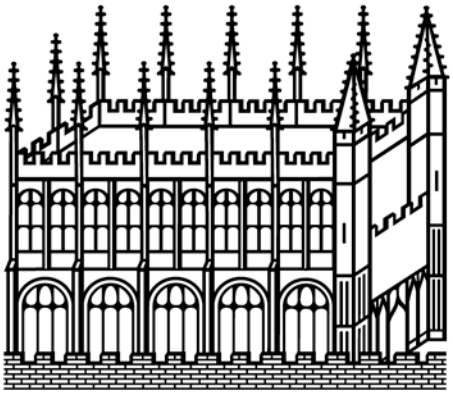

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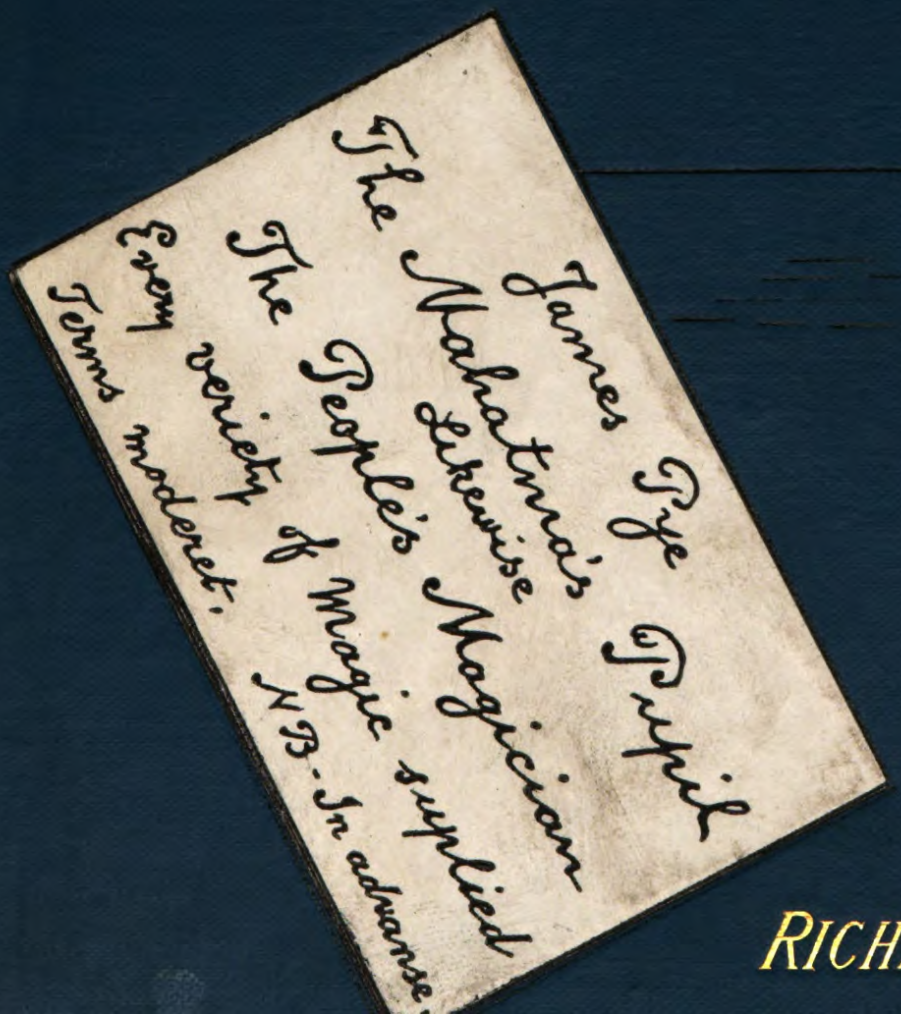

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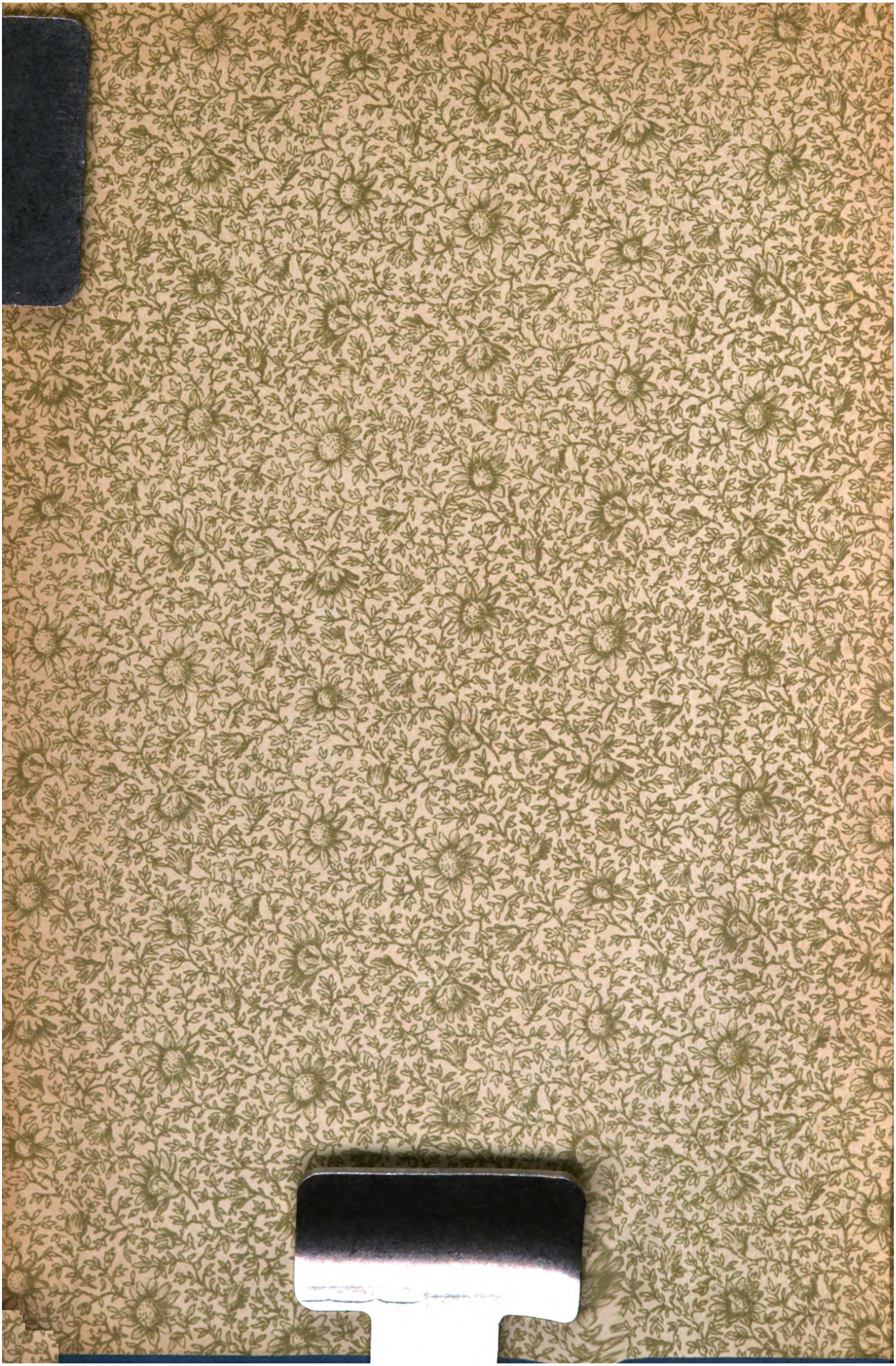

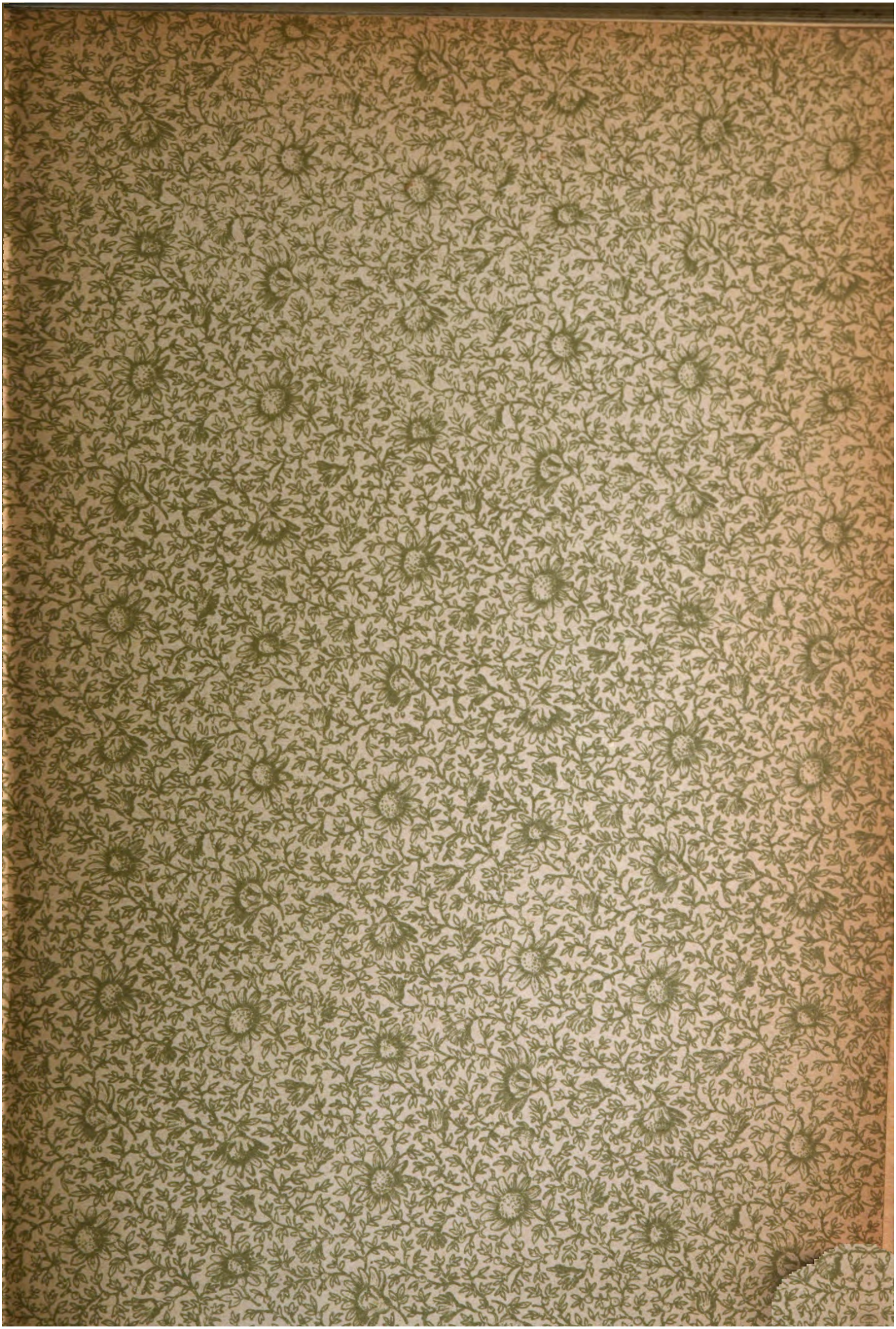

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THE MAHATMA'S PUPIL

BY

RICHARD MARSH

Author of "The Devil's Diamond," etc.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

"It is better not to do a thing at all, than to do it badly."

COPYBOOK MAXIMS.

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THE MAHATMA'S PUPIL.

CHAPTER I.

THE PEOPLE'S MAGICIAN.

"EXCUSE me, but would you mind obliging me with the price of a dinner?"

Mr. Redford looked round at the speaker,—the request was a somewhat unusual one.

"The price of a dinner? And what may be your idea of a dinner?"

"Well, something worth calling a dinner; none of your 'Best sixpenny dinners in London,' you know. Something—something in the Criterion line: five courses and a dessert and a bottle, you know."

The fellow was an impudent scoundrel, if he was not drunk to boot.

Mr. Redford turned to move away. The man caught him by the arm. He lowered his voice. "I'll make it worth your while if you will!"

"You'll make it worth my while? How do you propose to do that?"

"I'm a magician!"

The man uttered the words from behind the shelter of his hand, as if to prevent them being overheard by the passers by. Mr. Redford regarded him a little more intently. He was middle aged. There was a week's growth of bristles on his cheeks and chin. He wore a shocking hat. His clothes were shabby. His boots were down at heel. There was a general look about him as if he had not been undressed for a week.

"You look a magician!"

"That's just it, I don't,—I know I don't, but I am—so help me, I am!"

"It seems odd that a magician should not be sufficiently master of magic to enable him to procure for himself the price of a dinner, even of a dinner of five courses and a dessert at the Criterion."

The stranger cleared his throat, deprecatingly. Mr. Redford was slightly amused. He began to suspect that he was in the presence of a novelty in vagabonds.

"Look here, sir, I tell you how it is. I am a magician, and though I can't do no

magic for myself, I can do anything for you!"

"You can do anything for me?"

"Just tell me to do anything, that's all I ask,—just tell me! Put a name to it, and then you'll see!"

"It strikes me, my friend, that yours is a case which requires the interposition of a policeman."

"You call a policeman,—you just call one!"

The man stood rubbing his hands and smiling. Mr. Redford could not altogether make him out.

"There is one,—shall I call him?"

A policeman stood in the centre of the road, performing the difficult duty of managing the traffic of the London streets, at any rate, of that portion of it which came that way. He was a fine, soldierly man, as the City constables invariably are. The stranger watched him with a peculiar smile.

"You call him!"

Mr. Redford, regarding this as a challenge—*and* an impertinence—raised his hand to beckon to the officer. The moment he did so, that personage did what probably no City constable ever did before—he turned a somersault in

mid air—as clean a somersault as ever a circus rider threw—boots, helmet, truncheon, overcoat and all. It was so neatly done—Barnum's Lady Somersault Thrower never did it neater. He came down on his feet, on the exact spot from which he had started, as cleverly as though he had been practising that sort of thing for years. Mr. Redford was—not at all unnaturally—startled. The passers by seemed startled too. The policeman himself—when he regained his right end up—seemed to be more startled than any one. He looked about him with that "I-saw-you-do-it! What-do-you-mean-by-it?" sort of air, which a policeman can assume at will.

The stranger pressed his hands to his side. He chuckled.

"Didn't I do it neat?" he said.

"You!" Mr. Redford stared.

"Yes, me! Who do you suppose done it if it wasn't me? Look here, I'll do it again."

What the stranger did, or whether he did anything, was more than Mr. Redford could say; but scarcely were the words out of his lips than the policeman *did* it again. There was another wonderful vision of boots, helmet, truncheon, overcoat, whirling in mid air. The

policeman had turned another somersault in the centre of the road—a somersault which was quite as neatly turned as the first had been. The "act" created a sensation. 'Bus-drivers evinced a lively interest in this display of the officer's agility.

"Hinkore!" cried the Jehu of a "Walham Green." "Never saw nothing better in all my days, never! I say, Jim"—to his conductor—"do you see this slop a-doing flip-flaps in the middle of the street?"

"Ain't the gentleman going to 'and 'is 'elmet round?" inquired a John Bull. "It ain't often that I feels moved to contribute to a testimonial to a peeler, but this is a peeler, this one is. My Ikey! what is them slops a-coming to?"

The crowd, which so easily does assemble in a London thoroughfare, bade fair to assemble now. Instead of doing his best to expedite the traffic, the officer seemed to have gone out of his way to cause confusion. Mr. Redford did not wait to see what would be the end of it. He turned to the stranger, who was chuckling to himself as if in the enjoyment of some monstrous joke.

"Come with me to my office."

The stranger fell in by Mr. Redford's side,

chattering and chuckling, as that gentleman walked quickly away from the immediate neighbourhood of the gathering crowd.

"With pleasure, sir: anything to oblige; I'm at your service, sir. Didn't he do that neat? Lovely! I never played a joke upon a copper before—I never thought of it! I never do think of these things, somehow; it's my poor head—it's my poor head! Lor', I could make 'em all turn flip-flaps if you like, gals and all! But there, never mind, I am a magician, I am; I tell you straight I am."

It was not very far to Mr. Redford's office. It was on the top floor of a very dingy building, not by any means one of the new palatial blocks. Nor was it a large office, nor well furnished. Its chief contents were an ancient writing-table and two or three equally ancient chairs. There was no evidence of the presence of a clerk, not even of the proverbial office-boy —Mr. Redford had admitted himself and his companion with a key which he had taken from his waistcoat pocket. Nor was there evidence of much business either. In fact, there never was much business transacted in that office,—its tenant only wished there were.

Mr. Redford was a man of between forty and

fifty years of age. His face and bearing suggested that each individual year had left its impress on him as it passed. His own attire was not by any means resplendent. It was neat, but certainly not with the neatness which suggests new clothes. It was rather that of the man who takes tender and anxious care of the only clothes he has. There was something about him which suggested—well, not exactly sternness. It was possibly this indefinable something which had induced the stranger, with the instinct of the true mendicant, to address him.

When he found himself alone with the stranger he seemed to be rather at a loss as to what to say to him. He stood looking at the stranger, and the stranger stood looking at him; the latter twirling his doubtful hat round and round with his very doubtful hands. At last Mr. Redford found his voice.

"How dared you tell me such an impudent lie?"

"I never told you no lie, sir, never! I'm a truthful man, sir, I am."

"And yet you dared to tell me that it was you who caused that policeman to behave in—in that extraordinary manner?"

"Look here, sir: just you cast your eye on this—that's who I am—and then you'll know all about it, sir."

The stranger took from an inner pocket of his coat a piece of pasteboard—an extremely dirty piece of pasteboard. This he handed to Mr. Redford, that gentleman evincing no undue anxiety to receive it into his temporary possession.

It was a common white card, or, rather, it had, possibly, once been white. On it was written, in handwriting which suggested the unpractised scribe—

James Pye,

The Mahatma's Pupil,

Likewise

The People's Magician.

Every veriety of magic suplied. Terms moderet. N.B.—In advanse.

"I've meant to have it printed, over and over again I have; but somehow I could never spare the coin—never!"

The stranger seemed to read something in Mr. Redford's face. He put his hand up to his lips and coughed.

"I daresay the spelling isn't what it might

be, but I knew the printer 'd attend to that—if it ever came to printing."

Mr. Redford glanced up from the piece of pasteboard.

"Is your name James Pye?"

"It is."

Mr. Pye sighed, as if the fact of his name being James Pye were ample cause for sighs.

"What do you mean by calling yourself 'the Mahatma's Pupil'?"

"Well, sir, I calls myself the Mahatma's Pupil because I am."

"And I suppose you are also the People's Magician?"

Again Mr. Pye coughed behind his hand.

"Well, sir, that's what I should like to be; but, somehow, the people—leastways, the general run of them—don't seem to be so much in want of a magician as might have been expected."

"I should imagine that they are not in want of a magician who is not sufficiently master of magic to procure for himself the price of his own dinner."

Mr. Pye hesitated; he seemed to see the logic of this.

"Perhaps, sir, you will allow me to tell you

all about it. It's rather a singular story, I do assure you."

"Lie away, my friend."

Mr. Pye looked mournfully at Mr. Redford. He seemed to think that the manner in which permission was given him to unfold his narrative was not particularly encouraging.

However, he swallowed his resentment. He began his tale.

"By profession, sir, I'm what they calls a handy man."

"You look a handy man. And what do *you* call a handy man?"

"Well, sir, I does a bit of gardening, and I looks after the stables a bit, and I drives a bit, and I cleans the boots a bit, and I cleans the knives a bit, and I waits at table a bit, and I does a bit of cooking when it's wanted, and I'm not above doing a bit of sewing, and—and—" Mr. Pye scratched his head, as if at a loss for additions to the list—"in fact, sir, I'm by profession what they calls a handy man."

Mr. Redford laughed.

"Lie on!"

Mr. Pye was obviously pained.

"I wish you wouldn't say that, sir—I really do. I ain't a liar, sir, not by nature; it 'd have

been as well for me if I had been, perhaps. But I dare say you'll know me better before I've done." Mr. Pye sighed. "Well, sir, I got into service with a"—Mr. Pye gave Mr. Redford a curious glance out of the corners of his eyes—"Theosophist."

"A Theosophist?"

"Yes, sir, a Theosophist. It was some time before I knew the party was a Theosophist, and then it was some time longer before I knew what kind of article a Theosophist chanced to be. The party's name was Snelling; he was a cure! He was always crying. I never knew such a chap for crying. Talk about a three months' baby—no three months' baby ever howled like that there Snelling. I couldn't make out what caused his waterworks. I was the only servant about the place, and at last he told me." Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips. "It was all about his Mahatma."

"His Mahatma?"

"Yes; his Mahatma. I didn't know no more about a Mahatma than I did about a Theosophist, nor yet so much, perhaps, and that's saying precious little, that is. But this here Snelling told me what a Mahatma is. A Mahatma is a

Indian party what lives—I don't rightly know quite where, but somewhere over in them there parts. A lively place it must be, from what I see of the only Mahatma ever I cast eyes upon. He's a regular dab at hankey-pankey, a Mahatma is. A dealer in magic and spells; a wizard quite—quite in a wholesale kind of way. It seems that every Theosophist ought to have his own particular Mahatma, so that he can amuse himself with hankey-pankey whenever he feels that way disposed. This here Snelling, he wanted his Mahatma; but he never come, leastways, he never come to him. He wanted him so bad, he regularly howled for him. I never saw such a man to blubber. And the more he blubbered, the more the Mahatma didn't come. And, at last"—Mr. Pye cast a furtive glance all round the room—"at last, instead of coming to Snelling, that there Mahatma he come to me."

Mr. Pye paused. Mr. Redford regarded him with a deepening smile.

"Of course you were glad to see him?"

"Not when he come at first I wasn't, not by no manner of means." Mr. Pye dropped his voice. He came a step nearer. "One night, I had got into bed, and was just going to sleep,

when some one began pulling at my wig till I thought that every separate hair in my head would be pulled clean out. Lor! how I did holler! you never heard nothing like my screeching. I turned round as best I could, and"— Mr. Pye dropped his voice still lower— "there was a dark-coloured gentleman, togged out as I never saw no gentleman togged out before, hauling at the hair of my head with both his hands as if he was hauling for his life. When he sees I sees him, he let go.

"'Well,' I says, when I'd had a chance to take my breath, 'you're a nice sort of party to come into a person's bedroom without knocking at his door, and introducing yourself to him like that. It's no reason, because you haven't got no hair on the top of your own head, why you shouldn't want me to have none on the top of mine.' All the hair he'd got on the top of his head was just a lock of hair like, right on the middle of his crown.

"'I'm a Mahatma,' he says.

"'Oh, you are, are you?' I says. 'Then you'd better go down to Mr. Snelling, what sleeps on the floor below this,—he's the party what wants you.'

"I didn't like the look of him. How he'd

got where he was was more than I could understand, because I'd locked the doors, both back and front, before I came upstairs.

"'I don't want Snelling,' he says—'crying idiot! It's you I want. I'm going to teach you magic.'

"'Magic,' I says,—because of course, sir, I didn't believe in magic any more than you do standing there. I wasn't so ignorant as that, leastways I didn't think I was. But, lor'! there's ignorance and ignorance,—I know that now!"

Again Mr. Pye paused in his narrative, to sigh.

"'Yes, magic,' he says. 'It's a whim of mine. I haven't indulged myself in a whim these three thousand years and more; I think it's time I let myself go a little, so as to clear some of the cobwebs from my brain.'

"When he talked about its being three thousand years and more since he'd indulged himself in a whim, I didn't know quite what to make of it. He didn't look to me as if he was more than three thousand years of age. But then, so far as I know, I never have seen a party what was more than three thousand years of age, so perhaps I don't know how he ought to look. But there, it doesn't matter. This here party, he goes on talking.

"'I'll teach you,' he says, 'how to move mountains at a word; how to stand churches on their steeples.'

"The idea of standing churches on their steeples tickled me.

"'Well,' I says, 'I haven't been no particular scholar up to now; I daresay I could manage with a bit more learning.'

"His eyes, they looked, when I said that—— Ah! I've seen them look like that a good many times since then, and I've never got to like it any more through practice.

"'That's cheek!' he says. 'I'll pay you out for that. I'll teach you how to place Westminster Abbey on the top of St. Paul's Cathedral in less time than the flashing of a second; but I'll deny you the power of procuring for yourself a penny loaf. You shall be in the position of the man who is able to pour into the pockets of his friend all the riches of the Indies, and who shall yet continue himself in beggary. You shall be able to provide food for millions; while, if you are compelled to rely upon your own exertions, you yourself shall starve. You, the dispenser of fortunes, shall yourself be the recipient of charity!'"

Mr. Pye took out what appeared to be the

remnants of a very ancient and very dirty pocket-handkerchief. With it he wiped his brow.

"Well, sir, when this here party began to talk like that, I tell you I didn't half like it. Because, as you says to me yourself just now, and as I've said to myself many and many a time, What's the good of being a magician, it's no matter how extra swell a magician you may be, if you can't do magic for yourself? A lively spree it 'd be to go chucking sovereigns into another party's pockets, and then get yourself run in for cadging! I've done it too!"

At the recollection of that untoward accident, Mr. Pye heaved a dismal groan.

"Only the other day I turned ten golden sovereigns into a party's pocket, and then when I asked him—I was stone broke! I always am!—for the loan of one, blowed if he didn't give me into charge! Straight he did! *That* sort of thing don't make a magician's life a happy one, you know.

