



Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries



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Half-Past Twelve In Eternity

By ROBERT W. SNEDDON

THE man walking along the road stopped suddenly. "Hello!" he said aloud. "What the dickens!" He stared about him in bewildered fashion as he took in his surroundings—the tree-lined road which rolled in front of him, the neat little suburban houses, the distant prospects of the hills.

"It's funny. Here I am on the way to John's," he mused; "and yet, darn it all, I never thought it possible I could get on a train, get off it, and start walking without any recollection of it. What on earth could I have been thinking of? That's what the human brain can do. I've been working too hard. Maybe I'd best lay off a bit."

He sat down on a low stone wall and began to laugh softly.

"Certainly is the craziest business. I remember leaving the office. Old Welsh was still playing with his books. I believe he's sorry when twelve o'clock comes Saturday and he can't juggle figures till Monday morning again. I came down and went back up again to get some papers. It was snowing, and I tried to get on a bus. The thing was full, so I stood aside, and then another one came up, and I stepped out and slipped. It's a wonder the bus didn't go over me."

He got up. "Oh, what's the use? I was worrying about that Sprague case, and forgot what I was doing. Only thing I can't understand is—where's the snow? And it's warm here—warm as a summer day. Must be getting on."

Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out his watch.

"Just like the old timpiece. Stopped. Half past twelve—just after I left the of-

face. Here's an automobile coming. Say, what's the time, old man?"

The automobile sped past, its driver staring ahead of him.

"Well, I'll be— Struck a deaf one."

Grumbling, he walked on a little farther, then turned swiftly as he heard the approach of another car.

Stepping a little to one side, he held up his hand.

"I'll get it from this bird," he told himself grimly.

As the car came up, with a thin-faced man in goggles at the wheel, the man on the road let out a shout.

"What's the time, brother?"

IT SEEMED to him that for a moment the man at the wheel gave a start, then without other sign of having heard the query, stepped on the gas so that the car leaped forward, just grazing the indignant pedestrian.

"What's the idea? Want to kill me?" the latter shouted, shaking his fist at the cloud of dust. "People have no time to be civil to you nowadays. Well, I don't suppose it matters. I'll walk in on John and give him a surprise. I hope to heavens he hasn't gone off to the links."

As he neared the trim house with its patch of lawn, a small boy on a scooter shot toward him.

"Got an alarm clock, son?" he asked whimsically. "If you have, maybe you can tell what time it is. My watch has stopped work for the day."

The boy put one foot down sharply on the road and checked his progress with a startled look; then as if remembering some injunction pulled out an old watch at-

tached to a string, looked at it, then slung it back into his pocket with a twirl of the wrist, and, without a word, wheeled the scooter round. Shoving off with his active foot, he was almost out of earshot before William Hopkins found words.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" he growled. "What's wrong with the people here? I never met such a bunch of close-mouths. Might as well be a foreign country for all the answer they'll give you. Even the kids are dumb as oysters. How can John stand them? If I lived here I'd go crazy in a week. Why, the people in the suburbs don't know they're alive."

He walked up the concrete path, and was about to put his hand up to the shining brass knocker when he noticed the French window of the living room was open. He stepped to it and looked inside.

"Hello, John!" he cried cheerfully; and the man inside standing by the heavy table turned slowly and smiled.

With a step he was at the window, holding out his hand.

"Bill! This is great! I had a hunch you might come out today. Come in, man."

William Hopkins shook his friend's hand warmly and stepped in over the low sill. "Just took it into my head to run out and see you. I haven't been here for a coon's age, John. But I said to myself, certainly must look up the boy; and here I am. Say, I'm sure glad to see you, John."

"Same here. It's been quite a time since we saw each other, Bill. You're looking much the same."

"Can't complain. I feel as young as I ever did, and I don't see you've changed any these past two years."

"No," John smiled with a faintly amused twinkle in his eyes; "I guess I'm pretty much now as I always look. But how are things with you?"

"Pretty good—pretty good, John. Plugging along in the same old way."

"Same old way, eh?" John echoed.

"Of course. That seems to tickle you. How's business?"

"Business?" said John with an air of

surprise. "I thought you knew I retired some time ago."

