

**ГЕРБЕРТ
УЭЛЛС**

TWELVE
STORIES AND
A DREAM

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Twelve Stories and a Dream

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Twelve Stories and a Dream:

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H. G. Wells

Twelve Stories and a Dream

1. FILMER

In truth the mastery of flying was the work of thousands of men – this man a suggestion and that an experiment, until at last only one vigorous intellectual effort was needed to finish the work. But the inexorable injustice of the popular mind has decided that of all these thousands, one man, and that a man who never flew, should be chosen as the discoverer, just as it has chosen to honour Watt as the discoverer of steam and Stephenson of the steam-engine. And surely of all honoured names none is so grotesquely and tragically honoured as poor Filmer's, the timid, intellectual creature who solved the problem over which the world had hung perplexed and a little fearful for so many generations, the man who pressed the button that has changed peace and warfare and well-nigh every condition of human life and happiness. Never has that recurring wonder of the littleness of the scientific man in the face of the greatness of his science found such an amazing exemplification. Much concerning Filmer is, and must remain, profoundly obscure – Filmers attract no Boswells – but the essential facts and the concluding scene are clear enough, and there are letters, and

notes, and casual allusions to piece the whole together. And this is the story one makes, putting this thing with that, of Filmer's life and death.

The first authentic trace of Filmer on the page of history is a document in which he applies for admission as a paid student in physics to the Government laboratories at South Kensington, and therein he describes himself as the son of a "military bootmaker" ("cobbler" in the vulgar tongue) of Dover, and lists his various examination proofs of a high proficiency in chemistry and mathematics. With a certain want of dignity he seeks to enhance these attainments by a profession of poverty and disadvantages, and he writes of the laboratory as the "gaol" of his ambitions, a slip which reinforces his claim to have devoted himself exclusively to the exact sciences. The document is endorsed in a manner that shows Filmer was admitted to this coveted opportunity; but until quite recently no traces of his success in the Government institution could be found.

It has now, however, been shown that in spite of his professed zeal for research, Filmer, before he had held this scholarship a year, was tempted, by the possibility of a small increase in his immediate income, to abandon it in order to become one of the nine-pence-an-hour computers employed by a well-known Professor in his vicarious conduct of those extensive researches of his in solar physics – researches which are still a matter of perplexity to astronomers. Afterwards, for the space of seven years, save for the pass lists of the London University, in which

he is seen to climb slowly to a double first class B.Sc., in mathematics and chemistry, there is no evidence of how Filmer passed his life. No one knows how or where he lived, though it seems highly probable that he continued to support himself by teaching while he prosecuted the studies necessary for this distinction. And then, oddly enough, one finds him mentioned in the correspondence of Arthur Hicks, the poet.

“You remember Filmer,” Hicks writes to his friend Vance; “well, HE hasn’t altered a bit, the same hostile mumble and the nasty chin – how CAN a man contrive to be always three days from shaving? – and a sort of furtive air of being engaged in sneaking in front of one; even his coat and that frayed collar of his show no further signs of the passing years. He was writing in the library and I sat down beside him in the name of God’s charity, whereupon he deliberately insulted me by covering up his memoranda. It seems he has some brilliant research on hand that he suspects me of all people – with a Bodley Booklet a-printing! – of stealing. He has taken remarkable honours at the University – he went through them with a sort of hasty slobber, as though he feared I might interrupt him before he had told me all – and he spoke of taking his D.Sc. as one might speak of taking a cab. And he asked what I was doing – with a sort of comparative accent, and his arm was spread nervously, positively a protecting arm, over the paper that hid the precious idea – his one hopeful idea.

“‘Poetry,’ he said, ‘Poetry. And what do you profess to teach

in it, Hicks?"

"The thing's a Provincial professorling in the very act of budding, and I thank the Lord devoutly that but for the precious gift of indolence I also might have gone this way to D.Sc. and destruction..."

A curious little vignette that I am inclined to think caught Filmer in or near the very birth of his discovery. Hicks was wrong in anticipating a provincial professorship for Filmer. Our next glimpse of him is lecturing on "rubber and rubber substitutes," to the Society of Arts – he had become manager to a great plastic-substance manufactory – and at that time, it is now known, he was a member of the Aeronautical Society, albeit he contributed nothing to the discussions of that body, preferring no doubt to mature his great conception without external assistance. And within two years of that paper before the Society of Arts he was hastily taking out a number of patents and proclaiming in various undignified ways the completion of the divergent inquiries which made his flying machine possible. The first definite statement to that effect appeared in a halfpenny evening paper through the agency of a man who lodged in the same house with Filmer. His final haste after his long laborious secret patience seems to have been due to a needless panic, Bootle, the notorious American scientific quack, having made an announcement that Filmer interpreted wrongly as an anticipation of his idea.

Now what precisely was Filmer's idea? Really a very simple one. Before his time the pursuit of aeronautics had taken two

divergent lines, and had developed on the one hand balloons – large apparatus lighter than air, easy in ascent, and comparatively safe in descent, but floating helplessly before any breeze that took them; and on the other, flying machines that flew only in theory – vast flat structures heavier than air, propelled and kept up by heavy engines and for the most part smashing at the first descent. But, neglecting the fact that the inevitable final collapse rendered them impossible, the weight of the flying machines gave them this theoretical advantage, that they could go through the air against a wind, a necessary condition if aerial navigation was to have any practical value. It is Filmer's particular merit that he perceived the way in which the contrasted and hitherto incompatible merits of balloon and heavy flying machine might be combined in one apparatus, which should be at choice either heavier or lighter than air. He took hints from the contractile bladders of fish and the pneumatic cavities of birds. He devised an arrangement of contractile and absolutely closed balloons which when expanded could lift the actual flying apparatus with ease, and when retracted by the complicated "musculature" he wove about them, were withdrawn almost completely into the frame; and he built the large framework which these balloons sustained, of hollow, rigid tubes, the air in which, by an ingenious contrivance, was automatically pumped out as the apparatus fell, and which then remained exhausted so long as the aeronaut desired. There were no wings or propellers to his machine, such as there had been to all previous aeroplanes, and the only

engine required was the compact and powerful little appliance needed to contract the balloons. He perceived that such an apparatus as he had devised might rise with frame exhausted and balloons expanded to a considerable height, might then contract its balloons and let the air into its frame, and by an adjustment of its weights slide down the air in any desired direction. As it fell it would accumulate velocity and at the same time lose weight, and the momentum accumulated by its down-rush could be utilised by means of a shifting of its weights to drive it up in the air again as the balloons expanded. This conception, which is still the structural conception of all successful flying machines, needed, however, a vast amount of toil upon its details before it could actually be realised, and such toil Filmer – as he was accustomed to tell the numerous interviewers who crowded upon him in the heyday of his fame – “ungrudgingly and unsparingly gave.” His particular difficulty was the elastic lining of the contractile balloon. He found he needed a new substance, and in the discovery and manufacture of that new substance he had, as he never failed to impress upon the interviewers, “performed a far more arduous work than even in the actual achievement of my seemingly greater discovery.”

But it must not be imagined that these interviews followed hard upon Filmer’s proclamation of his invention. An interval of nearly five years elapsed during which he timidly remained at his rubber factory – he seems to have been entirely dependent on his small income from this source – making misdirected

attempts to assure a quite indifferent public that he really HAD invented what he had invented. He occupied the greater part of his leisure in the composition of letters to the scientific and daily press, and so forth, stating precisely the net result of his contrivances, and demanding financial aid. That alone would have sufficed for the suppression of his letters. He spent such holidays as he could arrange in unsatisfactory interviews with the door-keepers of leading London papers – he was singularly not adapted for inspiring hall-porters with confidence – and he positively attempted to induce the War Office to take up his work with him. There remains a confidential letter from Major-General Volleyfire to the Earl of Frogs. “The man’s a crank and a bounder to boot,” says the Major-General in his bluff, sensible, army way, and so left it open for the Japanese to secure, as they subsequently did, the priority in this side of warfare – a priority they still to our great discomfort retain.

And then by a stroke of luck the membrane Filmer had invented for his contractile balloon was discovered to be useful for the valves of a new oil-engine, and he obtained the means for making a trial model of his invention. He threw up his rubber factory appointment, desisted from all further writing, and, with a certain secrecy that seems to have been an inseparable characteristic of all his proceedings, set to work upon the apparatus. He seems to have directed the making of its parts and collected most of it in a room in Shoreditch, but its final putting together was done at Dymchurch, in Kent. He did not

make the affair large enough to carry a man, but he made an extremely ingenious use of what were then called the Marconi rays to control its flight. The first flight of this first practicable flying machine took place over some fields near Burford Bridge, near Hythe, in Kent, and Filmer followed and controlled its flight upon a specially constructed motor tricycle.

The flight was, considering all things, an amazing success. The apparatus was brought in a cart from Dymchurch to Burford Bridge, ascended there to a height of nearly three hundred feet, swooped thence very nearly back to Dymchurch, came about in its sweep, rose again, circled, and finally sank uninjured in a field behind the Burford Bridge Inn. At its descent a curious thing happened. Filmer got off his tricycle, scrambled over the intervening dyke, advanced perhaps twenty yards towards his triumph, threw out his arms in a strange gesticulation, and fell down in a dead faint. Every one could then recall the ghastliness of his features and all the evidences of extreme excitement they had observed throughout the trial, things they might otherwise have forgotten. Afterwards in the inn he had an unaccountable gust of hysterical weeping.

Altogether there were not twenty witnesses of this affair, and those for the most part uneducated men. The New Romney doctor saw the ascent but not the descent, his horse being frightened by the electrical apparatus on Filmer's tricycle and giving him a nasty spill. Two members of the Kent constabulary watched the affair from a cart in an unofficial spirit, and a

grocer calling round the Marsh for orders and two lady cyclists seem almost to complete the list of educated people. There were two reporters present, one representing a Folkestone paper and the other being a fourth-class interviewer and “symposium” journalist, whose expenses down, Filmer, anxious as ever for adequate advertisement – and now quite realising the way in which adequate advertisement may be obtained – had paid. The latter was one of those writers who can throw a convincing air of unreality over the most credible events, and his half-facetious account of the affair appeared in the magazine page of a popular journal. But, happily for Filmer, this person’s colloquial methods were more convincing. He went to offer some further screed upon the subject to Banghurst, the proprietor of the New Paper, and one of the ablest and most unscrupulous men in London journalism, and Banghurst instantly seized upon the situation. The interviewer vanishes from the narrative, no doubt very doubtfully remunerated, and Banghurst, Banghurst himself, double chin, grey twill suit, abdomen, voice, gestures and all, appears at Dymchurch, following his large, unrivalled journalistic nose. He had seen the whole thing at a glance, just what it was and what it might be.

