Bangs John Kendrick

Toppleton's Client: or, A Spirit in Exile

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCING MR. HOPKINS TOPPLETON

Mr. Hopkins Toppleton, Barrister of London and New York, was considered by his intimates a most fortunate young man. He was accounted the happy possessor of an income of something over fifty thousand dollars a year, derived from investments which time had shown to be as far removed from instability, and as little influenced by the fluctuations of the stock market, as the pyramids of Egypt themselves. Better than this, however, better even than personal beauty, with which he was plentifully endowed, Mr. Hopkins Toppleton was blessed with a great name, which he had received ready-made from his illustrious father, late head of the legal firm of Toppleton, Morley, Harkins, Perkins, Mawson, Bronson, Smithers and Hicks. The value of the name to Hopkins was unquestionable, since it enabled him, at his father's death, to enter that famous aggregation of legal talent as a special partner, although his knowledge of law was scant, receiving a share of the profits of the concern for the use of his patronymic, which, owing to his father's pre-eminent success at the Bar, Messrs. Morley, Harkins, *et al.*, were anxious to retain. This desire of Mr. Toppleton's late associates was most natural, for such was the tremendous force exerted by the name he bore, that plaintiffs when they perceived it arrayed in opposition to their claims, not infrequently withdrew their suits, or offered terms upon which any defendant of sense might be induced to compromise. On the other hand, when a defendant found himself confronted with the fact that Hopkins Toppleton, Sen., had joined forces with the plaintiff, he usually either settled the claim against him in full or placed himself beyond the jurisdiction of the courts.

When Toppleton, Sen., died, it was very generally believed that the firm, whose name has already been mentioned at some length, lost not only its head, but also a very large proportion of its brains, – a situation quite as logical as it was unfortunate for the gentlemen with whom Mr. Toppleton had been associated. Nor was this feeling, that with the departure of Toppleton, the illustrious, for other worlds the firm was deprived of a most considerable portion of its claims to high standing, confined to cavilling outsiders. No one recognized the unhappy state of affairs at the busy office on Broadway more quickly than did Messrs. Morley, Harkins, Perkins, Mawson, Bronson, Smithers, and Hicks themselves, and at the first meeting of the firm, after the funeral of their dead partner, these gentlemen unanimously resolved that something must be done.

It was at this meeting that Mr. Hicks suggested that the only course left for the bereaved firm to pursue, if it desired to remain an aggressive force in its chosen profession, was to retain the name of Toppleton at the mast-head, and, as Mr. Mawson put it, "to bluff it out." Mr. Perkins agreed with Mr. Hicks, and suggested that the only honest way to do this was to induce Mr. Toppleton's only son, known to all – even to the clerks in the office – as Hoppy, to enter the firm as a full partner.

"I do not think," Mr. Perkins said, "that it is quite proper for us to assume a virtue that we do not possess, and while Hoppy – I should say Hopkins – has never studied law, I think he could be induced to do so, in which event he could be taken in here, and we should have a perfectly equitable claim to all the business which the name of Toppleton would certainly bring to us."

"I am afraid," Mr. Bronson put in at this point, "I am very much afraid that such a course would require the entire reorganization of the firm's machinery. It would never do for the member whose name stands at the head of our partnership designation, to be on such terms of intimacy with the office boys, for instance, as to permit of his being addressed by them as Hoppy; nor would it

conduce toward good discipline, I am convinced, for the nominal head of the concern to be engaged in making pools on baseball games with our book-keepers and clerks, which, during his lamented father's life, I understand was one of the lad's most cherished customs. Now, while I agree with my friend Perkins that it is desirable that the firm should have an unassailable basis for its retention of the name of Toppleton, I do not agree with him that young Hopkins should be taken in here if we are to retain our present highly efficient force of subordinates. They would be utterly demoralized in less than a month."

"But what do you suggest as an alternative?" inquired Mr. Morley.

"I believe that we should make Hopkins a special partner in the firm, and have him travel abroad for his health," returned Mr. Bronson after a moment's reflection.

"I regret to say," objected Mr. Hicks, "that Hoppy's health is distressingly good. Your point in regard to the probable demoralization of our office force, however, is well taken. Hopkins must go abroad if he becomes one of us; but I suggest that instead of sending him for his health, we establish a London branch office, and put him in charge on a salary of, say, 10,000 dollars. We have no business interests outside of this country, so that such a course, in view of his absolute ignorance of law, would be perfectly safe, and we could give Hoppy to understand in the event of his acceptance of our proposition that he shall be free to take a vacation whenever he pleases, for as long a period of time as he pleases, and the oftener the better."

"That's the best plan, I think," said Mr. Mawson. "In fact, if Hoppy declines that responsible office, I wouldn't mind taking it myself."

And so it happened. The proposition was made to Hopkins, and he accepted it with alacrity. He did not care for the practice of the law, but he had no objection to receiving an extra ten thousand dollars a year as a silent partner in a flourishing concern with headquarters in London, particularly when his sole duties were to remain away from the office on a perpetual vacation.

"I was born with a love of rest," Hoppy once said in talking over his prospects with his friends some time before the proposition of his father's partners had been submitted to him. "Even as a baby I was fond of it. I remember my mother saying that I slept for nearly the whole of my first year of existence, and when I came to my school days my reputation with my teachers was, that in the enjoyment of recess and in assiduous devotion to all that pertained to a life of elegant leisure, there was not a boy in school who could approach me."

The young man never railed at fate for compelling him to lead a life which would have filled others of robuster ideas with ennui, but he did on occasions find fault with the powers for having condemned him to birth in a country like the United States, where the man of leisure is regarded with less of reverence than of derision.

"It is a no harder fate for the soul of an artist to dwell in the body of a pork-packer," he had said only the night before the plan outlined by Mr. Hicks was brought to his attention, "than for a man of my restful tendencies to be at home in a land where the hustler alone inspires respect. What the fates should have done in my case was clearly to have had me born a rich duke or a prince, whose chief duty it would be to lead the fashionable world and to set styles of dress for others to follow. I'd have made a magnificent member of the House of Lords, or proprietor of a rich estate somewhere in England, with nothing to do but to spend my income and open horse shows; but in New York there is no leisure class of recognized standing, excepting, of course, the messenger-boys and the plumbers, and even they do not command the respect which foreign do-nothings inspire. It's hard luck. The only redeeming feature of the case is that owing to a high tariff I can spend my money with less effort here than I could abroad."

Then came the proposition from the firm, and in it Hoppy recognized the ingredients of the ideal life – a life of rest in a country capable of understanding the value to society of the drones, a life free from responsibility, yet possessing a semblance of dignity bound to impress those unacquainted

with the real state of affairs. Added to this was the encouragement which an extra ten thousand a year must invariably bring to the man appointed to receive it.

"It's just what I needed," he said to Mr. Hicks, "to make my income what it ought to be. Fifty thousand dollars is, of course, a handsome return from investments, but it is an awkward sum to spend. It doesn't divide up well. But sixty thousand a year is simply ideal. Twelve goes into sixty five times, and none over – five thousand a month means something, and doesn't complicate accounts. Besides, the increase will pay the interest on a yacht nicely."

"You are a great boy, Hoppy," said Mr. Hicks, when the young man had thus unbosomed himself, "but I doubt if you will ever be a great man."

"Oh, I don't know," said Hoppy; "there's no telling what may develop. Of course, Mr. Hicks, I shall go into the study of the law very seriously; I couldn't think of accepting your offer without making some effort to show that I deserved it. I shall give up the reading of my irresponsible days, and take to reading law. I shall stop my subscription to the sporting papers, and take the *Daily Register* and *Court Calendar* instead, and if you think it would be worth while I might also subscribe to the *Albany Law Journal*, with which interesting periodical I am already tolerably familiar, having kept my father's files in order for some years."

