



Winning His Name

*A Thrilling Complete Story of 'Prentice
Life in Old London*

By **MORTON PIKE**

THE FIRST CHAPTER

**What Simon Barbican Saw Through the
Snowflakes**

IT had been snowing all day. None of your feeble showers, with lulls and intervals between, but a good, old-fashioned, whirling, twisting, steady fall, the whole air full of it, and mighty dazzling to look upon.

As it went on hour after hour, folk out of doors became fewer, and at last disappeared altogether, as though the snow had buried them.

One waggon, two men on horseback, a homeless dog, and a woman with a basket, were the only signs of life that had crossed London Bridge from twelve o'clock at noon until ten minutes short of four, when the fall ceased as suddenly as it began.

Simon Barbican knew all about it, because he had scarcely moved his eyes from the window for five consecutive moments, to the detriment of work and the hindering of Master John Jewell's affairs.

Fortunately, the worthy goldsmith was occupied with weighty matters at the farthest end of the long, low room, and the weather

keeping all customers indoors, his apprentice was free to thaw a peephole by the simple process of laying a hot penny on the bull's-eye pane, and gaze his fill at the wonderful world of white without.

Oh, great dreams had Simon Barbican that short winter day—delightful prospects of battles royal when the apprentices of the Bridge should meet the lads of St. Paul's and Dowgate Hill and the Flatcaps of Chepe!

The solemn clock on the wall opposite seemed to tick with provoking slowness, and Simon Barbican could hardly contain himself.

There was another cause for the suppressed excitement that filled him, and this came about shortly after half-past three, when the storm had suddenly increased in fury, as if it had made up its mind to obliterate London town altogether.

Three men had struggled out of the blinding whirl—three cloaked figures, with hats pulled down over their faces, and each showing a bulging mantle that told of swords beneath.

Ordinarily, Simon would have taken little note of them. All wayfarers would be cloaked on such a day, and most men carried weapons in these good old times. But instead of blundering past and disappearing on their way, all three set their backs against the opposite wall and stood like statues in the gathering dusk.

"Ho!" said Simon Barbican to himself. "What have we here? Are yonder rogues watching our house?"

He breathed on this peephole, rubbed the already congealing moisture from the glass with his broad thumb, and set an eye to it.

It was a very open, honest, shrewd grey eye, somewhat prominent, as denoting courage, and planted beneath a strong brow on which the brown curls clustered thickly.

The three men stood close together, and in a few minutes the snow had piled so thickly upon them that they were merged into the grey wall behind them, and might have passed for a buttress of sorts, so motionless were they.

Simon Barbican was about to speak to his master, being convinced that the newcomers had some evil designs upon the goldsmith's premises, when one of the men detached himself from the others, took two strides to the corner, gazed along the narrow street that traversed the bridge, and after a pause stepped back and resumed his position of silent sentinel.

"They expect somebody," muttered the apprentice. "We shall see what we shall see."

Twice, after a short interval of time, the manœuvre was repeated, and Simon was now of opinion that they waited to waylay some traveller, for they crowded nearer to the angle of the wall, and seemed to be listening.

The apprentice threw a glance at the stout oak cudgel that stood behind the little charcoal brazier, and his grey eyes twinkled.

Then the snow ceased to fall, and he could see more clearly.

"There's going to be rough work—perhaps murder!" thought Simon Barbican.

"Simon!"

"Yes, master."

"It grows dark apace," said the goldsmith. "You may light your lamp and cast another billet upon the fire. I shall descend again shortly. You are diligent, I trust, Simon?"

"Yes, master."

Master John Jewell closed an ebony casket, over whose contents he had pored for the last hour, and, jangling a huge bunch of keys, opened the door to the staircase and mounted to the upper rooms.

Simon made a wry face.

"If I light the lamps the rogues will see that they are observed," said he. "I wish that whoever comes would come quickly. My fingers are itching to crack a pate!"

He stole on tiptoe to the fire, flung a log into it, and was back again in an instant, inwardly praying that his master would be detained above.

You must remember that at that period London Bridge was practically a street of shops and houses, built on nineteen arches. It had a gateway at each end. There was a chapel upon it, a drawbridge in the centre, and some of the houses were several storeys in height.

Had you walked over the bridge you would not have known but that you were in an ordinary narrow thoroughfare, save that every now and then there occurred an open space, over whose parapets you could see the river. And the house of Master John Jewell, being at a corner, fronted partly to the roadway and partly to the first space as you crossed from the City end of the bridge.

Simon's window looked out upon the open, and he could see the dark cleft between the opposite houses where the roadway continued towards the village of Southwark.

The ancient gables might have been covered with swansdown a good six inches in depth, and every sill and every projecting beam, each crevice and hanging sign and slant of red-tiled roof—in short, every resting-place that a right-minded snowflake might be expected to take advantage of was powdered and stuffed, and generally muffled with the feathery mantle of white.