At his touch, as it were, Filmer’s long-pent investigations exploded into fame. He instantly and most magnificently was a Boom. One turns over the files of the journals of the year 1907 with a quite incredulous recognition of how swift and flaming the boom of those days could be. The July papers know nothing

of flying, see nothing in flying, state by a most effective silence that men never would, could or should fly. In August flying and Filmer and flying and parachutes and aerial tactics and the Japanese Government and Filmer and again flying, shouldered the war in Yunnan and the gold mines of Upper Greenland off the leading page. And Banghurst had given ten thousand pounds, and, further, Banghurst was giving five thousand pounds, and Banghurst had devoted his well-known, magnificent (but hitherto sterile) private laboratories and several acres of land near his private residence on the Surrey hills to the strenuous and violent completion – Banghurst fashion – of the life-size practicable flying machine. Meanwhile, in the sight of privileged multitudes in the walled-garden of the Banghurst town residence in Fulham, Filmer was exhibited at weekly garden parties putting the working model through its paces. At enormous initial cost, but with a final profit, the New Paper presented its readers with a beautiful photographic souvenir of the first of these occasions.

Here again the correspondence of Arthur Hicks and his friend Vance comes to our aid.

“I saw Filmer in his glory,” he writes, with just the touch of envy natural to his position as a poet passe. “The man is brushed and shaved, dressed in the fashion of a Royal-Institution-Afternoon Lecturer, the very newest shape in frock-coats and long patent shoes, and altogether in a state of extraordinary streakiness between an owlish great man and a scared abashed self-conscious boulder cruelly exposed. He hasn’t a touch of

colour in the skin of his face, his head juts forward, and those queer little dark amber eyes of his watch furtively round him for his fame. His clothes fit perfectly and yet sit upon him as though he had bought them ready-made. He speaks in a mumble still, but he says, you perceive indistinctly, enormous self-assertive things, he backs into the rear of groups by instinct if Banghurst drops the line for a minute, and when he walks across Banghurst's lawn one perceives him a little out of breath and going jerky, and that his weak white hands are clenched. His is a state of tension – horrible tension. And he is the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age – the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age! What strikes one so forcibly about him is that he didn't somehow quite expect it ever, at any rate, not at all like this. Banghurst is about everywhere, the energetic M.C. of his great little catch, and I swear he will have every one down on his lawn there before he has finished with the engine; he had bagged the prime minister yesterday, and he, bless his heart! didn't look particularly outsize, on the very first occasion. Conceive it! Filmer! Our obscure unwashed Filmer, the Glory of British science! Duchesses crowd upon him, beautiful, bold peeresses say in their beautiful, clear loud voices – have you noticed how penetrating the great lady is becoming nowadays? – ‘Oh, Mr. Filmer, how DID you do it?’

“Common men on the edge of things are too remote for the answer. One imagines something in the way of that interview, ‘toil ungrudgingly and unsparingly given, Madam, and, perhaps – I don't know – but perhaps a little special aptitude.’”

So far Hicks, and the photographic supplement to the New Paper is in sufficient harmony with the description. In one picture the machine swings down towards the river, and the tower of Fulham church appears below it through a gap in the elms, and in another, Filmer sits at his guiding batteries, and the great and beautiful of the earth stand around him, with Banghurst massed modestly but resolutely in the rear. The grouping is oddly apposite. Occluding much of Banghurst, and looking with a pensive, speculative expression at Filmer, stands the Lady Mary Elkinghorn, still beautiful, in spite of the breath of scandal and her eight-and-thirty years, the only person whose face does not admit a perception of the camera that was in the act of snapping them all.

So much for the exterior facts of the story, but, after all, they are very exterior facts. About the real interest of the business one is necessarily very much in the dark. How was Filmer feeling at the time? How much was a certain unpleasant anticipation present inside that very new and fashionable frock-coat? He was in the halfpenny, penny, six-penny, and more expensive papers alike, and acknowledged by the whole world as “the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age.” He had invented a practicable flying machine, and every day down among the Surrey hills the life-sized model was getting ready. And when it was ready, it followed as a clear inevitable consequence of his having invented and made it – everybody in the world, indeed, seemed to take it for granted; there wasn’t a gap anywhere in that serried front of

anticipation – that he would proudly and cheerfully get aboard it, ascend with it, and fly.

But we know now pretty clearly that simple pride and cheerfulness in such an act were singularly out of harmony with Filmer's private constitution. It occurred to no one at the time, but there the fact is. We can guess with some confidence now that it must have been drifting about in his mind a great deal during the day, and, from a little note to his physician complaining of persistent insomnia, we have the soundest reason for supposing it dominated his nights, – the idea that it would be after all, in spite of his theoretical security, an abominably sickening, uncomfortable, and dangerous thing for him to flap about in nothingness a thousand feet or so in the air. It must have dawned upon him quite early in the period of being the Greatest Discoverer of This or Any Age, the vision of doing this and that with an extensive void below. Perhaps somewhen in his youth he had looked down a great height or fallen down in some excessively uncomfortable way; perhaps some habit of sleeping on the wrong side had resulted in that disagreeable falling nightmare one knows, and given him his horror; of the strength of that horror there remains now not a particle of doubt.

Apparently he had never weighed this duty of flying in his earlier days of research; the machine had been his end, but now things were opening out beyond his end, and particularly this giddy whirl up above there. He was a Discoverer and he had Discovered. But he was not a Flying Man, and it was only now

that he was beginning to perceive clearly that he was expected to fly. Yet, however much the thing was present in his mind he gave no expression to it until the very end, and meanwhile he went to and fro from Banghurst's magnificent laboratories, and was interviewed and lionised, and wore good clothes, and ate good food, and lived in an elegant flat, enjoying a very abundant feast of such good, coarse, wholesome Fame and Success as a man, starved for all his years as he had been starved, might be reasonably expected to enjoy.

After a time, the weekly gatherings in Fulham ceased. The model had failed one day just for a moment to respond to Filmer's guidance, or he had been distracted by the compliments of an archbishop. At any rate, it suddenly dug its nose into the air just a little too steeply as the archbishop was sailing through a Latin quotation for all the world like an archbishop in a book, and it came down in the Fulham Road within three yards of a 'bus horse. It stood for a second perhaps, astonishing and in its attitude astonished, then it crumpled, shivered into pieces, and the 'bus horse was incidentally killed.

Filmer lost the end of the archiepiscopal compliment. He stood up and stared as his invention swooped out of sight and reach of him. His long, white hands still gripped his useless apparatus. The archbishop followed his skyward stare with an apprehension unbecoming in an archbishop.

Then came the crash and the shouts and uproar from the road to relieve Filmer's tension. "My God!" he whispered, and sat

down.

Every one else almost was staring to see where the machine had vanished, or rushing into the house.

The making of the big machine progressed all the more rapidly for this. Over its making presided Filmer, always a little slow and very careful in his manner, always with a growing preoccupation in his mind. His care over the strength and soundness of the apparatus was prodigious. The slightest doubt, and he delayed everything until the doubtful part could be replaced. Wilkinson, his senior assistant, fumed at some of these delays, which, he insisted, were for the most part unnecessary. Banghurst magnified the patient certitude of Filmer in the New Paper, and reviled it bitterly to his wife, and MacAndrew, the second assistant, approved Filmer's wisdom. "We're not wanting a fiasco, man," said MacAndrew. "He's perfectly well advised."

And whenever an opportunity arose Filmer would expound to Wilkinson and MacAndrew just exactly how every part of the flying machine was to be controlled and worked, so that in effect they would be just as capable, and even more capable, when at last the time came, of guiding it through the skies.

Now I should imagine that if Filmer had seen fit at this stage to define just what he was feeling, and to take a definite line in the matter of his ascent, he might have escaped that painful ordeal quite easily. If he had had it clearly in his mind he could have done endless things. He would surely have found no difficulty with a specialist to demonstrate a weak heart, or something

gastric or pulmonary, to stand in his way – that is the line I am astonished he did not take, – or he might, had he been man enough, have declared simply and finally that he did not intend to do the thing. But the fact is, though the dread was hugely present in his mind, the thing was by no means sharp and clear. I fancy that all through this period he kept telling himself that when the occasion came he would find himself equal to it. He was like a man just gripped by a great illness, who says he feels a little out of sorts, and expects to be better presently. Meanwhile he delayed the completion of the machine, and let the assumption that he was going to fly it take root and flourish exceedingly about him. He even accepted anticipatory compliments on his courage. And, barring this secret squeamishness, there can be no doubt he found all the praise and distinction and fuss he got a delightful and even intoxicating draught.

The Lady Mary Elkinghorn made things a little more complicated for him.

How THAT began was a subject of inexhaustible speculation to Hicks. Probably in the beginning she was just a little “nice” to him with that impartial partiality of hers, and it may be that to her eyes, standing out conspicuously as he did ruling his monster in the upper air, he had a distinction that Hicks was not disposed to find. And somehow they must have had a moment of sufficient isolation, and the great Discoverer a moment of sufficient courage for something just a little personal to be mumbled or blurted. However it began, there is no doubt

that it did begin, and presently became quite perceptible to a world accustomed to find in the proceedings of the Lady Mary Elkinghorn a matter of entertainment. It complicated things, because the state of love in such a virgin mind as Filmer's would brace his resolution, if not sufficiently, at any rate considerably towards facing a danger he feared, and hampered him in such attempts at evasion as would otherwise be natural and congenial.