"No, Hoppy," said Mr. Hicks, with a smile, "I don't think you'd better give up the sporting papers; 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.'"

"Perhaps you are right," said Hopkins, in reply to this. "But I *shall* read Blackstone, and accumulate a library on legal subjects, Mr. Hicks. In that I am firm. I am a good deal of a book-lover anyhow, and since law is to be my profession I might as well suit my books to my needs. I'll order a first edition of Blackstone at once."

"You'd better get the comic Blackstone," said Mr. Hicks, gravely. "You will find it a very interesting book."

"Very well, Mr. Hicks," returned the amiable head-partner-elect of the famous legal firm, "I'll make a note of that. I will also purchase the 'Newgate Calendar,' and any other books you may choose to recommend, – and I tell you what, Mr. Hicks, when my collection gets going it will be the talk of the town. I'll have 'em all in absolute firsts, and as for the bindings, your old yellow-backed tomes at the office will be cast utterly in the shade by my full crushed levant morocco books in rich reds and blues. Just think of the hundred or more volumes of New York reports in Russia leather, Mr. Hicks!"

"It takes my breath away, Hoppy," returned the lawyer. "Every one of the volumes will be absolutely uncut, I suppose, eh?"

"Never you mind about that," retorted Hopkins; "you think I'm joking, but you'll find your mistake some day. I'm serious in this business, though I think I'll begin my labours by taking a winter at Nice."

"That is wise," said Mr. Hicks, approvingly; "and then you might put in the summer in Norway, devoting the spring and autumn to rest and quiet."

"I'll think about that," Hopkins answered; "but the first step to take, really, is to pack up my things here, and sail for London and secure an office."

"A very proper sentiment, my dear boy," returned Mr. Hicks; "but let me advise you, do not be rash about plunging into the professional vortex. Remember that at present your knowledge of the law is limited entirely to your theories as to what it ought to be, and law is seldom that; nor must you forget that in asking you to represent us in London, it is not our desire to inflict upon you any really active work. We simply desire you to live in an atmosphere that, to one of your tastes, is necessarily broadening, and if you find it advisable to pursue intellectual breadth across the continent of Europe to the uttermost parts of the earth, you will find that the firm stands ready to furnish you with material assistance, and to remove all obstacles from your path."

"Thanks for your kindness, Mr. Hicks," said Hopkins. "I shall endeavour to prove myself worthy of it."

"I have no doubt of it, my boy," rejoined Mr. Hicks, rising. "And, in parting with you, let me impress upon you the importance, both to you and to ourselves in the present stage of your legal development, of the maxim, that to a young lawyer not sure of his law, and devoid of experience, there is nothing quite so dangerous as a client. Avoid clients, Hoppy, as you would dangerous explosives. Many a young lawyer has seemed great until fate has thrown a client athwart his path."

With these words, designed quite as much for the protection of the firm, as for the edification of that concern's new head, Mr. Hicks withdrew, and Hopkins turned his attention to preparations for departure; paying his bills, laying in a stock of cigars, and instructing his valet as to the disposition of his lares and penates. Four weeks later he sailed for London, arriving there in good shape early in June, ready for all the delights of the season, then at its height.

It was not until Hopkins had been four days at sea, that the firm of Toppleton, Morley, Harkins, Perkins, Mawson, Bronson, Smithers, and Hicks learned that the new partner had presided at a Coney Island banquet, given by himself to the office-boys, clerks, book-keepers, and stenographers of the firm, on the Saturday half-holiday previous to his departure. It is doubtful if this appalling fact would have come to light even then, had not Mr. Mawson, in endeavouring to discharge one of the office-boys for insubordination, been informed by the delinquent that he defied him; the senior member of the firm, the departed Hoppy, having promised to retain the youth in his employ at increased wages, until he was old enough to go to London, and assist him in looking after the interests of his clients abroad. An investigation, which followed, showed that Hopkins had celebrated his departure in the manner indicated, and also divulged the interesting fact that the running expenses of the office, according to the new partner's promises, were immediately to be increased at least twenty-five per cent. per annum in salaries.

CHAPTER II
MR. HOPKINS TOPPLETON LEASES AN OFFICE

It did not take Hopkins many days to discover that a life of elegant leisure in London approximates labour of the hardest sort. Nor was it entirely easy for him to spend his one thousand pounds a month, with lodgings for his headquarters. This fact annoyed him considerably, for he valued money only for what it could bring him, and yet how else to live than in lodgings he could not decide. Hotel life he abhorred, not only because he considered its excellence purely superficial, but also because it brought him in contact with what he called his "flash-light fellow countrymen, with Wagnerian voices and frontier manners" – by which I presume he meant the diamond studded individuals who travel on Cook's Tickets, and whose so-called Americanism is based on the notion that Britons are still weeping over the events of '76, and who love to send patriotic allusions to the star-spangled banner echoing down through the corridors of the hotels, out and along the Thames Embankment, to the very doors of parliament itself.

"Why don't you buy a house-boat?" asked one of his cronies, to whom he had confided his belief that luxurious ease was hard on the constitution. "Then you can run off up the Thames, and loaf away the tedious hours of your leisure."

"That's an idea worth considering," he replied, "and perhaps I'll try it on next summer. I do not feel this year, however, that I ought to desert London, considering the responsibilities of my position."

"What are you talking about?" said the other with a laugh. "Responsibilities! Why, man, you haven't been to your office since you arrived."

"No," returned Hoppy, "I haven't. In fact I haven't got an office to 'be to.' That's what bothers me so like thunder. I've looked at plenty of offices advertised as for rent for legal firms, but I'll be hanged if I can find anything suitable. Your barristers over here have not as good accommodations as we give obsolete papers at home. Our pigeon-holes are palatial in comparison with your office suites, and accustomed as I am to breathing fresh air, I really can't stand the atmosphere I have been compelled to take into my lungs in the rooms I have looked at."

"But, my dear fellow, what more than a pigeon-hole do you need?" asked his friend. "You are not called upon to attend to any business here. A post-office box would suffice for the receipt of communications from America."

"That's all true enough," returned Hopkins, "but where am I to keep my law library? And what am I to do in case I should have a client?"

"Keep your books in your lodgings, and don't count your clients before they get into litigation," replied the other.

"My dear Tutterson," Hopkins said in answer to this, "you are the queerest mixture of common sense and idiotcy I have ever encountered. My library at home, indeed! Haven't you any better sense than to suggest my carrying my profession into my home life? Do you suppose I want to be reminded at every step I take that I am a lawyer? Must my business be rammed down my throat at all hours? Am I never to have relaxation from office cares? Indeed, I'll not have a suggestion of law within a mile of my lodgings! I must have an office; but now that I think of it, not having to go to the office from one year's end to another, it makes no difference whether it consists of the ground floor of Buckingham Palace or a rear cell three flights up, in Newgate Prison."

"Except," returned Tutterson, "that if you had the office at Newgate you might do more business than if you shared Buckingham Palace with the Royal family."

"Yes; and on the other hand, the society at the palace is probably more desirable than that of Newgate; so each having equal advantages, I think I'd better compromise and take an office out near the Tower," said Hopkins. "The location is quite desirable from my point of view. It would be so

inaccessible that I should have a decent excuse for not going there, and besides, I reduce my chances of being embarrassed by a client to a minimum."

"That is where you are very much mistaken," said Tutterson. "If you hang your shingle out by the Tower, you will be one lawyer among a hundred Beef-Eaters, and therefore distinguished, and likely to be sought out by clients. On the other hand, if you behave like a sensible man, and take chambers in the Temple, you'll be an unknown attorney among a thousand Q.C's. And as for the decent excuse for not attending to business, you simply forget that you are no longer in America but in England. Here a man needs an excuse for going to work. Trade is looked down upon. It is the butterfly we esteem, not the grub. A man who *will* work when he doesn't need to work, is looked upon with distrust. Society doesn't cultivate him, and the million regard him with suspicion, – and the position of both is distinctly logical. He who serves is a servant, and society looks upon him as such, and when he insists upon serving without the necessity to serve, he diminishes by just so much the opportunities of some poor devil to whom opportunity is bread and butter, which sets the poor devil against him. You do not need an excuse for neglecting business, Toppleton, and, by Jove, if it wasn't for your beastly American ideas, you'd apologize to yourself for even thinking of such a thing."

