The Surprising Experiences of Mr. Shuttlebury Cobb

R·AUSTIN FREEMAN

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THE SURPRISING EXPERIENCES OF MR.
SHUTTLEBURY COBB

THE SIGN OF THE MERMAID

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BY

R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

NOVELS AND STORIES

BY

R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

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THE GIFTED STRANGER

THE humblest of creatures play their useful, and sometimes indispensable, parts in the great scheme of Nature. My introduction to the strange events connected with the Gifted Stranger was effected by a mere railway guard, and a mighty unceremonious one at that. He had blown his ridiculous whistle and waved his absurd flag, the engine had uttered a warning shriek, and the train had actually begun to move, when I raced wildly up the platform at Herne Hill.

"'Ere, in you get!" shouted the guard, spitting out his whistle and wrenching open a door; and, as I scrambled on the footboard, he applied a *vis a tergo* that sent me staggering across the compartment and caused the only

other occupant hastily to draw up his foot and rub that portion of his boot that corresponds to the corn on the little toe.

"Seem to be in a hurry," the proprietor of the toe remarked sourly.

"I'm not really," I replied. "It was the guard. I am sorry I trod on your foot."

"So am I," was the acid rejoinder. And the conversation languished.

I put my bag and stick in the rack and spread myself out. It was a first-class compartment, my ticket was a third, and the first stoppage was at Faversham. This was highly gratifying. We all like to get some of our own back from the railway companies.

My companion sat and stared out at the house-roofs that floated past the window as if immersed in his own reflections. He was a massively-built man with large feet, a sandy moustache, and a peculiarly foxy type of countenance. Socially I could not place him at all. He did not look like a professional man, or a farmer, or a ship-master, or, for the

matter of that, like a first-class passenger. But that was none of my business.

Presently he produced a letter from his pocket, and, holding it nearly at arm's length, slowly read it through. Now I object strongly to people who read letters under your very nose, for, try as you will, you can't help an occasional glance, and then you are annoyed with yourself. This was a long letter, written in a bold, legible hand on both sides of the paper and held out in the full light of the window. I tried to look away, but again and again my eyes unconsciously turned towards it and each time I found myself reading a sentence before I recollected myself. What made it worse was that the sentences were so very odd that they tempted me to steal a further glance to see what they meant, and my struggles to resist the temptation were not so successful as I should have wished.

"If it is really true, there is a fortune waiting for somebody."

I had read this sentence before I had the presence of mind to shut my eyes. And even while I was considering the question, If what was true ? behold ! my eyes had automatically opened and taken in another sentence.

"Your peculiar gifts and experience ought to help you to solve it."

I turned my eyes away guiltily, but could not help speculating. What were his peculiar gifts—besides a hypersensitive little toe ? And what would they help him to solve ? Before I was aware of it, my eyes were back on the paper and had lighted on this astonishing statement :

"It is in the room in which there is an iron pump and a sedan-chair."

Good Heavens ! I ejaculated inwardly. What kind of room can it be that contains an iron pump and a sedan-chair ? And what can the rest of the furniture be like ? In my amazement I stared at the letter like a fool, and at that moment I caught the eye of the owner.

It was very embarrassing. Of course I oughtn't to have looked at the letter, but then he ought not to have held it under my nose. And, in any case, it was rude of him to stare at me as he put the letter away and then to move pointedly to the other end of the compartment. I felt it very much and for some time sat gaping out of the window in great confusion, trying to ignore my fellow-passenger.

When, at length, I ventured to glance in his direction, I again caught his eye. But now there was a new expression in it; an expression of interest and lively curiosity. He held a number of official-looking blue papers in his hand, and, when he caught my glance, he hastily gathered them together—so hastily that he dropped one, and before he could snatch it up from the floor, I was able to observe that it had a photograph pasted on it. He seemed unreasonably annoyed about the accident—for it was only a man's portrait, after all. He rammed the

papers into his inside breast pocket, buttoned his coat, stuck his hands deep into his pockets and looked as if he would have liked to stick his feet in, too, and so generally put himself out of sight. For the rest of the journey he sat motionless in his corner, staring out of the window like a cataleptic waxwork, evidently determined to offer no further entertainment.

But he had given me some food for reflection to go on with. There was the room, for instance, which contained a pump, a sedan-chair and "It." What on earth could "It" be? A stuffed elephant, perhaps, or a full-size model of the *Victory*, or some similar portable trifle. And then my companion's "peculiar gifts and experience," what could that mean? Was he a clairvoyant or a crystal-gazer? He didn't look like one. But there was that photograph, and here my thoughts wandered off into speculative channels, which led nowhere, as I had not his peculiar gifts.

From these wanderings I presently came back to my own affairs. I had been sent down to Canterbury by old Morlett, our senior partner, on business connected with a property called Elham Manor. The rather ruinous old house had been taken by an American gentleman, Mr. Jezreel P. Damper, for one year on trial, with the understanding that, if he liked it, he should take it on lease. He had already been given possession but had apparently not entered into residence, and my business was to inspect the premises and make local arrangements for the execution of such repairs as I thought necessary, consulting with Mr. Damper if he was to be found. When I had done this I was to take a fortnight's holiday.

At Canterbury West my gifted fellow-traveller alighted and walked slowly towards the barrier. I bustled past him, and unostentatiously presenting my third-class ticket, hurried out of the station, down the approach into the High Street. Jubilantly I took my

way along the venerable thoroughfare towards the massive towers of the West Gate, anxiously considering where I should put up for the night, until my eye lighted on the jovial sign of the Falstaff Inn. Now a real painted sign is in these days a thing to be thankful for, and such a painted sign, too, to say nothing of the fine forged ironwork. I halted to admire the portrait of jolly Sir John, then, on the front of the house, I descried the winged wheel of the C.T.C., whereupon I dived in through the low doorway and demanded high tea and a night's lodging.

There is great comfort in an old-fashioned inn with a painted signboard and a landlord who knows what's what. I sat complacently in the coffee-room and watched a minor canon, disguised as a waiter, prepare the table for afternoon service and vanish silently. I sniffed a growing aroma of grilled ham, and when, anon, the canon reappeared, staggering majestically with a Falstaffian tea-tray, I

drew up to the table, poured myself out a bumper of tea, and decapitated a soft-boiled egg at a single stroke. And at that very moment the coffee-room door opened and in walked my peculiarly gifted fellow-traveller.