It remains a matter for speculation just how the Lady Mary felt for Filmer and just what she thought of him. At thirty-eight one may have gathered much wisdom and still be not altogether wise, and the imagination still functions actively enough in creating glammers and effecting the impossible. He came before her eyes as a very central man, and that always counts, and he had powers, unique powers as it seemed, at any rate in the air. The performance with the model had just a touch of the quality of a potent incantation, and women have ever displayed an unreasonable disposition to imagine that when a man has powers he must necessarily have Power. Given so much, and what was not good in Filmer's manner and appearance became an added merit. He was modest, he hated display, but given an occasion where TRUE qualities are needed, then – then one would see!

The late Mrs. Bampton thought it wise to convey to Lady Mary her opinion that Filmer, all things considered, was rather a "grub." "He's certainly not a sort of man I have ever met before," said the Lady Mary, with a quite unruffled serenity. And Mrs. Bampton, after a swift, imperceptible glance at that serenity,

decided that so far as saying anything to Lady Mary went, she had done as much as could be expected of her. But she said a great deal to other people.

And at last, without any undue haste or unseemliness, the day dawned, the great day, when Banghurst had promised his public – the world in fact – that flying should be finally attained and overcome. Filmer saw it dawn, watched even in the darkness before it dawned, watched its stars fade and the grey and pearly pinks give place at last to the clear blue sky of a sunny, cloudless day. He watched it from the window of his bedroom in the new-built wing of Banghurst's Tudor house. And as the stars were overwhelmed and the shapes and substances of things grew into being out of the amorphous dark, he must have seen more and more distinctly the festive preparations beyond the beech clumps near the green pavilion in the outer park, the three stands for the privileged spectators, the raw, new fencing of the enclosure, the sheds and workshops, the Venetian masts and fluttering flags that Banghurst had considered essential, black and limp in the breezeless dawn, and amidst all these things a great shape covered with tarpauling. A strange and terrible portent for humanity was that shape, a beginning that must surely spread and widen and change and dominate all the affairs of men, but to Filmer it is very doubtful whether it appeared in anything but a narrow and personal light. Several people heard him pacing in the small hours – for the vast place was packed with guests by a proprietor editor who, before all understood

compression. And about five o'clock, if not before, Filmer left his room and wandered out of the sleeping house into the park, alive by that time with sunlight and birds and squirrels and the fallow deer. MacAndrew, who was also an early riser, met him near the machine, and they went and had a look at it together.

It is doubtful if Filmer took any breakfast, in spite of the urgency of Banghurst. So soon as the guests began to be about in some number he seems to have retreated to his room. Thence about ten he went into the shrubbery, very probably because he had seen the Lady Mary Elkinghorn there. She was walking up and down, engaged in conversation with her old school friend, Mrs. Brewis-Craven, and although Filmer had never met the latter lady before, he joined them and walked beside them for some time. There were several silences in spite of the Lady Mary's brilliance. The situation was a difficult one, and Mrs. Brewis-Craven did not master its difficulty. "He struck me," she said afterwards with a luminous self-contradiction, "as a very unhappy person who had something to say, and wanted before all things to be helped to say it. But how was one to help him when one didn't know what it was?"

At half-past eleven the enclosures for the public in the outer park were crammed, there was an intermittent stream of equipages along the belt which circles the outer park, and the house party was dotted over the lawn and shrubbery and the corner of the inner park, in a series of brilliantly attired knots, all making for the flying machine. Filmer walked in a group of three

with Banghurst, who was supremely and conspicuously happy, and Sir Theodore Hickle, the president of the Aeronautical Society. Mrs. Banghurst was close behind with the Lady Mary Elkinghorn, Georgina Hickle, and the Dean of Stays. Banghurst was large and copious in speech, and such interstices as he left were filled in by Hickle with complimentary remarks to Filmer. And Filmer walked between them saying not a word except by way of unavoidable reply. Behind, Mrs. Banghurst listened to the admirably suitable and shapely conversation of the Dean with that fluttered attention to the ampler clergy ten years of social ascent and ascendancy had not cured in her; and the Lady Mary watched, no doubt with an entire confidence in the world's disillusionment, the drooping shoulders of the sort of man she had never met before.

There was some cheering as the central party came into view of the enclosures, but it was not very unanimous nor invigorating cheering. They were within fifty yards of the apparatus when Filmer took a hasty glance over his shoulder to measure the distance of the ladies behind them, and decided to make the first remark he had initiated since the house had been left. His voice was just a little hoarse, and he cut in on Banghurst in mid-sentence on Progress.

"I say, Banghurst," he said, and stopped.

"Yes," said Banghurst.

"I wish – " He moistened his lips. "I'm not feeling well."

Banghurst stopped dead. "Eh?" he shouted.

“A queer feeling.” Filmer made to move on, but Banghurst was immovable. “I don’t know. I may be better in a minute. If not – perhaps... MacAndrew – ”

“You’re not feeling WELL?” said Banghurst, and stared at his white face.

“My dear!” he said, as Mrs. Banghurst came up with them, “Filmer says he isn’t feeling WELL.”

“A little queer,” exclaimed Filmer, avoiding the Lady Mary’s eyes. “It may pass off – ”

There was a pause.

It came to Filmer that he was the most isolated person in the world.

“In any case,” said Banghurst, “the ascent must be made. Perhaps if you were to sit down somewhere for a moment – ”

“It’s the crowd, I think,” said Filmer.

There was a second pause. Banghurst’s eye rested in scrutiny on Filmer, and then swept the sample of public in the enclosure.

“It’s unfortunate,” said Sir Theodore Hickle; “but still – I suppose – Your assistants – Of course, if you feel out of condition and disinclined – ”

“I don’t think Mr. Filmer would permit THAT for a moment,” said Lady Mary.

“But if Mr. Filmer’s nerve is run – It might even be dangerous for him to attempt – ” Hickle coughed.

“It’s just because it’s dangerous,” began the Lady Mary, and felt she had made her point of view and Filmer’s plain enough.

Conflicting motives struggled for Filmer.

“I feel I ought to go up,” he said, regarding the ground. He looked up and met the Lady Mary’s eyes. “I want to go up,” he said, and smiled whitely at her. He turned towards Banghurst. “If I could just sit down somewhere for a moment out of the crowd and sun – ”

Banghurst, at least, was beginning to understand the case. “Come into my little room in the green pavilion,” he said. “It’s quite cool there.” He took Filmer by the arm.

Filmer turned his face to the Lady Mary Elkinghorn again. “I shall be all right in five minutes,” he said. “I’m tremendously sorry – ”

The Lady Mary Elkinghorn smiled at him. “I couldn’t think – ” he said to Hickle, and obeyed the compulsion of Banghurst’s pull.

The rest remained watching the two recede.

“He is so fragile,” said the Lady Mary.

“He’s certainly a highly nervous type,” said the Dean, whose weakness it was to regard the whole world, except married clergymen with enormous families, as “neurotic.”

“Of course,” said Hickle, “it isn’t absolutely necessary for him to go up because he has invented – ”

“How COULD he avoid it?” asked the Lady Mary, with the faintest shadow of scorn.

“It’s certainly most unfortunate if he’s going to be ill now,” said Mrs. Banghurst a little severely.

“He’s not going to be ill,” said the Lady Mary, and certainly she had met Filmer’s eye.

“YOU’LL be all right,” said Banghurst, as they went towards the pavilion. “All you want is a nip of brandy. It ought to be you, you know. You’ll be – you’d get it rough, you know, if you let another man – ”

“Oh, I want to go,” said Filmer. “I shall be all right. As a matter of fact I’m almost inclined NOW – . No! I think I’ll have that nip of brandy first.”

Banghurst took him into the little room and routed out an empty decanter. He departed in search of a supply. He was gone perhaps five minutes.

The history of those five minutes cannot be written. At intervals Filmer’s face could be seen by the people on the easternmost of the stands erected for spectators, against the window pane peering out, and then it would recede and fade. Banghurst vanished shouting behind the grand stand, and presently the butler appeared going pavilionward with a tray.

The apartment in which Filmer came to his last solution was a pleasant little room very simply furnished with green furniture and an old bureau – for Banghurst was simple in all his private ways. It was hung with little engravings after Morland and it had a shelf of books. But as it happened, Banghurst had left a rook rifle he sometimes played with on the top of the desk, and on the corner of the mantelshelf was a tin with three or four cartridges remaining in it. As Filmer went up and down that room wrestling

with his intolerable dilemma he went first towards the neat little rifle athwart the blotting-pad and then towards the neat little red label

“.22 LONG.”

The thing must have jumped into his mind in a moment.

Nobody seems to have connected the report with him, though the gun, being fired in a confined space, must have sounded loud, and there were several people in the billiard-room, separated from him only by a lath-and-plaster partition. But directly Banghurst's butler opened the door and smelt the sour smell of the smoke, he knew, he says, what had happened. For the servants at least of Banghurst's household had guessed something of what was going on in Filmer's mind.

All through that trying afternoon Banghurst behaved as he held a man should behave in the presence of hopeless disaster, and his guests for the most part succeeded in not insisting upon the fact – though to conceal their perception of it altogether was impossible – that Banghurst had been pretty elaborately and completely swindled by the deceased. The public in the enclosure, Hicks told me, dispersed “like a party that has been ducking a welsher,” and there wasn't a soul in the train to London, it seems, who hadn't known all along that flying was a quite impossible thing for man. “But he might have tried it,” said many, “after carrying the thing so far.”

In the evening, when he was comparatively alone, Banghurst broke down and went on like a man of clay. I have been told he

wept, which must have made an imposing scene, and he certainly said Filmer had ruined his life, and offered and sold the whole apparatus to MacAndrew for half-a-crown. "I've been thinking –" said MacAndrew at the conclusion of the bargain, and stopped.

The next morning the name of Filmer was, for the first time, less conspicuous in the New Paper than in any other daily paper in the world. The rest of the world's instructors, with varying emphasis, according to their dignity and the degree of competition between themselves and the New Paper, proclaimed the "Entire Failure of the New Flying Machine," and "Suicide of the Impostor." But in the district of North Surrey the reception of the news was tempered by a perception of unusual aerial phenomena.

Overnight Wilkinson and MacAndrew had fallen into violent argument on the exact motives of their principal's rash act.