"Well, I fancy you are right," replied Toppleton. "To tell you the truth, I never thought of it in that light before. There is value in a leisure class, after all. It keeps the peach-blow humanity from competing with the earthenware, to the disadvantage of the latter. I see now why the lower and middle classes so dearly love the lords and dukes and other noble born creatures Nature has set above them. It is the generous self-denial of the aristocracy in the matter of work, and the consequent diminution of competition, that is the basis of that love. I'll do as you say, and see what I can do in the Temple. Even if a client should happen to stray in at one of those rare moments when I am on duty, I can assume a weary demeanour and tell him that I have already more work on my hands than I can accomplish with proper deference to my health, and request him to take his quarrel elsewhere."

So the question was settled. An office was taken in the Temple. Hopkins bought himself a wig and a gown, purchased a dozen tin boxes, each labelled with the hypothetical name of some supposititious client, had the room luxuriously fitted up, arranged his law library, consisting of the "Comic Blackstone," "Bench and Bar," by Sergeant Ballantyne, the "Newgate Calendar," and an absolute first of "Parsons on Contracts," on the mahogany shelves he had had constructed there; hung out a shingle announcing himself and firm as having headquarters within, and, placing beneath it a printed placard to the effect that he had gone out to lunch, he turned the key in the door and departed with Tutterson for a trip to the land of the Midnight Sun.

Now it so happened, that the agent having in charge the particular section of the Temple in which Hopkins' new office was located, had concealed from the young American the fact that for some twenty-five or thirty years, the room which Toppleton had leased had remained unoccupied – that is, it had never been occupied for any consecutive period of time during that number of years. Tenants had come but had as quickly gone. There was something about the room that no one seemed able to cope with. Luxuriously furnished or bare, it made no difference in the fortunes of Number 17, from the doors of which now projected the sign of Toppleton, Morley, Harkins, Perkins, Mawson, Bronson, Smithers, and Hicks. Just what the trouble was, the agent had not been able to determine in a manner satisfactory to himself until about a year before Hopkins happened in to negotiate with him for a four years' lease. Departing tenants, when they had spoken to him at all on the subject, had confined themselves to demands for a rebate on rents paid in advance, on the rather untenable ground that the room was uncanny and depressing.

"We can't stand it," they had said, earnestly. "There must be some awful mystery connected with the room. There has been a murder, or a suicide, or some equally dreadful crime committed within its walls at some time or another."

This, of course, the agent always strenuously denied, and his books substantiated his denial. The only possible crime divulged by the books, was thirty-three years back when an occupant departed

without paying his rent, but that surely did not constitute the sort of crime that would warrant the insinuation that the room was haunted.

"And as for your statement that the room makes you feel weird and depressed," the agent had added with the suggestion of a sneer, "I am sure there is nothing in the terms of the lease which binds me to keep tenants in a natural and cheerful frame of mind. I can't help it, you know, if you get the blues or eat yourselves into a state that makes that room seem to you to be haunted."

"But," one expostulating tenant had observed, "but, my dear sir, I am given to understand that the five tenants preceding my occupancy left for precisely the same reason, that the office at times is suffocatingly weird; and that undefined whispers are to be heard playing at puss in the corner with heart-rending sighs at almost any hour of the day or night throughout the year, cannot be denied."

"Well, all I've got to say about that," was the agent's invariable reply, "is that *I* never saw a sigh or heard a whisper of a supernatural order in that room, and if you want to go to law with a case based on a Welsh rarebit diet, just do it. If the courts decide that I owe you money, and must forfeit my lease rights because you have dyspepsia, I'll turn over the whole business to you and join the army."

Of course this independent attitude of the agent always settled the question at once. His tenants, however insane they might appear to the agent's eyes, were invariably sane enough not to carry the matter to the courts, where it was hardly possible that a plaintiff could be relieved of the conditions of his contract, because his office gave him a megrim, super-induced by the visit of a disembodied sigh.

Judges are hard-headed, practical persons, who take no stock in spirits not purely liquid, realizing which the tenants of Number 17, without exception, wisely resolved to suffer in silence, invariably leaving the room, however, in a state of disuse encouraging to cobwebs, which would have delighted the soul of a connoisseur in wines.

"If I can't make the rent of the room, I can at least raise cobwebs for innkeepers to use in connection with their wine cellars," said the agent to himself with a sad chuckle, which showed that he was possessed of a certain humorous philosophy which must have been extremely consoling to him.

At the end of three years of abortive effort to keep the room rented, impelled partly by curiosity to know if anything really was the matter with the office, partly by a desire to relieve the building of the odium under which the continued emptiness of one of its apartments had placed it, the agent moved into Number 17 himself.

His tenancy lasted precisely one week, at the end of which time he moved out again. He, too, had heard the undefined whispers and disembodied sighs; he, too, had trembled with awe when the uncanny quality of the atmosphere clogged up his lungs and set his heart beating at a galloping pace; he, too, decided that so far as he was concerned life in that office was intolerable, and he acted accordingly. He departed, and from that moment No. 17 was entered on his books no longer as for rent as an office, but was transferred to the list of rooms mentioned as desirable for storage purposes.

To the agent's credit be it said that when Hopkins Toppleton came along and desired to rent the apartment for office use his first impulse was to make a clean breast of the matter, and to say to him that in his own opinion and that of others the room was haunted and had been so for many years; but when he reflected that his conscience, such as it was, along with the rest of his being, was in the employ of the proprietors of the building, he felt that it was his duty to hold his peace. Toppleton had been informed that the room was useful chiefly for storage purposes, and if he chose to use it as an office, it was his own affair. In addition to this, the agent had a vague hope that Hopkins, being an American and used to all sorts of horrible things in his native land – such as boa-constrictors on the streets, buffaloes in the back yard, and Indians swarming in the suburbs of the cities, – would be able to cope with the invisible visitant, and ultimately either subdue or drive the disembodied sigh into the spirit vale. In view of these facts, therefore, it was not surprising that when Hopkins had finally signed a four years' lease and had taken possession, the agent should give a sigh of relief, and, on his return home, inform his wife that she might treat herself to a new silk dress.

During the few weeks which elapsed between the signing of the lease and Hopkins' ostensible departure on a three months' lunching tour, he was watched with considerable interest by the agent, but, until the "Gone to Lunch" placard was put up, the latter saw no sign that Hopkins had discovered anything wrong with the office, and even then the agent thought nothing about it until the placard began to accumulate dust. Then he shook his head and silently congratulated himself that the rent had been paid a year in advance; "for," he said, "if he hasn't gone to New York to lunch, the chances are that that sigh has got to work again and frightened him into an unceremonious departure." Neither of which hypotheses was correct, for as we have already heard, Hopkins had departed for Norway.

As for the sigh, the young lawyer had heard it but once. That was when he was about leaving the room for his three months' tour, and he had attributed it to the soughing of the wind in the trees outside of his window, which was indeed an error, as he might have discovered at the time had he taken the trouble to investigate, for there were no trees outside of his window through whose branches a wind could have soughed even if it had been disposed to do so.

CHAPTER III
MR. HOPKINS TOPPLETON ENCOUNTERS A WEARY SPIRIT

It was well along in October when Hopkins returned to London, and he got back to his office in the Temple none too soon. The agent had fully made up his mind that he was gone for good, and was about taking steps to remove his effects from Number 17, and gain an honest penny by sub-letting that light and airy apartment for his own benefit, a vision of profit which Toppleton redivivus effectually dispelled.