As the apprentice came back to his peephole, his hand went out to the cudgel in the corner, and his breathing quickened.

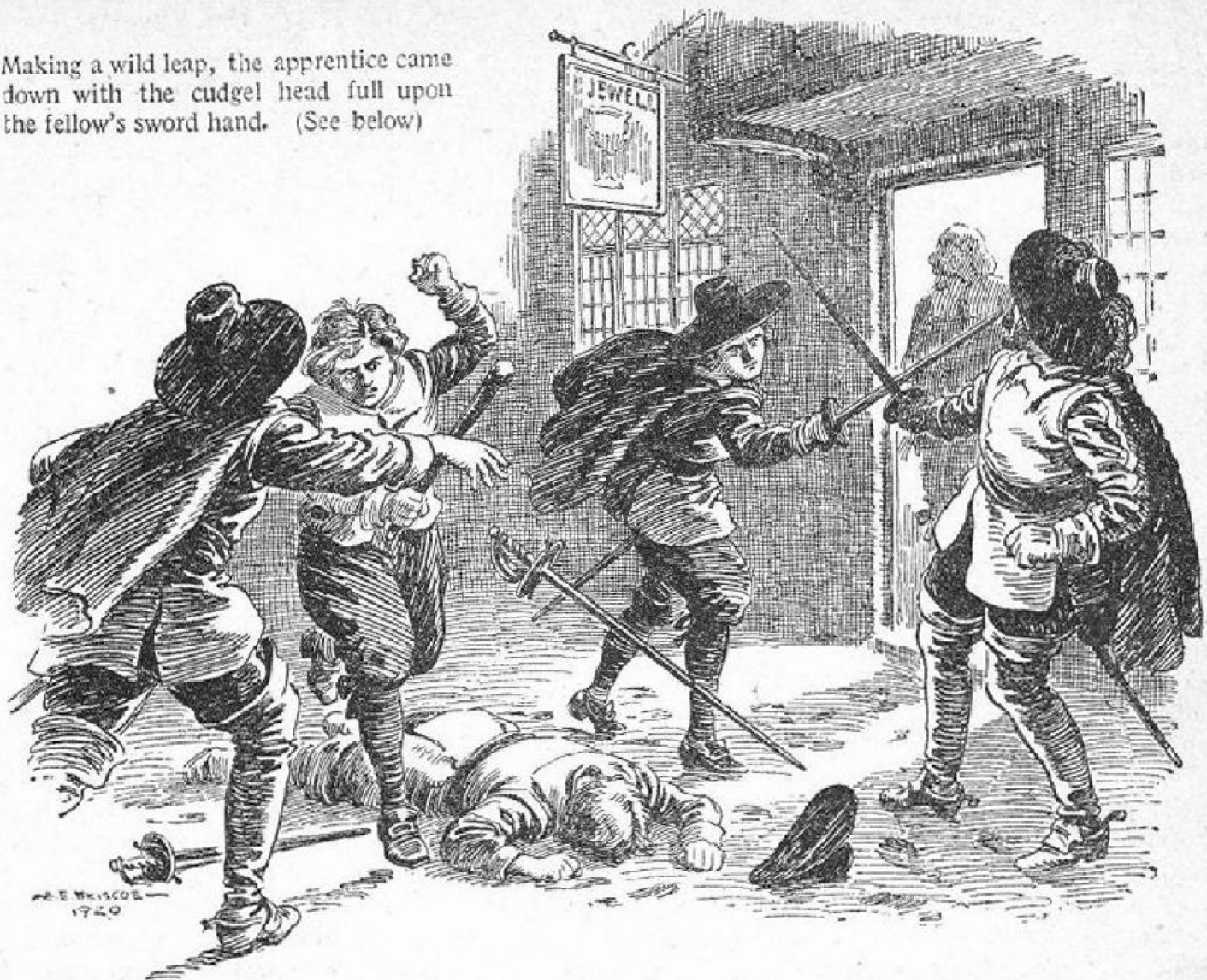
The three men had drawn their swords, and were crouching low.

Simon slid the chain from the massive door and set it noiselessly ajar.

"If this is fair play, three against three?" he said to himself, "'tis none of my business; if 'tis a robbery, I shall ring Bow Bells on their crowns to some purpose!"

He resumed his position at the window, having no mind to shiver in the icy blast that blew from the Thames, and he was watch-

Making a wild leap, the apprentice came down with the cudgel head full upon the fellow's sword hand. (See below)



ing like a terrier at a rat-hole, when a sound buffet fell upon his ruddy cheek, and Master John Jewell stood behind him.

"So this is what you call diligence, Simon Barbican!" said the goldsmith, with a short chuckle at the success of his stratagem.

