ’adn’t no experience, you’d think it was something to do with the room. But we knows these jobs, sir. They’re mostly all alike. We’ll take that drain up and have a look at it.”

“But you’re talking nonsense,” said the General. “If the smell came from outside, it would smell outside as well as inside, but it doesn’t. It’s in this room and nowhere else.”

“Oh do leave Mr. Walford alone,” said his wife, “let him do his own job. You can’t pretend to know much about a plumber’s trade.”

“No, by Gad, I can’t,” grunted the General, “but I d—— well do know that there’s a filthy stink in my room and nowhere else. But have it your own way.”

And she had it her own way, and the men came along and tore up the path and pulled up the drain, and produced a smell that beat the other one hollow, and pervaded the entire atmosphere.

The General wisely decided to leave the men to their job and take his wife off on a jaunt for the day.

When they returned in the evening, the smell from the drain was slightly reduced as the men had covered it up before leaving their work for the day, but the stench in the dressing-room had become absolutely insupportable and the General had to have his things moved into another room.

Mr. Walford came to report. “It’s all right, sir,” he said. “We’ve got at the root of the trouble, and we’ll fix it up proper to-morrow.”

Late in the evening the children returned full of accounts of the splendid time they’d been having. Their aunt told them what the workmen had been doing, and added that they were coming again to-morrow to finish the job.

“They found that the smell in uncle’s room, came from outside,” she told them, “and it’s just the usual case in country houses of something wrong with the drains.”

Violet got hold of Jack in a quiet corner before they went to bed and said: “I say, Jackie, this thing is going too far and has got to stop. It’s going to cost a lot of money pulling up all these drains, and uncle will be as savage as a roaring lion when he finds out about our poor little rat.”

“Well, silly, what can we do? We can’t back out of what we’ve done, and we’ll be gone in two days’ time,” replied Jack.

“Oh no, don’t let’s be mean. We can’t let poor old uncle and aunt have all

this bother.”

“Well, then what?”

“Why, we’ll just have to go and confess.”

Jack thought this a rather feeble ending to their enterprise but had to agree that Violet was right.

Next morning, after breakfast, the General was writing in his study when there came a timid knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said, whereupon the niece and nephew entered wearing rather sheepish expressions on their usually alert faces.

“Please we’ve come to confess,” murmured Violet.

“Confess what? Been putting your foot in it again I suppose. Ridiculous infants. Never try a trick till you reckon you can see it through. What’s up now?”

“Why, the smell, uncle. In your room. You said we stank. And we read that story about ‘An unsavoury interlude’ and we thought we’d score off you—and make you stink. So we put a dead rat under the floor-boards in your dressing-room.”

“What the—how the——” the General began with a roar, and then hastily checked the volley of expletives that rose to his lips. “So, my young friends. You adopt this line of action towards your aged uncle? And to keep in with the story you refer to, am I to assume the character of ‘King’, and deal with you as he would have dealt with *Stalky and Co.*?”

“Oh no, please uncle,” hastily interposed Jack. “We don’t want you to be like Mr. King. But we’re very sorry and please forgive us.”

Forgiveness came more easily to the General as it pleased him enormously to feel that he had been right and the plumber wrong.

“All right, my little amateurs,” he said, “you have my full forgiveness for the matter as far as I am concerned, but it is not within my power to forgive your copying someone else’s joke. Make a note of that. Your jokes must be your own and not cribbed from other people.”

“We really are frightfully sorry, uncle,” said Violet, “but we read that story in *Stalky and Co.*, and we thought it was just the sort of joke you would enjoy.”

“Did you? Well, that’s another thing that cannot be forgiven.”

“What?”

“Why, thinking that a man who plays off a joke on someone, enjoys the same joke when it’s played off on him. There’s nothing quite so unpleasant as being hoist with one’s own petard, and your beastly rat was most literally a ‘petard’. Go away and be good and then you will be happy.”

THE END

“ ‘Since I became the father of children, I ceased to play the child. Now thou art old, relinquish childishness, and leave it to the young to indulge in play and merriment. Expect not the sprightliness of youth from the aged; for the stream that ran by can never return. The season of youth has slipt through my hands; alas! When I think on those heart-exhilarating days! The lion has lost the sturdy grasp of his paw: I must now put up, like a lynx, with a bit of cheese’.”

SHEIK SAADI, *“The Gulistan.”*

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author's name and photo have been added to the original blank book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *More Yarns* by Lionel Charles Dunsterville]