"The man was certainly a poor, cowardly body, but so far as his science went he was NO impostor," said MacAndrew, "and I'm prepared to give that proposition a very practical demonstration, Mr. Wilkinson, so soon as we've got the place a little more to ourselves. For I've no faith in all this publicity for experimental trials."

And to that end, while all the world was reading of the certain failure of the new flying machine, MacAndrew was soaring and curvetting with great amplitude and dignity over the Epsom and Wimbledon divisions; and Banghurst, restored once more to hope and energy, and regardless of public security and the Board

of Trade, was pursuing his gyrations and trying to attract his attention, on a motor car and in his pyjamas – he had caught sight of the ascent when pulling up the blind of his bedroom window – equipped, among other things, with a film camera that was subsequently discovered to be jammed. And Filmer was lying on the billiard table in the green pavilion with a sheet about his body.

2. THE MAGIC SHOP

I had seen the Magic Shop from afar several times; I had passed it once or twice, a shop window of alluring little objects, magic balls, magic hens, wonderful cones, ventriloquist dolls, the material of the basket trick, packs of cards that LOOKED all right, and all that sort of thing, but never had I thought of going in until one day, almost without warning, Gip hauled me by my finger right up to the window, and so conducted himself that there was nothing for it but to take him in. I had not thought the place was there, to tell the truth – a modest-sized frontage in Regent Street, between the picture shop and the place where the chicks run about just out of patent incubators, but there it was sure enough. I had fancied it was down nearer the Circus, or round the corner in Oxford Street, or even in Holborn; always over the way and a little inaccessible it had been, with something of the mirage in its position; but here it was now quite indisputably, and the fat end of Gip's pointing finger made a noise upon the glass.

“If I was rich,” said Gip, dabbing a finger at the Disappearing Egg, “I'd buy myself that. And that” – which was The Crying Baby, Very Human – “and that,” which was a mystery, and called, so a neat card asserted, “Buy One and Astonish Your Friends.”

“Anything,” said Gip, “will disappear under one of those cones. I have read about it in a book.

“And there, dadda, is the Vanishing Halfpenny – , only they’ve put it this way up so’s we can’t see how it’s done.”

Gip, dear boy, inherits his mother’s breeding, and he did not propose to enter the shop or worry in any way; only, you know, quite unconsciously he lugged my finger doorward, and he made his interest clear.

“That,” he said, and pointed to the Magic Bottle.

“If you had that?” I said; at which promising inquiry he looked up with a sudden radiance.

“I could show it to Jessie,” he said, thoughtful as ever of others.

“It’s less than a hundred days to your birthday, Gibbles,” I said, and laid my hand on the door-handle.

Gip made no answer, but his grip tightened on my finger, and so we came into the shop.

It was no common shop this; it was a magic shop, and all the prancing precedence Gip would have taken in the matter of mere toys was wanting. He left the burthen of the conversation to me.

It was a little, narrow shop, not very well lit, and the door-bell pinged again with a plaintive note as we closed it behind us. For a moment or so we were alone and could glance about us. There was a tiger in papier-mache on the glass case that covered the low counter – a grave, kind-eyed tiger that wagged his head in a methodical manner; there were several crystal spheres, a china hand holding magic cards, a stock of magic fish-bowls in various sizes, and an immodest magic hat that shamelessly displayed its springs. On the floor were magic mirrors; one to draw you out

long and thin, one to swell your head and vanish your legs, and one to make you short and fat like a draught; and while we were laughing at these the shopman, as I suppose, came in.

At any rate, there he was behind the counter – a curious, sallow, dark man, with one ear larger than the other and a chin like the toe-cap of a boot.

“What can we have the pleasure?” he said, spreading his long, magic fingers on the glass case; and so with a start we were aware of him.

“I want,” I said, “to buy my little boy a few simple tricks.”

“Legerdemain?” he asked. “Mechanical? Domestic?”

“Anything amusing?” said I.

“Um!” said the shopman, and scratched his head for a moment as if thinking. Then, quite distinctly, he drew from his head a glass ball. “Something in this way?” he said, and held it out.

The action was unexpected. I had seen the trick done at entertainments endless times before – it’s part of the common stock of conjurers – but I had not expected it here.

“That’s good,” I said, with a laugh.

“Isn’t it?” said the shopman.

Gip stretched out his disengaged hand to take this object and found merely a blank palm.

“It’s in your pocket,” said the shopman, and there it was!

“How much will that be?” I asked.

“We make no charge for glass balls,” said the shopman politely. “We get them,” – he picked one out of his elbow as he

spoke – “free.” He produced another from the back of his neck, and laid it beside its predecessor on the counter. Gip regarded his glass ball sagely, then directed a look of inquiry at the two on the counter, and finally brought his round-eyed scrutiny to the shopman, who smiled.

“You may have those too,” said the shopman, “and, if you DON’T mind, one from my mouth. SO!”

Gip counselled me mutely for a moment, and then in a profound silence put away the four balls, resumed my reassuring finger, and nerved himself for the next event.

“We get all our smaller tricks in that way,” the shopman remarked.

I laughed in the manner of one who subscribes to a jest. “Instead of going to the wholesale shop,” I said. “Of course, it’s cheaper.”

“In a way,” the shopman said. “Though we pay in the end. But not so heavily – as people suppose... Our larger tricks, and our daily provisions and all the other things we want, we get out of that hat... And you know, sir, if you’ll excuse my saying it, there ISN’T a wholesale shop, not for Genuine Magic goods, sir. I don’t know if you noticed our inscription – the Genuine Magic shop.” He drew a business-card from his cheek and handed it to me. “Genuine,” he said, with his finger on the word, and added, “There is absolutely no deception, sir.”

He seemed to be carrying out the joke pretty thoroughly, I thought.

He turned to Gip with a smile of remarkable affability. "You, you know, are the Right Sort of Boy."

I was surprised at his knowing that, because, in the interests of discipline, we keep it rather a secret even at home; but Gip received it in unflinching silence, keeping a steadfast eye on him.

"It's only the Right Sort of Boy gets through that doorway."

And, as if by way of illustration, there came a rattling at the door, and a squeaking little voice could be faintly heard. "Nyar! I WARN 'a go in there, dadda, I WARN 'a go in there. Ny-a-a-ah!" and then the accents of a down-trodden parent, urging consolations and propitiations. "It's locked, Edward," he said.

"But it isn't," said I.

"It is, sir," said the shopman, "always – for that sort of child," and as he spoke we had a glimpse of the other youngster, a little, white face, pallid from sweet-eating and over-sapid food, and distorted by evil passions, a ruthless little egotist, pawing at the enchanted pane. "It's no good, sir," said the shopman, as I moved, with my natural helpfulness, doorward, and presently the spoilt child was carried off howling.

"How do you manage that?" I said, breathing a little more freely.

"Magic!" said the shopman, with a careless wave of the hand, and behold! sparks of coloured fire flew out of his fingers and vanished into the shadows of the shop.

"You were saying," he said, addressing himself to Gip, "before you came in, that you would like one of our 'Buy One and

Astonish your Friends' boxes?"

Gip, after a gallant effort, said "Yes."

"It's in your pocket."

And leaning over the counter – he really had an extraordinarily long body – this amazing person produced the article in the customary conjurer's manner. "Paper," he said, and took a sheet out of the empty hat with the springs; "string," and behold his mouth was a string-box, from which he drew an unending thread, which when he had tied his parcel he bit off – and, it seemed to me, swallowed the ball of string. And then he lit a candle at the nose of one of the ventriloquist's dummies, stuck one of his fingers (which had become sealing-wax red) into the flame, and so sealed the parcel. "Then there was the Disappearing Egg," he remarked, and produced one from within my coat-breast and packed it, and also The Crying Baby, Very Human. I handed each parcel to Gip as it was ready, and he clasped them to his chest.

He said very little, but his eyes were eloquent; the clutch of his arms was eloquent. He was the playground of unspeakable emotions. These, you know, were REAL Magics. Then, with a start, I discovered something moving about in my hat – something soft and jumpy. I whipped it off, and a ruffled pigeon – no doubt a confederate – dropped out and ran on the counter, and went, I fancy, into a cardboard box behind the papier-mache tiger.

"Tut, tut!" said the shopman, dexterously relieving me of my headdress; "careless bird, and – as I live – nesting!"

He shook my hat, and shook out into his extended hand two or three eggs, a large marble, a watch, about half-a-dozen of the inevitable glass balls, and then crumpled, crinkled paper, more and more and more, talking all the time of the way in which people neglect to brush their hats INSIDE as well as out, politely, of course, but with a certain personal application. “All sorts of things accumulate, sir... Not YOU, of course, in particular... Nearly every customer... Astonishing what they carry about with them...” The crumpled paper rose and billowed on the counter more and more and more, until he was nearly hidden from us, until he was altogether hidden, and still his voice went on and on. “We none of us know what the fair semblance of a human being may conceal, sir. Are we all then no better than brushed exteriors, whited sepulchres – ”

His voice stopped – exactly like when you hit a neighbour’s gramophone with a well-aimed brick, the same instant silence, and the rustle of the paper stopped, and everything was still...

“Have you done with my hat?” I said, after an interval.

There was no answer.

I stared at Gip, and Gip stared at me, and there were our distortions in the magic mirrors, looking very rum, and grave, and quiet...

“I think we’ll go now,” I said. “Will you tell me how much all this comes to?..

“I say,” I said, on a rather louder note, “I want the bill; and my hat, please.”

It might have been a sniff from behind the paper pile...

"Let's look behind the counter, Gip," I said. "He's making fun of us."

I led Gip round the head-wagging tiger, and what do you think there was behind the counter? No one at all! Only my hat on the floor, and a common conjurer's lop-eared white rabbit lost in meditation, and looking as stupid and crumpled as only a conjurer's rabbit can do. I resumed my hat, and the rabbit lolloped a lollop or so out of my way.

"Dadda!" said Gip, in a guilty whisper.

"What is it, Gip?" said I.

"I DO like this shop, dadda."