He did not appear to notice me, which was uncomfortable. I am not a conspicuous man, but I am quite visible to the naked eye at a distance of seven feet, which was the distance that separated us as he sat at the other end of the table pretending that I didn't exist. It was not only uncomfortable, it was offensive. Perhaps his toe still rankled in his breast—if I may use the expression—or my inadvertent glance at his letter was still unforgiven. In any case his glum and silent presence at the table destroyed all pleasure in my meal. It was neither solitude nor company. Hurriedly I gobbled up eggs, ham and toast, drained the tea-pot to the last drop, rose from the table and stalked out of the room.

A couple of minutes later I was once more

strolling up the High Street, debating whether I should begin my business at once or wait till the morrow. Entering the city by the West Gate, I paused on the bridge to look down on the quiet river, the flock of resting boats, and the picturesque houses with their thresholds awash, leaning over their unsteady reflections, when, chancing to look back, to my surprise and annoyance I observed the gifted stranger sauntering towards me.

It was very singular. I had left the inn only a few minutes and when I came away he had but just begun his meal. This indecorous haste in feeding further prejudiced me against him, which, together with a dim suspicion that he was following me, made me decide to get clear of him. Starting forward, I strode down a by-street, darted through an archway and along an alley and then traversing a narrow lane once more found myself in the High Street.

A careful look round showed me that the gifted one was not in sight. Probably he had

gone down the by-street and missed the archway. I was turning to resume my walk when I perceived straight before me the entrance of the City Museum. Now museums have a fascination for me, especially provincial museums, which are apt to contain antiquities of local interest. The present one, too, offered a sanctuary from my gifted acquaintance, for if he was really following me, he would probably spend the rest of the day scouring the streets in search of me. Accordingly I entered the museum and began to browse round the galleries, of which the first two that I entered were tenanted by a dreary company of stuffed birds. From the ornithological rooms I passed to a picture gallery furnished abundantly with examples of the old masters of the "brown and shiny" school. This was not very thrilling. What was more to the point was a notice on the wall directing visitors to the Coplin Collection of local antiquities. Following the direction of the pointing hand, I started forthwith

along a narrow passage that led to a distant annexe, which, to judge by its present condition, was seldom trodden by the foot of man. At the end of the passage I came to a large room, at the threshold of which I halted with a gasp of recognition. For the first thing that met my eye was a sedan-chair, and the second, a curious iron pump.

This, then, was the mysterious room. The next question was What was "It?" I ran my eye over the various objects displayed confidingly on tables, unguarded by glass covers. "Leather corset, said to have been worn by Queen Elizabeth," and extremely contracted in the region of the gizzard. That wasn't it. "Ivory recorder with silver key." That wasn't it. "Wheel-lock musket," "Child's Shoe," "Carved horn drinking-cup," none of these fitted the implied description. And, at last, I came to the veritable "It."

No doubt was possible. I identified it at the first glance. Mystery and secrecy exhaled from it like a subtle perfume. Concentrating

my attention to a perfect focus, I bent over the table to examine it minutely.

It was a silver mirror, a small piece, of charming design and exquisite workmanship, wrought—mirror and frame together—from a single plate of silver. The few square inches of polished surface were surrounded by a broad, richly ornamented frame, the design of which included an encompassing ribbon which supported an oblong pendant. And here was where the mystery came in. For on ribbon and pendant was engraved, in delightfully picturesque "old face" lettering, the following strange inscription:

"A Harp and a Cross and goode redd golde,
Beneath ye Cross with ye Harp full nigh,
Ankores three atte ye foote of a tree
And a Maid from ye Sea on high.
Take itt. Tis thine. Others have stepped over.
Simon Glynn. 1683."

I read through this poetic gem a half a dozen times and was none the wiser then. In sporting parlance, it was a "fair knock out." I could make nothing of it. At length I turned to the descriptive label for enlightenment—and didn't get it.

"Small silver mirror, discovered in 1734, concealed in an aumbry in Elham Manor House. This house was built by Simon Glynn, a goldsmith and an official of the mint under the Commonwealth, who lived in it for many years. The aumbry was discovered behind the panelling of the dining-room during some repairs. The mirror is believed to be Glynn's own work and the doggerel verses engraved on the frame are supposed to refer to some hidden treasure, but their exact meaning has never been ascertained. See Boteler's 'Manor Houses of Kent,' for an account of Simon Glynn and Elham Manor House."

Here was news indeed! Elham Manor! I had the keys in my pocket at the very

moment! And I had full authority to carry out any structural repairs that I thought necessary! And the cryptogram had never been deciphered!

Now I understood that mysterious sentence in my friend's letter: "There is a fortune waiting for somebody." Yes, indeed! Perhaps it was waiting for me. I seemed to understand, too, why the gifted one had dogged me in that singular manner. No doubt his letter had contained some helpful tips and he suspected that I had read them —and I wished I had, now. But he little suspected that I had the run of Elham Manor, and I mustn't let him if I could help it.

Feverishly I copied into my note-book the inscription and the label. Then I wandered round the room, thinking hard and looking at the exhibits. Should I repair to the adjoining library and look up Boteler, or should I make a bee-line for the Manor House? I turned over this question before the pump, the shoe, the pistol and the

recorder, but could not make up my mind. I cogitated as I stood in front of the sedan-chair, vainly seeking to peer in through the curtained windows. In sheer absence of mind, I tried the fastening, and when, to my surprise, the door came open, revealing the snugly-cushioned interior, I became suddenly possessed by an insane curiosity to feel what the inside of a sedan-chair was like. Yielding to the impulse, I backed in and sat down, and then, to complete the sensation, I drew the door to, when it shut with an audible click.

I sat in the semi-darkness turning over my problem. Should I risk the publicity of the reading-room or go direct to the Manor House? And what the deuce could Simon Glynn mean by that absurd doggerel? The sedan-chair was extremely comfortable, and the dim light that filtered in through the worn curtains was pleasant and conducive to thought. I enjoyed myself amazingly—until my ear caught the sound of approaching

footsteps and an unmistakable clerical voice. Then, thinking that it was high time to move, I gave a gentle push at the door.

But the confounded thing wouldn't budge. I pushed a little harder, but the door only creaked protestingly. It evidently had a snap catch. In short, I was locked in. I was about to try if the front window could be let down when the footsteps entered the room and a sonorous clerical voice arose in wordy exposition. I broke out into a cold perspiration and hardly dared to breathe —especially as the dusty interior was inducing a distinct tendency to sneeze.

"Here is a sedan-chair," the voice expounded, "a vehicle which illustrates—leave that handle alone, James, you are not allowed to touch—which illustrates the primitive modes of locomotion in use among our forefathers. You will observe——"

Here I seized my nose with both hands. My eyes watered. My shoulders heaved. I tried to hold my breath, but it was no go.

