

EXCERPTS

THE

HAUNTED

THE STORY
OF A
STRANGE
MYSTERY.



TOLD BY
RICHARD
MARSH.

Illustrated by H. H. Flerc.

I.

“WELL, that’s the most staggering thing I’ve ever known!”

As Mr. Philpotts entered the smoking-room, these were the words—with additions—which fell upon his, not unnaturally, startled ears. Since Mr. Bloxham was the only person in the room, it seemed only too probable that the extraordinary language had been uttered by him—and, indeed, his demeanour went far to confirm the probability. He was standing in front of his chair, staring about him in a manner which suggested considerable mental perturbation, apparently unconscious of the fact that his cigar had dropped either from his lips or his fingers and was smoking merrily away on the brand-new carpet which the committee had just laid down. He turned to Mr. Philpotts in a state of what seemed really curious agitation.

“I say, Philpotts, did you see him?”

Mr. Philpotts looked at him in silence for a moment, before he drily said, “I heard you.”

But Mr. Bloxham was in no mood to be put off in this manner. He seemed, for some cause, to have lost the air of serene indifference for which he was famed—he was in a state of excitement, which, for him, was quite phenomenal.

“No nonsense, Philpotts—did you see him?”

“See whom?” Mr. Philpotts was selecting a paper from a side table. “I see your cigar is burning a hole in the carpet.”

“Confound my cigar!” Mr. Bloxham stamped on it with an angry tread. “Did Geoff Fleming pass you as you came in?”

Mr. Philpotts looked round with an air of evident surprise.

“Geoff Fleming!—Why, surely, he’s in Ceylon by now.”

“Not a bit of it. A minute ago he was in that chair talking to me.”

“Bloxham!” Mr. Philpotts’ air of surprise became distinctly more pronounced, a fact which Mr. Bloxham apparently resented.

“What are you looking at me like that for, pray? I tell you I was glancing through the *Field*, when I felt someone touch me on the shoulder. I looked round—there was Fleming standing just behind me. ‘Geoff,’ I cried, ‘I thought you were on the other side of the world—what are you doing here?’ ‘I’ve come to have a peep at you,’ he said. He drew a chair up close to mine—this chair—and sat in it. I turned round to reach for a match on the table, it scarcely took me a second, but when I looked his way again hanged if he weren’t gone.”

Mr. Philpotts continued his selection of a paper—in a manner which was rather marked.

“Which way did he go?”

“Didn’t you meet him as you came in?”

“I did not—I met no one. What’s the matter now?”

The question was inspired by the fact

that a fresh volley of expletives came from Mr. Bloxham's lips. That gentleman was standing with his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, his legs wide open, and his eyes and mouth almost as wide open as his legs.

"Hang me," he exclaimed, when, as it appeared, he had temporarily come to the end of his stock of adjectives, "if I don't believe he's boned my purse."

"Boned your purse!" Mr. Philpotts laid a not altogether flattering emphasis upon the "boned!" "Bloxham! What do you mean?"

Mr. Bloxham did not immediately explain. He dropped into the chair behind him. His hands were still in his trouser pockets, his legs were stretched out in front of him, and on his face there was not only an expression of amazement, but also of the most unequivocal bewilderment. He was staring at the vacant air as if he were trying his hardest to read some riddle.

"This is a queer start, upon my word, Philpotts," he spoke in what, for him, were tones of unwonted earnestness. "When I was reaching for the matches on the table, what made me turn round so suddenly was because I thought I felt someone tugging at my purse—it was in the pocket next to Fleming. As I told you, when I did turn round Fleming was gone—and, by Jove, it looks as though my purse went with him."

"Have you lost your purse?—is that what you mean?"

"I'll swear that it was in my pocket five minutes ago, and that it's not there now; that's what I mean."

Mr. Philpotts looked at Mr. Bloxham as if, although he was too polite to say so, he could not make him out at all. He resumed his selection of a paper.

"One is liable to make mistakes about one's purse; perhaps you'll find it when you get home."