The return, for this reason, was of course a grave disappointment to Mr. Stubbs, but he rose to the occasion when the long lost lessee appeared on the scene, and welcomed him cordially.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Glad to see you back. Didn't know what had become of you or should have forwarded your mail. Have a pleasant trip?"

"Very," said Toppleton, shortly.

"It seems to have agreed with you, – you've a finer colour than you had."

"Yes," replied Hopkins, drily. "That's natural. I've been to Norway. The sun's been working day and night, and I'm tanned."

"I hope everything is – er – everything was all right with the room, sir?" the agent then said somewhat anxiously.

"I found nothing wrong with it," said Hopkins; "did you suspect that anything was wrong there?"

"Oh, no! – indeed not. Of course not," returned the agent with some confusion. "I only asked – er – so that in case there was anything you wanted, you know, it might be attended to at once. There's nothing wrong with the room at all, sir. Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Well, that's good," said Toppleton, turning to his table. "I'm glad there's nothing the matter. It will take a very small percentage of the rental to remedy that. Good morning, Mr. Stubbs."

"Good morning, sir," said Mr. Stubbs, and then he departed.

"Now for the mail," said Hopkins, grasping his letter-opener, and running it deftly through the flap of a communication from Mr. Morley, written two months previously.

"Dear Hoppy," he read. "We have just been informed of your singular act on the Saturday previous to your departure for London."

"Hm! what the deuce did I do then?" said Hopkins, stroking his moustache thoughtfully. "Let me see. 'Singular act.' I've done quite a number of singular things on Saturdays, but what – Oh, yes! Ha, ha! That Coney Island dinner. Oh, bosh! – what nonsense! as if my giving the boys a feast were going to hurt the prospects of a firm like ours. By George, it'll work just the other way. It'll fill the force with an enthusiasm for work which – "

Here Hopkins stopped for a moment to say, "Come in!" Somebody had knocked, he thought. But the door remained closed.

"Come in!" he cried again.

Still there was no answer, and on walking to the door and opening it, Toppleton discovered that his ears had deceived him. There was no one there, nor was there any sign of life whatever in the hallway.

"I'm glad," he said, returning to his chair and taking up Mr. Morley's letter once more. "It might have been a client, and to a man at the head of a big firm who has never been admitted to practice in any court or country, that would be an embarrassment to say the least. It's queer though, about that knock. I certainly heard one. Maybe there is some telepathic influence between Morley and me. He usually punctuates his complaints with a whack on a table or back of a chair. That's what it must have been; but let's see what else he has to say."

"Of course," he read, "if you desire to associate with those who are socially and professionally your inferiors, we have nothing to say. That is a matter entirely beyond our jurisdiction, but when you commit the firm to outrageous expenditures simply to gratify your own love of generosity, it is time to call a halt."

"What the devil is he talking about?" said Hopkins, putting the letter down. "I paid for that dinner out of my own pocket, and never charged the firm a cent, even though it does indirectly reap all the benefits. I'll have to write Morley and call his attention to that fact. How vulgar these disputes – "

At this point he was again interrupted by a sound which, in describing it afterwards, he likened to a ton of aspirates sliding down a coal chute.

"This room appears to be an asylum for strange noises," said he, looking about him to discover, if possible, whence this second interruption came. "I don't believe Morley feels badly enough about my behaviour for one of his sighs to cross the ocean and greet my ears, but I'm hanged if I know how else to account for it, unless there's a speaking tube with a whistle in it somewhere hereabouts. I wonder if that's what Stubbs meant!" he added, reflecting.

"Bah!" he said in answer to his own question, picking up Mr. Morley's letter for a third time. "This is the nineteenth century. Weird sounds are mortal-made these days, and I'm not afraid of them. If there were anything supernatural about them, why didn't the air get blue, and where's my cold chill and my hair standing erect? I fancy I'll retain my composure until the symptoms are a little more strongly developed."

Here he returned to his reading.

"We desire to have you explain to us, at your earliest convenience," the letter went on to say, "why you have so extravagantly raised the salary of every man, woman and child in our employ, utterly regardless of merit, and without consultation with those with whom you have been associated, to such a figure that the firm has been compelled to reduce its autumn dividend to meet the requirements of the pay roll. Your probable answer will be, I presume, – knowing your extraordinary resources in the matter of explanations – that you cannot consent to be a mere figure-head, and that you considered it your duty to impress upon our clerks the fact that you are not what they might suspect under the circumstances, but a vital, moving force in the concern; but you may as well spare yourself the trouble of making any such explanation, since it will not be satisfactory either to myself or to the other members of the firm, with the possible exception of our friend Mawson, who, with his customary about-town manners, is disposed to make light of the matter. We desire to have you distinctly understand that your duties are to be confined entirely to the London office, and to add that were it not for your esteemed father's sake we should at once cancel our agreement with you. The name you bear, honoured as it is in our profession, is of great value to us: but it is, after all, a luxury rather than a necessity, and in these hard times we are strongly inclined to dispense with luxuries whenever we find them too expensive for our pockets."

Hopkins paused in his reading and pursed his lips to give a long, low whistle, a sound which was frozen *in transitu*, for the lips were no sooner pursed than there came from a far corner the very sound that he had intended to utter.

For the first time in his life Toppleton knew what fear was; for the first time since he was a boy, when he wore it that way, did he become conscious that his hair stood upon end. His blood seemed to congeal in his veins, and his heart for a moment ceased to beat, and then, as if desirous of making up for lost time, began to thump against his ribs at lightning pace and with such force that Hopkins feared it might break the crystal of the watch which he carried in the upper left-hand pocket of his vest.

Mr. Morley's letter fluttered from his nerveless hand to the floor, and, despite its severity, was forgotten before it touched the handsome rug beneath Hopkins' table. The new sensation – the sensation of fear – had taken possession of his whole being, and, for an instant, he was as one paralyzed. Then, recovering his powers of motion, he whirled about in his revolving chair and started to his feet as if he had been shot.

"This is unbearable!" he cried, glancing nervously about the room. "It's bad enough to have an office-boy who whistles, but when you get the whistle in the abstract without the advantage of the office-boy, it is too much."

Then Hopkins rang the bell and summoned the janitor.

"Tell the agent I want to see him," he said when that worthy appeared, and then, returning to his desk, he sat down and mechanically opened a copy of the *Daily Register* and tried to read it.

"It's no use," he cried in a moment, crumpling the paper into a ball and throwing it across the room. "That vile whistle has regularly knocked me out."

The paper ball reached the door just as the agent entered, and struck him athwart the watch chain.

"Beg pardon," said Hopkins, "I didn't mean that for you. Everything here seems to be bewitched this morning, that dull compilation of legal woe included."

"It's of no consequence, sir, I assure you," returned the agent uneasily.

"No, I don't think it amounts to a row of beans to a man who hates trouble," said Hopkins, referring more to the journal than to the untoward act of the paper ball. "But I say, Mr. Stubbs, I've been having a devil of a time in this room this morning, and when I say devil I mean devil."

Stubbs paled visibly. The moment he had feared had come.

"Wh – wh – what sus – seems to b – be the m – mum – matter, sir?" he stammered.

"Nothing seems, something *is* the matter," returned Hopkins. "I don't wonder you stammer. You'd stammer worse if you had been here with me three minutes ago. Stubbs, I believe this room is haunted!"

Mr. Stubbs's efforts at surprise at this point were painful to witness.

"Haunted, sir?" he said.

"Yes, haunted!" retorted Hopkins; "and by a confoundedly impertinent something or other that not only sighs and knocks on the door but whistles, Stubbs – actually whistles. Has this room a history?"