I felt it coming—coming—and at last it came.

"*Ha chow!*"

The expounding voice ceased. There was a deathly silence. And then, in stern accents:

"How many more times am I to remind you, Alfred, of the indecorousness of sneezing in public places?"

"Please, sir, it wasn't me," piped a small, protesting voice.

"'It wasn't *me*'! You mean, I presume, 'It was not *I*.' And don't make your bad manners and bad grammar worse by prevarication. I heard you. Let us move on."

They moved on. The solemn exposition continued. And then they moved off. As their footsteps retreated, I made a tentative attack on the front window, but hardly had I grasped the webbing strap when my ear caught a faint creak. There was someone in the room, still, a person with one

slightly creaky boot. I heard the creak travel slowly round the room, halting at intervals. Then it made a prolonged halt—in the neighbourhood of the mirror, as I judged by the sound. And meanwhile I sat and perspired with anxiety.

Presently the creaking boot moved on again. It travelled more quickly now; and it began to travel in my direction. Slowly, gradually it approached, nearer and nearer it came, until, at last, it was opposite my prison. And there it paused. I held my breath until I was like to burst. How much longer was the idiot going to stand there staring like a fool at an ordinary, common-place sedan-chair?

I was on the very verge of suffocation when something touched the handle. Then it turned slowly; the door opened, and there—yes—my prophetic soul! it was—my highly gifted friend. He looked in at me with sour surprise and hastily closed his note-book. But he made no remark. After a prolonged

stare he made an attempt to shut the door, but I had the presence of mind to stick my foot out. Then he turned away. I listened to his footsteps retreating down the passage at a slow saunter until they were faint in the distance; when their rhythm suddenly changed to that of a quick walk. He was off somewhere in a great hurry—probably to the library to consult Boteler.

I stepped out of my prison with my mind made up. I would go and make a preliminary inspection of Elham Manor and read up Boteler when I had seen it. Striding briskly down the passage and through the galleries I came out into the street and turned towards the road to Sturry. I knew my way, for I had looked it up on the Ordnance Map. The old house stood on a side road between Sturry and the village of Bouldersby, only a mile or two out of the town.

It was a pleasant summer evening and the sun was still shining brightly as I came out

on the country road and took my way blithely past farm and meadow and tree-shaded oast. About a mile and a half from the city I came upon a finger-post inscribed "Bouldersby and Hawkham," and pointing up a by-road bordered by lofty elms. Taking this direction I walked on for another mile or so until a bend in the road brought me suddenly to what I recognised at once as my destination, a low, red-brick wall abutting on the road and above it the stepped gables and lichen-covered roof of an ancient and highly picturesque house.

I walked along in front of the wall until I reached the iron gates, and here I halted to reconnoitre. For that ridiculous jingle of old Simon Glynn's rang in my head anew as I looked at the front of the old house. The iron gates were hung from two massive brick pillars, each surmounted by a stone pineapple, and on the front of one pillar was carved in high relief a shield bearing a St. George's cross, while

the other bore a relief of a shield with an Irish harp.

Here, then, were the Harp and Cross plain enough, but the other items mentioned in the doggerel were not so obvious. It is true that, between the windows above the porch, was a carved brick niche containing a statue of a young woman, and a very charming little statue it was, evidently the portrait of a young Puritan lady; but whether she came from the sea or the land there was nothing to show. There was, however, a good deal to show what interpretation had been put on the doggerel rhyme, for the flagged path from the gate to the porch seemed to have suffered from a succession of earthquakes. And the excavators had not stopped at the path; the pillar that bore the Cross device was sensibly out of the perpendicular, showing that its very foundations had been rooted up, and the brick-work itself showed numerous patches where treasure-seekers had bored into it. Evidently the gifted one and I

were by no means the first explorers in this field.

I had just taken the keys from my pocket, and was selecting the one that belonged to the gate, when the silence was broken by a faint rhythmical sound from the road round the bend. It was the creak of a boot—one boot, not a pair—and as I listened, it seemed to me that I had heard it before. I slipped the keys back into my pocket—for it would be better not to be seen entering the house—and was beginning to saunter up the road, when the creak materialised into my gifted competitor, coming round the bend like a lamp-lighter. He slowed down suddenly when he saw me, and as I strolled round another turn in the road, I observed that he had stopped and was gazing about him with his back to the house, as if he had not noticed it.

I walked on towards Bouldersby considering the situation. My respected rival was evidently nervous and suspicious of me. He

thought I knew a good deal more than I did. And this suggested the question: How much did he know? Apparently that letter had contained some useful information which he suspected me of having extracted. But if it was true that the treasure was still undiscovered, and he had some private information that I had not, perhaps it would be as well to keep an eye on him and see if I could pick up a hint or two from his proceedings.

I had just reached this sage conclusion and was on the point of turning back, when I perceived, a little way ahead, a small roadside inn; a picturesque little house, standing back from the road behind a small green, on which was a signpost bearing the sign of the Royal George. The pleasant aspect of the house led me to approach and reconnoitre when I observed that it had a back wing extending into a garden and that the garden ran down to the river and adjoined an orchard. I approached past the little bay window (in

which was a card inscribed with the legend "New-laid Eggs") and looked in at the door. It was a most primitive inn. A couple of barrels on stands and a row of mugs on a shelf formed its entire outfit, and the only persons visible were an old woman, who sat sewing busily in a Wycombe armchair, and a corpulent tabby cat.

The homely comfort of the place, the quiet and the proximity of the river, offered an agreeable suggestion. As the old lady looked up and smiled a greeting, I advanced and ventured to enquire:

"Do you happen to have any accommodation for a lodger?"

Mine hostess nodded and smiled as she replied: "Yes, they're all new-laid. I keeps my own fowls and feeds 'em myself."

This seemed irrelevant. Raising my voice considerably, I asked:

"Could you put me up here for a week or so?"

"Oh, apples!" she answered doubtfully.

"No, they're hardly ripe yet. It's a bit early, you see."

The reply was a little disconcerting. But its dogged as does it. I tried again. With an ear-splitting yell that was like to have swept the mugs off the shelf, I repeated my question—and was asked in return whether I would have mild or bitter ?