"But it wasn't no use talking to this—this coloured gentleman"—Mr. Pye cast another furtive glance about the room—"what came to me that night. He had a way about him there

wasn't no resisting. He made me get out of bed, and stand in the middle of the floor in my shirt,—and it wasn't a warm night either,—and he gave me my first lesson in magic then and there. Oh, lor'! what a time I had of it,—no one can't think, sir, no one can't! I never was extra quick about the headpiece, and he went on at such a rate I couldn't understand him; it did make him so wild!

"Well, sir, it ain't no use my keeping on telling you this here story for a week. He came the next night, and the next, and the next; he came every night, as soon as I was in bed, to teach me this here magic. I'm sure I didn't want him—and there was old Snelling howling for him as though his heart would break. I only wish he'd took up with Snelling instead of me. The way he handled me was awful—he hit, and kicked, and scratched. Oh, lor'! if I was to tell you I do believe you'd cry, like Snelling, just out of sympathy. I got on very well—for me; I learnt a lot of things—a lot of things; I never thought I should have learnt the half of them. But I didn't get on well enough for him, not by chalks I didn't. And it did make him so wild! I always was a muddly kind o' cove; and somehow, what with my nervousness,

and the way he had of handling me—lor'! he'd think nothing of knocking me pretty near to pieces—I got the things he told me into my head in a muddly kind of way. I never was quite clear about what I'd got to do, and the consequence was, that when I did a thing it was likely as not I did it upside down. To show you what I mean,—if I wanted to turn a chair into a table, it was even betting that I turned a table into a chair; it did make him so wild! And it's just the same with me up to this present moment. Somehow, I never feel sure that a thing will turn out just as I wanted it to turn. I've been had in that way more than once; I tell you, it isn't nice!

"Well, sir, he kept getting wilder and wilder, and I got more and more muddled; and at last, one night, something happened which sent him right off his chump. He pretty nearly murdered me, and then he took himself away—and it was about time too, I tell you—and he never came back no more, thank goodness! I've never set eyes on him——"

Mr. Pye paused. He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder. A very curious change took place in the expression of his face, and in his entire bearing. He shrank back towards

Mr. Redford, as if from something which approached. Mr. Redford could see nothing to cause the change in the man's demeanour. And yet Mr. Pye was trembling, as if palsied by sudden fear. All at once he stooped, as if to avoid a blow; and that same moment Mr. Redford heard a peculiar sound—the sound of some one being beaten; of blows being rained hard and fast on some one close at hand. If he could trust the evidence of his ears, and not of his eyes—for, with the exception of the stranger and himself, there was no one to be *seen* —the blows were being rained on Mr. Pye. It sounded as if they were; and that gentleman's demeanour afforded corroborative testimony. He screeched, and squirmed, and twisted, as a person might screech and squirm and twist who struggled, vainly, to escape chastisement. Suddenly, Mr. Pye fell to the floor—he *seemed* to be hurled to the floor, he came down with such a reverberating bang—and all was still.

CHAPTER II.

THE ART OF BRINGING A DOG INTO A ROOM.

MR. PYE remained on the floor, his arm raised, as if to shield his head from an expected blow. Mr. Redford, conscious of vague discomfort, which, however, he would have been at a loss to define, stared at the prostrate hero. There was a momentary pause. Then Mr. Pye, with obvious caution, lowered his arm. He looked about him. His eyes went round and round the room. Then, with what was, apparently, a sigh of heartfelt relief, he sat up upon the floor. "Oh, lor'! he's gone!"

Mr. Redford, wholly at a loss to comprehend his visitor's singular behaviour, regarded him with lowering brows.

"Are you trying to play some trick upon me, sir? Who's gone?"

Mr. Pye put his hand up to his head, tenderly.

"Didn't you see him? You're lucky. I saw him—and I felt him too!"

"What do you mean? Felt whom?"

"Why,"—Mr. Pye's eyes went round the room again, in seeming apprehension of being overheard, his voice dropped to a whisper—"the Mahatma. I suppose he heard me telling you about the handlings he used to give me, and he didn't like it, so he thought he'd come and give me another, just to pay me out; and ain't he done it too! Oh, lor'! I shouldn't be surprised if I was a mass of bruises for a month of Sundays!"

Mr. Pye raised himself to a perpendicular position. Judging from the manner in which he performed that simple act, it was, in his case, just then, an act which was attended with considerable pain.

"Do you take me for a complete idiot, sir? I can assure you that you are mistaken if you do. There has been no one in this room except you and I."

"Ah, you didn't see him! You're not a magician; I am. I wish I wasn't! Some people might think it's a fine thing to be a magician; I'll take my oath I've not found it so. Has he given me a couple of black eyes, or only one?"

Mr. Pye advanced his countenance towards

Mr. Redford. There certainly was a peculiar appearance about his eyes—a very peculiar appearance indeed. Not only about one of them, as Mr. Pye seemed modestly to hope, but about both. If his physiognomy was not destined, and very shortly destined, to be ornamented by a couple of magnificent black eyes, appearances were exceedingly deceptive. About other portions of his face, too, there was a curious suggestiveness,—both his cheeks and ears were unnaturally red. Mr. Pye put his hand up to his mouth.

"I thought so: he's knocked another tooth out. I hadn't got many left, so I suppose one more or less don't make no odds."

Mr. Redford stared; Mr. Pye *looked* as though he had been in the wars.

"I tell you what it is, my friend: according to your own account, even granting that the astounding tale which you have told is true—which, I need scarcely say, I am very far from doing—you are a person whose acquaintance it is not desirable to cultivate."

"That's where you're wrong, sir—that's where you're wrong. I can't do anything for myself, but I can do anything for you, don't you see?"

"I don't. Let us descend to plain English. What can you do for me?"

"Put a name to what you want me to do! then you'll see."

Mr. Redford reflected.

"I will put a name to it. Can you put a five-pound note into my pocket?"

Mr. Pye, in his turn, seemed to be reflecting.

"I might,—and then I mightn't. It's my muddly head! I'll tell you all about it. The other day a chap asked me if I could get him fifty sovereigns. I says, 'Of course I can.' And, sure enough, before he could wink his eye, down tumbled fifty sovereigns from the ceiling. Lor'! wasn't he happy! But he wasn't so happy when, about a quarter of an hour afterwards, he got took up for passing counterfeit coin. You see, with my muddly head, I'd made a mistake; I'd got him snide pieces instead of real ones. It was that sort of thing what used to make the Mahatmas so precious wild."

"It strikes me, my man, that you're a dangerous fellow. The more I see of you, the less I like you. Be so good as to take yourself downstairs."

Mr. Redford pointed to the door. Mr. Pye only shook his head.

"Now, don't you, now,—don't you! You're altogether wrong. You ask me to do anything for you, and I'll do it. Only what I says is this: I'm doing it for you, and it's only right that you should give me a fair share of what I does."

"But, on your own confession, you can't do anything for me worth doing."

"That's where you make a mistake. Don't I tell you I'm a magician?"

"You do tell me that; but you also tell me, in the same breath, what a remarkable example of a magician you appear to be."

"That's because you haven't tried me in the right way. I can do things, I tell you. I tell you one thing I'm a dab at,—that's love."

"Love?"

Mr. Redfern's countenance was extremely doubtful.

"Yes—love. I'll make any gal in love with any chap in less than half a jiffy. I don't care if they're married or single; it don't make no odds to me. I'll show you what I mean. Isn't there a gal on the other side the street?"

Mr. Redford moved towards the window, which, like Mr. Pye, would have been all the

better for being washed. He looked out, as well as the dirt permitted. There was a "gal" on the other side the street. The "gal" took the shape of a woman, who, directly Mr. Redford appeared at the window, as though something had informed her of the fact, turned right round and looked up at him. Not only did she look up at him, but, to Mr. Redford's unbounded astonishment, the moment she caught sight of him she began to behave in the most extraordinary way.

"There is a woman across the street; but, good gracious! she's waving a kiss to some one. It must be to some one on the floor beneath; it *can't* be to me!"

"It is to you."

"But the woman's a perfect stranger, and she looks respectable—highly respectable; and she's forty, if a day!"

Mr. Pye chuckled, as he had chuckled when the constable threw that somersault in his helmet and his boots.

"I told you I was a dab at it."

Something in his tone caused Mr. Redford to swing round upon his heels.

"A dab at what, sir?"

"At love. I told you I was. I told you I

could do the trick in less than half a jiffy. She's in love with you."

Mr. Pye doubled himself up in an apparent ecstasy of enjoyment.

"In love with me? I never saw the woman in my life before!"

"And she never saw you neither; but that don't make no difference to me."

"Makes no difference to you!"

"Not the least. She mightn't never have seen you even now; it wouldn't never have made no odds. She'd go through fire and water for you, that woman would."

"Go through fire and water for me? But," gasped Mr. Redford, "I'm a married man!"

Mr. Pye's enjoyment of the situation became less obvious.

"You're—a married man?"

"Of course I'm a married man! I've a grown-up son and three grown-up daughters."

"Oh! And is your wife living?"

"Living! I should rather think my wife was living. If there is one thing she dislikes, it is for me to look at another woman, or for another woman to look at me. If Helen were to know that while I stood at the office window another woman, a perfect stranger, had kissed her hand

at me across the street, my life would not be worth living."

Mr. Pye's jaw distinctly fell.

"I've done it again! That's just like me! I never saw such luck as mine! I think you might have told me you were married."

"I might have told you I was married! How was I to suppose——"

Mr. Redford returned to the window.

"She's kissing her hand again! She'll draw a crowd! She must be mad! She's crossing the street!"

"Yes, she's coming to see you."

"Coming to see me?"

"Listen."

Mr. Pye stood in an attitude of attention. A faint sound was audible, coming from the direction of the staircase.

"Here she comes. I knew she would. She's that gone on you, she can't find it in her heart to keep away."

Mr. Redford glared at the too magical magician.

"Perhaps, Mr. Pye, you will tell me what you think I'd better do."

Steps were heard upon the stairs.

"Lock the door."

Mr. Redford locked it, just in time. Scarcely had he locked it when they heard the handle turned. There was a momentary silence; then there came a tapping at the panel. The tapping was accompanied by a curious sound, as of a person panting for breath.

"If there'd been one more stair," said a voice outside the door, "I should have dropped. To a person of my figure four flights means murder."

"Is she stout?" inquired Mr. Pye from behind the shelter of his hand.

"From the look of her I should say she weighed twenty stone, if she weighed an ounce."

"Oh, lor'!" the magician groaned; "I've done it again."

The voice continued to be heard without.

"Open the door, now, there's a dear! My husband's got his office just over the way, and if one of his clerks were to see me come in here—and they're always looking out of the window, I know they are—and George was to come and find me here, there'd be words. He's of a very jealous disposition, George is, and very violent when he's roused. Besides, it doesn't seem right for me to be standing

outside your office door, when I'm the mother of nine."

On hearing this, the magician indulged himself with another groan.

"I don't seem to have made a success of it, do I? Oh, lor'! the mother of nine!"

Mr. Redford said nothing, but he glared. Either his feelings were too strong for words, or else he judged that, while that visitor remained outside, silence was golden. The voice without went on,—

"This must be the place; I can't have mistaken it. And yet there doesn't seem to be any one inside." There came a louder knocking at the door; then a pause. "Oh, dear! if I've come up those four flights for nothing, —with such a figure as mine." There was a sigh,—so portentous a sigh that it was unmistakable, even through the panels of the door. "I never felt so odd as I felt when I saw that dear face looking at me through that dirty window,—never! not even when I first saw George. And me a respectable married woman, and the mother of nine!"

Another sigh, another pause, longer than before. Then some indistinct murmur. "She's going," whispered Mr. Pye: "thank goodness!"

Apparently the visitor had come to the conclusion that she had made a mistake, and that there was no one in the room. A sound was heard as of a heavy body beginning to descend the stairs. The listeners within the room scarcely seemed to draw their breath. The sound grew fainter. It died away. Mr. Pye ventured to speak in his ordinary tone of voice.

"She's gone!"

Mr. Redford listened a moment longer, then he turned to Mr. Pye.

"Now, you scoundrel, what shall I do to you?"

Pye rubbed his chin dubiously.

"I didn't make a success of it, did I, quite?"

"It depends, Mr. Pye, upon what you consider a success."

"And yet it shows you what I can do."

"It certainly does show that."

"Yes, of course it does. Perhaps a woman what weighs twenty stone, and is the mother of nine, isn't everybody's money—I don't say she is, not at all. Perhaps I made a error here; but she did fall in love with you, didn't she? Come up four flight of stairs to show it too!"

Mr. Redford said nothing, but his looks were eloquent.

"It shows you what I can do, doesn't it?"

"Mr. Pye, I have already admitted that."

"Yes, of course you have—just so. But you don't seem hearty." Mr. Pye did not seem hearty, or happy either. "I can do things when I like; I tell you straight I can." Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips. "There's another thing I'm a dab at."

"Mr. Pye, if this thing is at all like that thing, I trust—I sincerely trust you will keep it to yourself. May I ask that favour?"

Mr. Pye shuffled from foot to foot. He did not seem to like the manner in which Mr. Redford was eyeing him.

"But it isn't at all like that thing,—it's a different thing entirely. It isn't an easy thing to do neither. I *am* a dab at bringing a dog into a room."

Mr. Redford stared. He did not know if the man was joking.

"You are a dab at what?"

Again Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"I *am* a dab at bringing a dog into a room."

Mr. Redford stared still more.

"Really, Mr. Pye, you appear to be a remarkable man."

"You don't understand me. I don't mean how you mean, I mean like this here. Here's the door locked, and here's you and me alone in here, and yet I'll bring a dog into this room out of nothing at all."

Mr. Redford moved forward. He gripped Mr. Pye by the arm. He seemed disturbed.

"There is one objection to your excellent idea,—I happen to have a constitutional dislike to dogs, a dislike which almost amounts to fear."

Mr. Pye seemed disappointed.

"That's a pity, because it really is a hard thing to do, to bring a dog into a room, and I took a particular lot of pains in practising it, too. I shouldn't like you to go away and think I'm a swindler and can't do nothing, because I can do things, I can. I'll tell you what, I'll bring into the room a little tiny toy terrier, just a lady's pet, what you could put in your waistcoat pocket,—no one can't be afraid of that. Now then!"

Before he had a chance to speak, Mr. Redford felt that something had been done; some intuition told him that something had

entered the room. There was an interval of silence, and then—a low, ominous growl.

"What's that?" Mr. Redford sprang round with unexpected suddenness. The sight which he saw made the blood run cold in his veins. He had, as he said, and as some people do have, a constitutional dislike to dogs. His feelings—when he saw an enormous and particularly wicked-looking bulldog, glaring at him from under the shadow of the ancient writing-table, showing his teeth in a fashion which was uncomfortably suggestive, and growling in a manner which was even more suggestive still—his feelings, when he saw this sight, were indescribable. Mr. Pye seemed almost as much moved as Mr. Redford.

"Oh, lor'! what a murderous-looking critter! I had a piece taken right out of my leg by a animal like that. I don't want to lose another piece, I tell you."

Mr. Redford was positively trembling.

"Is—is this your toy terrier?"

"He don't look much like a toy terrier, does he? I never see such a ugly-looking brute before. Ain't he growling?"

"Is—it the dog you've brought into the room?"

"I suppose it must be. Oh, lor'! I've done it again." Mr. Pye seemed to be doing his best to place Mr. Redford between himself and the visitor, whom he had apparently unintentionally invited. "If there's one thing I can't abide, it is them bulldogs. I say, if you was to unlock the door, perhaps you might induce him to get outside; them bulldogs is such dangerous beasts. Look out! he's coming for you!"

It seemed that the brute was coming for some one. He moved out from underneath the table, emitting another growl as he did so. Then he stood eyeing the startled faces in front of him in a manner which was not calculated to inspire nervous folk with confidence. Then, with uncomfortable deliberation, he began slowly to advance. He was almost on to Mr. Redford. That gentleman did not wait for him to be on him quite. With an agility which did him credit he bounded right over the brute and on to the writing-table. The brute made one spring at him as he passed, his jaws meeting in an ugly-sounding snap; but he missed, and Mr. Redford was in comparative safety. It is not improbable that, had he chosen, the visitor might successfully have stormed the table, which tottered under Mr.

Redford's weight; but glancing at the now altogether unprotected magician, he seemed to think that he was an easier prey. The magician seemed to think so too. He began to cry for help.

"I say, don't let him touch me! Call him off! call him off!"

The animal advanced. Mr. Pye presented to him his rear. With singular promptitude the brute fastened its teeth into the more fleshy portion of his attenuated frame. The magician roared,—

"Oh lor'! oh lor'! he's murdering me!"

There was a cupboard in one corner of the room, the top of which did not quite reach the ceiling. Mr. Pye made for this, the dog hanging on behind. In spite of his most uncomfortable hanger-on, the magician made a spring at the cupboard. He caught at the top with his hands. The bulldog was untrue to the proverbial characteristic of its race. When the magician made his spring, he either lost his grip or relinquished it; probably the latter, because he made no attempt to regain his hold. Possibly he did not like the taste of Mr. Pye. The creature regarded the unfortunate magician's well-worn boots, dangling within an inch

of its nose, with an air which was almost suggestive of contempt,—he disdained to bite again.

Mr. Redford had retained sufficient presence of mind to enable him to take advantage of Mr. Pye's disaster. The moment the dog made good his grip—and his attention seemed engaged—Mr. Redford sprang off the table, unlocked the door, threw it open, and regained his post of vantage. The creature seemed to be quite conscious of what had happened. Having sniffed disdainfully at Mr. Pye, he turned, and perceived the open door. He glanced up at Mr. Redford, as if to say that he was quite aware who had opened it. Squatting himself down on his haunches, he regarded the table with a certain amount of interest, as if he were considering whether it was worth his while to storm it. Mr. Redford hoped with all his heart that he would arrive at a negative decision. Apparently the creature did. He raised himself upon all fours, and, with provoking deliberation, sauntered towards the door. Mr. Pye, dangling by his hands, watched his progress with unmistakable anxiety. When he reached the door, the creature paused, looked round once, and

vanished. The instant he was gone Mr. Redford leapt off the table and banged the door. The magician dropped to his feet.

"Thank goodness!" he exclaimed. "He has gone! Did you ever hear of a magician going out of his way to get a dog into the room to bite a piece right out of him? There's another piece gone out of me! Oh, lor'! there never was a man with such luck as mine!"

Mr. Redford was silent. He regarded Mr. Pye for some moments intently. He began to pace the room. Then he took up a judicial attitude in front of the empty fireplace, Mr. Pye watching him out of the corners of his eyes.

"I don't quite know what to make of you, my man."

Mr. Pye was softly rubbing the hinder portion of his frame.

"It's plain enough,—I'm a magician, that's what I am."

"Yes; you are a magician."

Mr. Redford's tone was grim. He resumed his pacing to and fro. Then he again stood still. A troubled look came into his eyes,—the look of a man who is weighed down with care.

"I am a needy man—an extremely needy man. I have a wife and family to support, and, try my best, I don't seem able to support them. You made a mistake in asking me for the price of a dinner."

"That's me all over. I'm sure to ask a man for the price of a dinner who is in want of the price of one himself."

"I have been in want of the price of a dinner before to-day, and, so far as I can see, I'm likely to be in want of the price of one again. I'm getting desperate."

Mr. Redford looked as if he were getting desperate; his mouth grew hard, and his eyes grew cold.

"You are either a man of remarkable powers, or—a remarkable trickster. I give you the benefit of the doubt. A drowning man clutches at a straw. I clutch at you. I will make you an offer. Listen—I will take you home with me, and I will give you board and lodging, at least for a time. I receive strangers in my house as boarders, so you will only be one more."

Mr. Redford smiled a peculiar smile.

"I will consider what I want you to do for me. It occurs to me that you are essentially a

man with whom more haste means less speed; as you say yourself, you get muddled. When, after consideration, I have decided on my requirements, I will submit them to you. If you do what I require, and it turns up trumps, you shall have half the benefit."

Mr. Pye's face brightened.

"That's what I want, sir; that's what I want. It's all I ask—my share!"

"You shall have your share. There is one stipulation which I make,—that you don't attempt any magic on your own account. When you attempt anything on your own initiative, your efforts seem to be crowned with equivocal success."

"They do, that's a fact!"

Mr. Redford reflected. It would hardly do to quarter Mr. Pye with Sarah, the maid-of-all-work; he might practise his hankey-pankey tricks on her. He knew that Mrs. Redford would not provide for him a special room and a special table; so he made a virtue of necessity.

"I will treat you exactly as one of my own family. You shall sit at our table, and you shall have what we have. I am quite aware of the risk which I am running. I am quite aware that some people would call me quixotic,

or even worse than that. I am taking pity upon your miserable condition. I can only hope that you will make me an adequate return."

"I will, sir,—I promise you I will."

Mr. Pye fulfilled his promise; he made Mr. Redford a more than adequate return.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW BOARDER.

MR. REDFORD resided at No. 23, Acacia Road, Camberwell. Some people said that that was where Mrs. Redford resided, under the apparent impression that the house was hers, not his. Possibly this arose from a habit which the lady had of speaking of *my* house, *my* servant, *my* rules,—my this, my that, and my the other. Still the fact remains that Mr. Redford was supposed to pay the rent; whether he always did so is another matter altogether.

The truth is, the Redfords were a migratory family; they were always moving. They had lived, within a comparatively short space of time, at Bow, Stepney, Hampstead, Highgate, Wood Green, Paddington, Blackheath, Woolwich, Greenwich, Plumstead, Lambeth, Chelsea, Putney, Walham Green; and now they were trying Camberwell for the sake of a little change. It was their first quarter in Acacia

Road; and as the quarter was now drawing to a close, how long they stayed there was doubtful at the best; it depended upon how much Mr. Redford was able to contribute towards the payment of at least a portion of the quarter's rent.

What Mr. Redford was, nobody exactly knew. He had described himself, on different occasions, as being different things—a great many different things. He had an office in the City, which he frequently changed, often as frequently as once a month; but what he did in the office was to all except, *possibly*, himself, a mystery. One thing he did not do,—he very seldom brought any money home.

Mrs. Redford took boarders, when she could get them, which was not by any means so often as she desired. The house had been newly furnished—on the hire system, from *another* firm; and if they could only keep the furniture in the house as long as they remained in it themselves, all might be well. At present there were only two boarders—a lady, a Miss Thomas, a "full" boarder, who paid small terms, and certainly got no more than she paid for—the establishment was run on rather an irregular system—and a gentleman, a Mr.

Bristow, a "partial" boarder, who only slept and breakfasted at home. But Mrs. Redford was hopeful—poor lady! she was always hopeful—of further additions. If she had only known of the addition which her husband was bringing her that day, possibly it would have been the final straw. And yet a more promising establishment for a magician to display his magic in Mr. Pye could not have chanced upon; they were always in want of a magician, were the Redford family.

The youngest Miss Redford, Nelly Redford, was just going out—it really was no secret—to purchase some potatoes for the late dinner. A late dinner was always a feature in Mrs. Redford's establishment; sometimes it was a very late dinner indeed, as her boarders found. Miss Nelly, going down the steps to the front gate, looked down the street. She only looked once—that one look was apparently enough for her. She went flying up the steps, and back into the house again.

"Mamma!"—she found the lady in the dining-room, which, in the Redford case, denoted a very small apartment—"here's papa coming along the street with a bailiff!"

"Nelly!"—Mrs. Redford caught at the table

by which she was standing—"how do you know?"

"How do I know! I should think that by now I ought to know a bailiff when I see one. I just looked out of the gate, and I saw papa coming round the corner with a bailiff at his side."

"Is it—is it on a judgment summons?"

"I suppose it is. Oh, mamma, what shall we do?"

It was a peculiarity of the Redford family that, although one would have supposed that they had become habituated to disasters, each fresh one overwhelmed them as completely as if it had been the first which had chanced to come their way.

"I don't know. Whose can it be?"

"What does it matter? Aren't they out against him all over the place? For my part, I wonder that he ever dare show his face in the streets at all. Poor papa!"

Miss Nelly put her handkerchief up to her eyes; she was a very pretty girl, and hers were very pretty eyes.

"There's nothing in the house to pawn, and I daren't sell any of the furniture."

"For gracious' sake, mamma, don't do that;

we had enough of that last time. We don't want to have you in prison as well as papa. Here they are! Do you know the man?"

At that moment Mr. Redford passed the window with a man at his side—the man at his side being a very shabby man indeed. Mother and daughter surveyed the couple under cover of the window curtains.

"He's a stranger to me. The villain!" It was another peculiarity of the Redford family that to them all bailiffs were villains. Of course they knew very well indeed that all bailiffs were very far from being villains, but it was a way they had. "I'll go to the door, Sarah mustn't let them in."

Sarah very seldom did attend to the door; the Redfords generally thought it better to answer it themselves. At the first sound of the knocker the door was opened, lest Sarah should come up. Mrs. Redford stood facing her husband with her hand pressed to her side.

"What is it?" she asked.

Mr. Redford, finding his entrance into his own house checked by the corporeal presence of his wife, glanced up in surprise.

"What is what, my dear?"

"Is it—is it a judgment?"

Mr. Redford caught his wife's eye. He perceived what was the nature of the mistake which she had made. His amazement was quite natural.

"A judgment? My dear, I fail to understand you. Mrs. Redford, I have brought you a fresh addition to your establishment in the shape of a new boarder."

