

TANTIVY CORNER

By "Q."

Illustrated by J. R. Skelton



AT Sir John's end of the dinner-table the Chief Constable was frankly talking "shop" with his host and the High Sheriff; excusably, too, for all three had just come through the turmoil of a General

Election, and the ladies were keen to hear how this and that had happened. The Chief Constable spoke with a certain quiet satisfaction, to which he had a right; for trouble had been feared in one or two polling districts, and, by general consent, his police had handled things well. The High Sheriff listened, and nodded from time to time with a large gravity. Sir John interrupted here and there with a question. He was young, and had succeeded to his baronetcy, with a small but growing patrimony, a short four years ago: a modest, open-air sportsman, who took himself as Magistrate, Deputy Lieutenant, and what-not very seriously, with a genuine eagerness to learn.

At the other end of the table, where sat his young wife, Lady Vepe, having the Bishop on her right, and on her left Mr. Bagshot, M.P.—that week elected for a neighbouring constituency—her friend Miss Hemerton was telling of a book she found in a parcel from Mudie's—an "Adventure," as it was entitled, of two English ladies in Paris, who, paying a visit to the Petit Trianon, had, in broad daylight and in full possession of their senses, walked straight into the past, following alleys obliterated a hundred years since, encountering persons as long ago dead, in the end coming face to face with Marie Antoinette herself. The story was well attested. The experiences of the two ladies differed—they had not seen alike—yet the separate visions confirmed rather than contradicted each other, and some of the details noted were so trivial that no historical knowledge, however dim, could have suggested

them. Miss Hemerton, full of the story, wanted to know if it were possible that a scene imprinted on the retina of a dead woman's—Marie Antoinette's—eyes could survive, and by transference impose itself upon the vision of a couple of Englishwomen more than a hundred years later: and, if so, how?

The Bishop cleared his throat. "A strange case, undeniably," said he. "In an ordinary way, one explains these visions *subjectively*—by hallucination in the person who sees. But here are two witnesses; and, if the tale be true, the vision must have been imposed *from without*."

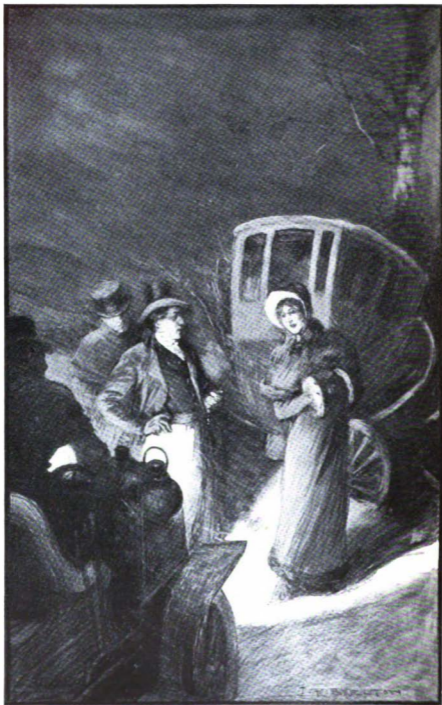
He cleared his throat again and paused, considering the difficulty. "That a whole scene from the past could so reconstruct itself—"

"But it can," put in Mr. Bagshot sharply, across his hostess. "I—er—beg your pardon, my lord"—for the Bishop was not used to having his sentences interrupted, and his eyebrows plainly showed this.

To make matters worse, just then, in the awkward silence, the Chief Constable's voice, at the far end of the table, was heard to say: "In fact, it's with the police as with the clergy. You catch a man young and make a parson of him, or you make a constable of him, and henceforth he's 'the man in the white choker' or 'the man in blue,' as it may be—a man separated from his fellows, anyway, and wearing a uniform to remind him of it. With all respect to Thomas Carlyle, it's wonderful how a suit of clothes will operate on the human mind."

"I—I beg your pardon," repeated Mr. Bagshot, this time addressing his hostess, "but—most extraordinary!—they're saying, down there, the very thing his lordship's remark had suggested to my mind. You'll forgive me, my lord?" He inclined again towards the Bishop, who bowed in return, but in a puzzled way, and with a dawning suspicion that Mr. Bagshot had drunk too much champagne after his electoral exertions.

"The fact is," continued Mr. Bagshot,



"But what has happened to your horses? Have you broken down, too?"