It seemed hopeless. But I liked the look of the place. It was scrupulously clean and well-kept ; and the rustic quiet, the pleasant garden and the river flowing past, urged me to new efforts. I scribbled my question on a scrap of paper which I handed to the old lady ; but observing that this seemed to give offence, I hastily added a line explaining that I was suffering from a sore throat and had lost my voice. This completely appeased her and she allowed me to continue the negotiations on paper, of which the upshot was that, if I was content to "live plain and not expect too much waiting on," I could have the small bedroom

overlooking the garden and move in to-morrow evening.

I walked back towards Elham Manor in high spirits. I had secured pleasant country lodgings and a convenient base from which to carry out the repairs and explorations on the old house and keep a watch on my rival. That was a good start, and now I would make a preliminary inspection of the house—if I could do so unobserved—and then look up Boteler's history.

When I came in sight of the Manor House, my rival was nowhere to be seen. But I approached warily in case he had climbed over into the grounds to begin his explorations, and I had a good look round before inserting my key into the gate. As I turned the key, I noted the excellent condition of the lock—which seemed to have been recently oiled—and the same thing struck me when I unlocked and opened the front door. Apparently our tenant, Mr. Damper, had begun his restorations with an oil-can.

I walked with echoing footsteps through the hall and into the empty rooms, wondering dimly how I should communicate with Mr. Damper, but thinking more of Simon Glynn and his hidden treasure. The fine old house was falling slowly but surely into dceay. Such repairs as would make it really habitable would leave no corner of it undisturbed and must surely bring to light the secret hiding-place if it really existed. Thus reflecting, I wandered from room to room, noting the dilapidations and speculating as to the whereabouts of the treasure, until I came to a chamber at the end of the building which was at a slightly lower level. Descending the short flight of stairs, I tried the massive door, and, finding it locked, produced the bunch of labelled keys. As I inserted the first key, I thought I detected a faint sound of movement from within, and the unpleasant idea of rats suggested itself, but I worked away until I found a key—labelled " Butler's Pantry "—that turned in the lock. The

heavy door swung open with a loud creak, and I entered the room, which was in almost total darkness, the only source of light being a few chinks in the shutters.

Dark as it was, however, there was light enough for me to see a very strange and unexpected object, to wit, a small but massive chest which stood on the bumpy oaken floor near to one window. I drew near to examine it, and then found that it was fastened only by a bolt, though it was clearly intended to be secured with a padlock. In mere idle curiosity, I drew back the bolt and raised the lid, and then I got a mighty surprise. For even in that dim light it was easy to see that the contents were of no ordinary value. Rings, pendants, bracelets, brooches, glittered and sparkled in the dim light; gold chains were heaped together like samples of cable in a ship-chandler's, and the interstices of the pile were filled in with a litter of unmounted stones.

I was positively staggered. What made

it still more astonishing was that this was obviously not Simon Glynn's treasure. The chest was a new one and the jewels were not only fresh and bright but were manifestly modern in character. That I could see at a glance. But what this treasure was, how it came here, and to whom it belonged, were questions to which I could suggest no answer.

I knelt down by the chest and began to turn over the articles one by one. I am no great judge of jewellery, but it was evident that some of these things were of very great value. Here was a pendant, for instance, of which the central diamond was half an inch in diameter. That alone must be worth some hundreds of pounds. I picked it up to look at it more closely—and at that instant both my wrists were seized in a vice-like grip. I dropped the pendant and, uttering a yell of surprise, began to struggle to free myself. But the grip only tightened; gradually my hands were forced together on my chest; something cold touched my wrists;

there was a metallic click, and, glancing down, my astonished gaze lighted on a pair of handcuffs.

"Now, it's no use kicking up a dust," said a voice close to my ear. "I've got the cuffs on you, so you'd better come along quiet."

I twisted my head round to get a view of the speaker, and succeeded in catching a glimpse of half a face. But that was enough. It was—my prophetic soul again—the gifted investigator. And one of his peculiar gifts I was now able to sample—a most uncommon degree of muscular strength.

"I've got you, you know," he resumed unpleasantly. "You can't get away, so you'd better chuck up the sponge and come quietly."

This was all very well, but I am not a naturally submissive person. I made no comment, but, straightening myself suddenly like a mechanical jumping frog, I capsized him backwards and began to make play with

my legs. It was an undignified affair, I must admit. We rolled over and over on the floor; we pummelled and prodded one another ambiguously and without purpose, and once I cut short an eloquent remonstrance by planting my knee in the middle of his abdomen. But the odds were against me, and the end of it was that I reclined on my back with his knee on my chest and listened to the terms of surrender.

But now a most astonishing thing befell. Even as he leaned over me and expounded the folly of my conduct, I was aware of a dim shape behind him, noiselessly approaching. A face—a foreign-looking face, with a waxed moustache and fiercely-cocked eyebrows—appeared over his shoulder and slowly drew nearer and nearer. I gazed with fascination, and the words of wisdom trickled unheeded into my ears; and still the face drew nearer. Then came a sudden movement, a shout of surprise from the gifted one, another shout, and a sound of sixteen heavy

portmanteaux falling down a steep flight of stairs.

Released from the weight of my assailant, I sat up and watched events. My eyes, accustomed by now to the dim light, took in a heap of squirming humanity from which issued a stream of breathless objurgation. I counted six legs—all in violent movement—and reasonably assumed the existence of three individuals. One pair of legs, incomparably the most active, I identified speculatively, by the stockinged feet, as those of my late assailant, for he must have removed his creaky boots to have approached me so silently, which now placed him at a disadvantage, as the other two warriors wore their boots—and used them.

Presently, from the writhing mass, a man partially detached himself and began to angle for the wildly-kicking feet with a loop of cord. For some time he was unsuccessful and the feet had the best of it—unless his head was unusually hard—but at last the

loop slipped over the ankles and was drawn tight; on which the gifted one made appropriate comments in terms unsuitable for verbatim report and ending in a muffled snort. The loop having been secured by one or two round turns and a knot, the two strangers rose, breathing heavily and rubbing certain apparently painful spots on their persons. Meanwhile, my late adversary lay motionless and silent, his legs lashed together and his wrists secured by handcuffs; and now I understood that curious snort that had cut short the flow of his eloquence, for I observed that my rescuers had tied a gag over his mouth.

I ventured, at this juncture, to draw attention to my own condition. But it was unnecessary. The two strangers approached me, still rubbing themselves. I held out my manacled hands to have the gyves unlocked, when, to my astonishment, one of the foreign rascals pushed me down and sat on my stomach while the other took a few turns

with a cord round my ankles. I protested vigorously.