He waved his hand towards his companion. Mrs. Redford glanced at him. She had had some seedy-looking boarders in her time—some whose luggage had not amounted to the proverbial pocket-handkerchief, but never quite such a seedy-looking one as this.

"My dear, will you permit us to enter?"

She permitted them to enter. The gentleman performed the ceremony of introduction.

"Mr. Pye, this is Mrs. Redford. Mrs. Redford, this is Mr. Pye, a gentleman whom I commend to your genial hospitality."

Mrs. Redford looked at Mr. Pye—askance. Mr. Pye shuffled from foot to foot, and touched his hat, and behaved generally in a way which Mrs. Redford was persuaded that she had seen many and many a time before—in bailiffs.

"John, come here."

Mrs. Redford led the way into the parlour,

which was at the back of the house. Mr. Redford followed. Mr. Pye was left in the hall. The lady shut the door as her husband entered. Her bearing was distinctly stern; more so than his was.

"John, is that a bailiff?"

If Mr. Redford's astonishment at having such a question addressed to him was not genuine, it was, at any rate, a very decent imitation.

"A bailiff? Helen! I don't know what you mean."

"Oh yes, you do. Are you his prisoner?"

Mr. Redford's astonishment increased.

"His prisoner? Helen! That *gentleman*" —Mr. Redford laid a stress upon the word— "is Mr. Pye, who, as I have told you, proposes to become a boarder in your establishment."

"Does he? Where's his luggage?"

Mr. Redford reflected.

"His luggage will possibly arrive to-night."

"Will it? I hope it will. What does he propose to pay?"

"There—there has been no final arrangement made. I will see that it's all right, my dear."

Mrs. Redford, judging from her manner, did not seem to think that all would be right.

"John, there is a mystery about that man. Who is he?"

"Helen, don't be—don't be foolish. The man is what I say he is."

Mrs. Redford regarded her husband with a stony glare.

"Very well, Mr. Redford. I say nothing. You have ruined us before, and you will ruin us again, that is all. There's nothing for dinner."

The genuineness of the amazement with which Mr. Redford received this announcement was altogether unmistakable.

"Nothing for dinner?"

"There are a few bones and scraps which I have hashed. There is nothing else. I sent to Gibson's for a shoulder of mutton. He declined."

"That is very extraordinary behaviour of Gibson's."

Mrs. Redford pressed her lips together; perhaps she didn't think it was.

"I only hope that your friend is not hungry, that's all."

Mr. Redford had doubts upon that subject —very grave doubts they were.

"He will have to make the best of it if he

is. He knows he will have to be content with what the rest of us have."

What Mr. Pye did not know was what the rest of them had.

"Which bedroom can he have?"

"The little back room at the top of the house, if he must have one. There is nothing there which he can steal."

Mr. Redford turned as if to go. But at the door he paused. All at once his manner changed. It became nervous, tremulous.

"Helen, I—I think it possible that, at last, there will be a change in my position."

"You have said that before, Mr. Redford; and there has been a change—for the worse."

"Yes, I—I know; but this time it—it will be for the better. Helen, we have had hard times together, you and I."

"Speak for yourself, Mr. Redford."

"I am speaking for myself, and for you. But I think it possible that within—within a very few hours my position may be materially improved. I may—I may soon become rich, and—and if I do——"

"Mr. Redford, don't be a fool! I should think you have been drinking."

Thus crushed, Mr. Redford sighed, and left

the room. He found Mr. Pye patiently waiting in the hall, quite in the manner of a bailiff.

"Come this way, Mr. Pye; I will show you to your room. You will find a peg in the hall on which to hang your hat."

Mr. Pye had retained his hat on his head. Now he put his hand up to it nervously, as if he were strongly disinclined to part with it.

"Thank you, I'll take it with me, if it's all the same to you, sir. It's the only hat I have."

The suggestion which the words conveyed was scarcely flattering to his host. But Mr. Redford did not seem to notice it. He led the way upstairs.

"This, I believe, Mr. Pye, is to be your apartment, for the present."

Mr. Pye glanced round the apartment they had entered without evincing any symptoms of enthusiastic satisfaction. The room in question was a very little one—in fact, a tiny attic. The roof was sloping; you could only stand upright at one end. There was no fire-place. Light was admitted through a skylight overhead. And, to crown all, the room was about as scantily furnished as it well could be to be called a furnished bedroom. Mr. Pye lost no time in giving his host to understand

that the apartment did not meet with his entire approval.

"I'm not going to stop up here, you know. Why, I had a better room than this at Snelling's—lor', three times as good!"

Mr. Redford did not altogether like his guest's dissatisfaction.

"My good sir, I have only brought you up here to wash and make yourself look decent."

"Oh!"

Mr. Pye held out his hands in front of him, as though he did not relish the idea of washing them, though he surely must have felt they needed it. He raised the tails of his coat in an endeavour to see himself behind.

"Has that there dog torn the seat right out of my trousers?"

"If you leave the tails of your coat down, nothing can be noticed. I will leave you now. When you have finished your toilet, you will be able to find your way downstairs. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Mr. Redford was not by any means sure of this—he only hoped it would be ready. Dinner, at the best of times, was a movable feast in that establishment. He stepped towards the door. Mr. Pye stopped him.

"I say!"

"Well?"

Mr. Pye was still endeavouring to see himself behind.

"You haven't got a pair of old breeches you could lend me? These of mine ain't new ones, you know."

They certainly were not new ones. Mr. Redford was quite as conscious of that as Mr. Pye could be. But the question of "lending" him a pair was a delicate one. Mr. Redford's own wardrobe was not extensive. The garments it contained were not much newer than Mr. Pye's. Before he "lent" anything Mrs. Redford would have to be consulted. If the new boarder's sojourn in the establishment were to be inaugurated by the loan of a pair of breeches, Mr. Redford was clearly of opinion that it was advisable that the matter should be shelved.

"I will talk the matter over with you after dinner. You must manage for the present."

Mr. Redford left the room without giving Mr. Pye an opportunity to repeat his request. But, by dint of raising his voice, Mr. Pye managed to make himself sufficiently audible. He was evidently dissatisfied.

"Well, I'll tell you what it is, I hope the dinner's better than the room."

Mr. Redford said nothing. He would have liked, then and there, to have turned his guest out into the streets from whence he came. But he refrained. Little but misfortune had come his way so far; but, in spite of that, he was a sanguine man, and golden visions were dangling before his eyes. For those golden visions the magician was responsible.

"Mamma," said Miss Nelly Redford, slipping into the parlour directly her father had vanished up the stairs with Mr. Pye, "what is it?"

Her mother regarded her with that stony expression of countenance with which the members of her family were only too familiar. She opened her lips just wide enough to let the words slip through—

"It's a new boarder."

Miss Nelly looked as though she did not clearly grasp her mother's meaning, though it was expressed with sufficient plainness.

"Mamma, what do you mean?"

"It's a new boarder."

"Do you—do you mean that it's an execution? But I thought that they couldn't put

in an execution when the furniture wasn't ours."

Mrs. Redford's tone was even grimmer than before.

"Don't ask me questions; ask your father. *He* knows; *I* don't. *He* says that's he's brought me a new boarder."

Moving across the room, Mrs. Redford began to fidget with the ornaments upon the mantel-shelf. Nelly looked after her, with her pretty eyes wide open.

"But, mamma, that dirty man!"

"His manners may be better than his appearance, and his birth than either; let's hope so!"

"But, mamma, he looks like a beggar."

The daughter's innocently uttered observations did not tend to sweeten the mother's temper.

"Perhaps your father thought, as we were beggars ourselves, that we might like to receive another beggar—as a boarder."

"Whatever will Miss Thomas say?"

"She'll ask him if he belongs to the Somerset or to the Devonshire Browns."

"Is his name Brown?"

"I don't know what his name is: ask your father. Your father says that his name is Pye."

"Pye!"

The young lady's bewilderment seemed to increase.

"Mamma, what is he going to pay?"

This inquiry seemed to be almost as much as her mother could endure; it touched a tender point.

"Ask your father. Don't I tell you to ask your father? He says it will be all right; and of course, if he says so, we know it will be."

"Mamma"—the young lady's looks were eloquent; the family's experience of Mr. Redford's "sayings" was all the other way—"has he any luggage?"

Her mother's patience vanished.

"If you've nothing better to do than to stand there asking questions all day long, I have."

And, possibly with a view of proving what she said, Mrs. Redford bustled from the room. Nelly, left alone, considered the matter from her own particular standpoint.

"Well, when Frank"—Frank was her brother—"sees that man, he'll want to know if we have opened what he calls a 'doss-house.'"

Mrs. Redford, bustling out of the parlour, and bustling up the stairs, bustled into her bedroom. There she found her husband. Mr.

Redford, when she came in, glanced round at her with what was suspiciously like a guilty start. Mrs. Redford, who knew her man, felt an instant conviction that she had detected him in some glaring act of criminality. She eyed him—as she knew how. Her husband, instead of meeting her glance, looked in an exactly contrary direction.

"John, what are you doing there?"

Mr. Redford appeared to be examining the contents of his chest of drawers—or rather, such portions of the chest as, theoretically, pertained to him. He was holding out one pair of trousers in his right hand, and another pair of trousers in his left. He seemed to be endeavouring to discover which of the two pairs was the most genuine antique. The fact was, that he was so conscious that Mr. Pye's own garments were too far gone for civilised society that he had conceived the sinister design of "lending" him a pair of his own relics, without the cognisance of Mrs. Redford. With the idea of furthering that design, he had stolen into his bedroom, routed out his trousers from the recesses in which Mrs. Redford kept them, and was now endeavouring to make up his mind as to which pair was the worse for wear

—a question which he found it rather difficult to decide. But now that Mrs. Redford's "eye" was on him, all thought of putting his design into execution vanished into air.

"I—I was looking through my things."

"What for?"

"I—I was just looking to see if I had a pair of old trousers, so that I could just lay my hand on them if at any time I wanted to."

"What for?"

"Nothing, my dear."

Mr. Redford began to put the garments back into the drawer, as if it had been his intention to do so all along. Mrs. Redford kept her "eye" on him. The gentleman wished she wouldn't; but then, he had wished the same thing more than once before. Mrs. Redford was the guardian of his garments, as she was of everything which, theoretically, was his. She doled him even his pocket-handkerchiefs. He was quite aware that she objected to his interfering with her arrangements.

"Where's your friend?"

The lady's tone was hard and cold. Mr. Redford fidgeted.

"I don't know that he can exactly be called my friend. Mr. Pye is in his bedroom."

"What's he doing there?"

"Really, my dear! I presume he's performing his toilet."

"What with?"

Mr. Redford stared.

"Has he water, soap, towel, comb, brush,—has he anything of any kind?"

It seemed that Mr. Pye had not, as the lady phrased it, "anything of any kind," judging from the figure he presented on his appearance in the parlour. On reaching the hall—having found his own way downstairs—Mr. Pye, his hat still on his head, peered about him, with a certain amount of anxiety visible on his countenance. Just then, Sarah chanced to come that way. Mr. Pye accosted her.

"Excuse me, miss, but where is it?"

Sarah looked at him; she did not like his looks at all.

"Where's what?"

Mr. Pye drew his hand across his lips. "The grub!"

Sarah stared. Fortunately, Mr. Redford, who had been watching for his guest's appearance, by no means in an unduly comfortable state of mind, opened the parlour door just then, and saw him standing in the hall, or it is

not impossible that Sarah would have addressed him in a way in which the gentlemen boarders of that establishment were not wont to be addressed.

"Ah, Mr. Pye, I was looking for you; seeing that you didn't lose your way." Mr. Redford perceived that Mr. Pye still wore his hat. "Hang your hat in the hall, sir."

"Eh?"

Mr. Pye touched the brim of his hat dubiously.

"Hang your hat in the hall, sir; there are pegs."

"It's the only hat I have."

Mr. Redford made a snatch at the only hat he had. Mr. Pye tried to save it. He was too late; it adorned a peg. It only required a moment's glance to enable Mr. Redford to see that his guest had not derived much advantage from his toilet opportunities. He dropped his voice, so that it was only audible to his guest.

"Mr. Pye, you don't seem to have done much to make yourself look decent."

Mr. Pye's glances were still wandering towards his hat.

"Eh? no. There wasn't no soap, nor yet no water. It's a nasty little hole up there;

there's nothing in it. I say, where's the grub? In here?"

Mr. Pye's appearance was, not to phrase it too strongly, so exceedingly unsatisfactory, that, at the last moment, Mr. Redford hesitated as to whether, after all, it wouldn't be advisable to locate him in the kitchen. But, before he could make up his mind, Mr. Pye solved the question for himself by entering the parlour. Resigning himself to circumstances, Mr. Redford went in after him.

The apartment already contained two ladies. With the best grace at his command, Mr. Redford went through the ceremony of introduction.

"Mr. Pye, this is Miss Thomas, another member of our little circle. Miss Thomas, this is Mr. Pye—a new addition."

He did not say to what Mr. Pye was an addition; possibly he himself was not altogether clear upon that subject. A lady rose, and, in the most condescending manner possible, held out her hand.

"Charmed to meet you, Mr. Pye—delighted! May I ask if you are one of the Pyes of Norfolk?"

Miss Nelly was the other lady. When she

heard this, she thought of her mother's words and smiled—not joyously, but still she smiled. Mr. Pye did not know quite what to make of the outstretched hand. He stared at it as though he rather expected to find a coin inside. He drew his hand across his mouth, which seemed to be a favourite trick of his.

"Eh?"

The lady did not seem to know what to make of the gentleman's manner. She repeated her inquiry.

"I was asking if you were one of the Pyes of Norfolk?"

Mr. Pye looked up. The lady before him was tall and thin, and about five-and-thirty. She wore *pince-nez*. There was something about her which was suggestive of gush.

"I dunno. Who's they?"

Miss Thomas started. It was not only the words, it was the voice, and the manner. Fortunately, under the circumstances, she was short-sighted, and the room was dark. Still she saw quite enough of the gentleman in front of her to wonder, in a ladylike way, who on earth he was. Mr. Redford essayed a diversion. He turned to his daughter. There was, in his bearing, a ghastly attempt at jauntiness.

"Mr. Pye, this is my daughter, my youngest, Nelly, the child of my old age. We are not seven; we are three; that is to say, three daughters and a son. I believe I mentioned to you my son."

Mr. Pye drew his hand across his lip—that fatal trick!

"You said something about it—I don't know. I say, where's the grub?"

He turned to Miss Thomas, possibly mistaking her position in the establishment. "You'll excuse me, mum, but I'm hungry; and if you'd lived three blessed days on twopence, you'd be hungry too!"

Had a bombshell fallen in that little parlour, it could scarcely have created more sensation. Mr. Redford turned pink and green. Happily there came a diversion just then in the shape of an announcement that dinner was ready.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAHATMA'S PUPIL DINES.

"QUITE an original!" whispered Miss Thomas, as she walked by Miss Nelly's side into the dining-room.

Miss Nelly's tone, as she replied, was ominous.

"So I should say—very much of an original. I can't think wherever papa can have found him."

In her heart she was asking herself what dreadful mystery there was about this man which could have induced her father to bring him into the house, and treat him as one of the family. Had papa got into a greater mess than ever, and was this man's presence the outward sign and symbol of the trouble he was in?

They found Mrs. Redford already seated at the dinner table. On her right was her second daughter, Annie. Miss Annie Redford was a board-school teacher; her earnings formed no

insignificant part of the family income. Mrs. Redford carved; painful experience having taught her that Mr. Redford was not to be trusted to make supplies go as far as they were intended to go. In front of her was a covered dish. Mr. Redford took the other end of the table. In front of him was a vegetable dish. He placed Miss Thomas on his right and Mr. Pye upon his left. Miss Nelly sat on Mr. Pye's left, so that Mrs. Redford had a daughter on either side of her.

Mr. Pye's countenance, as he took his seat, was a vivid note of interrogation. Sarah removed the cover—Mrs. Redford had things done with a certain style—and, as she did so, Mr. Pye, rising three or four inches from his chair, leaned over the table to see what were the contents of the dish. When he perceived what the contents were, his jaw fell open, he dropped back into his chair, and words came from his mouth whose meaning was only known to Mr. Redford. "Worse than Snelling's,—heaps worse!"

Mr. Redford tried to look unconcerned, and failed.

"I must apologise for the somewhat scanty

fare; but, as you know, Mr. Pye, we were unable to give Mrs. Redford notice of your coming."

Mr. Pye looked at Mr. Redford, open-mouthed, round-eyed.

"Oh!" he said.

Mrs. Redford favoured Mr. Pye with one of the glances she was famous for, while she served the hash. "Perhaps, sir, you are not hungry?"

The accusation seemed to fill Mr. Pye with unutterable amazement.

"Not hungry! Me! Oh, lor'!"

Miss Annie, being possibly gifted with an unusually keen sense of the humorous, laughed outright; Miss Nelly ventured on a wintry smile; so Mr. Redford tried to pass it off as a joke.

"Let's hope that good digestion will wait on appetite."

Miss Thomas crossed her hands in what she supposed was a becoming manner. She herself was used to the Redford dinners, being quite aware of what sort of board and lodging she might expect for a somewhat irregular fifteen shillings a week, when she herself was the only boarder.

"Town air does give one an appetite—don't you think it does?"

When Mr. Pye understood that this question was addressed to him, he gasped: "I don't want no giving. You're safe to have a appetite, in town or out of town, if you don't never get nothing to eat."

Either the unanswerable nature of this proposition, or the way in which it was stated, caused it to be received in total silence. There was a piece of bread at the side of Mr. Pye, as there was at the side of everybody else. Having swallowed his piece in a manner which bade fair to choke him, the unfortunate magician's appetite had reached a famine pitch. He reached over for the loaf, which was in the middle of the table.

Mr. Redford interposed.

"Allow me," he said.

"No, you don't! I'll have a bite at something!"

There was about half a loaf on the bread-tray. Grasping this with both his hands, Mr. Pye broke it into two. Retaining a piece in either hand, he commenced alternately to take a bite from each. The proceeding roused the public interest. Sarah, handing round the

plates, sniggered audibly. Miss Thomas stared with a degree of amazement which evidently caused her to overlook the fact that an essential rule of good breeding is *not* to stare. Mr. Redford endeavoured to divert attention from Mr. Pye and his half-loaf by questioning Miss Annie about her scholastic experiences of the day; but the attempt was vain.

Sarah, having handed a plate to each of the ladies, handed a plate of hash to Mr. Pye. The plate was not over-filled—a plate ought not to be over-filled—but that was no reason why Mr. Pye should tilt the plate up edge-ways and eye its contents with dissatisfaction, which was not only visible, but audible as well.

"All this for me? What, plate and all?"

Mr. Redford persevered in his endeavour to carry on a conversation with Miss Annie, but it wouldn't do.

"Well—here goes!" said Mr. Pye.

And it went.

No one then present had ever seen food eaten as Mr. Pye ate his food then. Had they been in places where men—and women—eat, literally, to live—say in the kitchens of common lodging-houses, or in workhouses, or in prisons, or in hundreds of places in which

they had not been, they would have been aware that Mr. Pye's manners were quite up to the standard of such places. But their experience, which had been pretty varied, had not extended quite so far.

Mrs. Redford pushed her plate away from her.

"At any rate, my appetite has gone."

"Mine ain't," said Mr. Pye. "Mine's only just beginning. Anything you don't want hand over here—it's welcome. I should like to have a bite at something."

Mr. Redford still struggled like a man.

"Let's hope that we shall be better prepared for you next time."

"Yes, let's hope we shall—next time."

Mrs. Redford uttered those two little words —"next time"— with a peculiar significance.

"There ain't much upon these bones, and there ain't nothing else but bones."

Mr. Pye was holding them in his fingers, gnawing them as if he were a dog. He licked his fingers, wiping them upon his trousers. A fresh idea occurred to him.

"I say, ain't there nothing to drink?"

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Redford, with painful distinctness; "there is water."

Mr. Pye's face was blank.

"Water! Me drink water?"

"Unless you prefer to pay for beer."

"Eh?"

"It is the rule of this establishment, and, indeed, of all establishments of which I have heard, for boarders to pay for the malt liquors they consume in advance."

Mr. Pye stared at the lady; then turned to Mr. Redford.

"I say, this ain't five courses and a dessert, you know."

Mr. Redford looked at him meaningly.

"Don't you think that wine is a thing which you might provide?"

Mr. Pye caught his meaning, for a wonder. His countenance brightened.

"That ain't a bad idea: I will! Put a name to it. What shall it be?"

There was a fresh significance in Mr. Redford's glance.

"Take care—don't make a mess of it!"

"Never fear—I'm all right! You see. What shall it be? What do you say to champagne? I don't know much about it myself, never having tasted none; but I've heard a lot about champagne. Let's make it half a dozen bottles—eh? Now then!"

There was a sudden bang, as of something falling in the hall—so loud a bang that Miss Thomas rose from her seat with a little scream, while Mrs. Redford was perceptibly disturbed. Mr. Pye doubled himself up in his seat, and chuckled.

"That's it; I can do things—I can! It ain't come quite where I meant it to come; but it ain't so bad—for me."

Mr. Pye turned to Sarah.

"I say, miss, just cast your eye outside, will you? and see if there's anything in the hall."

Mrs. Redford issued her commands.

"Sarah, look into the hall, and see what it is has fallen. I shouldn't be surprised if it's the ceiling."

Sarah did as she was told. She opened the door and looked outside.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Whatever's this!"

Mr. Pye rose from his seat. He did not seem quite easy in his mind.

"Eh? Ain't it?—ain't it? I hope I ain't made a mess of it again. Oh, lor'!"

He glanced into the hall, and slapped his thigh.

"It's all right. I knew it would be!"

He turned to Mr. Redford.

"I told you I could do things, and so I can."

"Why," said Sarah, who had gone out into the passage, which, in Acacia Road, was dignified by the name of "hall," "if there isn't six bottles on the floor—six large ones, too. Well I never! There wasn't nothing in the hall just now, and I never heard any one come in; and one's all broke, and the stuff run out. It have made a mess upon the floor."

Mr. Pye rubbed his chin, still looking at Mr. Redford.

"That's a pity; but I couldn't help that. No one couldn't say that was my fault. Ask yourself—could they now?"

"Sarah, what are you talking about?"

Mrs. Redford moved towards the door. Her husband hastily advanced.

"Allow me, my dear. I think, perhaps, I understand this matter better than you."

"John!"

Mrs. Redford's manner was crushing; but, for once in a way, Mr. Redford declined to be crushed.

"Sarah, be careful how you handle those bottles. Give me one."

Sarah gave him one. He held it up. Mrs. Redford stared, as, indeed, did all the others in the room.

"This is something like, at last, ladies! This is a magnum of champagne. Let us examine the label. 'Veuve Clicquot'—the very thing. Not too sweet, nor, at the same time, too dry—a drink for kings and queens! Let us ascertain how many more bottles there are,—tell us, Sarah. Four more—four more magnums of champagne, besides one broken. The fracture is unfortunate; but accidents will happen, even in the best regulated families; is that not so, Mr. Pye?"

"Give us hold of a bottle," said Mr. Pye. "I'll show you."

"Mr. Redford," observed the lady of the house, "I require an explanation."

"An explanation, my dear? What of?"

"How did that wine get there? If it is a wine—which I don't believe."

"If seeing's not believing, probably tasting is. I'm afraid we've no champagne pliers in the house,—we're not champagne drinkers, as a rule, are we, Mrs. Redford?—so we must manage with the best substitute we can find." Mr. Redford used a knife with such dexterity

that, in a very short space of time, he had the bottle open. "Now, ladies, glasses round—bumpers, if you please."

Mr. Redford walked round the table, filling the ordinary tumblers with the creaming wine. His proceedings were observed with a lively interest; the whole affair was of the nature of a "surprise party," as they have it in the States. When Mr. Pye's glass was filled, he raised it to his lips, and quaffed its contents at a single draught. "Ah, that's something like, that is! if that's champagne, give me another glass."

With a sigh of satisfaction, he held his tumbler out to be replenished. Mr. Redford turned the bottle upside down, to show that it was empty.

"Nothing there, my friend. Sarah, another bottle, if you please."

Another bottle was produced. That, like the first, was quickly opened—with a neatness, too, which really did Mr. Redford the greatest credit. Again Mr. Pye's glass was filled, nor did the host forget his own.

Mr. Redford resumed his seat.

"Sit down, my dear"—Mrs. Redford still was standing—"and drink your wine. I believe

you will find that it is wine, if you taste it; tasting's believing, you will find."

Mrs. Redford sat down. There was an "I'll-find-out-all-about-it" expression written on every outline of her countenance. But possibly she concluded that it was better, for the moment, that cross-examination should be postponed. The ladies began to inquire into the contents of their glasses. They sipped, and sipped, and sipped again. Apparently the result of these various sips was not devoid of satisfaction. Miss Thomas gave verbal testimony that this was, at any rate, the case with her.

"Really"—sip—"quite nice"—sip—"quite nice"—a pretty liberal drink—"excellent champagne! One would be almost inclined to think that you were a magician, Mr. Pye."

She beamed—shortsightedly—across the table at the gentleman in front of her. Mr. Pye—who was holding out his glass to Mr. Redford to be replenished, with the apparent intention of drinking the wine in pailfuls—chuckled.

"They might think I was a magician, and yet not be so very far wrong either—would they, eh?"

Mr. Pye looked at Mr. Redford, and he winked. Mr. Redford, leaning back in his

chair, his glass held aloft, one eye closed, regarded his wine with the other—as a connoisseur invariably does regard his wine.