Mr. Bloxham sat in silence for some moments. Then, rising, he shook himself as a dog does when it quits the water.

"I say, Philpotts, don't ladle out this yarn of mine to the other fellows, there's a good chap. As you say, one is apt to get into a muddle about one's purse, and I dare say I shall come across it when I get home. And perhaps I'm not very well this afternoon; I am feeling out of sorts, and that's a fact. I think I'll just toddle home and take a scidnitz, or a pill, or something. Ta ta!"

When Mr. Philpotts was left alone he smiled to himself, that superior smile which we are apt to smile when conscious that a man has been making a conspicuous ass of himself on lines which may be his, but which, we thank Providence, are emphatically not ours. With not one, but half a dozen papers in his hand, he seated himself in the chair which Mr. Bloxham had recently relinquished. Retaining a single paper, he placed the rest on the small round table on his left—the table on which were the matches for which Mr. Bloxham declared he had reached. Taking out his case, he selected a cigar almost with the same care which he had shewn in selecting his literature, smiling to himself all the time that superior smile. Lighting the cigar he had chosen with a match from the table, he settled himself at his ease to read.

Scarcely had he done so than he was conscious of a hand laid gently on his shoulder from behind.

"What! back again?"

"Hullo, Phil!"

He had taken it for granted, without troubling to look round, that Mr. Bloxham had returned, and that it was he who touched him on the shoulder. But the voice which replied to him, so far from being Mr. Bloxham's, was one the mere sound of which caused him not only to lose his bearing of indifference but to spring from his seat with the agility almost of a jack-in-the-box. When he saw who it was had touched him on the shoulder, he stared.

"Fleming! Then Bloxham was right, after all. May I ask what brings you here?"

The man at whom he was looking was tall and well-built, in age about five and thirty. There were black cavities beneath his eyes; the man's whole face was redolent, to a trained perception, of something which was, at least, slightly unsavoury. He was dressed from head to foot in white duck—a somewhat singular costume for Pall Mall, even on a summer afternoon.

Before Mr. Philpotts' gaze, his own eyes sank. Murmuring something which was almost inaudible, he moved to the chair next to the one which Mr. Philpotts had been occupying, the chair of which Mr. Bloxham had spoken.

As he seated himself, Mr. Philpotts eyed him in a fashion which was certainly not too friendly.

"What did you mean by disappearing

just now in that extraordinary manner, frightening Bloxham half out of his wits? Where did you get to?"

The new comer was stroking his heavy moustache with a hand which, for a man of his size and build, was unusually small and white. He spoke in a lazy, almost inaudible, drawl.

"I just popped outside."

"Just popped outside! I must have

Mr. Philpotts stopped short. Having settled the paper on the table to his perfect satisfaction, he turned round again towards the man he was addressing—and as he did so he ceased to address him, and that for the sufficiently simple reason that he was not there to address—the man had gone! The chair at Mr. Philpotts' side was empty; without a sign or a sound its occupant had vanished, it would almost seem, into space.

II.

Under the really remarkable circumstances of the case, Mr. Philpotts preserved his composure to a singular degree. He looked round the room; there was no one there. He again fixedly regarded the chair at his side; there could be no doubt that it was empty.

To make quite sure, he passed his hand two or three times over the seat; it met with not the slightest opposition. Where could the man have got to? Mr. Philpotts had not, consciously, heard the slightest sound; there had not been time for him to have reached the door. Mr. Philpotts knocked the ash off his cigar. He stood up. He paced leisurely two or three times up and down the room.

"If Bloxham is ill, I am not. I was never better in my life. And the man who tells me that I have been the victim of an optical delusion is talking of what

he knows nothing. I am prepared to swear that it was Geoffrey Fleming who touched me on the shoulder; that he spoke to me; and that he seated himself upon that chair. Where he came from, or where he has gone to, are other questions entirely." He critically examined his finger nails.

"If those Psychical Research people have an address in town, I think I'll have a talk with them. I suppose it's three or four minutes since the man vanished. What's



been coming in just when you went out. I saw nothing of you; you've put Bloxham into a pretty state of mind."