"Here! I say! You're making a mist ——" I didn't get any further, for one of the foreign brutes dabbed something into my mouth and tied it there with a string behind my neck. Then he issued a command to the other miscreant in some ridiculous jargon which I suppose served them in place of a language, and the other villain hurried out of the room. He returned in less than a minute and made some report in his wretched substitute for speech, and the two wretches then picked up my unfortunate and gifted acquaintance and carried him away.

I lay on the floor reflecting, with profound misgivings, on my alarming situation. Evidently I and my rival had unwittingly discovered the hiding-place of a gang of thieves, and those scoundrels were going to put us out of the way of doing them any mischief. That was clear. But what was our destination? Were they going to drop

us in the river? Or would they convey us to some cellar or vault and knock us on the head? Either possibility was equally likely and equally unpleasant.

My meditations were cut short by the reappearance of the two miscreants, who, without a word, picked me up by my arms and ankles and marched away with me. Up the stairs, into the hall and out through this on to the flagged path, we went, like a somewhat hurried and premature rustic funeral; and we were just approaching the front gates when another very singular thing happened. I was being borne head first, while my captors marched facing forward, and I was thus able to command a view of the rear. Now, as we approached the gate, chancing to turn my eyes towards the flanking wall that separated the garden from the orchard, to my unutterable surprise I saw three heads slowly rise from behind it. Each head was, naturally, furnished with a face, and each face was adorned with one of the

very broadest grins that I have ever seen. It was really a most astonishing affair.

Outside the gates a closed fly was drawn up, otherwise not a creature was in sight. The door was opened by the driver and I was bundled in and deposited on the back seat, the other half of which was occupied by my gifted friend, whose boots had been considerately placed on his knees. The two ruffians entered and shut the door, the driver mounted to his seat, and away we went at a smart trot.

I was relieved to note that we were not being driven towards the river, and was rather surprised to find that our route lay towards the town. But it was not merely towards the town; it soon became evident that the town itself was our objective. The audacity of these villains was positively staggering! Heedless of the risk of detection, these miscreants bore us, manacled, bound and gagged, not merely through the outlying suburbs, but into the very city. Jost-

ling cabs, carts, vans and carriages, past the teeming footways and busy shops, we passed unblushingly into the High Street itself, and then, turning down a well-frequented side-street, came at length to a halt. I directed my astonished eyes out of the near window, hardly able to believe in such brazen audacity; and the first object they encountered was a blue glass lamp bearing the inscription "Police Station."

The driver sprang down and opened the door, the two "foreign devils" hooked me out of the seat and carried me swiftly in through the open doorway to a large office, where they deposited me on the floor and hurried away without a word. A police inspector and a sergeant looked in amazement from me to the departing ruffians and then looked at one another.

"Rum go, this," said the inspector, with another doubtful glance at me. "I hope it's all right, but they'd no authority to make arrests."

Here the two ruffians returned, bearing my unfortunate companion, at the sight of whom the inspector's face assumed a distinctly careworn expression.

"I seem to know this man," he said in a low voice. Then, addressing our captors, he asked: "Who are these two prisoners?"

"Zey are two of ze gang," the senior ruffian replied carelessly; "I do not know vich two. I find zem quarrelling about ze booty. I catch zem. Zey are here. Enough," and he began superciliously to roll a cigarette.

"Take off the gags, sergeant," said the inspector, and as he spoke he, himself, untied mine and pulled me up into a sitting position, while the sergeant did the same for my fellow-sufferer.

"Now," said the inspector, addressing the latter, "what's your name?"

"My name, sir," replied the gifted one with as majestic an air as is possible to a man who is seated on the floor with his feet tied together, "is Burbler, Detective Sergeant

Burbler of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"Hanged if I didn't think so," murmured the inspector. "Take off the cuffs, sergeant and untie his feet. You've made a mistake, gentlemen. You've arrested one of our officers."

"I sink not," the foreign person replied haughtily. "Zat man is a criminal. Look at 'is face. I haf experience"; and he calmly lighted his cigarette.

"You'll have some more experience when I get these handcuffs off," said Burbler; but here the inspector interposed, forbidding violence and demanding explanations.

"How did this affair happen?" he asked.

"I'll tell you," Burbler replied, savagely. "I was sent down here to look out for this Chicago-St.Petersburg gang. From information received I was going to Elham Manor where I expected to find traces of them, when I met this man Polopsky" (here he actually pointed to me!). "I recognised him at

once from his photograph—I've got it here," and he pulled out from his pocket the photograph which I had seen in the train, and showed it to the inspector, who examined it closely, and, having remarked that it " seemed rather a poor likeness," returned it. " Well," pursued Burbler, " I followed him and saw him hanging about Elham Manor, and, when he saw me and sneaked away, I got into the house by a back window and waited. Presently he came back and let himself in with a key and went to a locked room and entered that with another key. I followed him in and caught him with a lot of the stolen property in his possession, a whole trunk-load of it."

" Where is the stolen property now ? " the inspector asked.

" I suppose it's in the house still," replied Burbler, and he continued furiously : " Well, I had just overpowered Polopsky and got the cuffs on him and was about to secure the property, when these two blithering

lunatics rushed in, and—well, you see what happened. I'm going to prosecute them for assault and unlawful arrest."

"Better not," said the inspector. "Russian Secret Police, you know. Exceeded their powers, of course, but better not make a fuss. You are going to charge Polopsky, I suppose?"

Burbler grunted assent, and turning to me said:

"Louis Polopsky, I arrest you on the charge of burglary and forgery and I caution you that anything you may say will be used in evidence against you. Do you want to make any statement?"

"I should like to remark," I replied, "that my name is not Polopsky; and that, if any damage is done to the premises of Elham Manor through your coming away and leaving the door and gates unlocked, I shall hold you responsible."

The inspector looked at me suspiciously and asked: "What do you say your name is?"

"My name," I replied, "is Shuttlebury Cobb, of the Firm of Morlett and Griller, solicitors to the landlord of Elham Manor, and I am, at present, in charge of the property."

I handed the inspector some papers and a draft agreement that I had in my pocket, together with a bunch of labelled keys; and while he looked them over, the rather chap-fallen detective put on his boots.

"It seems to me," I continued, "that you have all been making rather free with our premises. May I ask if those other three men were some of your people?"

"What other three men?" the inspector asked in a rather startled tone.

"The men who were watching us as we left the house."

"*What men?*" demanded the inspector, the two foreign devils and Sergeant Burbler in a frantic chorus.

"The men who were in the orchard, watching us over the wall."