"So should I," I said to myself, "if the counter wouldn't suddenly extend itself to shut one off from the door." But I didn't call Gip's attention to that. "Pussy!" he said, with a hand out to the rabbit as it came lolloping past us; "Pussy, do Gip a magic!" and his eyes followed it as it squeezed through a door I had certainly not remarked a moment before. Then this door opened wider, and the man with one ear larger than the other appeared again. He was smiling still, but his eye met mine with something between amusement and defiance. "You'd like to see our show-room, sir," he said, with an innocent suavity. Gip tugged my finger forward. I glanced at the counter and met the shopman's eye again. I was beginning to think the magic just a little too genuine. "We haven't VERY much time," I said. But somehow we were inside the show-room before I could finish that.

“All goods of the same quality,” said the shopman, rubbing his flexible hands together, “and that is the Best. Nothing in the place that isn’t genuine Magic, and warranted thoroughly rum. Excuse me, sir!”

I felt him pull at something that clung to my coat-sleeve, and then I saw he held a little, wriggling red demon by the tail – the little creature bit and fought and tried to get at his hand – and in a moment he tossed it carelessly behind a counter. No doubt the thing was only an image of twisted indiarubber, but for the moment – ! And his gesture was exactly that of a man who handles some petty biting bit of vermin. I glanced at Gip, but Gip was looking at a magic rocking-horse. I was glad he hadn’t seen the thing. “I say,” I said, in an undertone, and indicating Gip and the red demon with my eyes, “you haven’t many things like THAT about, have you?”

“None of ours! Probably brought it with you,” said the shopman – also in an undertone, and with a more dazzling smile than ever. “Astonishing what people WILL carry about with them unawares!” And then to Gip, “Do you see anything you fancy here?”

There were many things that Gip fancied there.

He turned to this astonishing tradesman with mingled confidence and respect. “Is that a Magic Sword?” he said.

“A Magic Toy Sword. It neither bends, breaks, nor cuts the fingers. It renders the bearer invincible in battle against any one under eighteen. Half-a-crown to seven and sixpence, according

to size. These panoplies on cards are for juvenile knights-errant and very useful – shield of safety, sandals of swiftness, helmet of invisibility.”

“Oh, daddy!” gasped Gip.

I tried to find out what they cost, but the shopman did not heed me. He had got Gip now; he had got him away from my finger; he had embarked upon the exposition of all his confounded stock, and nothing was going to stop him. Presently I saw with a qualm of distrust and something very like jealousy that Gip had hold of this person’s finger as usually he has hold of mine. No doubt the fellow was interesting, I thought, and had an interestingly faked lot of stuff, really GOOD faked stuff, still —

I wandered after them, saying very little, but keeping an eye on this prestidigital fellow. After all, Gip was enjoying it. And no doubt when the time came to go we should be able to go quite easily.

It was a long, rambling place, that show-room, a gallery broken up by stands and stalls and pillars, with archways leading off to other departments, in which the queerest-looking assistants loafed and stared at one, and with perplexing mirrors and curtains. So perplexing, indeed, were these that I was presently unable to make out the door by which we had come.

The shopman showed Gip magic trains that ran without steam or clockwork, just as you set the signals, and then some very, very valuable boxes of soldiers that all came alive directly you took off the lid and said – . I myself haven’t a very quick ear

and it was a tongue-twisting sound, but Gip – he has his mother’s ear – got it in no time. “Bravo!” said the shopman, putting the men back into the box unceremoniously and handing it to Gip. “Now,” said the shopman, and in a moment Gip had made them all alive again.

“You’ll take that box?” asked the shopman.

“We’ll take that box,” said I, “unless you charge its full value. In which case it would need a Trust Magnate – ”

“Dear heart! NO!” and the shopman swept the little men back again, shut the lid, waved the box in the air, and there it was, in brown paper, tied up and – WITH GIP’S FULL NAME AND ADDRESS ON THE PAPER!

The shopman laughed at my amazement.

“This is the genuine magic,” he said. “The real thing.”

“It’s a little too genuine for my taste,” I said again.

After that he fell to showing Gip tricks, odd tricks, and still odder the way they were done. He explained them, he turned them inside out, and there was the dear little chap nodding his busy bit of a head in the sagest manner.

I did not attend as well as I might. “Hey, presto!” said the Magic Shopman, and then would come the clear, small “Hey, presto!” of the boy. But I was distracted by other things. It was being borne in upon me just how tremendously rum this place was; it was, so to speak, inundated by a sense of rumness. There was something a little rum about the fixtures even, about the ceiling, about the floor, about the casually distributed

chairs. I had a queer feeling that whenever I wasn't looking at them straight they went askew, and moved about, and played a noiseless puss-in-the-corner behind my back. And the cornice had a serpentine design with masks – masks altogether too expressive for proper plaster.

Then abruptly my attention was caught by one of the odd-looking assistants. He was some way off and evidently unaware of my presence – I saw a sort of three-quarter length of him over a pile of toys and through an arch – and, you know, he was leaning against a pillar in an idle sort of way doing the most horrid things with his features! The particular horrid thing he did was with his nose. He did it just as though he was idle and wanted to amuse himself. First of all it was a short, blobby nose, and then suddenly he shot it out like a telescope, and then out it flew and became thinner and thinner until it was like a long, red, flexible whip. Like a thing in a nightmare it was! He flourished it about and flung it forth as a fly-fisher flings his line.

My instant thought was that Gip mustn't see him. I turned about, and there was Gip quite preoccupied with the shopman, and thinking no evil. They were whispering together and looking at me. Gip was standing on a little stool, and the shopman was holding a sort of big drum in his hand.

“Hide and seek, dad-da!” cried Gip. “You're He!”

And before I could do anything to prevent it, the shopman had clapped the big drum over him. I saw what was up directly. “Take that off,” I cried, “this instant! You'll frighten the boy. Take it

off!”

The shopman with the unequal ears did so without a word, and held the big cylinder towards me to show its emptiness. And the little stool was vacant! In that instant my boy had utterly disappeared?..

You know, perhaps, that sinister something that comes like a hand out of the unseen and grips your heart about. You know it takes your common self away and leaves you tense and deliberate, neither slow nor hasty, neither angry nor afraid. So it was with me.

I came up to this grinning shopman and kicked his stool aside.

“Stop this folly!” I said. “Where is my boy?”

“You see,” he said, still displaying the drum’s interior, “there is no deception – ”

I put out my hand to grip him, and he eluded me by a dexterous movement. I snatched again, and he turned from me and pushed open a door to escape. “Stop!” I said, and he laughed, receding. I leapt after him – into utter darkness.

THUD!

“Lor’ bless my ‘eart! I didn’t see you coming, sir!”

I was in Regent Street, and I had collided with a decent-looking working man; and a yard away, perhaps, and looking a little perplexed with himself, was Gip. There was some sort of apology, and then Gip had turned and come to me with a bright little smile, as though for a moment he had missed me.

And he was carrying four parcels in his arm!

He secured immediate possession of my finger.

For the second I was rather at a loss. I stared round to see the door of the magic shop, and, behold, it was not there! There was no door, no shop, nothing, only the common pilaster between the shop where they sell pictures and the window with the chicks!..

I did the only thing possible in that mental tumult; I walked straight to the kerbstone and held up my umbrella for a cab.

“Ansoms,” said Gip, in a note of culminating exultation.

I helped him in, recalled my address with an effort, and got in also. Something unusual proclaimed itself in my tail-coat pocket, and I felt and discovered a glass ball. With a petulant expression I flung it into the street.

Gip said nothing.

For a space neither of us spoke.

“Dada!” said Gip, at last, “that WAS a proper shop!”

I came round with that to the problem of just how the whole thing had seemed to him. He looked completely undamaged – so far, good; he was neither scared nor unhinged, he was simply tremendously satisfied with the afternoon’s entertainment, and there in his arms were the four parcels.

Confound it! what could be in them?

“Um!” I said. “Little boys can’t go to shops like that every day.”

He received this with his usual stoicism, and for a moment I was sorry I was his father and not his mother, and so couldn’t suddenly there, coram publico, in our hansom, kiss him. After

all, I thought, the thing wasn't so very bad.

But it was only when we opened the parcels that I really began to be reassured. Three of them contained boxes of soldiers, quite ordinary lead soldiers, but of so good a quality as to make Gip altogether forget that originally these parcels had been Magic Tricks of the only genuine sort, and the fourth contained a kitten, a little living white kitten, in excellent health and appetite and temper.

I saw this unpacking with a sort of provisional relief. I hung about in the nursery for quite an unconscionable time...

That happened six months ago. And now I am beginning to believe it is all right. The kitten had only the magic natural to all kittens, and the soldiers seem as steady a company as any colonel could desire. And Gip – ?

The intelligent parent will understand that I have to go cautiously with Gip.

But I went so far as this one day. I said, "How would you like your soldiers to come alive, Gip, and march about by themselves?"

"Mine do," said Gip. "I just have to say a word I know before I open the lid."

"Then they march about alone?"

"Oh, QUITE, dad. I shouldn't like them if they didn't do that."

I displayed no unbecoming surprise, and since then I have taken occasion to drop in upon him once or twice, unannounced,

when the soldiers were about, but so far I have never discovered them performing in anything like a magical manner.

It's so difficult to tell.

There's also a question of finance. I have an incurable habit of paying bills. I have been up and down Regent Street several times, looking for that shop. I am inclined to think, indeed, that in that matter honour is satisfied, and that, since Gip's name and address are known to them, I may very well leave it to these people, whoever they may be, to send in their bill in their own time.

3. THE VALLEY OF SPIDERS

Towards mid-day the three pursuers came abruptly round a bend in the torrent bed upon the sight of a very broad and spacious valley. The difficult and winding trench of pebbles along which they had tracked the fugitives for so long, expanded to a broad slope, and with a common impulse the three men left the trail, and rode to a little eminence set with olive-dun trees, and there halted, the two others, as became them, a little behind the man with the silver-studded bridle.

For a space they scanned the great expanse below them with eager eyes. It spread remoter and remoter, with only a few clusters of sere thorn bushes here and there, and the dim suggestions of some now waterless ravine, to break its desolation of yellow grass. Its purple distances melted at last into the bluish slopes of the further hills – hills it might be of a greener kind – and above them invisibly supported, and seeming indeed to hang in the blue, were the snowclad summits of mountains that grew larger and bolder to the north-westward as the sides of the valley drew together. And westward the valley opened until a distant darkness under the sky told where the forests began. But the three men looked neither east nor west, but only steadfastly across the valley.