Re-seating himself, Mr. Philpotts turned to put the paper he was holding on to the little table. "I don't want to make myself a brute, but it strikes me that your presence here at all requires explanation. When several fellows club together to give another fellow a fresh start on the other side of the world——"

the time now? Whatever has become of my watch?"

He might well ask—it had gone, both watch and chain—vanished, with Mr. Fleming, into air. Mr. Philpotts stared at his waistcoat, too astonished for speech. Then he gave a little gasp.

"This comes of playing Didymus! The brute has stolen it! I must apologise to Bloxham. As he himself said, this is a queer start, upon my honour! Now, if you like, I do feel a little out of sorts; this sort of thing is enough to make one. Before I go, I think I'll have a drop of brandy."

As he was hesitating, the smoking-room door opened to admit Frank Osborne. Mr. Osborne nodded to Mr. Philpotts as he crossed the room.

"You're not looking quite yourself, Philpotts."

Mr. Philpotts seemed to regard the observation almost in the light of an impertinence.

"Am I not? I was not aware that there was anything in my appearance to call for remark." Smiling, Mr. Osborne seated himself in the chair which the other had not long ago vacated. Mr. Philpotts regarded him attentively. "You're not looking quite yourself, either."

The smile vanished from Mr. Osborne's face.

"I'm not feeling myself!—I'm not! I'm worried about Geoff Fleming."

Mr. Philpotts slightly started.

"About Geoff Fleming?—what about Fleming?"

"I'm afraid—well, Phil, the truth is that I'm afraid that Geoff's a hopeless case."

Mr. Philpotts was once more busying himself with the papers which were on the side table.

"What do you mean?"

"As you know, he and I have been very thick in our time, and when he came a cropper it was I who suggested that we who were at school with him might have a whip round among ourselves to get the old chap a fresh start elsewhere. You all of you behaved like bricks, and when I told him what you had done, poor Geoff was quite knocked over. He promised voluntarily that he would never touch a card again, or make another bet, until he had paid you fellows off with thumping interest. Well, he doesn't seem to have kept his promise long."

"How do you know he hasn't?"

"I've heard from Deecie."

"From Deecie?—where's Fleming?"

"In Ceylon—they'd both got there before Deecie's letter left."

"In Ceylon!" exclaimed Mr. Philpotts excitedly, staring hard at Mr. Osborne. "You are sure he isn't back in town?"

In his turn, Mr. Osborne was staring at Mr. Philpotts.

"Not unless he came back by the same boat which brought Deecie's letter. What makes you ask?"

"I only wondered."

Mr. Philpotts turned again to the paper. The other went on.

"It seems that a lot of Australian sporting men were on the boat on which they went out. Fleming got in with them. They played—he played, too. Deecie remonstrated—but he says that it only seemed to make bad worse. At first Geoff won—you know the usual sort of thing; he wound up by losing all he had, and about four hundred pounds beside. He had the cheek to ask Deecie for the money." Mr. Osborne paused. Mr. Philpotts uttered a sound which might have been indicative of contempt—or anything. "Deecie says that when the winners found out that he couldn't pay, there was a regular row. Geoff swore, in that wild way of his, that if he couldn't pay them before he died, he would rise from the dead to get the money."

Mr. Philpotts looked round with a show of added interest.

"What was that he said?"

"Oh, it was only his wild way of speaking—you know that way of his. If they don't get their money before he dies, and I fancy that it's rather more than even betting that they won't, I don't think that there's much chance of his rising from his grave to get it for them. He'll break that promise, as he has broken so many more. Poor Geoff! It seems that we might as well have kept our money in our pockets; it doesn't seem to have done him much good. His prospects don't look very rosy—without money, and with a bad name to start with."

"As I fancy you have more than once suspected, Frank, I never have had a high opinion of Mr. Geoffrey Fleming. I am not in the least surprised at what you tell me, any more than I was surprised when he came his cropper. I have always felt that, at a pinch, he would do anything to save his own skin." Mr. Osborne said

nothing, but he shook his head. "Did you see anything of Bloxham when you came in?"