"this isn't my first visit to Cornwall, and the last time—some eight or nine years ago—a mighty curious thing happened to me—curious, almost, as what happened to Miss Henerton's two ladies at Versailles. The place, if I mistake not, lies less than two miles from where we are sitting—a turning off the Truro road, called Tantivy Corner."

"Eh? What's that?" Sir John, catching the name, spoke up from his end. "Tantivy Corner? Hullo, Bagshot, what the deuce do *you* know of Tantivy Corner, that you speak of it so pat? The name's almost forgotten, even in these parts."

"There's a sort of wayside barn a stone's-throw down the cross-road," answered Mr. Bagshot. "A line of stables, it used to be."

"That's right—place where Tom Grigg's grandfather kept his relays for 'The Royal Mail' and 'Self-Defence' coaches, and harnessed-up for the last run into Truro—down Probus Hill, across Tressillian Bridge, and up past Pencalenick lodges at a timid average of fifteen miles an hour. Horses, men, the whole system, dead and done with, these seventy odd years! But you and I know Tantivy Corner—hey, Pamela?"

With the laugh he fired a rallying glance at his wife. But Lady Vepe was leaning back in her chair, her eyes scanning Mr. Bagshot's profile with a sudden quick interest.

Mr. Bagshot did not observe this scrutiny. "It really is a curious yarn," said he, resting his wrists on the table, his finger-tips meeting and making an arch slantwise over his dessert plate, as he bent forward and took possession of the company. "It happened in a Christmas Vacation. A reading-party from Christ Church, four of us undergraduates, with the Junior Censor—the grave man, nicknamed Adam, but actually he was called Wilkins—had hit on a retired farmhouse hard by here—Goon Moor. Our host's name, as I remember, was Tremenehere."

"One of my tenants," put in Sir John, in a queer voice. He caught his wife's eye, and it held many meanings, but chiefly it warned him to be silent. So he merely added: "Go on, Bagshot. This grows interesting."

"His wife," pursued Mr. Bagshot, "was a capital cook in a plain way. I remember her for that, and also because she persisted in speaking of us as 'them young Cantabs from Oxford.' We were five, as I have said: 'the grave man Adam,' surnamed

Wilkins; Merridew, a rowing man of vast bulk (dead these five years, poor fellow!); little Pitt, *alias* the Pitling, *alias* the Immortal Billy; Garrymore, who goes about nowadays as a bloated carl; and I. I never quite knew how Wilkins had happened on Goon Farm, or why he chose it, unless it were that, being ten miles from the sea, even more remote from a golf links, with no society within measurable distance—I beg your pardon."

"You need not beg anybody's pardon," Lady Vepe assured him. "Nobody in the neighbourhood entertained in those days."

"There was no reason, of course, why they should entertain us," said Mr. Bagshot. "We were entire strangers, and, so far as I could discover, the one thing that had fetched us to this spot was a theory of Wilkins's that, in the depth of winter, it never snowed or froze in Cornwall, in which theory, by the way, he was rather grievously mistaken. Probably he thought, too, that we should read the harder for being cut off from all dissipation. If so, he made another mistake; for the Pitling had brought a car with him—an infernal machine of the period—a Max-Prest by name, with a gearing arrangement and a thirst for petrol which had to be known to be believed."

"Right again," Sir John confirmed him. "A more rotten bag of tricks—"

"Eh?" Mr. Bagshot fumbled and felt for his eyeglass, a habit of his when startled. "Is it possible that you, too, have made acquaintance with a Max-Prest?"

"Once," answered Sir John hastily, catching his wife's eye. "Only once in my life. I—er—used to specialise in motors, after a fashion."

"I have never met with another. Indeed, we allowed, we four, after some experience of the beastly thing, that its inventor had palmed this one machine, the sole product of his invention, off on the Pitling and promptly died. The more it broke down, the more it intrigued us, for it never broke down twice in the same way. We spent hours on the most deplorable roads, ministering to its infirmities. Wilkins cursed it daily by all his gods; for three days out of four it played billy with our reading, and we straggled home late for dinner—afoot usually. The sums the Pitling paid for haulage promised, in the end, to endear us to the farmers, among whom we started by being infernally unpopular, for the Max-Prest could be relied upon to scare any horse it met.

"About the only occasion on which it 'functioned' decently was the one of which I am going to tell you.

"Unknown as we were in the county, someone must have found us out; for, early in January, a card arrived bearing an invitation to a bachelors' ball at Truro. 'Fancy Dress' was added.