"'There are more things,'" he admitted, with a previous authority, "'in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.'"

"I should think there was," said Mr. Pye; "there's me."

He emitted that peculiar chuckle, which seemed to be the nearest approach of which he was capable to a regular laugh. His spirits appeared to be rising as the wine was lowered. Mr. Redford paid scant attention to his companions; he continued on a train of thought of his own.

"It is quite conceivable that there may be, in nature, forces to which man, in a general sense, has lost the key, and yet of which the key may be in the possession of a solitary individual here and there."

"Ah," said Mr. Pye, with his glass to his lips; "and I'm one of them, I am."

Miss Thomas beamed across the table.

"Really one would almost think that you were in communication with the spirits."

"And you can bet your boots I am," said Mr. Pye.

Miss Thomas was scarcely prepared to bet her boots—few ladies are—but the assertion had evidently aroused her interest.

"Really! Do you mean it? Can you—can you procure messages?"

Mr. Pye did not in the least know what the lady meant, but he was not the sort of man, nor was he in the sort of mood, to allow himself to be alarmed at that. "Procure messages? I should think I can! A few!"

Miss Thomas stood up. She was absolutely trembling with excitement—or she seemed to be.

"Oh, Mr. Pye! Are you a spiritualist?"

She might as well have asked him if he was a latitudinarian, or a sesquipedalian, or a monolithic fragment—he knew as much about one thing as he did about the other. But want of comprehension seldom made much difference to him. He brought his empty glass down upon the table with a bang. "I am!" he said, "I am!"

The lady's attitude was rapturous. She clasped her hands; she heaved a sigh.

"Oh, Mr. Pye, to think of it! I also am a spiritualist. I believe most fervently in everything. I don't know much about it, but I am not one of those who believe that knowledge

is necessary to belief, are you? Oh, let us have a *séance*—at once! Come into the other room!" She turned to Miss Annie, with rapture in her eyes and in her voice. "I knew he was an original!" she cried. Miss Annie said nothing. Her eyes twinkled, and she looked at Mr. Pye. Miss Thomas leaned over the table. She cried, to her brother in the faith, "Oh, do come into the other room—at once!"

Mr. Pye did not seem to be so anxious to leave the table as the lady was—not by any means. He drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"Look here! there are a couple of bottles yet, you know."

Mr. Redford looked at Mr. Pye—significantly.

"Moderation is a virtue, even in a magician, Mr. Pye."

Mr. Pye seemed to be of an entirely opposite opinion; he resented this remark of Mr. Redford's.

"Yes, I daresay; and if I was to leave you alone with them two bottles, I wonder how much there'd be in them when I come back."

"Sir!"

Mr. Redford "fixed" the magician with his "eye." The magician endeavoured to meet him, eye to eye—to outstare his host. But that was a contest which he was unfitted to sustain. His glance quailed. He began to fidget in his chair. He shuffled to his feet. In a moment Miss Thomas had swooped upon her prey. "Do come!" she cried—"oh, do!"

The magician went.

Left alone with her husband, Mrs. Redford "fixed" him with *her* "eye." It was Mr. Redford's turn to be defeated. That was an eye which he seldom even attempted to meet; to do so he had learned, from long experience, was but to court disaster. He looked anywhere but towards his wife. She looked steadily at him.

"Mr. Redford,"—how well he knew that tone of voice: it haunted him in visions, sometimes, in the silent watches of the night, —"who is that man?"

"Really, my dear, I don't know that I can exactly tell you. I don't know that I am quite clear upon that point myself. One thing, however, I may tell you,—he is a remarkable man."

Mrs. Redford made no comment upon

this,—perhaps she thought that fact self-evident. Mr. Redford rose, as if he deemed the court of inquiry closed. But the lady had still another question to put.

"Mr. Redford,"—Mr. Redford paused, his hand upon the handle of the door,—"where did that wine come from?"

"I can assure you most solemnly, my dear, that I know no more where the wine came from than you do. Upon that subject, I must refer you, for information, to Mr. Pye."

CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE SÉANCE.

"NOW," said Miss Thomas, when she had secured her victim in the parlour, "how do you procure messages? Do you use a slate, or a piece of paper, or the—what d'ye call 'em? the thing that moves about—that was so fashionable a few years ago—that they got such lovely messages with."

Mr. Pye—who had not the faintest notion what the lady was talking about, and who had certainly never heard of Planchette, to which former plaything of the "spirits"—and their victims—she possibly alluded—stared at her with a vacant expression of countenance. His thoughts were with the bottles in the other room.

"Eh?" he said.

Miss Thomas locked her fingers together and smiled.

"Tell me, Mr. Pye, in confidence, are you a medium,—professionally, I mean?"

"I dunno,—dunno nothing about it. I say," —Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips—"d'ye think he's——eh?"

Mr. Pye lifted his hand to his lips in a way which might be full of suggestion to himself, but which suggested nothing to Miss Thomas' understanding.

"I'm afraid I don't quite know what you mean."

Mr. Pye explained. "D'ye think he's lushing the lot?"

But Miss Thomas did not appear to be appreciably enlightened.

"Still I'm afraid I'm a little in the dark."

Mr. Pye seemed to be astonished at her dulness,—he said as much.

"Well, you ain't very quick, are yer? D'ye think the bloke in the next room's emptying both the bottles?"

Miss Annie Redford had kept her eyes fixed on Mr. Pye. It is possible that she had understood his meaning better than Miss Thomas. This clear exposition of what his meaning really was seemed to be more than her risible nerves could stand. She burst into a peal of ringing laughter. Mr. Pye started. He appeared to be disconcerted.

"I dunno what she's laughing at." Miss Annie's mirth seemed to make him angry. "It don't seem to me to be no joke to know that another bloke's a-swigging of your liquor."

This was more than Miss Annie could endure; her enjoyment of the situation became almost hysterical. The magician glared.

"Well, this is a go!" He turned to Miss Thomas. "I come to this here dog-hole of a house, a-thinking I was a-going to get a dinner of five courses and a dessert, and I gets that there scragmeat muck, and not enough of that to——"

"How dare you, sir!"

It would have been as well if Mr. Pye, instead of confining his attention to Miss Annie's laughter, had kept half an eye upon Miss Annie's sister. He would have seen from obvious outward signs that Miss Nelly Redford was inclined to anything but mirth, and been warned in time. As it was, while he was still in the full flood of his eloquence, and was just, so to speak, getting warm, Miss Nelly advanced, and planting herself in front of him, addressed him in a tone of voice which made him almost spring out of his boots—those

ancient boots!—for Mr. Pye was constitutionally a nervous man.

"How dare you, sir, speak like that in my father's house? Don't let me hear it again!"

Mr. Pye, who had started back a good three feet, seemed disconcerted,—as though he did not know what to make of the young lady's clenched fists and flashing eyes at all.

"Well," he murmured, "this is a go."

Miss Thomas played the part of peacemaker.

"S—sh, my dear,—an original!—an original! Now, Mr. Pye, how are you going to procure us our messages?"

"I dunno." Mr. Pye eyed Miss Nelly very much as he had eyed the "toy terrier" in Mr. Redford's office, as if he wished she'd get outside. "Anyhow."

"Then if you leave it entirely to us, we would suggest that you should procure our sweet spirit messages with the aid of a piece of paper and a pencil, in the good old-fashioned, simple way."

Just then Mr. Redford entered the room.

"Ah, Mr. Redford, Mr. Pye is just going to begin our little *séance*. Isn't it good of him?"

Mr. Redford smiled a little doubtfully. Miss

Thomas armed herself with a blank sheet of note paper and a pencil. These she laid upon the table, with quite a charming little air of mystery.

"I must tell you, Mr. Pye, that we expect great things of you. We expect to see wonders —real wonders! A gentleman who can produce champagne—and such champagne—out of nothing, must be hand in glove with all the spirits."

The lady locked her fingers together, knuckles uppermost, in that pretty little way she had. It was a pity that the fingers were so bony, and the moustache which shaded off her simple smile so marked.

"Now whom shall the first message from the dear spirits be for?"

At that moment the mistress of the house appeared at the door. Miss Thomas turned to her with a burst of ecstasy.

"Ah, Mrs. Redford, we are already almost in the presence of the spirits; we seem to hear their wings: let the first message be for you." Mrs. Redford frowned; she did not seem to be at all ecstatic. "Tell us, whom would you like the message to be from?"

Mrs. Redford's reply was grim.

"I don't believe in such nonsense," she observed.

Miss Thomas was reduced to anguish.

"Please don't say that; you don't know by whom you may be overheard. Perhaps Mr. Pye may succeed in strengthening your faith —do, Mr. Pye, do! It is so dreadful to see the incredulity of this sceptic world. We are ready, Mr. Pye."

Miss Thomas inclined her head with a sort of gesture of invitation, as if to give a hint that it was about time that the performance should begin.

Mr. Pye looked at her, in evident haziness of mind.

"Look here," he said, "what is this little game?"

Miss Thomas explained.

"We wish you, Mr. Pye, to procure for us, upon this sheet of paper, and with this pencil, a message, for our hostess, from whichever of the sweet spirits you may choose."

Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"I dunno much about this kind of game—in fact, I dunno nothing at all. But I'll—I'll have a try. Here goes! Now then!"

Miss Thomas stood, with her fingers interlaced and her eyes upraised, in a pose which she possibly imagined would have presented a study to an artist; and so it would—to one of the artists on the staff of *Mr. Punch*. Mr. Redford's attitude was not suggestive of such simplicity of childlike faith. His countenance rather conveyed the consciousness of an inward intuition that the Mahatma's Pupil would make a mess of it; which, considering that Mr. Pye appeared not to have the faintest notion of what it was that Miss Thomas really expected him to do, seemed, on the face of it, to be not improbable. Mrs. Redford regarded the paper and pencil on the table with an air of ineffable contempt; while her two daughters looked from Mr. Pye to Miss Thomas, and from Miss Thomas to Mr. Pye, as if they could not make up their minds which of the pair they ought to laugh at first.

There was silence.

Then a curious thing happened—a very curious thing indeed.

It has already been remarked that Miss Thomas had placed the blank sheet of paper and the pencil on the table, side by side. She herself stood behind the table, but some two or

three feet away from it, in that attitude expressive of idyllic, and, indeed, seraphic peace. The others were scattered about the room. Mr. Redford was in front of the fireplace, and Mr. Pye was farthest from the table and nearest to the door. Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, was heard—a sound, a very faint sound—the sound of writing. Everybody started, everybody advisedly, because the everybody certainly included Mr. Pye. All eyes were turned towards the table.

On it they saw a very curious thing indeed.

The pencil was writing on the paper. There could be no doubt that it was writing, because not only was the pencil moving over the paper, as a pencil does move which writes, but they could hear it writing, and they could see that words were being formed by it before their eyes. But who the writer was—that is, who it was that held the pencil—there was no evidence to show. If they could trust to visual evidence, the pencil was moving of its own accord. It was really curious. There was the little pencil—it was only part of a common penny one—passing from word to word, and from line to line, as though it had all at once become endowed with life. It was almost ghostly! They

gazed, with open mouths and open eyes. And when the pencil arrived at the end of the communication from the mystic world of spirits, it completed the signature with the queerest flourish. Then it was lifted—it seemed to be lifted, though who lifted it, there was, as has been remarked, no evidence to show—from the paper, as one does lift a pencil when one has finished writing, and laid upon the table, but on the opposite side to that on which it had been placed before.

And there again was silence—silence which was broken by the utterance of a sound from Miss Thomas which was half gasp, half sigh. The curious thing which they all had witnessed seemed to have left her in a tremulous state both of mind and body.

"Strange—*how* strange! Wonderful indeed! Can we have been in the actual presence of a visitant from the world of spirits? Oh, if after this any one should dare to express incredulity of spiritualistic truths and teachings! Oh, how glad I am that I am of those who from the first believed!"

Mr. Redford seemed to have been almost as much affected, in a different way, by what he had seen as Miss Thomas had been.

"Suppose," he suggested, to the "believer from the first," "you let us know what it is the spirits have to say."

The suggestion seemed to fill the lady with a kind of frenzy.

"Dare I!" she exclaimed. "Oh, dare I! Am I worthy? I *am* a believer from the first. The thought sustains me. Yes; I think I dare. Oh—h!" She stretched out her hand towards the piece of paper, as though it were a red-hot coal. "Ah—h!" she cried—it was like the "villain" at the "Vic."—"a shudder seems to go all over me." As a matter of fact she seemed actually to tremble. She drew the piece of paper towards her as though it were some precious thing. "Sweet fragment!"—it was a whole sheet of paper, and not a fragment, but no matter. She pressed the "sweet fragment" to her lips. "And has a spirit hand been laid on thee?" She pressed it to her bosom. "And now to see what wondrous words have been projected from the world of wisdom into this world of common—alas! too common—sense!"

She put her hand before her eyes, as if to prepare them for the splendours which they were presently to see. Then, removing her

hand, she allowed her eyes to rest upon the sheet of paper; she placed her *pince-nez* upon the bridge of her nose, which act, though, doubtless, a necessary one, rather tended to detract from the solemnity of the moment. She brought the paper within readable focus —which was very near the tip of her nose, because, even with glasses on, she was painfully short-sighted. Directly it reached that point she started. It was quite a dramatic start, and yet it was hardly the kind of start which one had been disposed to expect.

"Impossible!" she murmured. "It cannot be! And yet—it is!"

Her eyes travelled over the written words. As they did so, there came a change in the fashion of her countenance—a most unmistakable change. It lost something of its look of rapture; in fact, it lost it all. It became incredulous, then bewildered, then amazed.

She finished the perusal of the message from the "world of wisdom." She lowered the sheet of paper.

"Extraordinary—most extraordinary!"

The tone of her voice had become quite natural.

While the lady had been passing through

these different phases, she had been—what, possibly, she had no objection to be—the centre of interest, the observed of all observers. The extraordinary, and unmistakable, change which had taken place in her deportment tended rather to increase, than to lessen, curiosity. Mr. Redford could restrain himself no longer.

"Well, my dear Miss Thomas, we are waiting! we are waiting!"

Miss Thomas put her hand to her brow.

"Really, I—I hardly like to read it aloud."

Mr. Redford evinced impatience.

"Nonsense, my dear lady, nonsense! Isn't it written in English?"

"It certainly is written in English."

"Then let us hear what it is the spirits have to say. Don't you see we're waiting?"

"But it's such an extraordinary message for a spirit to send."

"All the more reason why you should read it, then—all the more reason, my dear lady. Don't you see that we are bursting with curiosity? Make haste! make haste!"

Miss Thomas still seemed doubtful, but she yielded.

"Of course, if you insist, I must."

Then she read aloud—it was true that it was in a somewhat tremulous tone of voice, but still it was aloud—the following message from the "world of wisdom":—

"*To* MRS. REDFORD.

"MADAM,—

"You will get no more meat from me till my account is paid. I have made repeated applications for a settlement, and I consider it nothing else than impertinence on your part to send to my shop this morning and ask for credit for another shoulder of mutton.

"Your obedient servant,

"ROBERT GIBSON."

To describe the silence which followed the reading of the "message" as blank silence, would be to supply an altogether inadequate description,—it was, rather, the silence of stupefaction. That any spirit should have thought it worth his while to send such a message as that from the spirit world was strange.

"Gibson!" murmured Miss Thomas. "Who is Robert Gibson?"

"A butcher."

The answer came from Mr. Redford—*sotto voce*.

"A butcher? Is he a disembodied butcher,—a butcher in the world of spirits?"

"He's the butcher at the corner of the street—impudent cad! He was very much alive this morning, but let's hope that he's dead by now."

"How strange! How passing strange!"

Mrs. Redford held out her hand to the lady.

"Let me look at that piece of paper."

Miss Thomas handed her the "message." Mrs. Redford eyed it.

"I believe that that's the man's own writing. You know it better than I do, Nelly,—isn't that his writing?"

She transferred the "message" to Miss Nelly. Miss Nelly scrutinised it with troubled eyes, Annie peeping over her shoulder as she did so.

"I — I really believe it is, mamma; it looks as though it were; but however was it written?"

"Don't ask me. You must ask your father—*he* knows. Mr. Redford, I owe that man for three weeks' meat. The meat has been consumed by the members of your household,—and your friends. He insulted me this morning, and as he has now insulted me again, in the

presence of strangers, perhaps you will see your way to pay his bill."

Mr. Redford fidgeted about upon the hearth-rug.

"My dear, there's no proof that the message has come from him. It's—it's only a little joke."

"Oh, it's only a little joke, is it? Then perhaps it's a joke of yours. Or perhaps I am indebted for it to your friend. One never knows!"

Mrs. Redford regarded Mr. Pye in a manner which seemed to cause that gentleman to feel uncomfortable,—to become conscious of a feeling of depression.

"Oh lor'!" he groaned: "I've made a mess of it again. There never was a man with such luck as mine,—no, never!"

Mr. Redford endeavoured to pass the matter off as the joke which he stated it to be.

"Never mind! You've done wonders, Mr. Pye—wonders! Now, suppose, Mr. Pye, you try your hand on me. No—no messages!" Mr. Redford said this rather hurriedly, as if he were afraid that the magician might get in front of him if he did not make haste. "The sample which we have had of spirit messages

has not been—has not been peculiarly successful, Mr. Pye,—not sufficiently successful to tempt us to inquire for more. Suppose you try your hand at a fresh departure, and—and get me a present, Mr. Pye."

Miss Thomas clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"Oh, a present from the spirits, Mr. Redford! How much too sweet!"

"I'm not particular about its being from the spirits; the spirits don't seem to be in a particularly benevolent frame of mind. I'm willing to receive a present from any one—any one; it's the same to me. Can you oblige me, Mr. Pye?"

Mr. Pye drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"What—what sort of a present would you like?"

Mr. Redford should have learnt caution from experience; in the effusiveness of his desire to smooth over the little matter of the "message," he, rashly, gave the magician a free hand.

"Any kind of present will do—any kind. I'm no more particular about the kind of present than I am about the quarter which it comes from. I'm always ready to receive a present—in that direction I'm in a chronic state of want

—so that I may safely say that the smallest contributions will be thankfully received."

If Mr. Redford had been wiser! If he had only reflected for a moment he surely would have been. If he had only seen the look of doubt upon the face of the magician, his sense of caution might have been roused in time. But he cheerfully rattled the coppers in his pockets—what there were of them, they were a scanty crew—and smiled upon the lady boarder and hied him to his fate.

"I'll see what I can do," said Mr. Pye. "I daresay I could get you something. Here goes! Now then!"

There was a moment's silence. Then something fell, or seemed to fall, from the ceiling on to the table underneath. It was a paper, blue in colour, and folded in an oblong form.

Miss Thomas pointed at it with a gesture which was, in the truest and the noblest sense, dramatic; or, at any rate, she intended it as such.

"For Mr. Redford,—a present from the spirits. I, as a believer from the first, claim the right to touch it first."

The mere aspect of the paper—"a present from the spirits"—viewed even through the

wrong end of a telescope, would have been the occasion, to an experienced hand, of feelings of the gravest doubt, of the most acute suspicion. But Miss Thomas, with that rashness which is born of innocence, snatched it up as though it were the sort of thing which one is anxious to snatch up. But, when she had approached it sufficiently near the end of her nose, even she began to doubt.

"It—it can't be—a summons!"

Mr. Redford snatched the "present" from the lady's hands, though his was not the snatch of joyous welcome. He, probably, had seen something of the kind before—many a time! He had but to give a single glance at it, and all signs of cheerfulness vanished from his countenance,—for that time, at any rate, if not for ever.

"A writ!" he yelled. "A writ! Great Potiphar!"

He did not dance about the room with rage, because he had got beyond the age for dancing, but he stamped his foot as if he designed to dash it through the floor, and he glared at Mr. Pye in a way which caused the magician to start back as if he had been struck a sudden blow.

"A writ!" gasped Mr. Redford again, almost inarticulate with rage.

He tore the paper open with hands which shook with fury. When he perceived its contents, his rage became almost paroxysmal—it transfigured him; never such a change in a man was seen.

"Good Lord!" he screamed. "Smithson *versus* Redford! Smithson *versus* Redford!" He made a rush at the magician. Fortunately Mr. Pye made way in time. "You—you idiot! I've half a mind to murder you."

Mr. Pye put up his arms as if to ward off a blow.

"You said get yer anything—it wasn't no odds to you what it was; and I've got you something, ain't I?"

"You—you inconceivable blockhead! Do you suppose I wanted you to present me with a writ? Is that your present from the spirits? You"—it is to be feared that Mr. Redford's language did not convey a blessing. "Are you aware that the chief object of my existence during the last six months has been to escape the service of this identical writ? Are you aware that it has come to me in registered letters, and I've declined to take them in?

Are you aware that I've kept myself a prisoner in a single room for days—that I've hidden myself in holes—that I've run as for my life—that I've lied, and struggled, and——Oh you—oh you—leather-headed fool!"

As the climax of his fury, Mr. Redford threw the paper—the "present of the spirits"—into the face of the magician.

Mr. Pye shook his head with an air of melancholy resignation, taking good care to keep as far as possible out of the reach of Mr. Redford's arm. Picking up the paper from where it had fallen on the floor, he wiped it carefully on his sleeve.

"Oh lor'! I've made a mess of it again! No man ever had such luck as mine!"

"Such luck as yours! What man ever had such luck as mine? To pick a filthy beggar out of the very gutter; to bring him into my house to ruin me for life! I'll—I'll——"

It is not impossible that, in the extremity of his indignation, Mr. Redford would have physically assaulted the magician then and there.

"Mr. Redford, there are ladies present."

"Yes, my dear, I know there are. I'm quite aware of it, but I'm—I'm driven wild."

"Mr. Redford, don't attack me! This is your friend, not mine!"

"My friend! my friend!" Mr. Redford glared afresh at the cowering Mr. Pye. "Give me that paper, sir!" He snatched the "present of the spirits" from the magician's hand. "Miss Thomas, if in my natural and justifiable warmth I have said anything calculated to offend the ears of a lady, I—I must ask you to look it over."

Miss Thomas bowed, with a smile of the sweetest condescension. Mr. Redford took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. He was making an evident effort at self-control.

"Of course—of course, there has been no service—none at all! It is absurd to talk of such a thing. It has only been a joke, a—a wretched joke,"—with a glare at Mr. Pye,—"but still—still nothing but a joke. I have only just given a mere cursory glance at the paper, as you all have seen, so that I—I really have no reason to suspect that the thing is anything but a dummy. Miss Thomas, I trust that I may rely on you not to allow any hasty words which I may have uttered to travel beyond our little circle."

"Mr. Redford, don't you know that you

may? Am I not one of the family—your friend? If any one were so silly as to ask me anything about anything"—her smile became quite girlish—"I should say that I knew nothing about it, nothing at all; I never do! You may rely on me."

Mr. Redford looked at her as though he were not so sure of that as he would have liked to have been. But, if that were so, he dissembled.

"I have not looked at the paper, and I don't intend to look at it. I am going to tear it up, and to burn it; and, with it, it is my desire to burn all memory of the"—another glare at Mr. Pye—"the joke."

He suited the "action to the word." He tore the paper into strips. He struck a match and lighted them. The burning fragments he threw into the empty grate, then stood and watched them until the "present of the spirits" was consumed to ashes.

CHAPTER VI.

HER MOST PRECIOUS THINGS.

WHILE that little conflagration was still taking place, Miss Thomas struck an attitude. She was always striking attitudes, yet one likes to record that, just then, she struck another. She spoke in her most mellifluous tones.

"If so insignificant a person as I may be allowed to say one word—may I?" No one was so brutal as to refuse to grant her the permission which she craved. "It is so good of you! The one little word which I wish to speak is this. I have a theory: that, so far, we have seen the spirits in a mischievous frame of mind. Alas! it is only too probable that, sometimes, even spirits are mischievously inclined. But for that surely the blame should not rest on Mr. Pye. It seems to me that Mr. Pye has done wonders which are almost worthy of a magician."

"He is a magician!"

Mr. Pye pulled himself together a little. He apparently did not perceive that, at any rate, Mr. Redford's words were spoken in irony. He settled his waistcoat in its place—that relic of a waistcoat!

"So I am a magician; I tell you straight I am. It's my muddly head what's wrong. That's what used to make the"—Mr. Pye glanced furtively about the room — "the coloured gentleman so wild."

The "believer from the first" went on,—

"But now may we not hope that their mischievous mood is past? For my part I cannot believe that, among sweet spirits, such a mood can long endure. I believe, quite earnestly, that it has fled." Miss Thomas stretched out her arms on either side of her, like semaphores. "To show the sincerity of my belief, I am prepared, even after what we have heard and seen, to place myself, unreservedly, in Mr. Pye's all-powerful hands."

"They would be the better for washing," muttered Mrs. Redford, half beneath her breath, glancing at the "all-powerful hands."

But Miss Thomas was not to be deterred by bathos. She turned to the master of the house.

"Have you any objection, Mr. Redford?"

Mr. Redford grinned sardonically.

"I cannot have the faintest objection, Miss Thomas, to your placing yourself in Mr. Pye's all-powerful hands, if you feel inclined that way."

"How good of you—how good!" The lady turned to the magician. "Mr. Pye, I am going to place perfect confidence in you. Entreat the sweet spirits to have mercy upon me. Tell them that I have been a believer from the first. I do not ask from them a message. Far less do I venture to ask them for a present. On the contrary, I desire their assistance to enable *me* to send a present to a nameless friend."