Burbler sprang to his feet, with one boot unlaced. For one moment the four officers and the station sergeant stared at me in silence; for another moment they stared at one another; then, with one accord, they made a rush for the door.

I followed them out. The fly was still waiting at the kerb, and the five men were endeavouring to enter it simultaneously by the same doorway. I watched their frantic struggles. I saw them finally pack themselves in; and, when the inspector had snorted out the destination, I saw the fly drive off. Then I slowly wended my way back to the Falstaff and bespoke a substantial dinner.

UP to that eventful day on which my firm sent me down to Canterbury on business connected with the tenancy of Elham Manor, the even tenor of my life had been uninterrupted by any cataclysms or abnormal occurrences. But from the moment in which I set forth on that apparently prosaic errand, I seemed to be taken into the charge of some exuberantly sportive Jinn. The whole world appeared to go mad with one accord. I became the plaything of erratic chance, the football of circumstance; and circumstance seemed to have a decided leaning towards the Rugby game. . . .

After the explanation at the police-station,

I naturally thought I had heard the last of that absurd business.

But I hadn't.

Our tenant not having arrived yet, I had a good deal of time on my hands, for I could not begin the repairs in the house until I had seen him ; and the fact that I had found Detective-Sergeant Burbler still prowling about the premises, induced me to keep clear of the place for the present and devote myself to a study of the surrounding country.

One of my earliest jaunts was along the road that leaves the city towards the north ; a pleasant, sylvan road though somewhat trying as to the gradients.

"Wot ye not wher ther stont a litel toun,
Which that icleped is Bob-up-and-doun
Under the Ble, in Canterbury way ? "

That was the road only that I passed Harbledown on my left hand and "bobbed

up and down" through Blean and across the hills beyond until I finally bobbed down past Bostal mill to the seashore at Whitstable.

It was a delightful walk—with one exception. There happened to be another man going the same way. That is the worst of country roads. In a city street the passing multitudes leave one solitary and undisturbed, but on a quiet country road, a single foot-passenger, going in the same direction, destroys the solitude completely. Naturally he walks at about your own pace. If you try to outwalk him or lag behind, he occupies your attention; if you try to ignore him, his obtrusive figure ahead or his irritating footfalls from behind break in continually on your meditations. My present companion wore spectacles and looked like a German. Not that I would reproach him on that account. I don't suppose he wore spectacles by choice, and, of course, the poor creature couldn't help

being a German. I merely record the facts.

At the top of Bostal Hill he halted to survey the Harbour down below through a pair of prism binoculars, and I took the opportunity to nip on ahead and rid myself of him.

It was in an oyster-shop near Whitstable Harbour that the plot began to thicken. In spite of a substantial tea at the Falstaff, the sight of dainty and delicate natives peeping coyly from barrels at the shop door, acted as a lodestone to draw me into the little parlour, where already a couple of gourmets were seated before a Gargantuan dish, regardless of the interested observers who peered in through the window. I ordered a dozen "royals," and, taking a seat at an empty table, entertained myself with the conversation of the other two customers, pending the arrival of my own meal.

"And you really think I might venture,

doctor ? " said one of them, a dyspeptic, nervous-looking young man, casting a look of gluttonous alarm at the dish.

The jovial faced medicus peppered an oyster with deliberate care.

" Well," said he, " it's your own affair, you know. Chances about a million to one against enteric in these beds. Still, I shouldn't eat too many "—there were two dozen on the dish. " Of course, at my age the risk is infinitesimal, but at yours—well, you must use your own judgment," and here the doctor diminished his own chance of immunity by one millionth and smacked his lips.

Nearly ten minutes elapsed. I had just poured myself out a glass of stout as a preliminary to the feast, the doctor had swallowed his sixteenth oyster with an audible " gollop," and his companion was apprehensively munching his last slice of brown bread and butter, when there lurched into the room a large man of seafaring aspect, wearing

a seal-skin cap. He ordered half a dozen oysters—" Qvick, if you please "—and seated himself at my table, apologising civilly with a slight foreign accent, for finishing his cigarette.

" Zome English people opject to smoke at meal-times," he remarked.

I assured him that I had no objection whatever, on which he thanked me and began to converse affably, informing me that he was the master of a timber ship from Riga, that he was going to sea that very night, and that he would be glad to be clear of the approaches to the Thames.

" Ach ! But it is a bad river, zis London river. Shoals and sandts, sandts and shoals everyvere. Noding but sandts and shoals."

As he mentioned the detested shoals, he shook his head and glared at me reproachfully, as if I had put them there, so that I felt almost constrained to apologise for their presence, and might actually have done so

had not the stream of conversation been interrupted by the entry of the proprietor with a small dish.

"Not very peckish this evening, Captain Popoff," he remarked as he set the dish before his customer.

"No," replied the captain; "my appetide is spoil. Zis night I leave Englandt. Perhaps I come not again, and zen I see my goodt friendts again never."

His methods of dealing with oysters were summary in the extreme. The succulent natives might have been some sort of unsavoury medicament to judge by the way in which he disposed of them. One after another they vanished from their shells, unseasoned and unsavoured, even as grains of barley are spirited into the gizzard of a hungry fowl. In a couple of minutes the dish was cleared, and the captain, having swigged off his glass of stout, heaved a sigh of relief and drew from his pocket a gaily-coloured packet of cigarettes.

"Vill you take one?" he asked, holding the packet towards me. "Zey are very choice. You do not buy cigarettes like zese in Englandt."

It was no empty boast. The cigarette that I lighted was quite the best that I had ever smoked and I hastened to tell him so.

"Zen," said he with a gratified smile, "you will allow me to present you the packet. I have plenty more. No? Zen, perhaps, if you are not occupied you vill come and see my ship, and I vill give you a box of cigarettes for a keepsake and you shall drink a glass of vodka with me in my cabin. How do you say?"

I accepted the invitation with pleasure, and accordingly, when we had paid our reckonings, the captain and I set forth together for the harbour. As we passed in through the gates I became aware of that kind of awakening among the shipping that heralds the approach of high water. The

ordinary business of the day was over. The high stages from which the coal whippers take flying leaps into space at the ends of their hoisting ropes, stood idle, and the grimy baskets rested on heaps of "slack" beside the sieves. Mariners, washed and unwashed, crawled up the quay-face like geckoes with no visible means of support, on their way townward, or lounged about in groups, spinning interminable yarns. The last of the oyster smacks had taken up her moorings, the whelk boats lay stranded above tide-marks on the beach outside, and everything bore an aspect of repose excepting the outgoing craft, which were all in a state of ferment, hoisting sails and hauling on warps, all agog to get out on the top of the tide.