"I saw him going along the street in a cab."

"I want to speak to him; I think I'll just go and see if I can find him in his rooms."

III.

Mr. Frank Osborne scarcely seemed to be enjoying his own society when Mr.

that Osborne was not only a clear-sighted, he was a hard-headed, man. It could not have been long before it dawned upon him that the man with whom he fraternised was a naturally bad egg. Fleming was continually coming to grief; he would have come to eternal grief at the very commencement of his career if it had not been for Osborne at his back. He went through his own money; he went through as much of his friend's as his friend would let him. Then

"GEOFF SWORE, IN THAT WILD WAY OF HIS, THAT IF HE COULDN'T PAY THEM BEFORE HE DIED, HE WOULD RISE FROM THE DEAD TO GET THE MONEY."



Philpotts had left him. As all the world knows, he is a man of sentiment—of the true sort, not the false. He has had one great passion in his life—Geoffrey Fleming. They began when they were at Chilchester together, when he was big, and Fleming still little. He did his work for him, fought for him, took his scrapes upon himself, believed in him, almost worshipped him. The thing continued when Fleming joined him at the University. Perhaps the fact that they both were orphans had something to do with it; neither of them had kith nor kin. The odd part of the business was

came the final smash. There were features about the thing which made it clear, even to Frank Osborne, that in England, at least, for some years to come, Geoffrey Fleming had run his course right out. He strained all his already strained resources in his efforts to extricate the man from the mire. When he found that he himself was insufficient, going to his old schoolfellows, he begged them, for his sake—if not for Fleming's—to join hands with him in giving the scapegrace still another start. As

a result, interest was made for him in a Ceylon plantation, and Mr. Fleming with, under the circumstances, well-lined pockets, was despatched over the seas to turn over a new leaf in a sunnier clime.

How he had vowed that he would turn over a new leaf, actually with tears, upon his knees! And this was how he had done it: before he had reached his journey's end, he had gambled away the money which

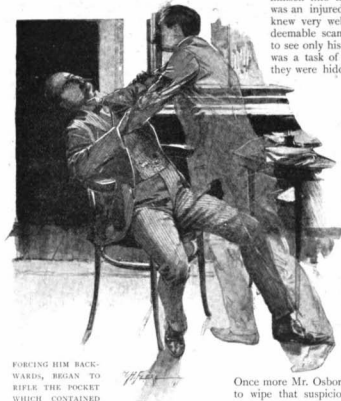
made of things—and he had had the ball at his feet when he started—poor, dear old Geoff! With his knuckles Mr. Osborne wiped a suspicious moisture from his eyes. Geoff was all right—if he had only been able to prevent money from slipping from between his fingers, and been gifted with a sense of *meum et tuum*—not a nicer fellow in the world!

Mr. Osborne sat trying to persuade himself into the belief that the man was an injured paragon, though he knew very well that he was an irredeemable scamp. He endeavoured to see only his good qualities, which was a task of exceeding difficulty—they were hidden in such a cloud of blackness. At least, whatever might be said against Geoff—and Mr. Osborne admitted to himself that there might be something—it was certain that Geoff loved him almost as much as he loved Geoff. Mr. Osborne declared to himself—putting pressure on himself to prevent his making a single mental reservation—that Geoff Fleming, in spite of all his faults, was the only person in the wide, wide world who did love him. And he was a stranger in a strange land, and in trouble again—poor, dear old Geoff!

Once more Mr. Osborne's knuckles went up to wipe that suspicious moisture from his eyes.

While he was engaged in doing this, a hand was laid gently on his shoulder from behind. It was, perhaps, because he was unwilling to be detected in such an act that, at the touch, he rose from his seat with a start—which became, so to speak, a start of petrified amazement when he perceived who it was who had touched him. It was the man of whom he had been thinking, the friend of his boyhood—Geoffrey Fleming.

"Geoff!" he gasped. "Dear old Geoff!"