The sublimity with which the words, "to a nameless friend,"—with a stress upon the "nameless"—were uttered, was worthy, or almost worthy, of the Tragic Muse. It was beautiful to hear Miss Thomas, especially as she continued,—

"Do not ask me to name my friend; do not, I beg you, ask me for the name. It is a name which can never be revealed; 'tis hidden here." She laid her hand upon her bosom. "Mr. Pye, have you sufficient influence with the sweet spirits to induce them to enable me to send a present to a nameless friend?"

Mr. Pye must have been wholly devoid of

any sense of humour; he showed no symptoms of a smile. He drew the back of his hand across his lips instead.

"What—what kind of a present?" he inquired.

"Nor must you ask me that—no, no! not that! What the present is to consist of must be known only to the sweet spirits and to me; it must consist of the most precious things I have."

Mr. Redford began to feel concerned. He perceived, as he could not help but do, what an infinity of opportunities Miss Thomas was offering Mr. Pye to display to complete advantage the most surprising of his gifts,—his gift for blundering. An inward monitor told him—he was beginning to know Mr. Pye so well—that in the performance of so excessively delicate a task as the lady was now imposing on him, it was, to all intents and purposes, practically impossible for him to do anything else than make a mess of things—a woeful mess! So, with a view of sparing the lady's feelings, Mr. Redford interposed.

"If you will take my strongly urged advice, Miss Thomas, you will specify the nature of the present which you desire to send."

The suggestion seemed to pain Miss Thomas.

"Why so? Oh, Mr. Redford, I thought you had no objection to my placing myself unreservedly in our friend's hands. And how can I specify the nature of the present better than by saying that it is to consist of the most precious things I have?"

"But suppose you were taken at your word, and you lost the most precious things you have?"

The prospect did not seem to dismay Miss Thomas in the least.

"Oh, rapture!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Redford was slightly nettled. Miss Thomas went too far.

"I doubt if you would say rapture if you lost the most precious things you have; because, I presume, that there are things which you would not care to lose."

"Nothing, nothing! There is nothing in the whole wide world which I would begrudge to a nameless friend. Mr. Redford, I entreat you, let me have my own way—this once!"

Mr. Redford shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear madam, you are welcome to have your own way for ever, so far as I am concerned. The consequences will be yours, not

mine. I imagine, from what you have already witnessed of Mr. Pye's skill and tact, that you are conscious that there are possibilities ?"

" I am prepared ! I am prepared for all ! "

" If you are prepared—— "

Mr. Redford turned away. He muttered something about there being no fool like an old fool. The words could not have referred to the " believer from the first "—it is impossible that he could have called Miss Thomas old.

The lady turned to Mr. Pye. She assumed an attitude of even intenser rapture than before.

" I am ready. Entreat the sweet spirits that they will send, from me, a present to a nameless friend. The present is to consist of the most precious things I have—of all that I hold most dear. Mr. Pye, can you do this for me ? "

Mr. Pye hitched his trousers up about the waist—it was obvious that they were only supported by a single brace.

" I dunno—I daresay : I'll have a try."

" Do have a try ! "

He had a try.

" Here's goes ! Now then ! "

If, in making her eccentric request to Mr. Pye, Miss Thomas had anything at all in her mind—

and it at least is possible that she, after all, had nothing, for it certainly is a fact that some ladies sometimes do have nothing in their minds, and that even when they assure their acquaintances, and wish them to believe, that they have most —but granting that, in this particular case, Miss Thomas had something in her mind, it is probable that that something was in the corner of some drawer, or in the bottom of some old box. A bundle of old letters, a lock or two of hair, a faded photograph,—some relics of the days which were no more,—these, perhaps, were the treasures which she imagined that she esteemed most dear. Such a collection would have formed a fitting gift, from the sentimental point of view, for "a nameless friend." The same remark could scarcely have been made of the articles which the present was really destined to consist of. It seemed that there were two opinions as to what were her most precious things.

As the sentimental lady was waiting, in a rapturous attitude, for the present to be sent, suddenly all signs of rapture fled. With a stifled exclamation, she put her hands up to her head. Something seemed to be happening to her hair. Miss Thomas wore a lovely "fringe,"

—a "fringe" which never required curling, and which yet was always neat. This "fringe" was behaving in the most amazing manner. It appeared to be making frantic efforts to leave its owner's head. Could that "fringe" be false? It really seemed to be, and in more senses than one; because, in spite of her repeated clutches, the false "fringe" rose from the lady's brow, and, with a sudden upward movement, vanished into air.

The lady's feelings, when she realised what had happened, may be left to conjecture. She uttered shriek after shriek. But there was worse to follow. She had desired that *all* her most precious things were to be sent; she was to be taken at her word.

Scarcely had the false "fringe" vanished, than a commotion began to take place at the back of her head. Something was happening to her "back hair"—something terrible. Hair-pins were flying out in all directions; plaits were becoming unplaited; bands were being unloosed. Then the crowning glory, the heart and centre of her hair, rose clear of her crown and followed the "fringe." A bald place, as large as a tea-plate, was left in the middle of the lady's head.

That she would have mourned the loss of her "centre-piece" at least as heartily as she had mourned her "fringe" one cannot doubt, only circumstances prevented. For no sooner did she open her lips to scream than it became obvious that disturbances were commencing inside her mouth,—something was happening to her teeth. She appeared to be threatened with dislocation of the jaw; she made the most astonishing grimaces. Then her teeth, her beautiful white teeth, began issuing from between her lips, not one by one, but in battalions—gold plates and all. They went after the "fringe" and after the "centre-piece"; and when they had gone it seemed that the unfortunate lady was left, not only without any hair on her crown, but without a tooth in her head.

But it seemed that all her "most precious things" were still not gone; for while the spectators were gazing, amazed and horror-stricken, at the spectacle which the "believer from the first" presented, the bosom of her dress began to heave, and the buttons and the seams to burst; and had not Miss Annie and Miss Nelly Redford, with singular presence of mind, taken her by the shoulders and rushed

her from the room, there is no knowing what fresh treasures might not have been sent as a present to that nameless friend; indeed, it is not for us to say what were not sent when they got her into the hall outside.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAHATMA'S PUPIL DOES HIS BEST.

WHEN the ruins of the "believer from the first" had disappeared, dead silence fell upon those who were left behind in the parlour. Mysterious sounds proceeded from the hall. Then they heard what was unmistakably the sound of the "ruined relic" being assisted up the stairs by the Misses Redford. Then all was still. What other of Miss Thomas' "most precious things" had departed to her "nameless friend" those within the parlour did not dare to ask or think.

Mrs. Redford turned to Mr. Redford. *He* turned away—he deemed it wiser.

"Well, Mr. Redford?"

"We—well, my dear?"

At that moment he felt that he had been over-hasty in extending the shelter of his home to Mr. Pye.

"I perceive, Mr. Redford, that you are laughing."

The accusation was really an unjust one; because, although there might have been convulsive twitches about the corners of Mr. Redford's lips, the sight which they had just witnessed had been almost too tragic for laughter. Besides, there were other things.

"I—I assure you, my dear, that—that you are wrong."

"Of course, an outrage on a woman is sure to make you laugh. The more the outrage, the more the laughter."

Mrs. Redford spoke in a *crescendo* scale. Mr. Redford tried, by his manner, to show that he was not at all embarrassed.

"My dear, I—I think, in fairness, you ought to remember that Miss Thomas desired that her most precious things should be sent to her nameless friend; and I think that even you must allow that it—it is exactly those things which have been sent. No one can deny, my dear, that her wish has—has been gratified."

"Mr. Redford!" Mrs. Redford rubbed her hands together in an energetic manner, which was a peculiarity of hers whenever she was deeply roused. "Oh, you men! Never mind, never mind! you're all the same,—wretches! But I suppose, Mr. Redford, that you will

hardly expect Miss Thomas to stay in the house after what has happened. I suppose you will allow that she may have some sense of feeling, although she is a woman. And, as Miss Thomas' weekly fifteen shillings is the only cash which I have received for a month or more, I shall be obliged if you will tell me how you propose to supply its place. Do you expect me to do what you have expected me to do before—carry on your house on nothing at all?"

Mr. Redford coughed. He fidgeted from foot to foot.

"I—I really think that you overstate the case, my dear."

"Do you indeed, sir, do you indeed? Never mind, sir, never mind!" Again the lady rubbed her hands. Then her manner changed: it became preternaturally solemn. "There is one subject on which I require information, Mr. Redford,—I mean to have it too; I intend to be trifled with no longer, sir—there is one question to which I demand an answer, as your wife, and as the mother of your children: who is this man?"

She pointed at Mr. Pye with an air of sternness which caused the Mahatma's Pupil, meta-

phorically speaking, to shrivel up into his boots. He put up his hands as if he thought she was about to hit him; than which, of course, nothing was further from the lady's mind.

Mr. Redford glanced at the magician as if he thought that the lady's was a question which that gentleman ought to be able to answer for himself; but he could see, with half an eye, that Mr. Pye thought otherwise.

The lady's inquiry was repeated.

"Mr. Redford, I insist upon your telling me, at once"—she brought down her fist upon the table with a bang—"who is this man?"

"I—I have already explained to you, my dear, that this is Mr. Pye—Mr. James Pye."

"And who is Mr. Pye?"

Mr. Redford glanced again at Mr. Pye for help; but no help came. So Mr. Redford arrived at a sudden resolution to make the best of things. He drew himself up with the air of a man whose mind was at ease.

"I will be frank with you, my dear; it has always been my intention to be frank: has it not been our intention to be frank, Mr. Pye?"

"Certingly," said Mr. Pye.

But there was not about Mr. Pye's general

demeanour such an appearance of frankness as would have commended itself to the mind of a candid woman.

"Mr. Pye, my dear, is a—is a magician."

Mr. Redford made the announcement in a manner which seemed to suggest that he expected his wife to receive it with astonishment. But if she was astonished, she showed no signs of it. On the contrary, her manner was cool and acid.

"A what?"

"A magician!"

"Fiddlesticks!"

"My dear, it is not fiddlesticks. It is as I tell you. Mr. Pye is a magician."

"And do you mean to tell me, Mr. Redford, that you have dared to bring into my house a common fortune-teller?"

It was Mr. Redford's turn to be surprised—he evidently was.

"My dear, you misunderstand me—completely. Mr. Pye is not a common fortune-teller, are you, Mr. Pye?"

But Mr. Redford seemed destined never to receive help from the magician—especially when he was most in need of it.

"I dunno," said Mr. Pye. "I never tried.

I daresay I might do a bit of fortune-telling, if I was to have a try at it."

Mr. Redford glared at Mr. Pye—not genially.

"Mr. Pye, my dear, is not a master of expression. His powers do not extend to a knowledge of the English grammar. But, in spite of that, my dear, it is as I tell you. Mr. Pye is a veritable magician, a *lusus naturæ*, a weaver of spells, a worker of miracles, such as we read of in 'The Arabian Nights,' and such as have not been heard of since the hour in which those tales were written until this day."

Mr. Redford said all this in his most impressive manner, but the lady did not seem to be impressed.

"Mr. Redford," demanded the partner of his joys and of his sorrows, "do you take me for a fool?"

Mr. Redford seemed to be almost too much amazed for words.

"My dear!" He turned to the magician. "Mr. Pye, I believe you have in your pocket that card of yours. Mrs. Redford would like to see it, Mr. Pye."

The magician began fumbling in his pocket. The lady watched him with ill-repressed contempt, the gentleman with equally ill-repressed

impatience. At last he found what he was feeling for. He produced the extremely doubtful piece of pasteboard with which he had introduced himself to Mr. Redford. He made a peculiarly futile effort to improve its appearance by rubbing it upon his sleeve. Mr. Redford stopped him.

"Give the card to Mrs. Redford, sir. It is not a very elegant card, my dear, but it will, at least, give you some idea of who and what Mr. Pye is."

The lady, with doubtful visage, took the card which Mr. Pye, with a certain suggestion of timidity, held out to her. She looked at it very much as a cabman looks at a fare which has been tendered to him, and which he considers to be less than his due.

"What's this?" she asked, just as cabby asks. Then she read aloud what was written on the card, in a tone of voice which was instinct with all the eloquence of scorn—

James Pye,

The Mahatma's Pupil,

Likewise

The People's Magician.

Every veriety of magic suplied. Terms moderet. N.B.—In Advanse.

Mrs. Redford gazed at this modest announcement of the magician's qualifications with an expression of countenance which was not suggestive of sympathy.

"What nonsense is this?" she inquired. "Why, the man can scarcely write, and far less spell. Don't bring such rubbish into my house, Mr. Redford, I must beg. I'd sooner have bailiffs than tramps."

The lady tore up the magician's "business card" into minute fragments. The fragments she threw into the grate. Her husband seemed shocked.

"Really, my dear, I don't know that you were justified in doing that. That card was Mr. Pye's."

"Don't Mr. Pye me, sir! I'll Mr. Pye him! You may be fooled—you very easily are!—but I am not to be imposed upon by every swindling beggarly scamp."

Mr. Redford pulled up his shirt collar.

"Really, my dear, I don't know that you have any warrant for what you say. I am aware that the claims that Mr. Pye advances are most unusual—incredible, if you choose. But I apprehend that you must believe even the incredible when you have proved it true.

I have ample warranty for my faith in Mr. Pye. It—it is true that he—he sometimes blunders in matters of detail; but that he is the actual possessor of powers of the most extraordinary and, indeed, incredible kind, there can be no doubt whatever.—Don't allow your modesty to ruin you! Have you nothing to say for yourself, Mr. Pye?"

Thus adjured, it seemed that Mr. Pye had something to say. He began to fidget from foot to foot, and to finger his ancient garments in that uncomfortable, nervous way which he did not seem to be able to master.

"I can do things—I can: tell you straight I can."

It seemed to be Mr. Pye's regular formula. On this occasion it was whined rather than spoken.

"I'm a dab at love——"

"Mr. Pye!" Mr. Redford interposed. A vision of the plethoric lady across the street, the mother of nine, flashed across his brain.

The magician started back.

"What's the matter? I wasn't a-going to do nothing. I wish you wouldn't holler at me like that, yer know; it's so unsettling. I never was in a crib like this in all my days

—no, never! It's worse than Snelling's—heaps!"

The magician put his hand up to his weary brow.

"Then there's another thing I'm a dab at: I'm a dab at bringing a dog into a room. It ain't an easy thing to do——"

"Mr. Pye!"

There was no knowing what the magician might do, just to show what he could do, and the prospect of another visitation from a "toy terrier" was more than Mr. Redford could stand.

Again the magician started back.

"There you are a-hollering again! I wasn't a-going to do nothing, was I? You ain't fair on me. When I can do things you won't let me. A magician's life, it ain't a happy one."

The deep sigh with which Mr. Pye gave utterance to this classical sentiment showed that it was a sentiment which came from the bottom of his heart. The lady was, however, by no means moved to sympathy.

"Mr. Redford, when you have quite finished talking nonsense to this—person, perhaps you will remember that I am here."

She turned to the magician.

"There is another thing which perhaps you can do, sir: perhaps you can take yourself outside my house!"

The hint thus delicately conveyed appeared to take the magician by surprise.

"Eh!" he said, and stared.

Mr. Redford seemed equally moved.

"Really, my dear! I must ask you——"

"Well, Mr. Redford, and what must you ask me?"

Mr. Redford would have spoken; but, continuing herself to speak, she checked him, emphasizing each separate word with a movement of her clenched fists.

"Mr. Redford, do you suppose that I am, like yourself, a person altogether void of common sense?—do you, sir? Do you ask me to believe in your magician? In the magic of a wretched, unwashed, uneducated creature, who is not even sufficiently master of magic to be able to find himself in decent clothes——"

Mr. Redford interposed, at any price.

"But he is, my dear!"

"He is what, Mr. Redford?"

"He is master of sufficient magic to find himself in decent clothes. Why, he has only

to say the word, and you will have the contents of all the tailors' shops in London in this room."

The lady gave a sniff of unqualified incredulity.

"Then by all means let him say the word."

Mr. Redford turned to Mr. Pye. He was not himself so sure of the truth of his own observation as he would have liked to have been, so he turned to the magician in search of his endorsement.

"Is not what I say correct? Can you not procure for us, in this room, the contents of all the tailors' shops in London by the utterance of a single word, Mr. Pye?"

If the magician had only looked more like a magician! There is something in appearances, after all. It was almost impossible to believe in a magician who would persist in hitching up his ancient breeches, and in drawing the back of his grimy hand across his lips. These things Mr. Pye was always doing; he did them then.

His reply was no more assured than it was wont to be.

"I dunno. I dessay. I'd have a try."

Mr. Redford eyed him keenly. Oh for a

rock of assurance on which to found his faith in Mr. Pye! He endeavoured to persuade himself—and Mrs. Redford—that his faith was stronger than, it is to be feared, it was.

"Of course you'll have a try, and there's no doubt, if you have a try, that you'll succeed."

He turned to Mrs. Redford.

"Mr. Pye's story, my dear, is a singular one. He was not born with magic powers; he has acquired them by education—acquired them, that is, with limitations."

The lady's interpolated comment was sufficiently grim.

"I believe in the limitations."

Mr. Redford smiled—or tried to.

"Quite so, my dear, quite so. But, even at the risk of seeming to justify your want of faith, I will go further, and say that, even within the limit of those limitations, Mr. Pye is apt to blunder. Mr. Pye is present, and will excuse my saying so—it is said upon his own authority; but it is a fact, I believe, that Mr. Pye is not remarkable for intellectual brilliancy—all the more credit to him for acquiring such extensive powers as he actually possesses;—but none the less this lack of

intellectual brilliancy causes him to—to—to now and then become confused in his ideas: is that not so, Mr. Pye?"

The magician acquiesced. "It's my muddly head," he said.

"As Mr. Pye puts it himself, with sufficient modesty, it's his muddly head."

Mrs. Redford eyed her husband with a stony glare.

"Have you quite finished, Mr. Redford?"

Her tone was not encouraging; but her sanguine husband was not to be crushed.

"I—I was endeavouring to explain to you, my dear, the more peculiar features of Mr. Pye's very peculiar case."

The lady went on, hard as the nether mill-stone,—

"Because, if you have quite finished, perhaps Mr. Pye will say the word which is to bring the contents of all the tailors' shops in London into this room."

"Quite so, my dear. I see that you believe in practice rather than in theory. Very good, then; then you shall see some practice."

Mr. Redford turned to the magician. His manner became judicial.

"Mr. Pye, an opportunity is now about to

be presented to you to do justice, not only to your powers, which, as you have yourself informed me, you have so laboriously, and even painfully, acquired ; but also, and at the same time, to the teachings of your master—— "

A somewhat startling interruption came from Mr. Pye.

" S-sh ! He's here ! "

" Here ? Who's here ? "

The magician was glancing over his shoulder. Even as Mr. Redford eyed him, his face became livid with terror. His voice sank to a whisper.

" The Mahatma ! Oh—h—h ! "

Mr. Redford, despite himself, was startled.

" Calm yourself, Mr. Pye. There is no one present except my wife and I."

" You—you—you can't see him ! I—I—can ! Go on, sir—go on ! "

The magician's upper and lower rows of teeth rattled together like castanets. There could be no sort of doubt as to the reality of his terror.

" If the fact is as you state it, Mr. Pye, and on your statement I desire to offer no sort of comment, then there is all the more reason why, in the presence of your master—— "

" Don't ! "

Mr. Pye put up his hands as if to ward off a threatened blow.

"Oh! I'll do my best! I will!—I will!"

The words were addressed to some one whom he seemed to see behind his back, rather than to Mr. Redford. From his manner and his attitude, he might have been glaring at a ghost. Mr. Redford glanced at his wife. He perceived that she, like himself, was not entirely at her ease. The sight of the man's abject and apparently causeless terror was sufficient to impress the strongest nerves.

Mr. Redford went on.

"What we desire you to do, Mr. Pye, is to procure for us, in this room, a sufficiency of wearing apparel. Not the contents of all the tailors' shops in London, but a sufficiency. We do not wish to limit you to any particular quantity. Both Mrs. Redford and I are ready to welcome a good assortment. Nor do we wish you to confine yourself to tailors' goods. We desire you to procure for us a good assortment of every article of masculine attire. This is, so far as I know, the first application which has been made to you to show that your powers can be applied to other than frivolous purposes. Rise, Mr. Pye, to the occasion. Calm yourself;

clear your mind ; collect your energies ; do not allow your faculties to become confused ; show that you can do something which is worthy of your master's teaching."

" Don't ! "

Again the magician's hands were raised as if to ward off that always threatening blow.

" I will do my best—I will ! "

Still his words seemed to be addressed to some unseen person behind his back.

" Here goes ! Now then ! "

CHAPTER VIII.

BALES OF MYSTERY.

IT was a peculiarity of Mr. Pye's conjurations that, when he conjured most, he seemed to conjure least. In histories of magic there is always a great deal said about the way in which magicians performed their works of wonder. We read of incantations, weaving of spells, drawing of magic circles, mixing of ingredients in mysterious pots, making mystic movements, waving of wands, and suchlike things. There was none of this affectation, with a strong savour of quackery, about Mr. Pye. Let us do him so much justice. Indeed, it was all the other way. With the exception of uttering the words which seemed, in a sense, to be his formula—"Here goes! Now then!"—and which certainly were not remarkable words, nor words calculated to dazzle the eye and confuse the mind of the beholder, he seemed, literally, to do nothing at all. Certainly, on this particular occasion, Mr.

and Mrs. Redford both observed him most intently, and they could not see that he did anything. Yet, no sooner had the words proceeded from his lips, than something happened which showed that he must have done something, and that something of an extraordinary kind.

A huge something fell on to the table with a crash, which not only shook the house to its foundations, but brought the table smashing to the floor.

"Good heavens!" cried Mrs. Redford.

And well she might. Many a well-bred lady, and wife, and mother, has used much stronger language than she used then, and for much less cause. They have not seen their parlour tables smashed to pieces, without a moment's warning, before their eyes.

Where the thing, which had come, had come from was more than they could say. It was ridiculous to suppose that it had come out of nothing. It seemed equally ridiculous to suppose that it could have come through the ceiling, for there was not so much as a crack in the ceiling through which it could have found its way—and an article such as that would have required a good deal more than a crack.

A huge bale, perhaps more than four feet square, done up in strong canvas sacking, and secured with an infinitude of cords,—such an article as that could scarcely find its way through a crack in the ceiling.

And this was the article which, all at once, had made its appearance in Mrs. Redford's parlour.

Mr. and Mrs. Redford gazed at it in blank amazement—especially Mrs. Redford. Mr. Redford had seen something of Mr. Pye's peculiar powers before; but they came with the force of a revelation to the lady. She had treated the man with ignominious scorn. She had never supposed that he could produce a bale of goods more than four feet square out of nothing at all. Now that he had proved that he could, having given utterance to that very natural exclamation recorded above, it seemed that she could do nothing else but stare.

Mr. Redford was the first to break the silence. He turned to his wife with an air in which agitation seemed to be blended with triumph.

"Well, my dear, n—now what have you to say? Didn't I tell you that Mr. Pye possessed powers of a—of a remarkable kind?"

Before Mrs. Redford had an opportunity to say what she had to say, or to comment upon what certainly seemed to be very striking evidence of the existence of some peculiar qualifications in Mr. Pye, her attention, and her husband's attention, were diverted, and that by a scream from the magician—a scream which seemed half of terror and half of pain.

"Oh!" screamed Mr. Pye. "Oh—h!!"

Turning, startled, the husband and wife were witnesses of a curious scene. They saw the magician stretch out his hands in front of him, as a man might stretch them out who is taken by the throat. Then they saw him act as though he had been taken by the throat, though, so far as they could see, there was no one there to take him. It seemed, too, that the unseen person who had taken him by the throat was shaking him as one might shake a dog, for the unfortunate Mr. Pye's head and arms and hands and legs were being tossed about in all directions, as though they were automatic, and were worked by strings. Not only so; it sounded as though some one was laying upon him the hands of violence. Slap, smack, slap! Bump, bang, thud! If Mr. Pye was not being slapped and kicked and pommelled, with even excessive

vigour, Mr. and Mrs. Redford were victims, not only of an audible, but of an optical delusion. The magician behaved as though he were being subjected to discourteous treatment. He yelled, and squirmed, and twisted, and seemed to do everything in his power to avoid the falling hail of blows.

It was the scene which had been enacted in Mr. Redford's office all over again.

When his invisible assailant seemed to think that Mr. Pye had had about enough, he raised him high in the air, as if at arm's length, and flung him, with a thud, to the floor. And where he fell, there the magician lay and groaned. The scene seemed to move Mrs. Redford even more than she had been moved by the appearance of the mysterious package. There was certainly something singularly uncanny in the sight of a visible man being assaulted by an invisible foe. She drew closer to Mr. Redford, with a shrinking timidity which was foreign to her character. She even laid her hand upon his arm, as if seeking his protection.

"John!" she murmured. "John!"

The gentleman was not quite so moved as the lady was; he had seen something of this kind before; but even he was not completely at his

ease. Possibly such a spectacle did not become stale by repetition. He addressed her in a tremulous whisper. "It's—it's the Mahatma!"

The words conveyed no meaning to the lady's mind.

"It's the what?" she said.

Mr. Redford had only the same information to supply. "The Mahatma!"

There was silence. Husband and wife, drawn close together for once in a way, stood looking at the magician. After a moment or two the magician raised his head, which had, up till then, remained recumbent on the floor. He looked about him, with frightened, furtive glances.

"He's gone!" he whispered. "He's gone."