The gaunt man with the scarred lip was the first to speak. “Nowhere,” he said, with a sigh of disappointment in his voice.

“But after all, they had a full day’s start.”

“They don’t know we are after them,” said the little man on the white horse.

“SHE would know,” said the leader bitterly, as if speaking to himself.

“Even then they can’t go fast. They’ve got no beast but the mule, and all to-day the girl’s foot has been bleeding – ”

The man with the silver bridle flashed a quick intensity of rage on him. “Do you think I haven’t seen that?” he snarled.

“It helps, anyhow,” whispered the little man to himself.

The gaunt man with the scarred lip stared impassively. “They can’t be over the valley,” he said. “If we ride hard – ”

He glanced at the white horse and paused.

“Curse all white horses!” said the man with the silver bridle, and turned to scan the beast his curse included.

The little man looked down between the melancholy ears of his steed.

“I did my best,” he said.

The two others stared again across the valley for a space. The gaunt man passed the back of his hand across the scarred lip.

“Come up!” said the man who owned the silver bridle, suddenly. The little man started and jerked his rein, and the horse hoofs of the three made a multitudinous faint pattering upon the withered grass as they turned back towards the trail...

They rode cautiously down the long slope before them, and so came through a waste of prickly, twisted bushes and strange

dry shapes of horny branches that grew amongst the rocks, into the levels below. And there the trail grew faint, for the soil was scanty, and the only herbage was this scorched dead straw that lay upon the ground. Still, by hard scanning, by leaning beside the horses' necks and pausing ever and again, even these white men could contrive to follow after their prey.

There were trodden places, bent and broken blades of the coarse grass, and ever and again the sufficient intimation of a footmark. And once the leader saw a brown smear of blood where the half-caste girl may have trod. And at that under his breath he cursed her for a fool.

The gaunt man checked his leader's tracking, and the little man on the white horse rode behind, a man lost in a dream. They rode one after another, the man with the silver bridle led the way, and they spoke never a word. After a time it came to the little man on the white horse that the world was very still. He started out of his dream. Besides the little noises of their horses and equipment, the whole great valley kept the brooding quiet of a painted scene.

Before him went his master and his fellow, each intently leaning forward to the left, each impassively moving with the paces of his horse; their shadows went before them – still, noiseless, tapering attendants; and nearer a crouched cool shape was his own. He looked about him. What was it had gone? Then he remembered the reverberation from the banks of the gorge and the perpetual accompaniment of shifting, jostling pebbles.

And, moreover – ? There was no breeze. That was it! What a vast, still place it was, a monotonous afternoon slumber. And the sky open and blank, except for a sombre veil of haze that had gathered in the upper valley.

He straightened his back, fretted with his bridle, puckered his lips to whistle, and simply sighed. He turned in his saddle for a time, and stared at the throat of the mountain gorge out of which they had come. Blank! Blank slopes on either side, with never a sign of a decent beast or tree – much less a man. What a land it was! What a wilderness! He dropped again into his former pose.

It filled him with a momentary pleasure to see a wry stick of purple black flash out into the form of a snake, and vanish amidst the brown. After all, the infernal valley WAS alive. And then, to rejoice him still more, came a little breath across his face, a whisper that came and went, the faintest inclination of a stiff black-antlered bush upon a little crest, the first intimations of a possible breeze. Idly he wetted his finger, and held it up.

He pulled up sharply to avoid a collision with the gaunt man, who had stopped at fault upon the trail. Just at that guilty moment he caught his master's eye looking towards him.

For a time he forced an interest in the tracking. Then, as they rode on again, he studied his master's shadow and hat and shoulder, appearing and disappearing behind the gaunt man's nearer contours. They had ridden four days out of the very limits of the world into this desolate place, short of water, with nothing but a strip of dried meat under their saddles, over rocks and

mountains, where surely none but these fugitives had ever been before – for THAT!

And all this was for a girl, a mere wilful child! And the man had whole cityfuls of people to do his basest bidding – girls, women! Why in the name of passionate folly THIS one in particular? asked the little man, and scowled at the world, and licked his parched lips with a blackened tongue. It was the way of the master, and that was all he knew. Just because she sought to evade him...

His eye caught a whole row of high plumed canes bending in unison, and then the tails of silk that hung before his neck flapped and fell. The breeze was growing stronger. Somehow it took the stiff stillness out of things – and that was well.

“Hullo!” said the gaunt man.

All three stopped abruptly.

“What?” asked the master. “What?”

“Over there,” said the gaunt man, pointing up the valley.

“What?”

“Something coming towards us.”

And as he spoke a yellow animal crested a rise and came bearing down upon them. It was a big wild dog, coming before the wind, tongue out, at a steady pace, and running with such an intensity of purpose that he did not seem to see the horsemen he approached. He ran with his nose up, following, it was plain, neither scent nor quarry. As he drew nearer the little man felt for his sword. “He’s mad,” said the gaunt rider.

“Shout!” said the little man, and shouted.

The dog came on. Then when the little man’s blade was already out, it swerved aside and went panting by them and past. The eyes of the little man followed its flight. “There was no foam,” he said. For a space the man with the silver-studded bridle stared up the valley. “Oh, come on!” he cried at last. “What does it matter?” and jerked his horse into movement again.

The little man left the insoluble mystery of a dog that fled from nothing but the wind, and lapsed into profound musings on human character. “Come on!” he whispered to himself. “Why should it be given to one man to say ‘Come on!’ with that stupendous violence of effect. Always, all his life, the man with the silver bridle has been saying that. If *I* said it – !” thought the little man. But people marvelled when the master was disobeyed even in the wildest things. This half-caste girl seemed to him, seemed to every one, mad – blasphemous almost. The little man, by way of comparison, reflected on the gaunt rider with the scarred lip, as stalwart as his master, as brave and, indeed, perhaps braver, and yet for him there was obedience, nothing but to give obedience duly and stoutly...

Certain sensations of the hands and knees called the little man back to more immediate things. He became aware of something. He rode up beside his gaunt fellow. “Do you notice the horses?” he said in an undertone.

The gaunt face looked interrogation.

“They don’t like this wind,” said the little man, and dropped

behind as the man with the silver bridle turned upon him.

“It’s all right,” said the gaunt-faced man.

They rode on again for a space in silence. The foremost two rode downcast upon the trail, the hindmost man watched the haze that crept down the vastness of the valley, nearer and nearer, and noted how the wind grew in strength moment by moment. Far away on the left he saw a line of dark bulks – wild hog perhaps, galloping down the valley, but of that he said nothing, nor did he remark again upon the uneasiness of the horses.

And then he saw first one and then a second great white ball, a great shining white ball like a gigantic head of thistle-down, that drove before the wind athwart the path. These balls soared high in the air, and dropped and rose again and caught for a moment, and hurried on and passed, but at the sight of them the restlessness of the horses increased.

Then presently he saw that more of these drifting globes – and then soon very many more – were hurrying towards him down the valley.

They became aware of a squealing. Athwart the path a huge boar rushed, turning his head but for one instant to glance at them, and then hurling on down the valley again. And at that, all three stopped and sat in their saddles, staring into the thickening haze that was coming upon them.

“If it were not for this thistle-down – ” began the leader.

But now a big globe came drifting past within a score of yards of them. It was really not an even sphere at all, but a vast, soft,

ragged, filmy thing, a sheet gathered by the corners, an aerial jelly-fish, as it were, but rolling over and over as it advanced, and trailing long, cobwebby threads and streamers that floated in its wake.

“It isn’t thistle-down,” said the little man.

“I don’t like the stuff,” said the gaunt man.

And they looked at one another.

“Curse it!” cried the leader. “The air’s full of it up there. If it keeps on at this pace long, it will stop us altogether.”

An instinctive feeling, such as lines out a herd of deer at the approach of some ambiguous thing, prompted them to turn their horses to the wind, ride forward for a few paces, and stare at that advancing multitude of floating masses. They came on before the wind with a sort of smooth swiftness, rising and falling noiselessly, sinking to earth, rebounding high, soaring – all with a perfect unanimity, with a still, deliberate assurance.

Right and left of the horsemen the pioneers of this strange army passed. At one that rolled along the ground, breaking shapelessly and trailing out reluctantly into long grappling ribbons and bands, all three horses began to shy and dance. The master was seized with a sudden unreasonable impatience. He cursed the drifting globes roundly. “Get on!” he cried; “get on! What do these things matter? How CAN they matter? Back to the trail!” He fell swearing at his horse and sawed the bit across its mouth.

He shouted aloud with rage. “I will follow that trail, I tell you!”

he cried. "Where is the trail?"

He gripped the bridle of his prancing horse and searched amidst the grass. A long and clinging thread fell across his face, a grey streamer dropped about his bridle-arm, some big, active thing with many legs ran down the back of his head. He looked up to discover one of those grey masses anchored as it were above him by these things and flapping out ends as a sail flaps when a boat comes, about – but noiselessly.

He had an impression of many eyes, of a dense crew of squat bodies, of long, many-jointed limbs hauling at their mooring ropes to bring the thing down upon him. For a space he stared up, reining in his prancing horse with the instinct born of years of horsemanship. Then the flat of a sword smote his back, and a blade flashed overhead and cut the drifting balloon of spider-web free, and the whole mass lifted softly and drove clear and away.

"Spiders!" cried the voice of the gaunt man. "The things are full of big spiders! Look, my lord!"

The man with the silver bridle still followed the mass that drove away.

"Look, my lord!"

The master found himself staring down at a red, smashed thing on the ground that, in spite of partial obliteration, could still wriggle unavailing legs. Then when the gaunt man pointed to another mass that bore down upon them, he drew his sword hastily. Up the valley now it was like a fog bank torn to rags. He tried to grasp the situation.

“Ride for it!” the little man was shouting. “Ride for it down the valley.”