FORCING HIM BACKWARDS, BEGAN TO RIFLE THE POCKET WHICH CONTAINED THE SEVENTY POUNDS.

was not his, and was in debt besides. Frank Osborne must have been fashioned something like the dog which loves its master the more, the more he illtreats it. His heart went out in pity to the scamp across the seas. He had no delusions; he had long been conscious that the man was hopeless. And yet he knew very well that if he could have had his way he would have gone at once to comfort him. Poor Geoff! What an all-round mess he seemed to have

He paused, seemingly in doubt whether to laugh or cry. "I thought you were in Ceylon!"

Mr. Fleming did exactly what he had done when he came so unexpectedly on Mr. Philpotts—he moved to the chair at Mr. Osborne's side. His manner was in striking contrast to his friend's—it was emphatically not emotional.

"I've just dropped in," he drawled.

"My dear old boy!" Mr. Osborne, as he surveyed his friend, seemed to become more and more torn by conflicting emotions. "Of course I'm very glad to see you, Geoff, but—how did you get in here? I thought that they had taken your name off the books of the club." He was perfectly aware that Mr. Fleming's name had been taken off the books of the club, and in a manner the reverse of complimentary. Mr. Fleming offered no remark. He sat looking down at the carpet, stroking his moustache. Mr. Osborne went stammering on—

"As I say, Geoff—and as, of course, you know—I am very glad to see you, anywhere; but—we don't want any unpleasantness, do we? If some of the fellows came in and found you here, they might make themselves nasty. Come round to my rooms; we shall be a lot more comfortable there, old man."

Mr. Fleming raised his eyes. He looked his friend full in the face. As he met his glance, Mr. Osborne was conscious of a curious sort of shiver. It was not only because the man's glance was, to say the least, less friendly than it might have been—it was because of something else, something which Mr. Osborne could scarcely have defined.

"I want some money."

Mr. Osborne smiled, rather fatuously.

"Ah, Geoff, the same old tale! Deecie has told me all about it. I won't reproach you; you know, if I had some, you should have it; but I'm not sure that it isn't just as well for both ourselves that I haven't, Geoff."

"You have some money in your pocket now."

Mr. Osborne's amazement grew apace—his friend's manner was so very strange.

"What a nose you always have for money; however did you find that out? But it isn't mine. You know Jim Baker left me guardian to that boy of his, and I've been

drawing the youngster's dividends—it's only seventy pounds, Geoff."

Mr. Fleming stretched out his hand—his reply was brief, and to the point.

"Give it to me!"

"Give it to you!—Geoff!—young Baker's money!"

Mr. Fleming reiterated his demand.

"Give it to me!"

His manner was not only distinctly threatening, it had a peculiar effect upon his friend. Although Mr. Osborne had never before shewn fear of any living man, and had, in that respect, proved his superiority over Fleming many a time, there was something at that moment in the speaker's voice, or words, or bearing, or in all three together, which set him shivering, as if with fear, from head to foot.

"Geoff!—you are mad! I'll see what I can find for you, but I can't give you young Baker's dividends."

Mr. Osborne was not quite clear as to exactly what it was that happened. He only knew that the friend of his boyhood—the man for whom he had done so much—the only person in the world who loved him—rose and took him by the throat, and, forcing him backwards, began to rifle the pocket which contained the seventy pounds. He was so taken by surprise, so overwhelmed by a feeling of utter horror, against which he was unable even to struggle, that it was only when he felt the money being actually withdrawn from his pocket that he made an attempt at self-defence. Then, when he made a frantic clutch at his assailant's felonious arm, all he succeeded in grasping was the empty air. The pressure was removed from his throat. He was able to look about him. Mr. Fleming was gone. He thrust a trembling hand into his pocket—the seventy pounds had vanished, too.

"Geoff! Geoff!" he cried, the tears streaming from his eyes. "Don't play tricks with me! Give me back young Baker's dividends!"

When no one answered and there seemed no one to hear, he began searching round and round the room with his eyes, as if he suspected Mr. Fleming of concealing himself behind some article of furniture.

"Geoff! Geoff!" he continued crying.

"Dear old boy!—give me back young Baker's dividends!"