"News to me, John. You don't say! Lucky dog—nothing to do but cut your coupons, and golf every day in the week if you want to. Well, well, you do surprise me. You were always such an active cuss."

"Oh, I'm not idle. I try to help the other fellow along a bit."

"Charity, eh?"

"Well, no. I don't like the word, Bill. I mean just doing what I can, in a friendly way, for any one that needs boosting."

"Well, I never thought you'd quit."

"Got to make room for the young ones."

"Young ones! That's a good one, John. Why, let me see—you're only thirty-eight, aren't you? And you look like thirty. Where do you get this old age stuff? I can't say I feel a day older."

"No, I don't suppose you do, Bill. It's a wonderful sensation."

"You bet it is. By George, last time I saw you, you were a pretty sick man, though John. I never thought you'd win through but you certainly cheated the doctors. You had them scared, and me, too. I told you when I left you lying there to go back to town, I thought it was good-bye, forever. But it just proves you can't kill a good man. You're good for a century yet."

"Why not for eternity? Might as well say that," replied John, still with the same faint smile.

"Eh—what's that?" William Hopkins threw back his head and let out a bellow of laughter. "Of course. Why not, the way science is progressing? Live forever, eh? That's the motto. Well, well, you certainly are the same merry old cuss, and it does me a world of good to see you. Don't know why, but I felt kind of blue coming along. No reason—kind of off color, you know. Too much work in the office. Or maybe it was your crazy people round here. What's got into them? You ask them a civil question, and you might as well be speaking to the air. Never a word out of them."

"They didn't hear you, of course."

"Aw, what's wrong with them? All got ear trouble? I speak loud enough for them to hear, don't I?"

"Yes, I can hear you."

"Well, what's the trouble, John?"

"They didn't see you."

"Didn't see me? Great heavens! I stood right in front of one bird with a buzz wagon, and flagged him to ask what time it was, and he shot past me like I was a wooden sign post."

"Oh, you'll get used to things like that. You'll learn not to worry about trifles."

TRIFLES! And see here, what kind of kids have you got here? I asked a kid on a scooter what the time was—my watch had stopped—and what does he do but shoot off without a peep out of his chest. I tell you, if a foreigner was dumped down here he'd think he'd struck a bunch of dummies or lunatics. Well, maybe not that, but people that hadn't an ounce of manners. This would be a gold mine for a salesman with the Book of Etiquette. Oh, excuse me—I didn't hear your friend come in."

He stopped awkwardly as a middle-aged man in a tweed suit sauntered into the room, went to the table, and, taking a cigar from the humidor on it, lit it carefully, looked at the match, then, going to the window, threw out the match end and stood looking out into the garden.

"Who's your loquacious friend?" asked Hopkins in a stage whisper.

"Oh, he lives here," answered John in his natural tone.

"Oh, he does?" A puzzled expression flickered across Hopkins' face. "Don't appear to bother his head very much about us."

"No."

"Deaf, like the rest of the neighbors?"

"You needn't whisper, old man; he can't hear us."

"Another of them. I'd think you'd be scared to live here."

"Nothing scares me now."

"No! I guess you're used to it, but I don't quite get the hang of things. You mean this fellow lives in your house?"

"Yes."

"Does he always act like this—as if he didn't notice anything or anybody? He is not blind as well as deaf, is he?"

"No, indeed."

"Well, who is he? He certainly acts like he owned the house."

"He does."

"What! For the love of Pete, how long has he been here, John?"

"Two years."

"And he lets you stay on? What's the big idea? I don't get it."

"He doesn't know I'm here," answered John easily.

"Say, what's the matter with me? He lives here, and don't know you're here? Why not? Am I crazy, or what's the matter?"

John came forward and laid his hand on his friend's arm.

"Don't you know yet, Bill?"

"Know what?"

"Know that I'm what those who don't know all call dead! I died two years ago."

"Dead!" William Hopkins stared incredulously, then shrank away with an inarticulate murmur. "You—oh, my God—now I remember. But—"

The other held him firmly as he added with a smile, radiant with affection:

"Don't be frightened, Bill. Everything's all right. You are dead too, old man. Run over by a bus three months ago, and you've just managed to come back to your old friends. It's all right, Bill, absolutely all right."