What happened then was like the confusion of a battle. The man with the silver bridle saw the little man go past him slashing furiously at imaginary cobwebs, saw him cannon into the horse of the gaunt man and hurl it and its rider to earth. His own horse went a dozen paces before he could rein it in. Then he looked up to avoid imaginary dangers, and then back again to see a horse rolling on the ground, the gaunt man standing and slashing over it at a rent and fluttering mass of grey that streamed and wrapped about them both. And thick and fast as thistle-down on waste land on a windy day in July, the cobweb masses were coming on.

The little man had dismounted, but he dared not release his horse. He was endeavouring to lug the struggling brute back with the strength of one arm, while with the other he slashed aimlessly. The tentacles of a second grey mass had entangled themselves with the struggle, and this second grey mass came to its moorings, and slowly sank.

The master set his teeth, gripped his bridle, lowered his head, and spurred his horse forward. The horse on the ground rolled over, there were blood and moving shapes upon the flanks, and the gaunt man, suddenly leaving it, ran forward towards his master, perhaps ten paces. His legs were swathed and encumbered with grey; he made ineffectual movements with his sword. Grey streamers waved from him; there was a thin veil of grey across his face. With his left hand he beat at something

on his body, and suddenly he stumbled and fell. He struggled to rise, and fell again, and suddenly, horribly, began to howl, “Oh – ohoo, ohoo!”

The master could see the great spiders upon him, and others upon the ground.

As he strove to force his horse nearer to this gesticulating, screaming grey object that struggled up and down, there came a clatter of hoofs, and the little man, in act of mounting, swordless, balanced on his belly athwart the white horse, and clutching its mane, whirled past. And again a clinging thread of grey gossamer swept across the master’s face. All about him, and over him, it seemed this drifting, noiseless cobweb circled and drew nearer him...

To the day of his death he never knew just how the event of that moment happened. Did he, indeed, turn his horse, or did it really of its own accord stampede after its fellow? Suffice it that in another second he was galloping full tilt down the valley with his sword whirling furiously overhead. And all about him on the quickening breeze, the spiders’ airships, their air bundles and air sheets, seemed to him to hurry in a conscious pursuit.

Clatter, clatter, thud, thud – the man with the silver bridle rode, heedless of his direction, with his fearful face looking up now right, now left, and his sword arm ready to slash. And a few hundred yards ahead of him, with a tail of torn cobweb trailing behind him, rode the little man on the white horse, still but imperfectly in the saddle. The reeds bent before them, the

wind blew fresh and strong, over his shoulder the master could see the webs hurrying to overtake...

He was so intent to escape the spiders' webs that only as his horse gathered together for a leap did he realise the ravine ahead. And then he realised it only to misunderstand and interfere. He was leaning forward on his horse's neck and sat up and back all too late.

But if in his excitement he had failed to leap, at any rate he had not forgotten how to fall. He was horseman again in mid-air. He came off clear with a mere bruise upon his shoulder, and his horse rolled, kicking spasmodic legs, and lay still. But the master's sword drove its point into the hard soil, and snapped clean across, as though Chance refused him any longer as her Knight, and the splintered end missed his face by an inch or so.

He was on his feet in a moment, breathlessly scanning the onrushing spider-webs. For a moment he was minded to run, and then thought of the ravine, and turned back. He ran aside once to dodge one drifting terror, and then he was swiftly clambering down the precipitous sides, and out of the touch of the gale.

There under the lee of the dry torrent's steeper banks he might crouch, and watch these strange, grey masses pass and pass in safety till the wind fell, and it became possible to escape. And there for a long time he crouched, watching the strange, grey, ragged masses trail their streamers across his narrowed sky.

Once a stray spider fell into the ravine close beside him – a full foot it measured from leg to leg, and its body was half a man's

hand – and after he had watched its monstrous alacrity of search and escape for a little while, and tempted it to bite his broken sword, he lifted up his iron-heeled boot and smashed it into a pulp. He swore as he did so, and for a time sought up and down for another.

Then presently, when he was surer these spider swarms could not drop into the ravine, he found a place where he could sit down, and sat and fell into deep thought and began after his manner to gnaw his knuckles and bite his nails. And from this he was moved by the coming of the man with the white horse.

He heard him long before he saw him, as a clattering of hoofs, stumbling footsteps, and a reassuring voice. Then the little man appeared, a rueful figure, still with a tail of white cobweb trailing behind him. They approached each other without speaking, without a salutation. The little man was fatigued and shamed to the pitch of hopeless bitterness, and came to a stop at last, face to face with his seated master. The latter winced a little under his dependant's eye. "Well?" he said at last, with no pretence of authority.

"You left him?"

"My horse bolted."

"I know. So did mine."

He laughed at his master mirthlessly.

"I say my horse bolted," said the man who once had a silver-studded bridle.

"Cowards both," said the little man.

The other gnawed his knuckle through some meditative moments, with his eye on his inferior.

“Don’t call me a coward,” he said at length.

“You are a coward like myself.”

“A coward possibly. There is a limit beyond which every man must fear. That I have learnt at last. But not like yourself. That is where the difference comes in.”

“I never could have dreamt you would have left him. He saved your life two minutes before... Why are you our lord?”

The master gnawed his knuckles again, and his countenance was dark.

“No man calls me a coward,” he said. “No. A broken sword is better than none... One spavined white horse cannot be expected to carry two men a four days’ journey. I hate white horses, but this time it cannot be helped. You begin to understand me?.. I perceive that you are minded, on the strength of what you have seen and fancy, to taint my reputation. It is men of your sort who unmake kings. Besides which – I never liked you.”

“My lord!” said the little man.

“No,” said the master. “NO!”

He stood up sharply as the little man moved. For a minute perhaps they faced one another. Overhead the spiders’ balls went driving. There was a quick movement among the pebbles; a running of feet, a cry of despair, a gasp and a blow...

Towards nightfall the wind fell. The sun set in a calm serenity, and the man who had once possessed the silver bridle came at last

very cautiously and by an easy slope out of the ravine again; but now he led the white horse that once belonged to the little man. He would have gone back to his horse to get his silver-mounted bridle again, but he feared night and a quickening breeze might still find him in the valley, and besides he disliked greatly to think he might discover his horse all swathed in cobwebs and perhaps unpleasantly eaten.

And as he thought of those cobwebs and of all the dangers he had been through, and the manner in which he had been preserved that day, his hand sought a little reliquary that hung about his neck, and he clasped it for a moment with heartfelt gratitude. As he did so his eyes went across the valley.

“I was hot with passion,” he said, “and now she has met her reward. They also, no doubt – ”

And behold! Far away out of the wooded slopes across the valley, but in the clearness of the sunset distinct and unmistakable, he saw a little spire of smoke.

At that his expression of serene resignation changed to an amazed anger. Smoke? He turned the head of the white horse about, and hesitated. And as he did so a little rustle of air went through the grass about him. Far away upon some reeds swayed a tattered sheet of grey. He looked at the cobwebs; he looked at the smoke.

“Perhaps, after all, it is not them,” he said at last.

But he knew better.

After he had stared at the smoke for some time, he mounted

the white horse.

As he rode, he picked his way amidst stranded masses of web. For some reason there were many dead spiders on the ground, and those that lived feasted guiltily on their fellows. At the sound of his horse's hoofs they fled.

Their time had passed. From the ground without either a wind to carry them or a winding sheet ready, these things, for all their poison, could do him little evil. He flicked with his belt at those he fancied came too near. Once, where a number ran together over a bare place, he was minded to dismount and trample them with his boots, but this impulse he overcame. Ever and again he turned in his saddle, and looked back at the smoke.

"Spiders," he muttered over and over again. "Spiders! Well, well... The next time I must spin a web."

4. THE TRUTH ABOUT PYECRAFT

He sits not a dozen yards away. If I glance over my shoulder I can see him. And if I catch his eye – and usually I catch his eye – it meets me with an expression.

It is mainly an imploring look – and yet with suspicion in it.

Confound his suspicion! If I wanted to tell on him I should have told long ago. I don't tell and I don't tell, and he ought to feel at his ease. As if anything so gross and fat as he could feel at ease! Who would believe me if I did tell?

Poor old Pyecraft! Great, uneasy jelly of substance! The fattest clubman in London.

He sits at one of the little club tables in the huge bay by the fire, stuffing. What is he stuffing? I glance judiciously and catch him biting at a round of hot buttered tea-cake, with his eyes on me. Confound him! – with his eyes on me!

That settles it, Pyecraft! Since you WILL be abject, since you WILL behave as though I was not a man of honour, here, right under your embedded eyes, I write the thing down – the plain truth about Pyecraft. The man I helped, the man I shielded, and who has requited me by making my club unendurable, absolutely unendurable, with his liquid appeal, with the perpetual “don't tell” of his looks.

And, besides, why does he keep on eternally eating?

Well, here goes for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but

the truth!

Pyecraft – . I made the acquaintance of Pyecraft in this very smoking-room. I was a young, nervous new member, and he saw it. I was sitting all alone, wishing I knew more of the members, and suddenly he came, a great rolling front of chins and abdomina, towards me, and grunted and sat down in a chair close by me and wheezed for a space, and scraped for a space with a match and lit a cigar, and then addressed me. I forget what he said – something about the matches not lighting properly, and afterwards as he talked he kept stopping the waiters one by one as they went by, and telling them about the matches in that thin, fluty voice he has. But, anyhow, it was in some such way we began our talking.

He talked about various things and came round to games. And thence to my figure and complexion. “YOU ought to be a good cricketer,” he said. I suppose I am slender, slender to what some people would call lean, and I suppose I am rather dark, still – I am not ashamed of having a Hindu great-grandmother, but, for all that, I don’t want casual strangers to see through me at a glance to HER. So that I was set against Pyecraft from the beginning.

But he only talked about me in order to get to himself.

“I expect,” he said, “you take no more exercise than I do, and probably you eat no less.” (Like all excessively obese people he fancied he ate nothing.) “Yet,” – and he smiled an oblique smile – “we differ.”

And then he began to talk about his fatness and his fatness;

all he did for his fatness and all he was going to do for his fatness; what people had advised him to do for his fatness and what he had heard of people doing for fatness similar to his. “A priori,” he said, “one would think a question of nutrition could be answered by dietary and a question of assimilation by drugs.” It was stifling. It was dumpling talk. It made me feel swelled to hear him.