"Yonder is what I call murder, master!" cried Simon, pointing through the window; and without another word he dodged beneath the still uplifted hand, flung the door wide open and darted into the snow.

"Good lack! Is the lad demented on a sudden?" ejaculated the worthy merchant; but a loud cry made him lift a blunderbuss from its pegs on the wall and hasten to the door.

A strange sight met his eyes. A slim lad, dressed all in black, was parrying the vicious thrusts of a burly ruffian, and using his sword in a mighty cunning fashion.

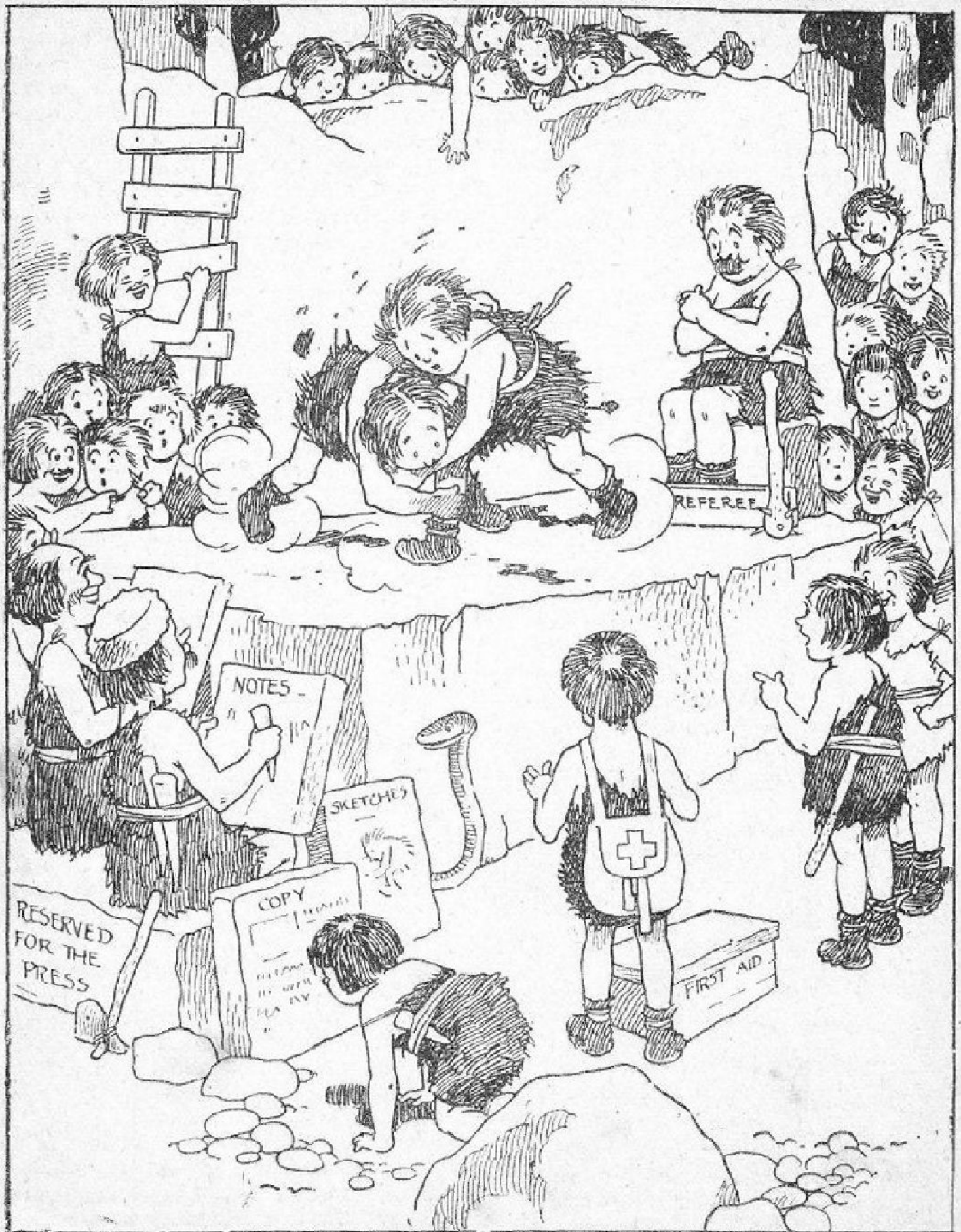
Two other scoundrels, turning at the sound of Simon Barbican's shout, were rushing upon the valiant apprentice, and Master John Jewell fell a-trembling at the spectacle of the unequal contest. So that it is a mercy the blunderbuss went not off and slew them all, else we had had no story to tell you.

"Help, help, neighbours all!" cried the goldsmith. "There is foul murder a-doing! The watch—the watch!"

"Never fear, master!" called out Simon cheerily. "I doubt not I can match the pair of them. Alsatian bullies, I warrant, and cowards, too. Ah, there's for thy nob, rogue!"