"I need hardly say we had no fancy dresses with us. But we agreed that it would be fun to attend, all but 'the grave man,' who would have no truck with such frivolities. So, after putting our heads together, we telegraphed to a man in King Street, Covent Garden, for four costumes of the Regency period, which in due course arrived at Grampond Road Station, and were delivered to us. I ask you to mark this. We had sent our measurements, size of heads, etc., and everything turned up to order—curly top-hats of beaver or long-napped silk, high-collared coats, tight-fitting pantaloons, everything *en règle* down to such trifles as gold-headed canes, fob-chains, ribboned eyeglasses. The costumier, in a covering letter, assured us—pray mark this again—that the garments were authentic specimens of the period, refitted to our measurements and newly lined. One of the suits had descended from the wardrobe of the great Brummel. Wilkins, when we paraded before him for a dress rehearsal, hailed us as the Abstract Bucks. We had taken the precaution—since we intended to drive over to Truro in the car, which was an open one—of ordering great-coats as well. Funny, tight-waisted things they were, with three or four capes apiece, and, as it turned out, we needed them.

"For, on the afternoon of the ball, it started to snow—yes, I know something of your much-advertised Cornish Riviera—and it snowed solidly for twenty-four hours. We reached Truro, however, without mishap, the car, for once in its career, behaving beautifully. Garrymore started a theory that it had been designed originally for polar exploration, and that this accounted for the rarity of the Max-Prest chassis. We dined at 'The Red Lion,' and I have a general recollection that all four of us danced afterwards with astonishing vigour and enjoyed ourselves thoroughly."

"I remember thinking it must be like heaven!" murmured Lady Vepe.

"Eh?" Mr. Bagshot turned half about. "Why, to be sure, you were there, and dancing, too, no doubt. But I'll be sworn," he added gallantly, "I had not the honour

of an introduction, or I should have remembered it."

"I was not there. But please go on."

Slightly puzzled, Mr. Bagshot picked up the thread of his story. "Let me see—Yes, certainly we must have enjoyed ourselves, because it was not until two in the morning that we collected our party, got out the car, and started for home. We should have stayed to the very end had not the Pitling reported that snow was still falling, and—let alone the difficulty of steering in such weather, with all the usual features of the road effaced—a very little more of it might prove too much for the always uncertain temper of Max-Prest. So, as I say, having changed our dancing shoes for stout boots, unstabled the car and lit the lamps, we bowled out of Truro, the streets of which already lay about four inches deep in snow.

"Billy, to do him justice, drove with great skill and a good deal less than his usual recklessness, while the car—as Garrymore pointed out, claiming that it confirmed his theory—really seemed to be enjoying itself. I dare say, though, that we owed as much to luck as to good management, and I have a notion that, after passing safely through Probus, Billy began to nod. At any rate, as we were rolling past Trewithian, where the plantation on our right hid the moon for a while, our off-wheel narrowly escaped a snow-covered mound of road-metal piled in the water-plate. I shook Billy by the collar and charged him with falling asleep.

"'Not a bit,' he assured me. 'Humours of the road—that's all: Christmas roysterers returning in the olden time. Would-be comic Christmas card—we're doing it life size! Highwayman at the corner—Hullo!' He put on the brake with a jerk that almost pitched us out of the car, and brought up all standing.

"'What, in the name of—of Santa Claus—'

"Our lamps, blazing down the road, lit up, at less than a dozen paces, a picture that might have come straight from a Christmas card—a broken-down post-chaise, with a horse tethered to a gate beside it, and by the chaise a solitary human figure standing, a woman, wrapped in a long dark cloak and wearing a poke-bonnet as old as your grandmother's.

"Before we could tumble out, she approached us, still in the glare of the lamps, and, as it seemed to me, with a swimming,

ghostly motion. Her face, under the eaves of the bonnet, was veiled against the weather; but I noted that her figure was slim and youthful, and her voice corresponded with it, as she said, with a catch of the breath, treating us at the same time to a little old-fashioned curtsey—

“Oh, sirs! But what has happened to your horses? Have you broken down, too?”

“Horses?” began Merridew—he was never quick at the uptake, poor fellow. But “Oh, hush, you duffer!” said I, pushing him aside from the step and pulling off my beaver, which by this time had a white top like a yachting-cap’s. “Miss or madam,” began I, with a bow, “have no thought about us, except that we are your servants, to help in any way we can.”