"Hullo!" exclaimed a voice—which certainly was not Mr. Fleming's. Mr. Osborne turned, Colonel Lanyon was

standing with the handle of the open door in his hand. "Frank, are you rehearsing for a five-act tragedy?"

Mr. Osborne replied to the Colonel's question with another.

"Lanyon, did Geoffrey Fleming pass you as you came in?"

"Geoffrey Fleming!" The Colonel wheeled round on his heels like a teetotum. He glanced behind him. "What the deuce do you mean, Frank? If I catch that thief under the roof which covers me, I'll make a case for the police of him."

Then Mr. Osborne remembered what, in his agitation, he had momentarily forgotten, that Geoffrey Fleming had had no bitterer, more outspoken, and, it may be added, more well-merited an opponent than Colonel Lanyon in the Climax Club. The Colonel advanced towards Mr. Osborne.

"Do you know that that's the blackguard's chair you're standing by?"

"His chair!"

Mr. Osborne was leaning with one hand on the chair on which Mr. Fleming had, not long ago, been sitting.

"That's what he used to call it himself,—with his usual impudence. He used to sit in it whenever he took a hand. The men would give it up to him—you know how you gave everything up to him, all the lot of you. If he couldn't get it he'd turn nasty—wouldn't play. It seems that he had the cheek to cut his initials on the chair—I only heard of it the other day, or there'd have been a clearance of him long ago. Look here—what do you think of that for a piece of rowdiness?"

The Colonel turned the chair upside down. Sure enough, in the woodwork underneath the seat were the letters, cut in good-sized characters—"G. F."

"You know that rubbishing way in which he used to talk. When men questioned his exclusive right to the chair, I've heard him say he'd prove his right by coming and sitting in it after he was dead and buried—he swore he'd haunt the chair. Idiot!—What is the matter with you Frank? You look as if you'd been in a rough and tumble—your necktie's all anyhow."

"I think I must have dropped asleep, and dreamed—yes, I fancy I've been dreaming."

Mr. Osborne staggered, rather than walked, to the door, keeping one hand in the inside pocket of his coat. The Colonel followed him with his eyes.

"Frank's ageing fast," was his mental comment as Mr. Osborne disappeared. "He'll be an old man yet before I am."

He seated himself in Geoffrey Fleming's chair.

It was, perhaps, ten minutes afterwards that Edward Jackson went into the smoking-room—"Scientific" Jackson, as they call him, because of the sort of catch phrase he is always using—"Give me science!" He had scarcely been in the room a minute before he came rushing to the door shouting—

"Help, help!"

Men came hurrying from all parts of the building. Mr. Griffin came from the billiard-room, where he is always to be found. He had a cue in one hand, and a piece of chalk in the other. He was the first to address the vociferous gentleman standing at the smoking-room door.

"Jackson!—What's the matter?"

Mr. Jackson was in such a condition of fluster and excitement that it was a little difficult to make out, from his own statement, what was the matter.

"Lanyon's dead! Have any of you seen Geoff Fleming? Stop him if you do—he's stolen my pocket-book!" He began mopping his brow with his bandanna handkerchief. "God bless my soul! an awful thing!—I've been robbed—and old Lanyon's dead!"

One thing was quickly made clear—as they saw for themselves when they went crowding into the smoking-room—Lanyon was dead. He was kneeling in front of Geoffrey Fleming's chair, clutching at either side of it with a tenacity which suggested some sort of convulsion. His head was thrown back, his eyes were still staring wide open, his face was distorted by a something which was half fear, half horror—as if, as those who saw him afterwards agreed, he had seen sudden, certain death approaching him, in a form which even he, a seasoned soldier, had found too horrible for contemplation.

Mr. Jackson's story, in one sense, was plain enough, though it was odd enough in another. He told it to an audience which evinced unmistakable interest in every word uttered.

"I often come in for a smoke about this time, because generally the place is empty, so that you get it all to yourself."

He cast a somewhat aggressive look upon his hearers—a look which could hardly be said to convey a flattering suggestion.