"Well, a sort of a one," returned Stubbs; "but I never heard any one complain about it on the score of whistling, sir."

"Stubbs, I believe you are lying. Hasn't somebody killed an office-boy in this apartment, for whistling?" queried Hopkins, gazing sternly at the shuffling agent.

"I'll take an affidavit that nothing of the kind ever happened," returned the agent, gaining confidence.

"That won't be necessary," said Toppleton. "I am satisfied with your assurance. But, Stubbs, to what do you attribute these beastly disturbances? Ghosts?"

"Of course not, Mr. Toppleton," replied Mr. Stubbs. "I fancy you must have heard some boy whistling in the hall."

"How about the knock and the sigh?" demanded the American.

"The knock is easily accounted for," returned the agent. "Somebody in the room above you must have dropped something on the floor, while the sigh was probably the wind blowing through the key-hole."

"Or a bit of fog coming down the chimney, eh, Stubbs?" put in Hopkins, satirically.

"No, sir," replied poor Stubbs, growing red where he had been white; "there is no fog to-day, sir."

"True, Stubbs; and you will likewise observe there is no wind to sough through key-holes," retorted Hopkins, severely, rising and walking to the window.

Stubbs stood motionless, without an answer. Toppleton had cornered him in a flimsy pretext, and then came the climax to his horrible experience.

From behind him in the corner whence had come the sigh and the whistle, there now proceeded a smothered laugh – a sound which curdled his blood and left him so limp that he staggered to the mantel and grasped it to keep himself from falling to the floor.

Hopkins turned upon him, his face livid with anger, and the two men gazed at each other in silence for a moment, the one endeavouring to master his fear, the other to smother his wrath.

"Do you mean to insult me, Mr. Stubbs, by laughing in my face when I send for you to request explanations as to the conduct – as to the – er – the conduct of your room? It sounds ridiculous to say that, but there is no other way to put it, for it *is* the conduct of the room of which I complain. What do you mean by your ill-timed levity?"

"I pass you my word, Mr. Toppleton, I will swear to you, sir, that nothing was further from my thoughts than mirth. I agree with you that it is no laughing matter for – "

"But I heard you laugh," said Toppleton, eyeing the agent, his anger now not unmixed with awe. "You laughed as plainly as it is possible for any one to laugh, except that you endeavoured to smother the sound."

"I did nothing of the sort, Mr. Toppleton," pleaded Stubbs, his hand shaking and his eyes wandering fearsomely over toward the mysterious corner where all was still and innocent-looking. "That laugh came from other lips than mine – if, indeed, it came from lips at all, which I doubt."

"You mean," cried Toppleton, grasping Stubbs by the arm with a grip that made the agent wince, "you mean that this room is – "

"Khee-hee-hee-hee-hee!" came the derisive laugh from the corner, followed by the mysterious whistle and heartrending sigh which Hopkins had already so unpleasantly heard.

Toppleton was transfixed with terror, and the agent, with an ejaculation of fear, ran from the room, and scurried down the stairs out into the court as fast as his legs could carry him, where he fell prostrate in a paroxysm of terror.

Deserted by the agent and shut up in the room with his unwelcome visitor – for the agent had slammed the door behind him with such force that the catch had slipped and loosened the bolt, so that Toppleton was to all intents and purposes a prisoner – Hopkins exerted what little nerve force he had left, and pulled himself together again as best he could. He staggered to his table, and taking a small bottle of whiskey from the cupboard at its side, poured at least one half of its fiery contents down into his throat.

"*Similia similibus*," said he softly to himself. "If I have to fight spirits, I shall use spirits." Then facing about, he gazed into the corner unflinchingly for a moment, following up his glance with one of the hand fire grenades that hung in a wire basket on the wall, which he hurled with all his force into the offending void. To this ebullition of heroic indignation, the only reply was a repetition of the sounds whose origin was so mysterious, but this time they proceeded directly from Toppleton's chair which stood at his side.

Another grenade, smashed into the maroon leather seat of the chair, was Hopkins' rejoinder, whereupon he was infuriated to hear the smothered laugh emanate from the depths of a treasured bit of cloisonné standing upon the mantel, within which it had been Hopkins' custom, in his apartments at home, to keep the faded leaves of the roses given to him by his friends of the fairer sex – a custom which, despite the volumes of tobacco smoke poured into the room by Hopkins and his companions night and day, kept the atmosphere thereof as sweet as a garden.

"You are a bright spirit," said Hopkins with a forced laugh. "You know mighty well that you are safe from violence there; but if you'll get out of that and give me one fair shot at you over on the washstand, you'll never haunt again."

"At last!" came the smothered voice, this time from the top of the jar. "At last, after years of weary waiting and watching, I may speak without breaking my vow."

"Then for heaven's sake," cried Hopkins, sinking back into his chair and staring blankly at the jar, "for heaven's sake speak and explain yourself, if you do not wish to drive me to the insane asylum. Who in the name of my honoured partners are you?"

There was a moment's pause, and then the answer came, —

"I am a weary spirit – a spirit in exile – harmless and unhappy, whose unhappiness you may be able to relieve."

"I?" cried Hopkins, wildly.

"Yes, you. I am come to intrust my affairs to your hands."

"You are – "

"A client," returned the spirit.

Hopkins gasped twice, closed his eyes, clutched wildly at his heart, and slid down to the floor an inert mass.

He had fainted.

CHAPTER IV
THE WEARY SPIRIT GIVES SOME ACCOUNT OF HIMSELF

How long Hopkins would have remained in an unconscious state had not a cold perspiration sprung forth from his forehead, and, trickling over his temples, brought him to his senses, I cannot say. Suffice it to relate that his stupor lasted hardly more than a minute. When he opened his eyes and gazed over toward the haunted vase, he saw there the same depressing nothingness accompanied by the same soul-chilling sighs that had so discomfited him. To the ear there was something there, a something quite as perceptible to the auricular sense as if it were a living, tangible creature, but as imperceptible to the eye as that which has never existed. The presence, or whatever else it was that had entered into Toppleton's life so unceremoniously, was apparently much affected by the searching gaze which its victim directed toward it.

"Don't look at me that way, I beg of you, Mr. Toppleton," said the spirit after it had sighed a half dozen times and given an occasional nervous whistle. "I don't deserve all that your glance implies, and if you could only understand me, I think you would sympathize with me in my trials."

"I? I sympathize with you? Well, I like that," cried Toppleton, raising himself on his elbow and staring blankly at the vase. "It appears to me that I am the object of sympathy this time. What the deuce are you, anyhow? How am I to understand you, when you sit around like a maudlin void lost in a vacuum? Are you an apparition or what?"

"I am neither an apparition nor a what," returned the spirit. "I couldn't be an apparition without appearing. I suppose you might call me a limited perception; that is, I can be perceived but not seen, although I am human."

"You must be a sort of cross between a rumour and a small boy, I suppose; is that it?" queried Toppleton, with a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

"If you mean that I am half-way between things which should be seen and not heard, and other things which should be heard and not seen, I fancy your surmise approximates correctness. For my part, a love of conciseness leads me to set myself down as a Presence," was the spirit's answer.

"I'll give you a liberal reward," retorted Toppleton, eagerly, "if you'll place yourself in the category of an Absence as regards me and my office here; for, to tell you the truth, I am addicted more or less to heart disease, and I can't say I care to risk an association with a vocally inclined zero, such as you seem to be. What's your price?"

"You wrong me, Toppleton," returned the Presence, indignantly, floating from the edge of the vase over to the large rocking chair in the corner by the window, which began at once to sway to and fro, to the undisguised wonderment of its owner. "I am not a blackmailer, as you might see at once if you could look into my face."

"Where do you keep your face?" asked Hopkins, sitting up and embracing his knees. "If you have brought it along with you for heaven's sake trot it out. I can't ruin my eyes on you as you are now. Have you no office hours, say from ten to two, when you may be seen by those desirous of feasting their eyes upon your tangibility?"