“She showed not the smallest surprise at our costumes. ‘I thank you, sirs, with all my heart. There has been a dr-readful mishap,’ she explained. ‘Our fore axle-pin has come out, as you see, and Jack—and the gentleman, I mean—has ridden back with the postboy to the cross-roads where the stables are, and a smithy, too, the postboy says, if he can wake up any smith at this hour—’

“Stables? Smithy?” echoed Garrymore behind me. “There’s a posting-stables at the railway station—nothing nearer in this forsaken land.”

“I do not understand you, sir,” she answered, wringing her hands in the roadway and looking very forlorn. “We saw the lights of the stables as we passed the cross-roads, not five hundred yards back. Tantivy Corner is the name of the place, so the post-boy said. He said, too, they were waiting there with the relay for the morning coach—“The Self-Defence.””

“I heard Garrymore gasp. ‘Stables—relays?’ muttered Merridew. ‘She *can’t* mean that tumbledown barn at the corner. Why, it must have stood empty since the year one!’”

“I could have called to them again to hush. It was evident that as yet they did not see what I saw—that we had driven a hundred yards into the past and come to a halt there. The moon, overtopping the plantation, shed her rays down and across the snow-encumbered road. The Pitling had plucked out one of our head-lamps and was examining the wreck of the chaise.

“‘Good Heavens!’ said he, rejoicing us, ‘it must have come straight out of the Ark!’”

“‘They must have reached the corner before this,’ said the young lady, moving to

the gate and hoisting herself upon its second bar. ‘Look, there are the stables, beyond the angle of the hedge. You can see the lights quite plainly.’ And, sure enough, we could.

“‘See here, you fellows,’ commanded Billy, ‘suppose we put forth our best strength and hoist this contraption to one side of the road. Then we might get the car past and push on to lend a hand. Here, Merridew, you and Bagshot get a lift on.’”

“‘But I tell you there *ain’t* any stables!’ Merridew protested. ‘The place is a ruin, and has been for these fifty years.’”

“‘It doesn’t greatly matter just now,’ explained Billy, with great lucidity, ‘which of us is drunk or which is sober. The point is, that we all do something, seeing the lady’s in a hurry. What’s the time, by the way?’ He pulled out his fob-watch and held it to one of the lamps. ‘Three-thirty and a little after,’ he announced.

“‘The young woman—by her shape she was little more than a girl—wring her hands afresh. ‘And the coach is timed for ten minutes to four!’”

“‘The coach, ma’am?’ demanded Billy. ‘What coach, ma’am?’”

““‘The Self-Defence,’” sir; and I greatly fear that dear papa will be on it. You see, Jack—he insists on my calling him Jack—and I were posting to Falmouth when this dr-dreadful mishap occurred; and dear papa, who disapproves of Jack, is so irascible—”

“‘Billy let out a long, low whistle, but it was interrupted by the sound of voices up the road. Presently lanterns showed, and a minute later I had no doubt at all that we had driven into the past, as a company joined us, headed by a postillion on a harness horse and a young gentleman in travelling boots and caped overcoat, the collar of which was turned up against the snow, for the snow still fell steadily, although the wind had dropped.

“‘Two or three stablemen—fellows in long waistcoats and tightish corduroy breeches—accompanied them, and they had brought along the smith, who promptly went down on his belly in the snow and crawled under the chaise to examine the damage. The stablemen, stooping, held their lanterns this way or that, as he directed.

“‘By and by, crawling forth again, he commanded us to bear a hand and tilt the machine on its side towards the hedge. We all started to help, when somebody cried out that he could hear the coach coming.

“‘We strained our ears, and there was no

mistake. The snow muffled all sound of wheels, but, the air by this time being windless, the pounding of the horses' gallop was faintly audible, with a distinct clink, now and again, of the swingle-bars. To remove all doubts, of a sudden a horn sounded, very musical and clear.

"That's to warn the relay," said a voice. "Thirty seconds or so, and you'll hear 'em draw up at the Corner."

"Sure enough, in something like that space of time, the galloping ceased. I turned and saw the young man slip an arm around the lady."

"Heavens, but did you, now?" interjected Sir John, who had been listening with the liveliest interest.

"I turned," repeated Mr. Bagshot, now intent on his climax, and not to be diverted, "and I saw the young man slip an arm around the lady to comfort her. Her shoulders heaved as she bent towards him and sobbed. They made a pretty silhouette against the glare of our lamps. They—the lamps and our car—were real, at any rate. I said a word in Billy's ear, and Billy walked up and touched the lady by the elbow."