Mr. Redford summoned courage to address him.

"What has happened, Mr. Pye?"

Mr. Pye continued to look about him in the same frightened, furtive way—the sort of glance which one might expect from the eyes of a well-whipped cur. He began, slowly and painfully, to raise himself from where he lay upon the floor. When he had gained a sitting posture, he again looked round him, still in the same abject, terror-stricken way.

"The Mahatma!' he groaned. "He's been

at me again,—oh, he has been giving me a doing! I wish he'd make an end of me at once, instead of a-cooking of my goose by inches. Oh lor'! I suppose I've made a mess of it again; though I don't know how, I'm sure. It's all this muddly head of mine. There never was a man with such luck as mine,—no, never."

Mr. Pye did present a pitiable sight. His nose was bleeding, his hair was all tossed and tumbled, as though some one had been endeavouring to tear it out by the roots, and both his cheeks were the colour of raw beef.

While Mrs. Redford continued to gaze, with bewildered amazement, at Mr. Pye, as he sat upon the floor caressing his sorest places, Mr. Redford was gradually becoming conscious of the presence of a foreign, and unusual, odour in the room.

"There's a"—sniff—"there's a curious smell in the room. What's the"—sniff—"what's the cause of it, my dear?"

Mrs. Redford's attention, thus called to the fact, noticed that there was a curious smell—such a smell as might arise from the contents of an ancient dustbin. She sniffed, and sniffed, then traced it to its source.

"It's that."

She pointed to the canvas-covered bale which Mr. Pye had evolved, it seemed, out of nothing. Mr. Redford perceived that the odour did seem to come from that direction.

"It"—sniff—"it—it certainly does seem to come from there."

He eyed the bale with a countenance on which dubitation was written large. Mr. Pye's attention seemed to be diverted from his own condition. He began to sniff.

"It do smell, don't it?" He eyed the bale with dismal eyes. "I suppose that's what all the shindy's been about,—that's what he's been giving me such a doing for. I've muddled it again—oh lor'! oh lor'!"

As Mr. Redford sniffed and sniffed, the forebodings which were beginning to fill his mind, as he continued to regard the bale, were evidently becoming more pronounced.

"What—whatever can be inside it, to smell like that?"

Mrs. Redford was becoming herself again, as the acidity which flavoured her next speech showed.

"Whatever is inside it, Mr. Redford? Why, of course, it contains the contents of all the tailors' shops in London."

Mr. Redford did not seem to be by any means so sure of even the partial truth of this as he would have liked to have been.

"I—I think that I had better see what it contains. Perhaps it is the canvas covering which smells."

His wife was filled with scorn.

"Perhaps it is," she said. "No doubt!"

Mr. Redford approached the portentous package, which lay amidst the ruins of the parlour table, with an air of caution which suggested that his anxiety to investigate its contents was alloyed with dark uncertainty.

"It seems to be well secured. I suppose I had better cut the string."

He was feeling in his pocket for his penknife, when the door opened to admit Miss Nelly.

"Mamma!" she exclaimed, "whatever was that noise?" Her eyes fell upon the damaged table, and the bale. "Why, whatever—— Oh!"

She might well cry "Oh!"—which she did with considerable power of lung. She had advanced a step or two into the room, with the evident intention of examining more closely into the constitution of the mysterious something which was lying on the floor, when there suddenly appeared, goodness alone can say

from where, another ponderous bale, own brother to the first, and crashed down upon the floor so close beside her that it was only by an agile movement that she was able to avoid being crushed beneath its weight.

Mrs. Redford uttered the same exclamation which she had given utterance to before.

"Good heavens!" she cried.

Mr. Redford stared in blank amazement.

"Mr. Pye, what—what's the meaning of this?" he gasped.

Mr. Pye scratched his head, as though the attitude of his mind were one of doubt.

"I dunno,—I—I expect they're coming in instalments."

"In instalments! If there are many more instalments like that, sir, we shall have the house down about our heads; it has already been shaken to its foundations."

"I've made a mess of it again—oh lor'! That's what he give me such a doing for. Instead of getting all them things at once they're a-coming in instalments. Look out—here's another one—oh lor'!"

There was another, and it came so close to him, as the other had done to Miss Nelly, that it was only his own agility which prevented it

knocking him over. As it was, it alighted on the floor with a crash which, as Mr. Redford put it, shook the house to its foundations.

All present, the magician included, regarded the latest comer with the silence of petrifaction. It was, like its predecessors, a huge canvas-covered bale, in size certainly not less than four feet square. The most amazing part of the business was that it seemed to have been hurled into the room through the solid wall. Common sense tells us that solid bodies cannot pass through solid walls, at least, without doing damage to the wall. As to the solidity of that bale there could be no question—one needed only to have heard it crash upon the floor. The paper upon the wall remained unbroken; it exhibited no sign of damage; and yet they were almost prepared to make an affidavit in the presence of a commissioner of oaths that they had seen that bale coming through that unbroken and undamaged wall.

"Are—are there any more instalments coming?" inquired Mr. Redford, when, after a considerable interval for reflection, he had recovered the use of his tongue.

Still the magician did not seem to have cleared all the cobwebs from his brain.

"I—I shouldn't think there was," he muttered. "I—I should think that was about all."

But he was wrong.

"Mamma," demanded Nelly, eyeing the three bales which, together, almost furnished the room, "what does this mean?"

Her mother rubbed her hands together in that energetic way she had.

"Don't ask me! Ask your father! He's been ordering the contents of all the tailors' shops in London, and here they are."

"Mamma, how—how strange they smell!"

Between her finger and thumb Miss Nelly pinched her pretty nose. And, as she did so, her mother, and her father, and Mr. Pye, pinched their noses between their thumbs and fingers too.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY MADE—TOO PLAIN!

IT was an undoubted fact, there was a strange odour associated with the near neighbourhood of those mysterious bales. And it was an equally undoubted fact that the odour associated with the near neighbourhood of the latest comers was even stronger than the odour associated with the near neighbourhood of the first arrival.

"I hope," said Mr. Redford, pinching his nose tightly between his finger and his thumb, —"I hope, Mr. Pye, that you have not made another blunder, and procured us something else instead of the wearing apparel we required."

"Nelly, open the window!" cried his wife. "We shall all of us be poisoned."

Miss Nelly threw the window up as far as it would go, and, having done so, deemed it wiser to thrust her head out as far as possible into the cool night air.

"There certainly seems to be a—a peculiar smell about these packages, which is not, as a rule, observable about—about ordinary garments, Mr. Pye."

"But these are extraordinary garments, Mr. Redford; they are all the latest styles from Savile Row!"

Mrs. Redford was certainly herself again. The tone of her husband's reply to her was dry.

"I am not aware that any peculiarity of odour is characteristic of the sartorial productions of Savile Row, my dear. However, let us investigate and see what we have here. Perhaps it is only the canvas, after all." He opened his penknife. "I—I think that I had better begin with the package which first arrived; the other two are certainly still stronger." He bent over the first arrival. "Dear me, how—how very peculiarly it smells! What have we here? Really, this is most amazing, Helen!" He stood up and turned to his wife. "There is actually a card attached to this package addressed to me."

He stooped again. With his penknife he detached, from the canvas covering, a large,

square, white card, on which was written, in bold, clear handwriting,

John Redford, Esq.,
25, *Acacia Road,*
Camberwell, S. W.

This he handed to his wife.

"Really," he repeated, "this is most amazing."

Mrs. Redford eyed the card, Then, with a grimness which was all her own, she said,—

"At any rate, there can be no mistake as to whom it is intended for, even if it does contain all the glories of Savile Row."

"As you say, my dear, after this there can be no doubt as to whom it is intended for; though I must admit"—the fact that Mr. Redford just then closed his nostrils tightly caused his voice to assume a singular nasal twang—"though I must admit that either the canvas covering, or the package itself, emits a perfume which is certainly not agreeable. However—let us hope for the best!"

Exactly what Mr. Redford meant by his final pious aspiration, it would perhaps be somewhat difficult to say.

He began the process of unfastening the

bale. It was a process which occupied some time. Never was one more carefully secured. It might have undergone the severest of all tests,—that of transit through the English parcel post,—with the possibility that, even in the storm and stress of that perilous passage, it would not prematurely have come undone. It took Mr. Redford a good fifteen minutes to unfasten it. It was enveloped in a perfect network of cordage. He had to cut and cut, and still he had to cut, and cut again. It was like cutting his way through a primeval forest, almost.

"It will damage my knife," he declared, as he paused for a moment to wipe the perspiration from his brow. "It will take off all the edge that was left. Mr. Pye, next time your friends send me a parcel, desire them not to ruin themselves in string."

The charm of it was, that, when he had hacked and hacked his way through the network of cordage, it was found that the canvas covering was itself so carefully secured that he had to hack and hack his way through that.

"Thank goodness!" he exclaimed, as at last he tore the canvas open. "It's done! Great Potiphar, what's this? There's another canvas

covering beneath." There was. And that was corded as before. There was every prospect of Mr. Redford's being able to enjoy an interesting evening's occupation,—if he got through it in one night. The affair threatened to resolve itself into a puzzle of a particularly exasperating and maddening kind. Solution required,—how to find his way to the contents of the bale.

"If there's much more of this," he shouted, "I'll send this little present back unpacked." He did not say where he would send it to, but, possibly, he had that clearly settled in his mind. "Mrs. Redford, tell that servant girl of yours to bring me up a saw!"

He recommenced,—without the saw. They watched him, with a growing fascination. It is a fascinating sight to see a man, in whom the bump of patience, in the matter of trifles, is not strongly developed, hewing his way, with a blunt and broken penknife, through about an acre of good, stout, well-seasoned, best quality string. And when, after all his labours, he tore the canvas open, only to reveal another canvas underneath, corded as before, he turned to the magician,—and he did not bless him.

"Pye!" he yelled, "is this some more of your tomfoolery? If you've been playing another of your muddleheaded tricks on me, I'll give you a thrashing, which will leave the thrashing which the Mahatma gave you at the post."

The magician shrank back with a well-marked air of deprecatory timidity.

"Oh lor'!" he moaned, "there never was a man with such luck as mine,—no, never!"

Mr. Redford threw his ancient penknife from him on to the floor.

"It's no good going on with that,—there's no cut left in it."

Mrs. Redford advanced to his assistance. As was almost invariably the case, she grew cool—aggravatingly cool—as her better half waxed warm.

"Nelly, give me my scissors off the side-board." Nelly gave her them. "Your father's lost his temper. Never mind, it's like a man! When a man has lost his temper it is always time for a woman to begin to show what she can do."

She began to show what she could do. With her scissors she went clip, clip, clipping through the wilderness of string. With every

clip a fresh bond was severed. After she had sundered a score or two of cords she paused for a moment to take breath.

"There ought to be something inside this thing, Mr. Redford, to make it worth one's while."

A second or two later she compressed her nostrils with firmer fingers. Her voice became more nasal.

"It strikes me, Mr. Redford, that the more this precious package of yours is unpacked, the more it smells."

It certainly did seem to be the case. Mr. Redford had noticed it himself. Each covering he removed seemed to give freer egress to a stronger smell. Could that plethora of canvas coverings have been intended to conceal, to a certain extent, the superlative perfume which was contained within?

The question suggested dreadful possibilities.

The removal of one canvas covering—only to reveal another one beneath, corded as before—was as much as Mrs. Redford could manage. She gracefully retired. She declared that she was conquered by the smell,—the removal of that one more canvas had added to its flavour. Mr. Redford returned to the attack.

"I'll see this thing through," he said, "if it kills me."

He glanced at the Mahatma's pupil out of the corner of his eye, as if it were his intention to convey a hint that, at the last mad moment, the murder of a magician would inaugurate the slaughter.

But it did not become absolutely necessary that blood should be shed, at least, not under the particular heading of the persistent duplication of those canvas coverings. They attained finality. Mr. Redford demolished the last of them. He announced the fact with pardonable pride.

"I think that I've unpacked this little article at last. I have!" As the rending of the canvas covering revealed that there was not another one beneath, he became excited. "Now—now to see what is inside!" The others gathered closer round. "Phew!" He clapped his hand to his unguarded nose. "The smell's enough to knock you down." It was—almost. "Why, whatever's this?"

His wife looked over his shoulder. "Is it all the glories of Savile Row?"

Nelly bent down to see, tightly squeezing her pretty nose. "Papa! Whatever is it?"

The magician, as he stole forward to peer into the revealed recesses of the bale, betrayed unmistakable anxiety. "Ain't it—ain't it togs?"

The master of the house was silent. From the expression of his countenance it seemed that he could not make up his mind as to what it was.

"It doesn't look to me," observed his wife, "as if your precious package contained all the glories of Savile Row."

"Papa!" exclaimed his daughter, "it's full of—full of—what, papa?"

"Ain't it—ain't it togs?" repeated the magician, faintly.

Mr. Redford tore the canvas wider open. His face, which had been growing blacker and blacker, grew, all at once, as black as night.

"It's old clothes," he said.

There arose a chorus from his companions.

"Old clothes?"

"It's old clothes," repeated Mr. Redford. He drew himself upright. He turned to Mr. Pye. "Yes, sir, that's what your valuable present contains,—old clothes!"

"I knew," exclaimed his wife, again rubbing her hands violently together in that characteristic way she had, "that you would find, Mr.

Redford, in your precious package all the glories of Savile Row—no doubt of it whatever."

The gentleman paid no heed to the lady. He continued to address the magician in a tone which became more ominous with every word.

"That's what it contains—old clothes—and the oldest of old clothes—stinking rags, sir! I am indebted to you, Mr. Pye,—oh yes, I am indebted, sir! I asked you to procure for me a good assortment of wearing apparel; and, so far as I can judge from what I have seen of the contents of this bale, you have done what I desired. I repeat, I am indebted to you, sir. But I take this opportunity of informing you that I did not expect that you would lump down upon my parlour table the scourings of the London rag shops, Mr. Pye. It seems that I have been working like a negro slave on purpose to unpack a mass of muck and filth which no rag-merchant would harbour within his walls,—the sweepings of the dustheaps. There can be no doubt that you are a magician, Mr. Pye!"

Mr. Redford caught at something in the bale. He dragged it out of the darkness into the light. He held it up in the air.

"May I ask you what this is? Will you be so good as to tell me what article of wearing apparel you call this, Mr. Pye? I am not able to judge merely by the smell, and there is not sufficient of it left to assist the judgment of the eye. Is it a coat? Or a waistcoat? Or a pair of trousers? Or a pair of boots? Or a shirt? I repeat that I am waiting for information, Mr. Pye."

The magician seemed to be overwhelmed beneath the burden of his woe.

"I dunno. There never was such luck as mine. I tell you straight, the magician's life, it ain't a happy one."

"If yours is the magician's life referred to, Mr. Pye, I should say that it promised to be full of happiness. And what do you call this, Mr. Pye? And this? And this? And this?"

Mr. Redford was tearing a nondescript collection of evil-smelling rags out of the bale, and flinging them down upon the floor. The sharer of his joys and sorrows interposed.

"I'll trouble you not to empty your dirty dustholes on to my carpet, Mr. Redford."

Her husband turned to her with a gesture of tragic irony.

"My dear, these are all the glories of Savile Row."

Mrs. Redford looked as if she could say a great deal, but thought that she had better not, —at least just then. She looked at the doubtful litter of odds and ends which, long ago, were garments, and contented herself with giving her hands a little active exercise. Her husband turned to the two other portentous-looking bales—the latest comers. He tightly grasped his nose.

"May I ask—may I ask if you would advise me, as a friend, to spend another couple of hours in penetrating to the hidden mysteries of your other little presents, Mr. Pye?"

"Mr. Redford!" screamed his wife, "if you dare——"

She had not time to complete her sentence before there came a knocking at the front door, so violent and continuous a knocking that, as had been the case on the arrival of the magician's "little presents," it seemed to shake the house to its foundations.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY MADE PLAINER.

IT was always a question, with the Redford family, when the knocker sounded, as to who should open the door. It was almost invariably ruled that Sarah had better not: they did not want her to be handed a summons, for instance, or an irate tradesman's bill. The bills were apt to be accompanied by "impudent messages," and they did not wish the commercial standing of the family to be lowered in the domestic's esteem. Whether Sarah did not know quite well what happened at the door, and what was brought, and what the bringer said, although she never "answered" it, is, at least, an open question; but, at any rate, the Redford family flattered themselves with the fond fiction that she did not.

It was, on the other hand, obviously inadvisable that Mr. Redford should fly on the wings of speed to give admission to the stranger. The summonses were intended for

him, and he was by no means anxious to receive them. It was him the irate tradesmen wished to see, and it was one of the chief objects of Mr. Redford's existence never, if he could possibly help it, to look upon the face of a tradesman to whom he owed a bill—and they were many.

When, therefore, there came, at that hour of the evening, a knocking loud enough to shake the house, anxiety raged in the Redford camp as to who should "answer" the door.

Mrs. Redford paused in the middle of her sentence. She turned a trifle pale. She asked a question.

"Are there—are there any lights in the front?"

Her idea was, if there were no lights, to put into practice a little ruse which had served the Redford family more than once, at a pinch, before. The intention was to convey to the knocker the impression, since no lights were visible in front, either that the Redford family was out, or else had retired to bed. It was true that the hour was somewhat matutinal for grown-up people to seek the shelter of their couches. But then other people have their little eccentricities, and why should not the

Redford family have theirs? It is certain that it was a pleasant little ruse which they had practised on more than one occasion with success. They had allowed undesirable strangers to knock, and knock, and knock, and knock, until they had almost knocked the knocker through the door. They had even permitted them to call through the keyhole to the effect that they—the knocking strangers—were quite aware that the Redford family was not out, and had not retired to rest. But since even the most irate of creditors seldom feels disposed to spend the night in knocking at his creditor's front door, the knocker was compelled, in the end, to acknowledge that the Herculean task of inducing the Redford family to become conscious of their presence, against the Redford family's will, was beyond their strength to perform.

Miss Nelly's answer to her mother's question showed, however, that on the present occasion this little ruse could scarcely be practised with success. "Why, mamma, there's a light in the hall, and in the dining-room as well."

Scarcely had the words issued from her lips when the knocking was repeated, with, possibly, even more vigour than before. Such knocking

as that could scarcely be the knocking of a friend.

"Who—whoever can it be?"

While Mrs. Redford was endeavouring to decide in her own mind who was, just then, the most likely person to make that threatening clamour at her front door, the knocking came again. The visitor was plainly in a hurry.

"Mamma, if you are going, I think you had better go at once, before Sarah goes,—or shall I go? You will only make him angry by keeping him waiting."

Again Mrs. Redford's hands came in for active exercise.

"I'm going. It's all very well for you to talk to me like that, miss, but you don't know what it is to be married to such a man as your father. And what are you going to do while I am telling lies for you, Mr. Redford?"

It was an unfortunate fact that, when there came that sort of knocking at his front door, Mr. Redford sometimes deemed it advisable, before his wife went to let the stranger in, to take refuge in his back garden, and even on his garden wall. He had even gone so far as to use his garden wall as a means of communication to enable him temporarily to trespass on

his neighbour's premises a little farther down the street. Although imprisonment for debt no longer exists theoretically, practically Mr. Redford had more than once been confined in different county jails for debt; and those were experiences a repetition of which he was anxious to avoid.

While he hesitated as to whether he should, or should not, take refuge "in the back," the knocking came again.

"I—I shall be all right, my dear; you—you'd better go and see who it is; t—tell them I'm not in."

Mrs. Redford cast on Mr. Redford a look of unmitigated scorn—as though she required him to instruct her as to what she was to tell "them"!

Opening the hall door about three inches, and leaning against it, to prevent its being unexpectedly opened farther, she peered outside. A short, stout gentleman stood upon the doorstep. He wore a smoking-cap and slippers,—which little details did not seem to suggest that he had travelled very far.

"Is Mr. John Redford in?" he inquired, in tones which were sufficiently audible.

"I am Mrs. Redford. What do you want?"

"I want to know," spluttered the stranger, "what is the meaning of this infernal outrage?"

The stout gentleman appeared to be angry. His passion was such that it was all he could do to articulate distinctly.

"Who are you? And what do you want?"

"I'll tell you who I am, and I'll tell you what I want, and I'll tell you precious quickly, and precious plainly!"

The stout gentleman appeared to be in an inexplicable passion. Mrs. Redford could not altogether make him out.

"Don't shout at me like that, man. You'll attract a crowd."

"Attract a crowd!" he yelled. "I'll attract a crowd before I've done. I'm Thomas Todd, that's who I am, and I live three doors farther up, at No. 22, as you're very well aware. But it doesn't follow, because I am so unfortunate as to be your neighbour, that I am to be subjected to your infernal outrages."

Mrs. Redford recognised him when he told her who he was. She knew, from a milkman who had served her until he declined the Redford custom, that his name was Todd, and she was aware that he lived at No. 22. She cer-

tainly owed him nothing,—not even for the "loan" of a piece of soap, or of a scuttle of coal.

She threw the door wide open, to enable her to arrive at a more rapid comprehension of the amazing state of anger which the stout gentleman was in. Mr. Redford and Nelly, perceiving that the coast was comparatively clear, ventured out into the hall. Even Mr. Pye's head protruded through the parlour door,—possibly, in his case, coming events cast their shadows before. Mrs. Redford was not easily bullied, even by a creditor. In the case of anybody else she was always ready for the fray.

"It strikes me," she began, "that you've been drinking."

Such an observation could scarcely be regarded as a tender of the olive branch. The stout gentleman seemed thunderstruck.

"Me drinking!" he gasped. "Well, this beats anything! I would have you know, madam, that I am a teetotaler, a temperance orator, and vice-president of the local branch of the Blue Ribbon Army."

"Is that any reason why you should hammer my door down, and stand on my doorstep, and shout at me?"

The stout gentleman, in his turn, did not seem as if he quite knew what to make of Mrs. Redford.

"I do not wish to bandy words with you, madam, but I wish you distinctly to understand that if I don't obtain satisfaction before I leave this doorstep, I go at once to the police."

"Go to the police! For goodness' sake, man, go to the police!"

Mr. Redford, perceiving that his wife's manner did not promise to further the immediate prospects of perfect peace, advanced to the door.

"Allow me, my dear. Perhaps I may be able to satisfy this gentleman. I am Mr. Redford, sir. What do you require?"

"I require satisfaction, sir—that's what I require."

"Satisfaction. sir, for what?"

"I will tell you, if you don't know,—though I strongly suspect that you do know. I was sitting just now, in my front sitting-room, smoking a quiet pipe, and reading the evening paper—and if a man is not to be allowed a little quietude when, after a hard day's work, he is smoking his pipe and reading his paper, I don't know what the world is coming to—when there

came a crash at the window which I thought for a moment was an earthquake. I jumped out of my chair, and called to my wife, 'Eliza!' and she came running into the room, shrieking out, 'Lord save us!' And just at that moment every pane of glass was smashed to splinters, and there came tumbling into the room a lot of dirty brown-paper parcels, which fell upon my wife's flower pots, and buried them in a heap of ruins. I was so thunderstruck that I was speechless. My wife, she said to me, 'Mr. Todd, do you think that the end of the world is coming?—it's overdue,' she said. 'Do you think that this sort of thing is a sign of the end of the world?' I said. 'A lot of dirty brown-paper parcels coming through your sitting-room is not a sign of the millennium, I hope.' Hardly had I got the words out of my mouth before there came another crash, just as though there was another earthquake; and directly afterwards we heard the glass in the window of the best bedroom overhead go smash, just as though a steam roller was walking over it. My wife, she's a nervous woman, and I thought she'd have hysterics; and as for me, I rushed up the stairs, with my wife hanging on to my coat tails. 'Mr. Todd!' she cried, 'Mr. Todd, the

end of the world is coming: I saw it in the almanack!' 'The end of my coat will come,' I said, 'if you don't let go behind.' And with that I gave a tug, and she let go, and went tumbling backwards down the stairs, until she reached the bottom; and I had to go down to her, and she'll be a mass of arnica and brown paper for a month,—I know she will. And then, when we went up together, because let me go by myself she wouldn't, there was the window in the best bedroom without an atom of glass left in it, and the wind coming through it like a hurricane; and the toilet glass knocked over, and the toilet table, and a lot of dirty brown-paper parcels lying all over the room; and I say that if a man is to be subjected to that sort of outrage with impunity, Socialism may as well come to-morrow, for there's an end of law and order, and I don't care who hears me say so."

The stout gentleman paused to take breath—just in time; for one could see, even in the uncertain light, that his face was purple. Mr. Redford availed himself of the opportunity to get a word in edgeways.

"Really," he observed, with what, under the circumstances, was almost excessive mildness,

"I am very sorry to hear of your misfortunes, Mr. Todd; but I am at a loss to see what connection they can have with me. I suppose that you hardly imagine that I have been standing in the middle of the road, raining brown-paper parcels through your front windows. I fail to perceive in what way you connect me with your disasters."

Mr. Redford's mildness added such an amount of fuel to the stout gentleman's already red-hot fury, that he actually began to hop about, in his slippers, on the doorstep.

"Oh, you don't see, don't you? But you shall see before I've done! I'm not likely to come here on a wild-goose chase; that's not the sort of man I am."

"Perhaps," suggested Mr. Redford, still in a manner which, to a marked degree, was calmness personified, "you will be so good as to tell me, Mr. Todd, what sort of man you are?"

Mr. Todd did not seem soothed by the suggestion.