"When I first came in I thought that the room was empty. It was only when I was half-way across that something caused me to look round. I saw that someone was kneeling on the floor. I looked to see who it was. It was Lanyon. 'Lanyon!' I cried. 'Whatever are you doing there?' He didn't answer. Wondering what was up with him and why he didn't speak, I went closer to where he was. When I got there I didn't like the look of him at all. I thought he was in some sort of a fit. I was hesitating whether to pick him up, or at once to summon assistance, when—"

Mr. Jackson paused. He looked about him with an obvious shiver.

"By George! when I think of it now, it makes me go quite creepy. Cathcart, would you mind ringing for another drop of brandy?"

The brandy was rung for. Mr. Jackson went on.

"All of a sudden, as I was stooping over Lanyon, someone touched me on the shoulder. You know, there hadn't been a sound—I hadn't heard the door open, not a thing which could suggest that anyone was approaching. Finding Lanyon like that had made me go quite queer, and when I felt that touch on my shoulder it so startled me that I fairly screeched. I jumped up to see who it was.

And when I saw"—Mr. Jackson's bandanna came into play—"who it was, I thought my eyes would have started out of my head. It was Geoff Fleming."

"Who?" came in chorus from his auditors.

"It was Geoffrey Fleming. 'Good God!—Fleming!' I cried. 'Where did you come from? I never heard you. Anyhow,

you're just in the nick of time. Lanyon's come to grief—lend me a hand with him.' I bent down, to take hold of one side of poor old Lanyon, meaning Fleming to take hold of the other. Before I had a chance of touching Lanyon, Fleming, catching me by the shoulder, whirled me round—I had had no idea the fellow was so strong, he gripped me like a vice. I was just going to ask what the dickens he meant by handling me like that, when, before I could say Jack Robinson, or even had time to get my mouth open, Fleming, darting his hand into my coat pocket, snatched my pocket-book clean out of it."

He stopped, apparently to gasp for breath.

"And, pray, what were you doing while

Mr. Fleming behaved in this exceedingly peculiar way—even for



HE WAS KNEELING IN FRONT OF GEOFFREY FLEMING'S CHAIR . . . DEAD.

Mr. Fleming?" inquired Mr. Cathcart.

"Doing!" Mr. Jackson was indignant. "Don't I tell you I was doing nothing? There was no time to do anything—it all happened in a flash. I had just come from my bankers—there were a hundred and thirty pounds in that pocket-book. When I realised that the fellow had taken it, I made a grab at him. And"—again Mr.

Jackson looked furtively about him, and once more the bandanna came into active play—"directly I did so, I don't know where he went to, but it seemed to me that he vanished into air—he was gone, like a flash of lightning. I told myself that I was mad—stark mad! but when I felt for my pocket-book, and found that that was also gone, I ran yelling to the door."

IV.

It was, as the old-time novelists used to phrase it, about three weeks after the events transpired which we have recorded in the previous chapter. Evening—after dinner. There was a goodly company assembled in the smoking room at the Climax Club. Conversation was general. They were talking of some of the curious circumstances which had attended the death of Colonel Lanyon. The medical evidence at the inquest had gone to shew that the Colonel had died of one of the numerous, and, indeed, almost innumerable, varieties of heart disease. The finding had been in accordance with the medical evidence. It seemed to be felt, by some of the speakers, that such a finding scarcely met the case.

"It's all very well," observed Mr. Cathcart, who seemed disposed to side with the coroner's jury, "for you fellows to talk, but in such a case, you must bring in some sort of verdict—and what other verdict could they bring? There was not a trace of any mark of violence to be found upon the man."

"It's my belief that he saw Fleming, and that Fleming frightened him to death."

It was Mr. Jackson who said this. Mr. Cathcart smiled a rather provoking smile.

"So far as I observed, you did not drop any hint of your belief when you were before the coroner."

"No, because I didn't want to be treated as a laughing-stock by a lot of idiots."