Alongside the end of the pier and opposite a great stack of newly landed timber, lay a smallish barquentine; a shabby looking craft with rusty white sides and a green painted underbody, intended to delude the unwary

into the belief that she was coppered. Most of her sails were hoisted, and two or three sailors were aloft loosing the remainder as the captain and I approached. By the name *ANNA : RIGA*, painted on her counter, I judged this to be our destination, and I was right.

"'Zis is my ship," said Captain Popoff. "Ve have just time for a glass and a little smoke before ze tide is full. Zen I shall vish you farewell."

He stepped down on to the rail, and, grasping a shroud, held out his hand to me and we both dropped down on deck close to the fore hatch, which was still open.

"Ve are a little untidy," said the captain, "but you vill excuse. Shall I go first?"

Rather to my surprise, he stepped to the open hatch and began to descend a fixed iron ladder. It seemed a queer way to approach the cabin, but I made no remark and

cautiously let myself down after him until I stood on the shingle ballast.

"It is very dark," said he, peering into the pitchy gloom aft. "Perhaps, as you are a stranger, I had better get a light to show you ze vay."

With this, he returned up the ladder; but no sooner had he reached the deck, than someone clapped the covers on the hatch, leaving me in total darkness. I thought this rather odd, but still had no misgivings until some three or four minutes had passed without any sign of the captain's reappearing. Then, as a clatter of falling ropes and running gear from above bespoke active preparations for departure, and sundry bumps and grinding noises suggested that the vessel was actually in motion, a sudden alarm seized me. Climbing up the ladder, I tried to push up the hatch cover, and, finding that it was securely fastened above, I fell to battering on it with my fists. This, however, produced no result, excepting a

very uncomfortable soreness of my knuckles, and even when I fetched up a large stone from the ballast and hammered with it for a good five minutes, my demonstrations evoked no response.

Reluctantly and with a sinking heart, I descended the ladder and sat down on the dry shingle to think over the situation. That the captain could have forgotten me was incredible ; that my persistent hammering on the hatch-cover had passed unnoticed was beyond belief. The only alternative was that I had been kidnapped, that I was being spirited away, though for what purpose I was unable to conceive. The whole set of circumstances was incomprehensible. Apparently I had fallen into the hands of some sort of brigands or pirates ; and yet to think of this harmless old timber knacker as a pirate seemed positively grotesque. However, the one fact was indisputable. I was being carried away forcibly to some foreign port—probably Riga ; unless I was to be

robbed and thrown overboard on the way. And as I reached this conclusion, a barely perceptible heave of the ballast on which I sat told me that the *Anna* was clear of the harbour and fairly started on her voyage.

I don't know how long I sat moping in the darkness of the *Anna's* hold. It can have been but a short time, though it seemed to me that hours had passed since I came down that fatal ladder. And as I sat there, memories of the past and speculations as to the future chased one another through my brain. I turned over the strange events of the last few days; I thought of the queer old silver mirror that I had seen in the museum at Canterbury and the quaint doggerel verses inscribed on it; I conned over the absurd jingle of which I had a copy in my pocket, and which I had dimly hoped might guide me to the discovery of Simon Glynn's treasure, hidden somewhere in the old manor-house—that grand old

house that I should probably never see again. And I thought of the pleasant holiday that I was to have enjoyed in the old city and the sweet country around it; and then by a swift transition, from the might-have-been I turned to the future—dark, threatening, inscrutable.

Suddenly I was aroused by a noise overhead. The hatch-covers were raised, a shaft of light shot down into the hold, and the captain's head appeared in the square opening above.

"Vould you please to come up, sir?" he asked politely.

Would I not! No lamplighter ever shinned up a ladder more actively than did I, with the purple sky above and that black cavern beneath. In a trice I was on deck, gazing sternly into the rather sheepish face of Captain Popoff.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain?" I demanded.

"You vill hear now," he replied, avoiding

my eye. "It is not my affair. I cannot help it. I do as I am toldt. Zat is all. Zis vay, if you please."

I followed him slowly along the deck, taking in the position of affairs as I went. The ship appeared to be crossing the estuary towards the north, for I could see over the port rail the distant Isle of Sheppey, while, directly astern, the low Kentish shore with the twin spires of Reculver loomed faint and far away in the warm evening light. The captain preceded me on to the low poop to the deck-house door, which was opposite the wheel and down a short flight of stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he halted, and, pushing open the door, invited me to enter; which I accordingly did; and got one of the biggest surprises of my life.

Seated at the small cabin table, each with a sheaf of papers before him, were three men. I recognised them all. One was the spectacled German who had dogged me on the Whitstable road. The others were the

two Russian police agents who had arrested me and the detective, Burbler, at Elham Manor. It was an astonishing meeting. The German presided, with a fat, complacent smile; the two Russians sat gloomily twisting their waxed moustaches as if they intended presently to gore me with the stiff points.

"Ach!" exclaimed the German, who seemed to be a facetious ruffian, "you are zobbrised to zee us, Mr. Mifflin, and you do not seem bleased. Zat is not so mit us. Ve are delighted to meet you."

I gazed at the German and his scowling accomplices with a feeling of stupefaction and began quaveringly:

"It seems to me that there is some extraordinary mistake——" when the former interrupted: "Vot again, Herr Mifflin! No, my vreindt, it is no goot. Zat cat he vill not chomp. Ve do not make mistagues. Ve are not ze English bolice."

"Would you mind telling me who you suppose I am?" said I.

"Ve do not zubbose," he replied blandly. "Ve know. You are Chacob Mifflin, *alias* Salter, *alias* Chones and zo on. Ve follow you to-day from Ganderbury, ve find, fortunately, a Russian ship chust about to sail, and ve catch you."

"What am I supposed to have done?" I asked.

"You are a burglar, you are a forger: but zat is not our affair. You make bombs for Polopsky and ze ozers, and zat *is* our affair. Vere are zose ozer men? Are zey still in Ganderbury?"

"I am sure I don't know," I replied. "I know nothing about those men; and my name is not Mifflin."

"Ach! Bot you haf so many names. Berhaps you vorget. Ven did you last see Polopsky?"

"I've never seen him at all to my knowledge," said I. "The last time you arrested me you said *I* was Polopsky."

"Zat vos ze English bolice vot zay zat.

Ve do not mistague an American for a Pole."

Here one of the Russians interrupted impatiently: "Ve vaste time talking vid zis American pig, Herr von Bommel. Let us search his pockets."