"Oh yes, I'll tell you what sort of man I am —I'll tell you before I've done. A lot of these dirty brown-paper parcels were packed so badly, and in such rotten paper, that they had burst open on falling to the floor; and out of these

parcels had tumbled some of the dirtiest, stinkingest, most filthily dilapidated, old boots and shoes I ever saw lying at the bottom of a ditch, or on the top of a ragman's barrow."

Mr. Todd indulged himself with another interval for taking in a supply of breath. As he mentioned what those parcels had contained, some of the members of the Redford family perceptibly started. Mr. Redford glanced over his shoulder back into the hall. As he did so, for some cause or other Mr. Pye, who had been peeping out into the hall, suddenly withdrew his head into the parlour,—why, he only knew. Mr. Redford, quite suddenly, seemed slightly troubled.

"Dear me!" he remarked,—he was distinctly less at his ease than he had been before—"that —that was strange."

"Strange, sir, strange! I should say it was strange! *You*"—Mr. Todd laid a startling emphasis upon the personal pronoun—"well may call it strange! The strangest part of it is, sir, that every one of these dirty brown-paper parcels bore a label which was plainly addressed,

John Redford, Esq.,
25, *Acacia Road,*
Camberwell, S.W.

Mrs. Redford shrank farther back into the hall. Mr. Redford uttered a sound which was very like a groan.

"Really, Mr. Todd," he stammered, "I—I——"

Mr. Todd cut him short.

"Perhaps, Mr. Redford, you will be so good as to explain why, at this hour of the night, you have your rubbish shot through my front windows?"

Mr. Redford turned feebly round.

"Mr. Pye," he murmured—"Mr. Pye, perhaps you will be able to give this gentleman an explanation, Mr. Pye."

Mr. Pye still confined himself within the precincts of the parlour. He showed no undue anxiety to put in an appearance in the hall. But his voice was heard issuing through the parlour door.

"Oh lor'! I have made a mess of it! That's what he give me such a doing for. I expect it's another of them instalments what's gone and got itself sent to the wrong address; but I should say that was the last of 'em, at any rate. Oh lor'!"

But Mr. Pye was wrong again: whatever else he had a talent for, he appeared to be the

possessor of a unique genius for being wrong; that was not the last of the "instalments."

Mr. Todd, perceiving that he received no intelligible reply,—intelligible, that is, to him,—repeated his inquiry.

"Well, Mr. Redford, have I once more to ask you to explain?"

Mr. Redford stammered a reply.

"Really, Mr. Todd, I—I'm afraid that I don't quite understand the affair myself. I—I apprehend that there's—there's been some mistake."

"I can assure you, Mr. Redford, that I do not require you to inform me that there's been some mistake; I was quite aware that there had been some mistake before I came—the most remarkable mistake of which I ever heard, as you'll find, Mr. Redford, before I've done. At the same time, Mr. Redford, I do not wish, in consequence of that mistake, to deprive you of your property. I have brought you a consignment, sir, as it were, upon account."

All this time the stout gentleman had been holding underneath his arm a huge brown-paper parcel. This he all at once held out to Mr. Redford. That gentleman regarded it askance.

"There is your name and address, Mr. Redford, upon the label. Take it, sir—take it. It is your property, sir, not mine."

"Thank you, I——"

It is possible that Mr. Redford was about to proffer his excuses; but Mr. Todd did not let him have the chance.

"Be so good, Mr. Redford, as to at once relieve me of the further custody of, at least, a portion of your property."

Since Mr. Todd insisted, Mr. Redford held out his hands,—not with any unbecoming anxiety, but still he held them out. No sooner did he do so than Mr. Todd relinquished—with every appearance of the most unmistak able anxiety—the custody of the brown-paper parcel.

The stout gentleman must either have handed over the parcel very awkwardly, or else it must have been most insecurely fastened, for no sooner did he loose his hold of it, than it burst right open, and the contents went tumbling down in all directions.

"Whatever—whatever is it?" asked Mr. Redford, peering down to see.

"It's another lot of old boots and shoes, sir; that's what it is."

"Old boots and shoes?"

"Yes, sir,—old boots and shoes. I doubt if you'll find a pair among them; but you'll find an astonishing variety of styles and shapes and sizes. Those which have got soles have got no uppers, and those which have got uppers have got no soles; and they're not sweet, sir, not sweet. There's a large cartload of them in my front sitting-room and in my best bedroom, and I shall be obliged to you if you will send a pantechnicon van and take possession of them at once."

"Thank you, I—I don't want them; you —you may keep them, Mr. Todd."

Mr. Todd immediately became apoplectically purple.

"Keep them!—me! I give you notice, Mr. Redford, that if you leave your stinking rubbish in my house five minutes longer, to breed a fever, and to infect my property with vermin, I'll charge you warehouse room, and make you pay for it through the nose. And there's another thing, Mr. Redford,—you'll be so good as instantly to send a glazier to mend my broken windows; and you'll be so good as to pay him for it. And in the morning I'll let you have an

estimate of other damage done to my property, and to my wife, and to me; and if you don't make it good to me before noon, I'll—I'll know the reason why; and so I give you, sir, to understand!"

CHAPTER XI.

SOME FINAL STRAWS.

WHILE Mr. Todd had been haranguing Mr. Redford, holding him, with the flood of his unceasing eloquence, much as the Ancient Mariner, with his cold eye, had held that most unwilling Wedding Guest, the victim of the stout gentleman's unceasing flow of language had been becoming dimly conscious that, to use the favourite expression of the classic Villain of the Drama, they were "observed": that they were "observed," indeed, by a rapidly increasing crowd.

But the chief of the "observers" appeared to be a tall, thin gentleman, who was holding and balancing in his arms a pyramid of—Mr. Redford could not see what. This gentleman seemed to be accompanied by a considerable retinue. At the back of the gentleman was a lady, at the back of the lady was a long line of boys, at the back of the boys were several little girls, and at the back of the little girls was a female domestic

servant. And each of these persons—lady, boys, little girls, and female domestic servant —was holding and balancing, in his or her arms, a pyramid of—Mr. Redford could not see what.

Not only were these persons, in themselves, an extremely interesting little exhibition, but they were a little exhibition which afforded the liveliest gratification to the afore-mentioned rapidly increasing crowd.

So soon as Mr. Todd paused once more to take in, before it became too late, a fresh supply of breath, the tall, thin gentleman advanced to the bottom of the little flight of steps which led to Mr. Redford's door.

He addressed himself to the proprietor—for the time being—of the Redford mansion.

"Are you Mr. John Redford, sir?"

He spoke in a voice which was remarkable for a peculiarly mournful intonation, and which was just, and only just, audible to Mr. Redford as he stood at his open door.

Mr. Redford hesitated for a moment as to whether he should, or should not, deny himself; but, possibly perceiving that a denial might prove futile, he decided, for once in a way, to cast in his lot with truth. "I am," he said.

"We've brought the hats," wailed the tall, thin stranger.

His voice was singularly like a wail. Its peculiar timbre almost reminded one of a funeral dirge.

Mr. Redford failed to catch his meaning. "The what?" he asked.

"The hats."

"You've brought the what, sir?"

Apparently the stranger seemed to imagine that Mr. Redford did not understand because he did not hear. He raised his wailing voice a little higher. "We've brought the hats, sir, —the hats!"

Mr. Redford began to wonder if the stranger could be quite right in his mind. The stranger seemed wholly unconscious of having caused such doubts. He continued, always in that curious, wailing cadence,—to have lived with a man who owned a voice like that must have been like living within continual sound of a passing bell,—"I had rather, Mr. Redford, that you had chosen some other route than down my chimneys."

"Down your what?"

"Down my chimneys."

Mr. Redford felt sure that the man was mad.

The stranger wheeled right round. He addressed his retinue,—beginning with the lady at his back.

"Mrs. Crawshaw-Pasley, boys, girls, and Mary Anne,—eyes front! march!"

Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley, for such seemed to be the remarkable stranger's euphonious name, appeared to be possessed of a subtle, and somewhat unusual, vein of humour. No sooner had he spoken than, performing another right-about-face, he commenced to mount Mr. Redford's front doorsteps, his whole retinue, down to Mary Anne at the end, following and keeping step behind.

As Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley came up the steps it began to be possible to see what it was that he was balancing with such singular care and nicety in both his arms. It was a pyramid of hats. Such hats! Rather they were hats which had once been hats. Straw hats, top hats, bowler hats, felt hats, peaked caps, cricket caps, college caps, military, naval, and clerical headgear,—an indescribable collection of brimless, napless, crownless, formless, greasy, bruised, and battered fragments of the coverings of a hundred bygone heads. And each one of Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley's retinue bore a

similar pyramid,—all hats! all hats! Recollections, it almost seemed, of all ages and all climes.

Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley reached the top of the steps without a "with your leave," or "by your leave." He shot his pyramid of hats into Mr. Redford's hall, and, having done so, stepped aside. And Mrs. Crawshaw-Pasley advanced, and she did as her husband did. And then each one of the boys, and of the little girls, came forward in turn, and followed suit; and, last of all, came Mary Anne.

Talk of shooting coals into a cellar! The process of shooting coals into a cellar was not to be compared to the way in which the Crawshaw-Pasleys shot their pyramids of ancient hats into Mr. Redford's hall. He—not to mention Mrs. Redford, who stood using strong language at the foot of the stairs—was almost overwhelmed beneath the falling avalanche.

When all the Crawshaw-Pasleys, even down to Mary Anne, had shot their pyramids, Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley's melancholy tones were heard again.

"There are no more of us. That is all we could manage, Mr. Redford. My chimneys

are still chock-full. Be so good as to send some one to sweep them in the morning. The remaining hats shall be delivered."

That was all that Mr. Crawshaw-Pasley said. He went down the steps, and all his retinue went with him. They were accompanied by the effusive plaudits of the deliriously delighted crowd.

Mr. Redford, feeling that he had been the victim of treatment which almost amounted to assault and battery, frantically clutched at various examples of the ghosts of departed hats; and, as he did so, his passion cooled, and his heart sank low. To each separate relic was attached a label, on which was inscribed his name and his address.

A voice was heard in the street without. It was the voice of Mr. Bristowe, who lived across the road.

Mr. Bristowe was a rough-and-ready and a hearty soul. He was reported to have made his money in fish.

"I say, Redford, you are a-going it, ain't yer? What yer! Upon my sivvey! 'Ave yer been a-giving orders to all the rag and bone merchants round about to send you wholesale consignments? I don't know what

your landlord will say to your turning his house into a muck shop, don't yer know. But, I say, just send across for a lot of stinking bundles what's come to my 'ouse addressed to you, and what seems to be full of a lot of filthy bits of socks, and shirts, and the Lord knows what besides!"

But the Redford family had borne as much as it could bear. The door of No. 25 was being closed; and just then another voice was heard without. This time it was the voice of a Mr. Foster, an elderly gentleman who lived next door.

"Excuse me, Mr. Redford: I have nothing for you, but I just wish to mention that the forcible manner in which you have your goods delivered has caused a heavy chandelier, which used to hang in my back parlour, to fall into the kitchen underneath, and, in consequence, an escape of gas is taking place which threatens to blow up the entire row."

CHAPTER XII.

THE METHOD OF THE MASTER.

THERE was one incident which occurred on that terrible night which deserves to be recorded—just one; and that more particularly because we have reason to believe that it either has been, or is, or is about to be, the subject of consideration to the erudite and judicial minds of the gentlemen who compose the Committee of Investigation of the Psychical Research Society. The rumour may be premature—it may even be erroneous; but we have heard it. We will not say from whom; but we have heard it. And certainly the incident seems to be, upon the face of it, an incident which is well worthy of inquiry.

Mr. Pye was in the parlour—alone; he was listening, with palpitating heart, to what was going on outside; he heard the fall of the first consignment of boots handed in by Mr. Todd; he heard the shooting of the pyramid of hats into the hall; and, as he heard, he trembled.

He felt, as he himself had more than once observed, that a magician's life was not a happy one. And as he stood there, listening, and trembling, and rubbing his bruises, and caressing his sorest places, and wishing himself well out of it, there came into the room a young lady ; or, in other words, a girl—just a girl.

She was pretty tall ; she held herself well up ; she had brown hair, which, in certain lights, gleamed like gold, and which had about it a natural waviness, which could not, in itself, be regarded as a radical defect ; she had a charming figure, just full enough, and yet not too full ; a little, clear-cut nose, perhaps a trifle suggestive of decision ; tempting mouth and lips, and a pair of big brown eyes, which could look all sorts of different things to all sorts of different people ; and which, when they looked the right sort of thing to the right sort of person, were as eloquently beautiful a pair of eyes as you would care to see.

This girl was Nelly Redford.

She came into the parlour and shut the door, and moved to Mr. Pye, and stood and looked at him ; and Mr. Pye, although some men would have given a good deal to be in his place, wished she wouldn't.

She fixed her big brown eyes upon Mr. Pye's face, and regarded him long and earnestly; and again Mr. Pye wished she wouldn't.

At last she spoke, to Mr. Pye's relief.

"I don't quite know what to make of you."

As, by this time, Mr. Pye was beginning not to know what to make of himself, this remark by no means took him by surprise. He merely shuffled from foot to foot, and drew the back of his hand across his lips, and hitched his trousers up at the waist.

The girl still kept her eyes fixed intently on his well-worn countenance.

"*Are* you a magician?"

If Mr. Pye's senses had been acute he would have noticed that in the girl's voice, as she asked the question, there was a ring of passion which suggested that, to her thinking, a great deal hinged upon the answer. But Mr. Pye's senses were not acute; about him nothing was acute, except his appetite and his drinkitite.

"I—I dessay. It's my muddly head what does it all. But I can do things when I like—I tell you straight I can."

"Can you do one thing for me?"

"I—I'd have a try."

"Yes, I daresay you would have a try. I've seen you have what you call a try before, and the success which has attended your trial has been worse, far worse, than failure. Where are poor Miss Thomas' new teeth? and her fringe? and her back hair?"

Miss Nelly made this inquiry in such a tone of voice, and with such a light in her big eyes, that Mr. Pye cowered and shrank away from her as if each of her words had been a lash which had fallen across his shoulders. As the girl continued to regard him, and began to understand what a miserable, backboneless, abject creature he really was, it is possible that a feeling of pity took the place of her resentment and her scorn. At any rate her voice grew softer.

"Perhaps, if I were to tell you very plainly and fully what it is I wish you to do, you might be able to do it for me without a blunder."

Mr. Pye was silent. Nelly hesitated. She seemed to be considering whether it would, or would not, be wise to make of Mr. Pye a confidant, and then to be urged all at once, by some desperate impulse, to an affirmative conclusion.

When she spoke again it was in a clear, even monotone, such as might be used by a teacher

in imparting a simple lesson to a painfully dull-headed child.

"Listen, Mr. Pye, and please pay attention to what I say. There is, at this moment, a great steamer voyaging to Australia. I don't quite know where it is, but I think that it is in the Red Sea. The steamer is called *The Indus*. Do you hear, Mr. Pye?—the steamer is called *The Indus*."

"Yes," said Mr. Pye, without, however, showing any signs of vivid comprehension, "I hear."

"I hope that you do hear, and I hope that you understand as well. On board this steamer there is a"— Nelly's voice slightly faltered— "a gentleman. He is what they call the second officer. His name is Bertie Wickham. Do you both hear and understand me, Mr. Pye?"

"Yes," said Mr. Pye; but neither his tone nor manner was particularly assuring.

"You see this envelope? It contains a letter." Nelly produced an envelope from her pocket. She held it out in front of Mr. Pye. "You see it is addressed, 'Bertie Wickham, Esq., Second Officer on board the Steamship *Indus*, voyaging to Australia.' Now, I want

you to send this letter, at once, this very instant, to Mr. Wickham. Can you do it, Mr. Pye?"

The magician drew the back of his hand across his lips.

"I—I dessay—I'd have a try."

"You'd have a try!" Nelly's tone was scornful. "I did not ask you, Mr. Pye, if you would have a try. I asked you to tell me, certainly,—yes or no!—can you do it?"

Exactly how it happened Miss Nelly never knew. She was standing, holding out the envelope to Mr. Pye, looking at him, trying to read assurance on his idiotically uncertain visage, when—a stranger stood in front of her. Where he came from, and how he came, she did not understand. He seemed to her to be the sudden creation of the impalpable air. He touched Mr. Pye lightly with his hand, so that Mr. Pye gave way to him, and he came between her and the magician.

A more remarkable-looking man Nelly had never seen. In hue he was what Mr. Pye called a "coloured gentleman." He was very tall and very thin. He was quite bald, with the exception of a single tuft of hair on the top of his dome-like head. His face was clean-

shaven, and it was long, and almost painfully thin. His nose was aquiline. He had the largest and most wonderful eyes Nelly had ever seen. She had never even dreamed that there could be such eyes as those. When you perceived them, you forgot all about the rest of his appearance. Your every faculty was riveted upon those impenetrable, all-seeing eyes.

He was dressed in what seemed to be a heterogeneous collection of long narrow strips of yellow linen. They were not sewn together, but were run round and round his body and his limbs, with their edges untrimmed, and the ends left dangling, in a manner which conveyed to the eye the impression that he was clothed with rags.

Nelly gazed at the stranger in speechless amazement, while Mr. Pye, when he saw him, crouched upon the floor, like a quivering cur who expects a whipping.

"Miss Redford, forgive me,—but will you permit me to offer you my services as a substitute for Mr. Pye?"

The stranger spoke in perfect English, without even the trace of a foreign accent, but in a tone of voice which sounded, to Nelly's startled senses, as if it came from far away.

"Who—who are you?" she stammered.

The stranger turned, and pointed, with a little significant gesture, to Mr. Pye.

"I am the Master of my Pupil. This, Miss Redford, is my Pupil. Does he not do credit to his Master?"

It was difficult to say in what the change consisted which took place in the stranger's countenance, but, all at once, as he stood looking at Mr. Pye, Nelly felt a cold shiver run all down her spine, and was not at all surprised when the magician, crouching on the floor, uttered a low, terror-stricken cry.

The stranger turned again to Nelly. His manner towards her was one of the most exquisite courtesy.

"I entreat you, Miss Redford, to acquaint me with what it is that you desire."

"I—I wished to send a letter to a friend."

"To a friend? Ah! I see!"

The stranger fixed his marvellous eyes upon her face, and Nelly became immediately conscious of an extraordinary feeling that he was reading the inmost secrets of her heart.

"To Mr. Wickham—to the man you love—to the man you sent away with a hungry heart

—to the man with whom you trifled—to the man to whom you would not confess your love. Ah, silly child! To the sailor, who, far, far across the sea, eats out his heart for you! This is the letter? Give it to me."

While Nelly shrank away, with the feeling that he had seen, at a glance, what was hidden in the innermost chambers of her young girl's heart as plainly as if he had seen it in a mirror, the stranger took the letter from her trembling hand. He held it, at arm's length, above his head. He uttered but a single word. "Behold!"

Whether she was, or was not, suddenly overtaken by a most amazing vision, Nelly does not know unto this hour. It seemed to her that when the stranger uttered that single word, in a moment, in less than a second of time, the parlour and the familiar surroundings fled—utterly!—and she was standing, in the open air, upon a sandy shore, beside a sullen sea, with the stranger at her side. She could feel the warm wind upon her cheek, stealing through her hair. She was conscious of the heat of a tropic sun, of the vivid tropic glare of the cloudless, brazen tropic sky, of the illimitable, scorched, sandy, treeless plain which was

at her back, of the lazy lapping of the languid waves.

All at once she was conscious that a huge steamer, with canvas awning over all her decks, was advancing across the waste of waters—a *living* ship, upon a painted sea. And then—she knew not how it came about, but she knew it was so—she was standing on the steamer's deck, a solitary unit amidst a crowded throng. It was some moments before she was able to resolve into their component parts the multitudinous details of the unfamiliar scene. But at last she realised that the deck was crowded with passengers, all attired in the coolest of all possible cool costumes, and all doing their best to suffer as little inconvenience as possible from the overwhelming heat. They reclined at full length on chairs, which were less chairs than couches; they lounged in hammocks; they lay upon the deck; they were here, there, everywhere, and always in the easiest of attitudes.

Nelly's eyes wandered from group to group, and from person to person, until they lighted upon a face and a form which she knew well. At the sight of this familiar face and form she started, and, beneath her breath, she gave a little cry. It was the face and form of a man,

a young man, who was attired in the neat, and cool-*looking*, costume which the officer of a mail steamer wears when his ship is traversing the heat of the Red Sea. He was a fairly tall, well-set-up young fellow, with an open, cheery face—a typical English face—and a fair skin, which was just becomingly bronzed by the heat of the sun.

It was Bertie Wickham. Nelly did not need a second look to tell her that. One glance was sufficient to cause her heart to first of all cease beating, and then to start off thundering against her ribs with what seemed to her to be the speed of an express train, and the force of a Nasmyth hammer. Her first emotions at sight of that young gentleman were, however, pleasurable ones, upon the whole. Her second emotions were not so sweet. It took some instants for her to realise that Mr. Wickham was talking, not only to a stranger, but to a feminine stranger, and a pretty one to boot. What was more, Mr. Wickham seemed to be enjoying the conversation he was having with the pretty stranger. What he said to her, and what she said to him, Nelly could not hear; but from the manner of the talkers it would seem that the remarks ex-

changed were of equal interest to both. Nelly had heard dreadful legends about the officers of great liners—how the chief of their duties consisted in flirting with the pretty female passengers. As she observed how each of those two persons seemed to be engrossed in the society of the other, an instantaneous conviction flashed upon her mind that all those dreadful legends *must* be true.

Suddenly, however, a really curious thing took place.

The conversation between the pair came to an end. The girl, with a little nod to Mr. Wickham, moved away. Mr. Wickham stood looking after her. His lips did not move, he said nothing out loud—he was scarcely likely to soliloquise in the middle of a crowd like that; people seldom do soliloquise in the middle of a crowd, even on the stage—and how she did it was more than Nelly understood, but she did distinctly hear him saying, *to himself*, as he gazed after the retreating stranger,—

"How like she is to Nelly—how like! She is not so pretty, not by chalks, but how she seems to bring back to me the very presence of my brown-eyed queen!"

When she heard him say that, Nelly's con-

viction of the truth of those awful legends was shattered into shivers; for as she turned to look at the retreating damsel she perceived that there was about her some sort of likeness to herself. And she was a pretty girl—Nelly felt that *no one* could be so mean as to question the girl's good looks—an uncommonly pretty girl. Yet she—Nelly—had heard Mr. Wickham say that the girl was not so pretty—not by chalks—as his brown-eyed queen. Now, it was one of the chief things which Nelly had pretended to object to in Mr. Wickham's conduct—upon dry land—that he would persist in calling her, to her face, Brown Eyes, and that he would continually speak of her as a brown-eyed queen.

Nelly Redford saw quite plainly what fearful rubbish the stuff really is which people will talk about the chief duties of the officers who devote their invaluable lives, and exhaustless energies, and exceptional faculties, to the navigation of great liners.

Mr. Wickham, sighing like a furnace, went below—to his cabin, in fact. Nelly followed him. It seems, upon reflection, a somewhat remarkable thing for her to have done; but then, on the other hand, it must be clearly

borne in mind that the whole of the circumstances were exceptional.

Mr. Wickham tore his cap off his head and hurled it on the floor—which was rather disrespectful treatment of his cap. He sat himself down upon his huge sea chest. He thrust his legs out straight in front of him, and his hands into his breeches' pockets, and he said, out loud,—

"I wonder what she's doing now? I don't suppose she ever wastes a thought on me, simmering in this great stewpan! What a moon-eyed calf I am!"

He rose. He began fidgeting about his little cabin—somewhat unnecessarily, considering the heat. His language was quite poetic—for a modern youth: "Brown Eyes—oh, my darling, my brown-eyed queen, if I were only sure that you sometimes think of me! If you had only given me an answer to my question before I came away! If you had only told me that you loved me—that you would be my wife! What would I not give for a line of your writing, for one word, Brown Eyes!—for one word from you!"

Mr. Wickham threw up his arms in a manner which used to be common enough in

the drama, but which is not so common in modern real life—that is, if we are to believe the persons who tell us that Great Pan is dead—and, as he did so, something fell on his uncovered head. Mr. Wickham's own first impression seemed to be that the violence of his emotion had dislodged the whole, or part, of the roof of the cabin. His tone, and his speech, became, all at once, sufficiently prosaic. He glanced upwards. "Hollo! What's that?"

Nothing seemed wrong overhead. So, in search of enlightenment, he glanced at the floor. "What the—blazes!"

What looked uncommonly like a court-shaped envelope was lying on the floor.

"I must have dropped it, I suppose."

He stooped to pick it up. As he did so, his face wore a puzzled look. When, turning it over in his hand, he saw the address which was written on the other side, he gave a startled cry.

"Good—good lord! Why, it's—it's Nelly's writing! What the devil's this?" He stood staring at the envelope like a man in a dream. He read the address out loud:—

"Bertie Wickham, Esq., Second Officer on

board the Steamship *Indus*, voyaging to Australia."

The hand which held the envelope fell to his side. He gave a sort of gasp.

"Good God!" He looked about him with bewildered eyes. "Is it witchcraft?" A sob came into his voice. Nelly, who all the time was watching this amazing scene, saw that tears were in his eyes. "Nelly's writing—Nelly's! It can't be true—it can't!"

As he held the letter out in front of him, Nelly could see that his big brown hand was trembling.

"It is—I'll swear it is!" He pressed that court-shaped envelope to his lips as though he were seized with a sudden paroxysm of anxiety to devour it with kisses. "My brown-eyed queen!"