One stands that sort of thing once in a way at a club, but a time came when I fancied I was standing too much. He took to me altogether too conspicuously. I could never go into the smoking-room but he would come wallowing towards me, and sometimes he came and gormandised round and about me while I had my lunch. He seemed at times almost to be clinging to me. He was a bore, but not so fearful a bore as to be limited to me; and from the first there was something in his manner – almost as though he knew, almost as though he penetrated to the fact that I MIGHT – that there was a remote, exceptional chance in me that no one else presented.

“I’d give anything to get it down,” he would say – “anything,” and peer at me over his vast cheeks and pant.

Poor old Pyecraft! He has just gonged, no doubt to order another buttered tea-cake!

He came to the actual thing one day. “Our Pharmacopoeia,” he said, “our Western Pharmacopoeia, is anything but the last word of medical science. In the East, I’ve been told –”

He stopped and stared at me. It was like being at an aquarium.

I was quite suddenly angry with him. “Look here,” I said, “who told you about my great-grandmother’s recipes?”

“Well,” he fenced.

“Every time we’ve met for a week,” I said, “and we’ve met pretty often – you’ve given me a broad hint or so about that little secret of mine.”

“Well,” he said, “now the cat’s out of the bag, I’ll admit, yes, it is so. I had it – ”

“From Pattison?”

“Indirectly,” he said, which I believe was lying, “yes.”

“Pattison,” I said, “took that stuff at his own risk.”

He pursed his mouth and bowed.

“My great-grandmother’s recipes,” I said, “are queer things to handle. My father was near making me promise – ”

“He didn’t?”

“No. But he warned me. He himself used one – once.”

“Ah!.. But do you think – ? Suppose – suppose there did happen to be one – ”

“The things are curious documents,” I said.

“Even the smell of ‘em... No!”

But after going so far Pyecraft was resolved I should go farther. I was always a little afraid if I tried his patience too much he would fall on me suddenly and smother me. I own I was weak. But I was also annoyed with Pyecraft. I had got to that state of feeling for him that disposed me to say, “Well, TAKE the risk!” The little affair of Pattison to which I have alluded was a

different matter altogether. What it was doesn't concern us now, but I knew, anyhow, that the particular recipe I used then was safe. The rest I didn't know so much about, and, on the whole, I was inclined to doubt their safety pretty completely.

Yet even if Pyecraft got poisoned —

I must confess the poisoning of Pyecraft struck me as an immense undertaking.

That evening I took that queer, odd-scented sandalwood box out of my safe and turned the rustling skins over. The gentleman who wrote the recipes for my great-grandmother evidently had a weakness for skins of a miscellaneous origin, and his handwriting was cramped to the last degree. Some of the things are quite unreadable to me — though my family, with its Indian Civil Service associations, has kept up a knowledge of Hindustani from generation to generation — and none are absolutely plain sailing. But I found the one that I knew was there soon enough, and sat on the floor by my safe for some time looking at it.

“Look here,” said I to Pyecraft next day, and snatched the slip away from his eager grasp.

“So far as I — can make it out, this is a recipe for Loss of Weight. (“Ah!” said Pyecraft.) I'm not absolutely sure, but I think it's that. And if you take my advice you'll leave it alone. Because, you know — I blacken my blood in your interest, Pyecraft — my ancestors on that side were, so far as I can gather, a jolly queer lot. See?”

“Let me try it,” said Pyecraft.

I leant back in my chair. My imagination made one mighty effort and fell flat within me. “What in Heaven’s name, Pyecraft,” I asked, “do you think you’ll look like when you get thin?”

He was impervious to reason. I made him promise never to say a word to me about his disgusting fatness again whatever happened – never, and then I handed him that little piece of skin.

“It’s nasty stuff,” I said.

“No matter,” he said, and took it.

He goggled at it. “But – but – ” he said.

He had just discovered that it wasn’t English.

“To the best of my ability,” I said, “I will do you a translation.”

I did my best. After that we didn’t speak for a fortnight. Whenever he approached me I frowned and motioned him away, and he respected our compact, but at the end of a fortnight he was as fat as ever. And then he got a word in.

“I must speak,” he said. “It isn’t fair. There’s something wrong. It’s done me no good. You’re not doing your great-grandmother justice.”

“Where’s the recipe?”

He produced it gingerly from his pocket-book.

I ran my eye over the items. “Was the egg addled?” I asked.

“No. Ought it to have been?”

“That,” I said, “goes without saying in all my poor dear great-grandmother’s recipes. When condition or quality is not specified you must get the worst. She was drastic or nothing... And there’s one or two possible alternatives to some of these other things.

You got FRESH rattlesnake venom.”

“I got a rattlesnake from Jamrach’s. It cost – it cost – ”

“That’s your affair, anyhow. This last item – ”

“I know a man who – ”

“Yes. H’m. Well, I’ll write the alternatives down. So far as I know the language, the spelling of this recipe is particularly atrocious. By-the-bye, dog here probably means pariah dog.”

For a month after that I saw Pyecraft constantly at the club and as fat and anxious as ever. He kept our treaty, but at times he broke the spirit of it by shaking his head despondently. Then one day in the cloakroom he said, “Your great-grandmother – ”

“Not a word against her,” I said; and he held his peace.

I could have fancied he had desisted, and I saw him one day talking to three new members about his fatness as though he was in search of other recipes. And then, quite unexpectedly, his telegram came.

“Mr. Formalyn!” bawled a page-boy under my nose, and I took the telegram and opened it at once.

“For Heaven’s sake come. – Pyecraft.”

“H’m,” said I, and to tell the truth I was so pleased at the rehabilitation of my great grandmother’s reputation this evidently promised that I made a most excellent lunch.

I got Pyecraft’s address from the hall porter. Pyecraft inhabited the upper half of a house in Bloomsbury, and I went there so soon as I had done my coffee and Trappistine. I did not wait to finish my cigar.

“Mr. Pyecraft?” said I, at the front door.

They believed he was ill; he hadn’t been out for two days.

“He expects me,” said I, and they sent me up.

I rang the bell at the lattice-door upon the landing.

“He shouldn’t have tried it, anyhow,” I said to myself. “A man who eats like a pig ought to look like a pig.”

An obviously worthy woman, with an anxious face and a carelessly placed cap, came and surveyed me through the lattice.

I gave my name and she let me in in a dubious fashion.

“Well?” said I, as we stood together inside Pyecraft’s piece of the landing.

“E said you was to come in if you came,” she said, and regarded me, making no motion to show me anywhere. And then, confidentially, “E’s locked in, sir.”

“Locked in?”

“Locked himself in yesterday morning and ‘asn’t let any one in since, sir. And ever and again SWEARING. Oh, my!”

I stared at the door she indicated by her glances.

“In there?” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s up?”

She shook her head sadly, “E keeps on calling for vittles, sir. ‘EAVY vittles ‘e wants. I get ‘im what I can. Pork ‘e’s ‘ad, sooit puddin’, sossiges, noo bread. Everythink like that. Left outside, if you please, and me go away. ‘E’s eatin’, sir, somethink AWFUL.”

There came a piping bawl from inside the door: “That

Formalyn?”

“That you, Pyecraft?” I shouted, and went and banged the door.

“Tell her to go away.”

I did.

Then I could hear a curious pattering upon the door, almost like some one feeling for the handle in the dark, and Pyecraft’s familiar grunts.

“It’s all right,” I said, “she’s gone.”

But for a long time the door didn’t open.

I heard the key turn. Then Pyecraft’s voice said, “Come in.”

I turned the handle and opened the door. Naturally I expected to see Pyecraft.

Well, you know, he wasn’t there!

I never had such a shock in my life. There was his sitting-room in a state of untidy disorder, plates and dishes among the books and writing things, and several chairs overturned, but Pyecraft —

“It’s all right, o’ man; shut the door,” he said, and then I discovered him.

There he was right up close to the cornice in the corner by the door, as though some one had glued him to the ceiling. His face was anxious and angry. He panted and gesticulated. “Shut the door,” he said. “If that woman gets hold of it — ”

I shut the door, and went and stood away from him and stared.

“If anything gives way and you tumble down,” I said, “you’ll break your neck, Pyecraft.”

“I wish I could,” he wheezed.

“A man of your age and weight getting up to kiddish gymnastics – ”

“Don’t,” he said, and looked agonised.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, and gesticulated.

“How the deuce,” said I, “are you holding on up there?”

And then abruptly I realised that he was not holding on at all, that he was floating up there – just as a gas-filled bladder might have floated in the same position. He began a struggle to thrust himself away from the ceiling and to clamber down the wall to me. “It’s that prescription,” he panted, as he did so. “Your great-gran – ”

He took hold of a framed engraving rather carelessly as he spoke and it gave way, and he flew back to the ceiling again, while the picture smashed onto the sofa. Bump he went against the ceiling, and I knew then why he was all over white on the more salient curves and angles of his person. He tried again more carefully, coming down by way of the mantel.

It was really a most extraordinary spectacle, that great, fat, apoplectic-looking man upside down and trying to get from the ceiling to the floor. “That prescription,” he said. “Too successful.”

“How?”

“Loss of weight – almost complete.”

And then, of course, I understood.

“By Jove, Pyecraft,” said I, “what you wanted was a cure

for fatness! But you always called it weight. You would call it weight.”

Somehow I was extremely delighted. I quite liked Pyecraft for the time. “Let me help you!” I said, and took his hand and pulled him down. He kicked about, trying to get a foothold somewhere. It was very like holding a flag on a windy day.

“That table,” he said, pointing, “is solid mahogany and very heavy. If you can put me under that – ”

I did, and there he wallowed about like a captive balloon, while I stood on his hearthrug and talked to him.

I lit a cigar. “Tell me,” I said, “what happened?”

“I took it,” he said.

“How did it taste?”

“Oh, BEASTLY!”

I should fancy they all did. Whether one regards the ingredients or the probable compound or the possible results, almost all of my great-grandmother’s remedies appear to me at least to be extraordinarily uninviting. For my own part —

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