"Quite so; I can understand your natural objection to that, but still I don't see your line of argument. I should not have cared to question Lanyon's courage to Lanyon's face while he was living. Why should you suppose that such a man as Geoffrey Fleming was capable of such a thing as, as you put it, actually frightening him to death? I should say it was rather the other way about. I have seen Fleming turn green, with what looked very much like funk, at the sight of Lanyon."

Mr. Jackson for some moments smoked in silence.

"If you had seen Geoffrey Fleming under the circumstances in which I did, you would understand better what it is I mean."

"But, my dear Jackson, if you will forgive my saying so, it seems to me that you don't shew to great advantage in your own story. Have you communicated the fact of your having been robbed to the police?"

"I have."

"And have you furnished them with the numbers of the notes which were taken?"

"I have."

"Then, in that case, I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Fleming were brought to book any hour of any day. You'll find he has been lying close in London all the time—he soon had enough of Ceylon."

A new comer joined the group of talkers—Frank Osborne. They noticed, as he seated himself, how much he seemed to have aged of late, and how particularly shabby he seemed just then. The first remark which he made took them all aback.

"Geoff Fleming's dead."

"Dead!" cried Mr. Philpotts, who was sitting next to Mr. Osborne.

"Yes—dead. I've heard from Deecie.

He died three weeks ago."

"Three weeks ago!"

"On the day on which Lanyon died."

Mr. Cathcart turned to Mr. Jackson, with a smile.

"Then that knocks on the head your theory about his having frightened Lanyon to death; and how about your interview with him—eh, Jackson?"

Mr. Jackson did not answer. He suddenly went white. An intervention came from an unexpected quarter—from Mr. Philpotts.

"It seems to me that you are rather taking things for granted, Cathcart. I take leave to inform you that I saw Geoffrey Fleming, perhaps less than half-an-hour before Jackson did."

Mr. Cathcart stared.

"You saw him!—Philpotts!"

Then Mr. Bloxham arose and spoke.

"Yes, and I saw him, too—didn't I, Philpotts?"

Any tendency on the part of the auditors to smile was checked by the tone of exceeding bitterness in which Frank Osborne was also moved to testify.

"And I—I saw him, too!—Geoff!—dear old boy!"

"Deecie says that there were two strange things about Geoff's death. He was struck by a fit of apoplexy. He was dead within the hour. Soon after he died, the servant came running to say that the bed was empty on which the body had been lying. Deecie went to see. He says that, when he got into the room, Geoff was back again upon the bed, but it was plain enough that he had moved. His clothes and hair were in disorder, his fists were clenched, and there was a look upon his face which had not been there at the moment of his death, and which, Deecie says, seemed a look partly of rage and partly of triumph.

ran, 'Remittance to hand. It comes in rather a miscellaneous form. Thanks all the same.' Deecie can only suppose that Geoff had managed, in some way, to procure the four hundred pounds which he had lost and couldn't pay, and had also managed, in some way, to send it on to Melbourne."

There was silence when Frank Osborne ceased to speak—silence which was broken in a somewhat startling fashion.

"Who's that touched me?" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Cathcart, springing from his seat.

They stared.



THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER PROCEEDING FROM THE, APPARENTLY, VACANT SEAT.

"I have been calculating the difference between Cingalese and Greenwich time. It must have been between three and four o'clock when the servant went running to say that Geoff's body was not upon the bed,—it was about that time that Lanyon died."

He paused—and then continued—

"The other strange thing that happened was this. Deecie says that the day after Geoff died a telegram came for him, which, of course, he opened. It was an Australian wire, and purported to come from the Melbourne sporting man of whom I told you." He turned to Mr. Philpotts. "It

"Touched you!" said someone. "No one's within half a mile of you. You're dreaming, my dear fellow."

Considering the provocation was so slight, Mr. Cathcart seemed strangely moved.

"Don't tell me that I'm dreaming—someone touched me on the shoulder!—What's that?"

"That" was the sound of laughter proceeding from the, apparently, vacant seat. As if inspired by a common impulse, the listeners simultaneously moved back.

"That's Fleming's chair," said Mr. Philpotts, beneath his breath.