Nelly registered, then and there, an instant, solemn vow and resolution that she would never, never again object to his calling her a brown-eyed queen.

It seems incredible, but that seafaring young man actually drew the back of his hand across his eyes. In his voice were tears.

"It's—it's a joke! Of—of course it is! That's all. It's only an empty envelope; what a fool I am!"

He tore open the envelope,—to make sure that it was empty. He took out the sheet of paper it contained.

"There—there is a letter,—at least, it looks as though it were a letter. What's this? '25, Acacia Road, Camberwell, Friday, July 25.' Why, that's—that's to-day! It's—it's witchcraft. 'My dear Bertie,—that is, if I still may say, my dear,'—If she still may say, my dear? why, whatever should she say?—'I don't know if this letter will ever reach you, but, if it does, I wish it to bring you my answer to your question. You remember what your question was? My answer's—yes.' Her answer's—yes! Nelly's answer's yes!"

Mr. Wickham's immediate further proceedings were of such a kind that, having due regard for his reputation for sanity, they are better left without description.

"And she sends me kisses! Nelly sends me —kisses!"

From behaving like a delirious madman, he all at once became preternaturally calm. So marked was the change, that his voice and manner were even strangely solemn.

"It seems that a great miracle has been worked on my especial behalf. If only the

miracle would go just one step further, and if I might be allowed to see—my darling's face."

Up to that moment Nelly had preserved the strictest silence. But it was beyond her power to be the witness of her lover's wild appeal and to keep her little tongue from wagging. "Bertie!" she cried.

She was sure he saw her, she was quite, quite sure he saw her, because, when she called upon his name, with a strange cry, he turned round, and his eyes met hers in one glad look of bewildered recognition, and he sprang towards her——

And that same instant, Mr. Wickham, and his cabin, and the ship, and the whole thing vanished, and she was in the little parlour, with the stranger's eyes upon her face. And she heard him say to her, in his clear, bell-like tones, which seemed to come from far away,—

"Your speaking broke the spell. Good-bye."

And he, too, was gone.

She was alone with Mr. Pye, who, with a furtive, frightened, well-whipped air, was rising from the floor.

"Did you see him," he asked,—"the coloured gent?"

He spoke in a husky whisper, casting timorous glances round the room. Before she could reply, the parlour door opened to admit her father.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VISION OF ALNASCHAR.

ADVANCING into the room, Mr. Redford carefully closed the door behind him. He moved to the magician. His voice was pitched in a somewhat lower key than usual. In it there was a tremor, as of anxiety.

"Mr. Pye, you'd better go to bed."

The magician looked at him, interrogatively.

"Eh?"

"I say, sir, that you had better go to bed,—I mean that you had better go at once, before my wife appears. If Mrs. Redford comes in and finds you here, I doubt if you will get a bed at all. After what has occurred, I fancy that you will not find her in too placable a frame of mind. Unless I am mistaken, Mrs. Redford's immediate impulse will be to present you with the key of the street."

The magician seemed unhappy.

"It's—it's hard lines, it is; I—I done my

best, I have. It's my muddly head what's all to blame, not me."

His host's reply was dry in the extreme.

"I shouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Redford were to bracket you and your head together, as a sort of cause and effect, Mr. Pye. So, if you take my strongly urged advice, you will go to bed while you have still the chance of a bed to go to. Will you be able to find your way to your own apartment?"

The magician's happiness did not seem to have perceptibly increased.

"It's a regular hole," he groaned. "It's worse than Snelling's."

"It may be worse than Snelling's, and it may be a regular hole: I am not, perhaps, an impartial critic; but it is better, I should certainly venture to suggest, than nothing at all. Are you going to bed, Mr. Pye, or—will you wait and have an interview with Mrs. Redford? She has only gone downstairs to speak to the maid."

"I'm a-going,—I'm a-going! Ain't yer—ain't yer a-going to give a cove so much even as a glass of beer? I ain't had no dinner of five courses and a dessert, you know."

"I've had a dinner of five courses and

a dessert—and more, thanks to you, Mr. Pye."

The magician winced. He even put up his arm as if to guard his head. It seemed to have become so familiar a movement to him that it had become, practically, automatic.

"No, Mr. Pye, I am not going to give you so much as even a glass of beer. But, if you wait a moment or two, Mrs. Redford will give you the key of the street. I fancy that this is she now coming up the kitchen stairs."

Mr. Redford's hearing may have been defective, or he may have only fancied that he heard, but the magician did not wait to see. He shuffled out of the room, and across the hall, and up the stairs, with a degree of alacrity which was almost comical. Mr. Redford followed him to the foot of the staircase. He spoke to him as he ascended. "I will call you in the morning, Mr. Pye. You need not trouble to rise until I call you."

The magician did not answer. He still shuffled up the stairs as fast as his rickety old legs would carry him. Mr. Redford stood and listened as he ascended. He heard him reach the top of the uppermost flight. He heard him enter his "regular hole" of a room,—that

unpalatial, ill-furnished attic which Mrs. Redford had assigned to him upon his first arrival. He heard him close the door behind him. And, when he heard that, Mr. Redford heaved a monstrous sigh. "Thank goodness, I'm rid of him! for the present, at any rate; let's hope he won't do any more mischief till the morning."

Mr. Redford returned into the parlour. As he did so, he looked at Nelly. Something unusual in her appearance struck his eye.

"Nelly, what's the matter? Are you tired?"

Nelly smiled,—such a curious smile. She put her hand up to her forehead with a startled gesture. To look at her one might almost have imagined that her father's words had roused her from a dream.

"I—I think I must be. Good-night, papa."

She kissed him on the brow—the merest makeshift of a kiss; and, without another word, before he could do anything to stop her, she had flitted from the room. He gazed after her, seeming a trifle bewildered.

"I suppose she's upset, like all the rest of us. What a night we've had,—what a night! That idiot Pye!"

Mr. Redford looked about the room with a

look of apprehension, as if he expected to see something which he did not desire to see. The look of apprehension, however, suddenly changed to one of the most unmistakable amazement,—to what one might call a look of petrified astonishment.

What had caused this sudden change did not immediately transpire, because, just then, Mrs. Redford appeared at the parlour door. She glanced round the chamber.

"Mr. Redford,"—her voice and her manner were the voice and the manner of the family autocrat,—"Mr. Redford, where's that man?"

Mr. Redford's manner was becomingly meek.

"What—what man, my dear?"

Meekness availed him nothing. The lady bridled. She resented the attempted evasion.

"What man? You know very well what man! Mr. Redford, where's your *friend*?"

The scorn which the lady put into the utterance of the final noun is not to be expressed in language.

"If—if you allude to Mr. Pye, my dear, I—I rather fancy that he's—he's retired to rest."

"Retired to rest! In my house! In my bed! Beneath my roof! I'll very soon unretire him from rest, if I have to pull him

out of bed with my own hands. Mr. Redford, go upstairs, this instant, and turn that wretch into the street! Are you going, sir, or am I to go?"

It seemed that she was to go—or, rather, it seemed as though she meant to go. At any rate, she moved as though such an intention was very present to her mind. Mr. Redford was genuinely alarmed.

"Really, my dear, I—I hope that you will do nothing—nothing unwise. There can be no doubt that Mr. Pye is—is a magician."

"No doubt whatever! And there can be no doubt whatever that he is the sort of magician whom the less I see the better I like."

Mr. Redford coughed, deprecatingly.

"There—there can be no doubt, my dear, that he has done some—some very remarkable things."

"Of that there cannot be a vestige of a doubt. If you want to see some of the remarkable things he has done you have only got to look——"

She paused—and looked. She looked upon the floor. And, as she did so, there came upon her face the look which had appeared upon her husband's face a moment before she entered

the room,—a look of the most unmistakable amazement. Her voice lost some of its tone of autocratic tyranny. It even seemed to tremble.

"Why, Mr. Redford, where—where are those precious packages of yours?"

Mr. Redford seemed to share her visible embarrassment. His glance, like hers, wandered round and round the room—in search of something, which, apparently, was not there.

It was certainly the fact, that, when Mrs. Redford,—and, for the matter of that, Mr. Redford too, had last been in that little parlour, the apartment had been distinguished by the presence of those three huge bales, which Mr. Pye had, seemingly, produced out of space. They had been, if one may say so, far too prominent a feature of the landscape not to be noticed. They had been so much out of proportion to the rest of their surroundings that, in a comparative sense, they had killed the Redford furniture. We say they had been, because, apparently, they were not now,—at least, if Mr. and Mrs. Redford could trust the evidence of their eyes, they were not in that small parlour. Bales, canvas, string, the littered contents of the opened bale,—even the odour, appeared to have fled.

With his handkerchief Mr. Redford wiped his brow. He did not seem to be quite easy in his mind.

"I—I noticed myself, my dear, that they—they appeared to have gone. Perhaps Mr. Pye, realising the mistake which he had made, has caused—has caused them to disappear. It's—it's thoughtful on his part, to—to say the least, my dear."

Mrs. Redford was standing close to the door. She moved backwards. She glanced outside.

"The hall is empty! The hats have disappeared!" Mrs. Redford came back into the room,—it might almost be said, she staggered. She sank into a chair. She spoke in a tone of funereal solemnity. "Mr. Redford, there will shortly be an inquest in Acacia Road. It will be held upon my body. But never mind!"

Mr. Redford was evidently affected.

"It's—it's not so bad as that, my dear."

"Mr. Redford, it is as bad: it's worse. No one knows what I have gone through since I have been your wife,—no one! No one knows what I may have to go through yet. You are not a husband who is calculated, Mr. Redford, to inspire a wife with confidence in the future. But this I do say,—the goings on

of a magician, especially of such a magician as Mr. James Pye, are more than I can bear."

Again Mr. Redford coughed, with an air of deprecation.

"I should like, Helen, to have a little quiet conversation with you. I think, if you will permit me, I will close the door."

The lady's permission was not expressed, but he closed the door. He took up his position before the empty fireplace. He seemed to require some seconds to enable him to collect his thoughts.

"Helen, I think you will admit that we have seen some remarkable things to-night."

"Mr. Redford, I have already told you that my nerves are shattered. Don't go too far."

The lady raised her voice in a manner which suggested that, if her nerves were shattered, her lungs were sound.

"My dear, I was only saying that we have seen some remarkable things to-night. I will go farther, and say that I think that you will admit that Mr. Pye is a magician."

Mr. Redford checked the lady's threatened interposition.

"Permit me, my dear,—if you will allow me

I will state, as briefly as I can, what is my view of the case. It has never been proved that there are not things in heaven and earth which are undreamed of in our philosophy—that there are not powers, the secret of which has either been lost, or of which the secret has never been found. To deny that two and two are four, when we have proved that two and two are four, is illogical. You and I have proved that Mr. Pye has found the secret, that he possesses these powers—with limitations."

"Limitations!"

The polysyllable came from the lady's lips like an echoed groan.

"Quite so, my dear; I say, with limitations. Mr. Pye's own statement of the affair is candid,—one might almost say that it is candid to a fault. He is a man of rudimentary education; of, practically, no education at all. His mental capacity is limited. He was offered the secret, but, with his defective brain-power, he was only able to master it in a confused and faltering manner—that is, he was only able to obtain an imperfect grasp of it. And to enable him to take full advantage of even that imperfect grasp he requires special conditions."

"I don't in the least know what you are

talking about, Mr. Redford—double Dutch, for all I know ; but never mind !"

"You will perceive in half a moment, my dear, what it is that I am aiming at. If you want Mr. Pye to do a thing for you, you must first of all give him to understand, clearly, precisely, minutely, what the thing you require him to do is. For instance, to-night we asked him to get us a supply of wearing apparel—and he got it us."

"Wearing apparel, Mr. Redford!—I call it stinking rags !"

"Just so ; it was wearing apparel, of a kind. He failed because we were not sufficiently precise in stating what it was that we required. If I had asked him to get me a pair of trousers, of the proper size, of good quality, ready for wear, made within the last four-and-twenty hours, say, by Poole, I have no doubt that he would have got me them."

"Through Mr. Todd's front window ?"

"Just so again ; we should have had to tell him, precisely, how they were to come. That they were to be packed in a neat brown-paper parcel, and laid, gently, on our doorstep."

"If I were you, Mr. Redford, I should try."

"I intend to, my dear ; but not exactly on

those lines." Mr. Redford put his hands beneath his coat tails. He see-sawed from foot to foot. "I intend—and, unless I am greatly mistaken, I shall succeed in my intention—to make, with Mr. Pye's assistance, a fortune."

Mrs. Redford was incredulous.

"Don't talk to me about your fortunes! I've seen your fortunes before! Before you've made your fortune a week we shall have the bailiffs in the house."

Mr. Redford went calmly see-sawing on.

"The first step which I shall take with the view of furthering my designs will be to educate Mr. Pye."

"Educate Mr. Pye! Educate your grandmother!"

Mr. Redford showed no signs of being crushed by the lady's vigorous Saxon.

"No, not educate my grandmother, but educate Mr. Pye. I am aware that the work of educating Mr. Pye, on the particular lines which I have in my mind's eye, will not be the work of a moment. I anticipate, and am prepared for, a series of failures. But that I shall succeed in the long run I have no doubt whatever."

Mrs. Redford resorted to that favourite little

trick of hers: she began briskly to rub the palms of her hands together.

"Perhaps you will condescend to use plain English, Mr. Redford. I am your wife."

"I am quite aware, my dear, that you are my wife."

"Don't gibe at me, sir! I have toiled, and moiled, and lied for you, although I am nothing but your wife. You would find very few wives who would do for you what I have done."

"Really, my dear——"

"John Redford, tell me, this instant, what you are going to ask that man to do for you."

"I am going to ask Mr. Pye to find for me a gold mine."

"A gold mine?"

Mrs. Redford was so astonished at the magnificence of her husband's modesty, that she forgot to continue to rub her hands.

Mr. Redford went quietly on, explaining his ideas and his intentions.

"A gold mine. I have not, as you may imagine, quite made up my mind where it is to be. That is a detail for after consideration."

"A detail for after consideration?"

"Exactly. South Africa is, just now, rather played out in the City. The new Australian

gold fields may show more promise, but we shall see. I intend to form, with Mr. Pye's assistance, for the development of that gold mine, a company.

"A company?"

Mrs. Redford's amazement was on a crescendo scale.

"I intend Mr. Pye to find me a board of directors. I even intend him to find me the shareholders who will buy the shares."

"Mr. Redford!"

"I intend to make a big thing of it, my dear—a big thing. And when that one company has been successfully floated, I intend, always with Mr. Pye's assistance, to float others."

The lady drew a long breath. What a man John Redford was!

"As you are aware, I have already acted as a promoter in a small, a very small, way; but I have been hampered by want of capital, baffled, beaten at every turn—it has been heart-breaking work—heart-breaking. But, with Mr. Pye's advent on the scene, unless I am greatly mistaken, matters will be changed. I am quite aware that Mr. Pye will require educating up to the point which I have in my mind; but when I have educated him, if, with a real, live

magician as my right-hand man, I can't do a good stroke of business in the company promoting line—why, we shall see. I will undertake to say that in a short, a very short, space of time I shall become the greatest company promoter the City has ever seen. Some great men have been company promoters, but I—I shall be the greatest of them all."

Mr. Redford pulled up his shirt collar. The lady could only gasp. Her husband's bounding imagination took away her breath.

"And then,—then, my dear, you shall have a finer wardrobe than was ever possessed by the wife of any American millionaire. My daughters shall marry princes, and Frank shall choose his wife from among the greatest ladies of the land. You shall have a house—half a dozen of them, if you like—which shall cause Colonel North to turn green with envy. And I will have a stud—a racing stud—which shall sweep away in front of them all the blue ribbons of the turf." Mr. Redford joined his hands together, almost, as it were, in an attitude of prayer. "And you, and I, and both of us, shall be amply recompensed, after many days, for all the trials and tribulations we have shared. And you shall be crowned with the

crown of laurels, which you have more, far more than doubly earned, as a loyal, and a helpful, and a faithful, and a patient wife."

And Mr. Redford actually kissed the lady,—and the lady let him.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT THE MORNING BROUGHT.

BUT alas for the visions of Alnaschar!

When, in those days which long have fled, Alnaschar woke from the vision of the building of that wonderful castle of his in Spain, he found that the fragile and insignificant foundation, on which the whole airy fabric had been raised,—had vanished.

And so with Mr. Redford. He continued, in sleep, his waking dreams. He dreamed all night of the great man which the magician was to make of him, of the wondrous things which were to be. And when, in the morning, he awoke, he found that the most insignificant foundation, that wholly unreliable foundation, on which the baseless fabric of his sanguine visions had been reared,—had fled.

At a quite matutinal hour, Mr. Redford, urged by Mrs. Redford, proceeded from his bedchamber to rouse Mr. Pye from slumber. He knocked at the magician's door. There was

no answer. He knocked again. Still no one replied.

"Mr. Pye!" he said. Still silence.

Mr. Redford turned the handle of the door. He found it was unlocked. He opened it, and discovered why his knocking had remained unanswered. Mr. Pye had not answered because—Mr. Pye was not there.

The little attic was untenanted. "He's gone!" exclaimed Mr. Redford.

Mrs. Redford must have been listening below to her husband's movements up above, because, when he uttered that exclamation, she addressed to him an inquiry.

"Who's gone?" she asked.

Mr. Redford's voice, as he replied, was troubled,—as though its owner was divided between anger and amazement.

"Mr. Pye! He must have stolen away like a thief in the night. What an idiot I was not to lock him in his room! I might have known that, if he got the chance, he would play me some such trick as this."

Mrs. Redford came hurrying up the stairs, in rather a conspicuous state of *demi-toilette*. Her manner was by no means sympathetic.

"Well, Mr Redford, where's all your fine

fortune now? I knew how it would be. I'm a better judge of character than you are,—I knew the man! I tell you again, as I told you before, that they were nothing but paltry tricks which he played on you last night!"

The palms of the lady's hands were being rubbed together,—in the way she had.

Mr. Redford, moving about the room, caught sight of a piece of paper which was lying on the pillow at the head of the bed.

"What's this?"

It was a small piece of dirty note-paper. On it were faintly scrawled, in pencil, two words. What they were Mr. Redford could just, and only just, make out.

"*Im of.*"

It was the magician's farewell message to his host and patron,—for "off" he had probably intended to have written. Mr. Redford eyed it angrily. "It's Pye's writing. It's the same writing which was on that wretched card of his."

Mrs. Redford took the scrap of paper from her husband's hand.

"That's a pretty sort of way of saying good-bye, after the manner in which he treated you last night."

Mr. Redford, still restlessly fidgeting about

the room, perceived, half concealed among the tumbled bedclothes, another piece of paper.

"Here—here's something else. What's this?"

It was a sheet of paper of rather unusual make,—something like the paper on which the Bank of England notes are printed.

On it were written, in a beautifully clear, small, foreign-looking handwriting, the somewhat singular words which follow:—

"*To* MR. JOHN REDFORD.

Written, in haste, in James Pye's bedroom, at two in the morning.

"*I have come to pay a visit to James Pye, my Pupil.*

"*Some little time ago, observing what common topics of conversation occultism and the occult arts had become among the English-speaking peoples, I resolved to instruct an English-speaking person in the knowledge of those mysteries which have been hidden from the Western world.*

"*I imagined that to instruct him in this knowledge would be to bestow on him the power of becoming a benefactor to the human race.*

"*Certain of the Brothers endeavoured to dissuade me.*

"*They had it that the civilisation of the Western world was of so complex a character that, to let in, even but one single ray of light, would be to work evil rather than good.*

"*I resolved to put the matter to the test.*

"*I chose James Pye to become my pupil.*

"*Scarcely had I done so when I regretted the decision I had made.*

"*The man is nothing but a fool.*

"*Such a fool in the Eastern world you will not find.*

"It had not occurred to me that I should experience difficulty in imparting the hidden mysteries.

"They are, when the key has once been found, simplicity itself.

"I found that I had reckoned without my host.

"It had not occurred to me that in an old and vaunted civilisation there could exist such imbecility as the imbecility of this man, James Pye.

"When I perceived what manner of man indeed he was, I resolved only to instruct him within certain limits.

"I have not even succeeded in instructing him within those limits.

"The fool!

"I have only succeeded, after many trials, and the infliction of frequent whippings, in beating into his head, parrot fashion, certain formulas, which he does not understand, and which he has not sufficient native wit to use to advantage even if he understood them.

"The Pupil has made of his Master a laughing-stock among the Brothers.

"I have had enough of him.

"I have come to inflict on him a final whipping, to take from him the little that he hath—to deprive him, for ever and for ever, of the muddled knowledge which he has of the hidden mysteries—to cast him out into the street.

"The fool!

"He may return to Snelling.

"Never again will I select a pupil from among the English-speaking peoples.

"For the annoyance which he has caused an innocent family, that which accompanies this writing is intended as some recompense.

"THE BROTHER WHO WAS SO UNWISE AS TO CHOOSE JAMES PYE TO BE HIS PUPIL."

One sentence in this remarkable effusion particularly caught Mr. Redford's attention. It was the last one. He read it again, out loud.

"'For the annoyance which he has caused an innocent family, that which accompanies this writing is intended as some recompense.' That which accompanies this writing!—what's it mean?"

Mr. Redford's voice trembled. He began to hunt among the bedclothes. He threw them open. As he did so, a good-sized canvas bag, which might have held, perhaps, a quartern of flour, was immediately revealed. Mr. Redford snatched it up—exclaiming as he felt its weight.

The neck of the bag was secured by a simply knotted piece of cord. He untied the knot. He opened the bag.

Mr. Redford, when he perceived its contents, gave an instant cry of exultation.

The bag was as full as it could hold of sovereigns. Not the colourable imitations of the Pupil, but the real, ringing, sterling sovereigns of the Master.

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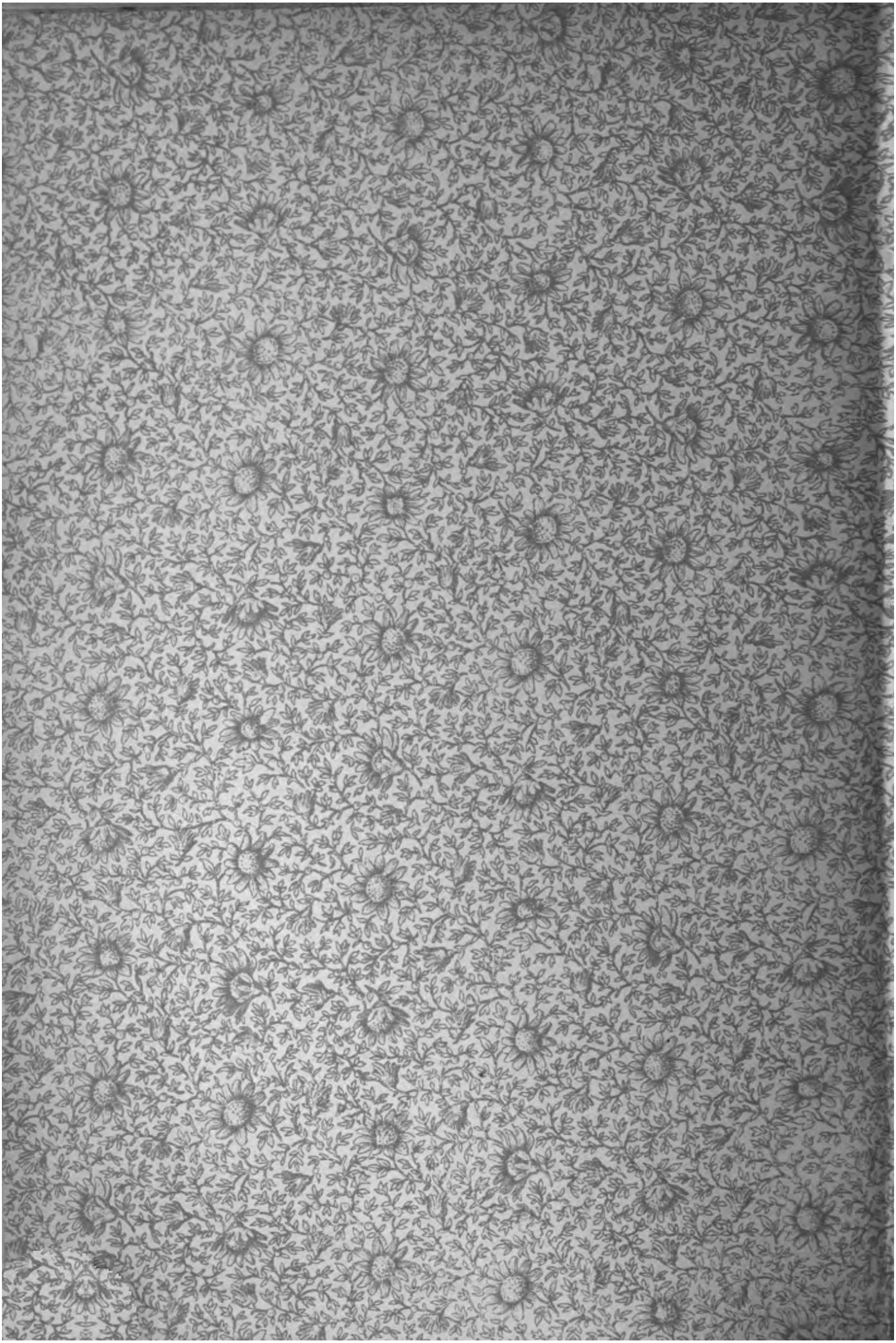
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