"By your leave, miss," said Billy. "I can't say that I understand this at all, but if you two are after running for it—why, I'm one to help a fellow-sportsman. There's just room here to turn the car. You, Bagshot, stand by and give the word before she bumps astern. Nip in, miss, if you please—you'll find a rug somewhere—and you, sir, might jump up forrad beside me—I'd be glad of a talk as we go along. But if it's racing the coach we are," wound up Billy, running forward to start up the works again, "I'll promise you that it shan't even smell us this side of Falmouth"—which, by the way, was a large promise, for Garrymore was wont to declare that the Max-Prest might be hunted on a day-old scent in any ordinary weather.

"But I don't understand," pleaded the young lady, very innocently. "For where are your horses?"

"She climbed in obediently, nevertheless, and her young man jumped for a seat in front. By this time the car was throbbing, shaking through all its length like a tramp steamer. Billy scrambled in and began to work her around. I shouted directions, all the while straining my ears to listen for the coach, if it were bearing down on us, which was ridiculous, for the noise made by the car would have drowned a brass band.

"Straight?" queried Billy. "What's that locking the off hind wheel?" He

jumped out in a hurry to see, when—pr-f! with a leap forward the Max-Prest took the road and fairly skimmed out of sight—it and the two innocents—leaving us there, stuck and standing.

"Goo-oochy losh!" Billy, turning a blank face to me at close quarters, had scarcely given this expression to his feelings when a shout from somewhere up the road warned us to jump aside for the hodge, just as the coach—yes, indeed, ladies—just as the mail-coach, with horses at full gallop and the guard blowing on his horn, thundered past, splashing up the snow in our faces. It went by like a whirlwind.

"I'll back the car, though—to the next corner!" yelled Billy above the uproar, and fell on me hysterically.

"We ran like two aimless fools down the road. But the noises of car and coach died away, and pursuit was plainly impossible. We retraced our steps, and found our companions chatting with the gang of men around the chaise. They were real enough, at all events. Having wisely decided that the axle was beyond repairing—at any rate, before daylight—they walked us back to Tantivy Corner, where—still as if we were living back a hundred years—we found the stables alight with lanterns hanging by the stalls. Six horses we found there, bedded up with a plenty of fresh straw, and rum, with hot water, going in the harness-room. The rum, again, was real enough; and when we had drunk it until our skins tingled, the stablemen—aged fellows all—put us on our road to tramp it home, which we did. And what do you suppose was the first thing we saw in the roadway before the house? Why, the Max-Prest, standing there in the snow, empty, with lamps still blazing, just as solid and as innocent as a baby!"

"Yes," said Lady Vepe softly, in her silvery voice, after a silence of some moments had rewarded the climax. "Yes, it was a heavenly drive, and I don't mind telling you—now, Jack!—that my husband proposed to me in the course of it. You see"—here she turned sweetly on the astounded Mr. Bagshot—"Jack was very poor in those days; he had scarcely a penny to bless himself, still less a penny to bless a country clergyman's daughter. We were too poor—the both of us—even to attend that ball. I had no frock less than three years old; and somehow we conceived a grudge against you rich young men, whom we were too poor even to entertain. There was no reason, you will say, why we should have nursed

any grudge against you? Perhaps not; yet you might understand if you had ever known poverty—the sort that's called genteel. And, after all, we were not the only ones. Grigg, at the posting-stables, keeps two cars now—quite decent ones—and quite often hires them out four days a week. But in those days he loathed the very name of a motor, and conceived he had a grievance against your reading-party because you never hired from him. That is how he came into the plot. He had an old coach in his stables, with one or two broken-down chaises. By searching through the wardrobes at home I found most of the dresses, and Grigg hunted up a guard's horn and uniform. As for

Jack, he had been learning with a motor-car firm in London, and was home for his holiday, so that part of the business came easy to him. Also, knowing the roads, it was easy for us to bring the car around to Goon Moor before you returned. But Jack behaved so sillily by the way, and the drive in the moonlight was so heavenly, that you almost caught us. As it was, we had just time to slip out and watch your discovery from behind the escallonia hedge. Then we raced back to Tantivy Corner, to help in dismantling the stables. No doubt you visited them next day, and found them forlorn as ever?"

"We did," said Mr. Bagshot.