"I am afraid you are joking, Hopkins," said the spirit, growing familiar. "If you are, I beg that you will stop. What is a good joke to some eyes is a very serious matter to others."

"That, my dear Presence," returned Toppleton, "is a very true observation, as is borne out by the large percentage of serious matter that appears in comic journals."

"Please do not be flippant," said the voice from the rocking-chair, sadly. "I have come to you as a suppliant for assistance. The fact that I have come without my body is against me, I know, but that is a circumstance over which I have absolutely no control. My body has been stolen from me,

and I am at present a shapeless wanderer with nowhere to lay my head, and no head to lay there, if perchance the world held some corner that I might call my own."

"I can't see what you have to complain about on that score," said Toppleton, rising from the floor and seizing a large magnifying glass from his table and gazing searchingly through it into the chair which still rocked violently. "An individual like yourself, if you are an individual, ought to be able to find comfort anywhere. The avidity with which you have seized upon that chair, and the extraordinary vitality you seem to have imparted to its rockers, indicate to my mind that the world has about everything for you that any reasonable being can desire. If you can percolate into my apartment and make use of the luxuries I had fondly hoped were exclusively mine, I can't see what is to prevent your settling down at Windsor Castle if you will. Aren't there any comfortable chairs and beds there?"

"I don't know whether there are or not," replied the Presence. "I never went there, and being a loyal British Presence, I should hesitate very strongly before I would discommode the Royal family."

"It might be awkward, I suppose," returned Toppleton with a laugh, "if you should happen to fall asleep in the Prince of Wales' favourite arm-chair, and he should happen to come in and sit on you, for I presume you are no more visible to Royalty than you are to Republican simplicity as embodied in myself. Still, as a loyal British subject, I should think you'd rather be sat on by the Prince than by a common mortal."

As Hopkins spoke these words the chair stopped rocking, and if its attitude meant anything, its invisible occupant was leaning forward and staring with pained astonishment at the young lawyer, who was leaning gracefully against the mantelpiece. Then on a sudden the chair's attitude was relaxed and it rocked slowly backward again, resuming its former pace. A few minutes passed without a word being spoken, at the end of which time the spirit sighed deeply.

"Is there anything in this world," it asked, "is there anything too sacred for you Americans to joke about? Have you no ideals, no – "

"Plenty of ideals but no special idols," returned Hopkins, perceiving the spirit's drift. "But of course, if I hurt your feelings by joking about the Prince, I apologize. Though unasked, you are still my guest, and I should be very sorry to seem lacking in courtesy. But tell me about this body of yours. How did you come to lose it, and is it still living?"

"Yes, it is still living," replied the spirit. "Living a life of honoured ease."

"But how the deuce did you come to lose it? that's what I can't understand. I have heard of men losing pretty nearly everything but their bodies."

"As I have already told you," said the spirit, wearily, "it was stolen from me."

"And have you no clue to the thieves? Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I know where it is. In fact I saw it only last week," replied the spirit with a sob, "and it's getting old, Toppleton, very old. When it was taken away from me it was erect of stature, broad-shouldered, muscular and full of health. To-day it is round-shouldered, flabby and generally consumptive-looking. When I occupied it, the face was clean-shaven and ruddy. The hair was of a rich auburn, the hands milk white. The carriage was graceful, and about my lips there played a smile that fascinated. The blue eyes sparkled, the teeth shone out between my lips when I smiled, like a strip of chased silver in the sunlight; I tell you, Toppleton, when I had that body it had some style about it; but now – it breaks my heart to think of it now!"

"It hasn't lost its good looks altogether, has it?" queried Hopkins, his voice slightly tremulous with the sympathy he was beginning to feel for this disembodied entity before him.

"It has," sobbed the spirit; "and I'm not surprised that it has, considering the life it has led since I lost it. The auburn hair that used to be my mother's pride, and my schoolmates' source of wit, has gradually dropped away and left a hairless scalp of an insignificant pinkish hue which would disgrace a shrimp. My once happy smile has subsided into something like a toothless sneer; for my dazzling teeth are no more. The blue eyes are expressionless, the elastic step is halting, and, what is worse, the present occupant of my physical self has grown a beard that makes me look like a pirate."

"I wonder you recognized yourself," said Hopkins.

"It was strange; but I did recognize myself by my ring which I still wear," returned the spirit. "But, Toppleton," it added, "you have no notion how terrible it is for a man to see himself growing old and breaking away from all the habits and principles of youth, powerless to interfere. For instance, my body was temperate when I was in it. I never drank more than one glass of whiskey in one day. Now it is brandy and water all day long, and it galls me, like the merry hereafter, with my temperance scruples, to see myself given over to intemperate drams. *I* never used profane language. Last Friday I heard my own lips condemn a poor unoffending fly to everlasting punishment. But I want to tell you how this outrageous thing came to pass. I want to tell you how it was that in the very bud of my existence I was robbed of a suitable case in which to go through life, and I want you, with your extraordinary knowledge of the law, as I understand it to be, to devise some scheme for my relief. If you don't, nobody will, and before many years it will be too late. The body is growing weaker every day. I can see that, and I want to get it back again before it becomes absolutely valueless. I believe that under my care, restored to its original owner, it can be fixed up and made quite respectable for its declining years. Of course the teeth and the hair are gone for ever, but I think I can furbish up the smile, the eye and the hands. I know that I can restore my former good habits."

"I'm hanged if I see how I can help you," rejoined Hopkins. "Do you mean to say that the present occupant of your personality is the creature who robbed you of it?"

"Precisely," said the spirit. "He's the very same person, and, stars above us, how he has abused the premises! He has made my name famous – "

"You don't mean to say that he took your name too?" put in Hopkins incredulously.

"I mean just that," retorted the spirit. "He stole my name, my body, my prospects, my clothing – every blessed thing I had except my consciousness, and he thrust that out into a cold, unsympathetic world, to float around in invisible nebulousness for thirty long years. Oh, it is an awful tale of villainy, Toppleton! Awful!"

"You say he has made your name famous," said Toppleton. "You give him credit for that, don't you?"

"I would if the very fame accorded my name did not tend to make me infamous in the eyes of those I hold most dear; and the beastly part of it is that I can't explain the situation to them."

"Why not?" asked Hopkins. "If you can lay all this misery bare to me, why can't you lay it before those for whose good will and admiration you are lamenting?"

"Because, Hopkins, they never address me, and it is my hard fate not to be able to open a conversation," returned the spirit. "If you will remember, it was not until you asked me who the devil I was, or some equally choice question of like import, that I began to hold converse with you; you are the only man with whom I have talked for thirty years, Hopkins, because you are the only person who has taken the initiative."

"Well, you goaded me into it," returned Hopkins. "So I can't see why you can't goad your friends of longer standing into it."

"The explanation is simple," replied the spirit. "My friends haven't had the courage to withstand the terrors of the situation. The minute I have whistled, sighed or laughed, they have made a bee line for the door, and raised such a hullabaloo about the 'supernatural visitation,' as they termed my efforts, that I couldn't do a thing with them. They've everyone of them, from my respected mother down, avoided me, even as that man Stubbs has avoided me. I believe you too would have fled if the door hadn't locked automatically, and so forced you to remain here."

"If I could have avoided this interview I should most certainly have done so," said Toppleton, candidly. "You can probably guess yourself how very unpleasant it is to be disturbed in your work by a whistle that emanates from some unseen lips, and to have your room taken possession of by an invisible being with a grievance."

"Yes, Hopkins. I've had almost the same experience myself," replied the spirit; "and to be as candid with you as you have been with me, I will say that it was just that experience, and nothing else, that is responsible for my present difficulties."

"That's encouraging for me," said Hopkins, nervously. "But tell me how have you become infamously famous?"