They did so, with the dexterity of professional pickpockets, but got mighty little for their pains. A pipe and tobacco-pouch, a match-box, a pocket-knife, a little small change—for I had, fortunately, left most of my money at the hotel—and a pocket-book formed the entire "catch"; of which the German pounced with avidity on the last item and began eagerly to turn over the leaves.

It was a nearly new book, and most of the entries consisted of rough notes relating to the proposed repairs of Elham Manor House, which, being full of abbreviations and accompanied by calculations and hastily-drawn diagrams, puzzled my Teutonic friend not a little. But suddenly his eye lighted up,

he ejaculated a voluminous "Ach!" and the two Russians craned forward to look over.

"Zo, Mr. Mifflin," he exclaimed, impressively, "you do not know Polopsky or ze ozers, bot yet you carry in your bocket a zegred gode. Can you oxplain zis?"

He held up the pocket-book, and I could have laughed aloud—under more favourable circumstances; for he had lighted on the absurd doggerel verses that I had copied from the ancient silver mirror in the Canterbury museum.

I endeavoured to "oxplain" how I came by the "secret code," saying nothing, however, about the hidden treasure to which it was supposed to refer. But my explanation was cut short by indignant snorts from the two Russians, and the German wagged his head admonishingly.

"Vy do you tell us zis nonsense, Mifflin, my vriendt? Haf ve not seen ze house vere your gang used to meet? Ze house vot

haf a cross on von gate-post, a harp on ze ozer and a statue of a yung maid above ze door? Vy do you tell us zese foolish lies? It shall do you no goot. Moch better for you if you oxplain vot you mean by zis gode. Tell us now, like a zenzible man. Vot, vor instance, is 'ankores dree?' Vot does zat mean?"

"That's just what I should like to know," said I, though it didn't seem to matter much, as I was apparently bound for Siberia.

The two Russians again snorted impatiently and even the impassive German showed signs of annoyance. Beckoning to the captain, who had been waiting by the door, he said, gruffly: "Take him avay, Cabtain. He is an opstinate fool. Ve shall gonsider zese doguments and zen ve vill talk to him again."

Accordingly I was conducted out of the cabin to a place on deck just in front of the deck-house and sheltered by the projecting

roof of the latter. Here the captain placed a small cask to serve as a seat, and, having furnished me with a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches, told off one of the crew to watch me and left me to my meditations. I was glad to exchange the heat of the stuffy cabin for the comparative coolness of the open air, for it was a sultry night and seemed to grow warmer as the light faded. The darkness of the short night—it was the second week in July—was fast closing in, for it was close on ten o'clock; the land had vanished, either in the gloom or the distance, and innumerable lights began to wink and twinkle over the calm sea. At one of these—a bright light on our port bow that flashed out and faded away at regular intervals—I noticed the captain staring from time to time with an anxious and worried expression, and once he shouted out some directions to the man at the wheel.

Shortly after this, the three police-officers

came out on deck, and, placing each a camp-stool on the main hatch a few yards away from me, sat down close together conversing earnestly in low tones and poring over my note-book by the light of a small lantern. I watched them with a faint grin as I smoked the captain's cigarettes, wondering what they would make of Simon Glynn's ridiculous jingle and what they would have to say to me when they had unravelled "the code." And so the time passed. The night closed in warm and dark; a soft breeze murmured in the sails and rigging and the ship moved (at no great pace, I suspect) over the calm sea.

It was just half-past ten, as I was made aware by one of the sailors who reached past me to tap out five strokes on the ship's bell which hung above my head, when there came a sudden interruption of the quiet monotony. In an instant I found myself on the deck on "all fours," the sailor who had rung the bell and the one who guarded

me staggered forward and fell sprawling at full length, and the three police-officers capsized as one man and scrambled up swearing as thirty. Then the captain rushed out of the deck-house bellowing like a marine bull of Bashan, the deck filled up with excited mariners who had appeared the Lord knows whence, ropes thumped on the planks, blocks and parrels squealed from aloft, canvas flapped, and a general pandemonium prevailed.

I have never seen men so deficient in self-control. The entire ship's company, including the police-officers, surged up and down the deck like a herd of bullocks. They gibbered, they gesticulated, they shouted; they craned over the side—though what the deuce they expected to see there but water I can't imagine—and one, the second mate, I believe, actually burst into tears. And all because the *Anna* had taken the ground on one of those "shoals and sandts" that the captain held in such detestation.

However, there she was, immovably seated on a sand-bank with a falling tide; and there she would undoubtedly remain until the returning water rose and lifted her off. Of course, if a strong breeze should spring up from the east—or anywhere else, for that matter—she would undergo a rapid conversion into driftwood; but at present the breeze was of the lightest and the sea quite calm, save for a tiny popple of wavelets.

Gradually the excitement subsided, at least to some extent. The sails were snugged down, the side-lights taken in and an anchor light hoisted, which activities seemed to relieve the emotional tension. But no one turned in. The police-officers were excessively nervous, the captain was in despair, and the sailors were rather more uneasy than sailors ordinarily are with "the shore on board."

To me, of course, the accident was an acceptable respite and even offered a faint

chance of escape. If the ship should go to pieces, so much the better. I was an excellent swimmer and had no doubt that, with the aid of some buoyant object, such as the cask on which I was seated, I could keep afloat until some passing vessel should pick me up. I turned over in my mind the exact procedure that I should follow in such a contingency, and considered whether, with the support of the floating cask, I could possibly reach the shore. And then, from the possibility of the ship breaking up, my mind passed naturally to the consideration of what I should do if she did not break up.

The tide turned at about one o'clock. The swirling and bubbling against the port side gradually died away and after an interval began to make itself heard from the starboard side. I looked about me with a new interest. The police-officers were seated on the main hatch—no more camp-stools for them !—hunched up and evidently dozing.

The captain had retired temporarily to his cabin; the crew were sitting about, half or wholly asleep, and, in the first confusion, my guard had abandoned his post and had forgotten to return.

The only boat that the ship carried rested in chocks on the booms, with a canvas cover laced on and a pile of raffle heaped on top. It would take a quarter of an hour at least to get her in the water. The tide was now running up strongly, and a mile or so away up-stream I could see a light that winked in and out at regular intervals—a gas-buoy, beyond all doubt, for I had seen it in the same place ever since we ran aground. That would furnish a guiding mark and perhaps a support as well.

Why not? It was a bit of a risk; but anything was better than a Russian prison.

With a last look round, I quickly slipped off my boots and then rose silently, and, picking up the little empty cask, crept