"The bandit who now occupies my being has violated every principle of religion and politics that he found in me when he took possession," returned the spirit, leaving the rocking-chair and settling down on the mantelpiece, in front of the clock. "Where I was a pronounced Tory he has made me vote with the Liberals. Notwithstanding the fact that I was brought up in the Church of England, he joined first the dissenters and is now a thorough agnostic, and signs my name to the most outrageous views on social and moral subjects you ever heard advanced. My family have cut loose from me as I am represented by him, and the dearest friend of my youth never mentions my name save in terms of severest reprehension. Would you like that, Hopkins Toppleton?"

"I'd be precious far from liking it," Hopkins answered. "It seems to me I'd commit suicide under such circumstances. Have you thought of that?"

"Often," replied the spirit; "but the question has always been, how?"

"Take poison! Shoot yourself! Drown yourself!"

"I can't take poison. That fiend who robbed me has my stomach, so what could I put the poison into?" retorted the spirit. "Shoot myself? How? I haven't a pistol. If I had a pistol I couldn't fire it, because I've nothing to pull the trigger with. If I had something to pull the trigger with, what should I fire at? I have no brains to blow out, no heart to shoot at. I'd simply fire into air."

"How about the third method?" queried Toppleton.

"Drowning?" asked the unhappy Presence. "That wouldn't work. I've nothing to drown. If I could get under water, I'd bubble right up again, so you see it's useless. Besides, it's only the body that dies, not the spirit. You see the shape I'm left in."

"No," returned Hopkins, "I perceive the lack of shape you are left in, and I must confess you are in the hardest luck of any person I ever knew; but really, my dear sir, I don't see how I can render you any assistance, so we might as well consider the interview at an end. Now that I am better acquainted with you I will say, however, that if it gives you any pleasure to loll around here or to sleep up there in my cloisonné jar with the rose leaves, you are welcome to do so."

"If you would only hear my story, Hopkins," said the spirit, beseechingly, "you would be so wrought up by its horrible details that you would devise some plan for my relief. You would be less than a man if you did not, and I am told that you Americans are great fighters. Take this case for me, won't you?"

Hopkins hesitated. He was strongly inclined to yield, the cause was so extraordinary, and yet he could not in a moment overcome his strongly-cultivated repugnance to burdening himself with a client. Then he was conscientious, too. He did not wish to identify the famous house of Toppleton, Morley, Harkins, Perkins, Mawson, Bronson, Smithers and Hicks with a case in which the possibilities of success seemed so remote. On the other hand he could not but reflect that, aside from the purely humane aspect of the matter, a successful issue would redound to the everlasting glory of himself and his partners over the sea – that is, it would if anybody could be made to believe in the existence of such a case. He realized that the emergency was one which must be met by himself alone, because he was thoroughly convinced that the hard-headed practical men of affairs whom he represented would scarcely credit his account of the occurrences of the last hour, and would set him down either as having been under the influence of drink or as having lost his senses. He would not have believed the story himself if some one else had told it to him, and he could not expect his partners in New York to be any more credulous than he would have been.

His hesitation was short-lived, however, for in a moment it was dispelled by a sigh from his unseen guest. It was the most heartrending sigh he had ever heard, and it overcame his scruples.

"By George!" he said, "I will listen to your story, and I'll help you if I can, only you will unstring my nerves unless you get yourself a shape of some kind or other. It makes my blood run cold to sit here and bandy words with an absolute nonentity."

"I don't know where I can get a shape," returned the spirit.

"What did the thief who took your shape do with his old one?" asked Hopkins.

"He'd buried it before I met him," returned the spirit.

"Buried it? Oh, Heavens!" cried Hopkins, seizing his hat. "Let's get out of this and take a little fresh air; if we don't, I'll go mad. Come," he added, addressing the spirit, "we'll run over to the Lowther Arcade and buy a form. If we can't find anything better we'll get a wooden Indian or a French doll, or anything having human semblance so that you can climb into it and lessen the infernal uncanniness of your disembodiment."

Hopkins rang the janitor's bell again, and when that worthy appeared he had him unfasten the door from the outside; then he and the spirit started out in search of an embodiment for the exiled soul.

"Hi thinks as 'ow 'e must be craizy," said the janitor, as Toppleton disappeared around the corner in animated conversation with his invisible client. "E's' talkin' away like hall possessed, hand nobody as hi can see within hearshot. These Hamericans is nothink much has far as 'ead goes."

As for Toppleton and the Presence, they found in the Lowther Arcade just what they wanted – an Aunt Sallie with a hollow head, into which the spirit was able to enter, and from which it told its tale of woe, sitting, bodily and visibly, in the rocking-chair, before the eyes of Hopkins Toppleton, the words falling fluently from the open lips of the dusky incubus the spirit had put on.

"It was odd, but not too infernally weird," said Hopkins afterwards, "and I was able to listen without losing my equanimity, to one of the meanest tales of robbery I ever heard."

CHAPTER V
HOPKINS BECOMES BETTER ACQUAINTED WITH THE WEARY SPIRIT

"I do not know," said the weary spirit, as he entered the head of the Aunt Sallie and endeavoured to make himself comfortable therein, "I do not know whether I can do justice to my story in these limited headquarters or not, but I can try. It isn't a good fit, this body isn't, and I cannot help being conscious that to your eyes I must appear as a blackamoor, which, to an English spirit of cultivation and refinement such as I am, is more or less discomfiting."

"I shouldn't mind if I were you," returned Hopkins. "It's very becoming to you; much more so, indeed, than that airy nothingness you had on when I first perceived you, and while your tale may be more or less affected by your consciousness of the strange, ready-made physiognomy you have assumed, I, nevertheless, can grasp it better than I might if you persisted in sounding off your woes from an empty rocking-chair, or from the edge of my cloisonné rose jar."

"Oh, I don't blame you, Toppleton," returned the spirit. "I am, on the contrary, very grateful to you for what you have done for me. I shall always appreciate your generosity, for instance, in buying me this shape in order to give me at least a semblance of individuality, and I assure you that if I can ever get back into my real body, I will work it to the verge of nervous prostration to serve you, should you stand in need of assistance in any way."

Hopkins' scrutiny of the Aunt Sallie, as these words issued from the round aperture in the red lips made originally to hold the pipe stem, but now used as a tubal exit for the tale of woe, was so searching that anything less stolid than the wooden head would have flinched. The Aunt Sallie stood it, however, without showing a trace of emotion, gazing steadfastly with her bright blue eyes out of the window, her eyelids more fixed than the stars themselves, since no sign of a wink or a twinkle did they give.

"I wish," said Toppleton, experiencing a slight return of his awed chilliness as he observed the unyielding fixity of Sallie's expression, "in fact, I earnestly wish we could have secured a ventriloquist's marionette instead of that thing you've got on. It would really be a blessing to me if you could wink your eyes, or wag your ears, or change your expression in some way or other."

"I don't see how it can be done," returned the spirit from behind Toppleton's back. "I cannot exercise any control over these wooden features."

Hopkins jumped two or three feet across the room, the unexpected locality of the voice gave him such a shock, and the pulsation of his heart leaped madly from the normal to the triply abnormal.

"Wh – whuh – what the devil did you do tha – that for?" he cried, as soon as he was calm enough to speak. "Do y – you want to give me heart failure?"

"Not I!" replied the spirit, once more returning to the Sallie. "That would be a very unbusiness-like proceeding on my part at a time like this, when, after thirty years of misery, I find at last one who is willing to champion my cause. I only wanted to see how my second self looked in this chair. To my eyes I appear rather plain and dusky-looking, but what's the odds? The figure will serve its purpose, and after all that's what we want. I'm sorry to have frightened you, Toppleton, honestly sorry."

"Oh, never mind," rejoined Toppleton, graciously. "Only don't do it again. Let's have the tale now."

"Very well," said the spirit. "If you will kindly shove me further back into the chair, and arrange my overskirt for me, I'll begin – that's another uncomfortable thing about my situation at present. It's somewhat trying to a spirit of masculine habits to find himself arrayed in a shape wearing the habiliments of the other sex."

Hopkins did as he was requested, and, throwing himself down on his lounge, lit his pipe, and announced himself as ready to listen.

"I think I'd like a pipe myself," said the Sallie. "I've got a fine place for one, I see."

"How can you talk if you stop your mouth up with a pipe?" asked Hopkins.

"Through my nose," replied the spirit. "Or there are holes in the ears, I can talk through them quite as well."

"Well, I guess not," returned Hopkins. "I have had enough of your weird vocal exercises to-day without having you talk with your ears, but if you'll smoke with one or both of them, you're welcome to do it."

"Very well," replied the spirit. "I fancy you're right, and inasmuch as I haven't had a pipe for thirty years, I'll let you fill up two for me, and I'll try 'em both."

Accordingly Hopkins filled two of the clay pipes, three dozen of which had come with the Aunt Sallie, and lighting them for the spirit, placed them in the ears of his vis-à-vis as requested.

"Ah," said the spirit as he began to puff, "this is what I call comfort." And then he began his story.

"I was born," he said, breathing forth a cloud of smoke from his right ear, "sixty years ago in a small house within a stone's throw of what is now the band stand in the park at Buxton."

"You must have had human catapults in those days," interrupted Toppleton, for as he remembered the band stand at Buxton, it was situated at some considerable distance from anything which in any degree represented a habitation in which one could begin life comfortably.

"I don't know about that. I am not telling you a sporting tale. I am simply narrating the events of my career, such as they are," returned the spirit, "and my father has assured me that the house in which I first saw light was, as I have said, within a stone's throw of what is now the band stand in the Buxton Park. The band stand may have been nearer the house in the old days than it is now, – that is an insignificant sort of a detail anyhow, and if you'd prefer it I will put it in this way: I was born at Buxton sixty years ago in a small house, no longer standing, from whose windows the band stand in the park might have been seen if there had been one there. How is that?"

"Perfectly satisfactory," replied Hopkins. "A statement of that kind would be accepted in any court in the land as veracious on the face of it, whereas we might be called upon to prove that other tale, which between you and me had about it a distinctly Munchausenesque flavour."

The spirit was evidently much impressed with this reasoning, for he forgot himself for a moment, and inhaled some of the smoke, so that it came out between his lips instead of from his ears as before.

"I am glad to see you take such interest in the matter," he said after a moment's reflection. "We must indeed have an absolutely irrefragable story if we are to take it to court. I had not thought of that. But to resume. My parents were like most others of their class, poor but honest. My mother was a poetess with an annuity. My father was a non-resistant, a sort of forerunner of Tolstoï, with none of the latter's energy. He was content to live along on my mother's annuity, leaving her for her own needs an undivided interest in the earnings of her pen."

"He was a gentleman of leisure, then," returned Hopkins, "with pronounced leanings towards the sedentary school of philosophy."

"That's it," replied the spirit. "That was my father in a nut-shell. He took things as they came – indeed that was his chief fault. As mother used to say, he not only took things as they came, but took all there was to take, so that there was never anything left for the rest of us. His non-resistant tendencies were almost a curse to the family. Why, he'd even listen to mother's poetry and not complain. If there were weeds in the garden, he would submit tamely, rather than take a hoe and eradicate them. He used to sigh once in awhile and condemn my mother's parents for leaving her so little that she could not afford to hire a man to keep our place in order, but further than this he did not murmur. My mother, on the other hand, was energetic in her special line. I've known that woman to turn out fifteen

poems in a morning, and, at one time, I think it was the day of Victoria's coronation, she wrote an elegy on William the Fourth of sixty-eight stanzas, and a coronation ode that reached from one end of the parlour to the other, – doing it all between luncheon and dinner. Dinner was four hours late to be sure, but even that does not affect the wonderful quality of the achievement."

"Didn't your father resist that?" queried Toppleton, sympathetically.

"No," replied the spirit, "never uttered a complaint."

"He must have been an extraordinary man," observed Toppleton, shaking his head in wonder.

"He was," assented the spirit. "Father was a genius in his way; but he was born tired, and he never seemed able to outgrow it."

Here the spirit requested Toppleton's permission to leave the Aunt Sallie for a moment. The head was getting too full of smoke for comfort.

"I'll just sit over here on the waste basket until the smoke has a chance to get out," he said. "If I don't, it will be the ruin of me."

"All right," returned Toppleton. "I suppose when a man is reduced to nothing but a voice, it is rather destructive to his health to get diluted with tobacco smoke. But, I say, that was a pretty tough condition of affairs in your house I should say. Poetic mother, do-nothing father, small income and a baby. How did you manage to live?"

"Oh, we lived well enough," replied the spirit. "The income was large enough to pay the rent and keep father from hunger and thirst – particularly the latter. Mother, being a poet, didn't eat anything to speak of, and I fed on cow's milk. We had a cow chiefly because her appetite kept the grass cut, and when I came along she served an additional useful purpose. In the matter of clothing we did first rate. Mother's trousseau lasted as long as she did, and father never needed anything more than the suit he was married in. Inheriting my mother's poetic traits, and my father's tendency to let things come as they might and go as they would, it is hardly strange that as I grew older I became addicted to habits of indecision; that I lacked courage when a slight display of that quality meant success; that I was invariably found wanting in the little crises which make up existence in this sphere; that I always let slip the opportunities which were mine, and that at those tides of my own affairs which taken at the flood would have led on to fortune, I was always high and dry somewhere out of reach, and that, in consequence, all the voyage of my life has been bound in shallows and in miseries, as my mother would have said."

"Your mother must have been a diligent student of Shakespeare," Toppleton retorted, resenting the spirit's appropriation to his mother of the great singer's words, and also taking offence at the implied reflection upon his own reading.

"Yes, she was," replied the spirit unabashed. "In fact, my mother was so saturated – she was more than imbued – with the spirit of Shakespeare, that she was frequently unable to distinguish her own poems from his, a condition of affairs which was the cause, at one time, of her being charged with plagiarism, when she was in reality guilty of nothing worse than unconscious cerebration."

"That is an unfortunate disease when it develops into verbatim appropriation," said Toppleton, drily.

"Precisely my father's words," returned the spirit. "But the effect of such parental causes, as I have already said," continued the exiled soul, "was a pusillanimous offspring, which for the offspring in question, myself, was extremely disastrous. The poet in me was just sufficiently well developed to give me a malarious idea of life. In spite of my sex I was a poetess rather than a poet. I could begin an epic or a triolet without any trouble; but I never knew when to stop, a failing not necessarily fatal to an epic, but death to a triolet. The true climaxes of my lucubrations were generally avoided, and miserably inadequate compromises adopted in their stead. My muse was a snivelling, weak-kneed sort of creature, who, had she been of this earth, would have belonged to the ranks of those who are addicted to smelling-salts, influenza and imaginary troubles, and not the strong, picturesque, helpful female, calculated to goad a man on to immortality. I generally knew what was the right thing to

do, but never had the courage to do it. That was my peculiarity, and it has brought me to this – to the level of a soul with no habitation save the effigy of a negress, provided for me by a charitably disposed chance acquaintance."

"You do not appear to have had a single redeeming feature," said Toppleton, some disgust manifested on his countenance, for to tell the truth he was thoroughly disappointed to learn that the spirit's moral cowardice had brought his trouble upon him.

"Oh, yes, I had," replied the spirit hastily, as if anxious to rehabilitate himself in his host's eyes. "I was strong in one particular. In matters pertaining to religion I was unusually strong. My very meekness rendered me so."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.