The other man, who had been a step behind his companion, made an involuntary grasp at his cloak to save him; but he reckoned without Simon Barbican's agility, and, with a leap like a wild-cat's, the apprentice came

GREYFRIARS SCHOOL IN PREHISTORIC TIMES



A WRESTLING MATCH IN THE SCHOOL GYM

down with the cudgel-head full upon the fellow's sword hand.

Doors began to open, and red lights poured on to the snow. Many voices clamoured for the watch with all the vehemence of indignant citizens, and the third ruffian gathered up his cloak.

"Beware, Silas!" cried he hoarsely. And suddenly abandoning his attack upon the young stranger, he bent his head and ran with all his might in the direction of the City.

Silas followed at top speed before the apprentice could prevent him, and there remained nothing of the fray but the trampled snow, the panting lad in black, and the prostrate figure of the third man Simon Barbican had stunned.

"Upon my life, we live in strange times!" said Master John Jewell, advancing into the open. "Hast killed the rogue, Simon?"

"'Twas no fault of mine if I have not, master. I hit him hard enough!" laughed the apprentice, stroking the head of his club tenderly, as one caresses a dog that has done well. "But who are you, young sir? You use your rapier very skilfully."

"Yet but for you they would have slain me," said the boy in black, holding forth his hand. "Thanks are poor things after so great a service, but they are all I can give you. Will you do me yet another kindness, and tell me where lives one Master John Jewell a goldsmith, upon the bridge, since 'tis him I seek?"

"Your business is with me, young sir?" said Master Jewell.

"It is," replied the boy; "and 'twere better transacted in any other spot but the street."

"Forgive me," said the goldsmith, putting his hand to his head. "I am a man of peace, and a brawl sends my wits all abroad. Let us within, young gentleman."

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Sealed Packet and its Bearer

MASTER JOHN JEWELL replaced his blunderbuss on its pegs, and led the way to the farther end of the long room, while Simon Barbican fastened the door with many locks and chains, as befitted a portal that led

to such fabulous wealth as the goldsmith was reputed to conceal in his dwelling.

Master Jewell was a kindly-visaged man of well-nigh sixty years—white as to his hair, which he wore in the old Cavalier manner; white as to his pointed beard and moustache, which were also fashioned after the style with which Vandyke's portraits of King Charles have made us so familiar.

His cheeks were red, his dress of russet velvet, for he was a prominent member of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, and had dealings with some of the very highest in the land—nay, even with the very Monarch himself, unless rumour lied. So it was incumbent upon him that his ruffles should be of fine lace, his linen of the best, and his whole person proclaim to the world that Master John Jewell of London Bridge was one worthy to be entrusted with plate, and money, and gems, and confidences too.

In those days the goldsmiths were the bankers, and, consequently, very important folk.

"Come in—come in, young gentleman!" said Master Jewell. "I am at a loss to know what you can want of me, or who has sent me a message, since I am expecting none."

And he adjusted a pair of horn spectacles on his nose.

"Nevertheless, 'tis for you, sir," said the boy, throwing back his cloak, and fumbling in the breast of his doublet, which was of new black cloth.

He drew forth a square parcel in a wrapping of vellum, sealed in half a dozen places with great red patches of wax, and holding it under a copper lamp, which the apprentice had lit in the meantime, he read the superscription, in a cramped hand, of the kind known as "Gothic."

"To Master John Jewell, Goldsmith, Upon London Bridge."

The goldsmith took it, and looked over the top of his spectacles curiously.

"And who may you be?" he said.

"My name is Gilbert, sir."

"Gilbert what?"

"Nothing but Gilbert," replied the boy, colouring. "My life has been a mystery. I remember no father or mother; and now my

guardian is dead, but bidding me with his last words to seek you out and give this into your hands."

At this the goldsmith and his apprentice stared at the boy with undisguised astonishment, and the boy looked from one to the other, half shyly, yet without timidity, and his underlip quivered.

"Perhaps the packet will tell you more," he said.

"Ah, yes, the packet," exclaimed worthy Master Jewell, breaking the seals. "Do you draw nigh to the fire, and dry your shoes, young sir, the while I peruse. Simon, tell Mistress Jewell that a guest will share our evening meal."

And the good man seated himself at his table.

Simon Barbican, his face aglow with his recent exertion, and vastly interested in the whole affair, went up the steep, cupboard-like stair to the upper floor, where he delivered his message gleefully, for Simon liked company, and then returned, to find the young stranger kneeling before the merry blaze of the logs, and his master looking at him with a strange expression on his face, half-troubled, half-pityingly.

The boy turned his head at the apprentice's coming, and Simon thought he saw the glisten of a tear.

Gilbert rose to his feet, his eyes bent on the goldsmith.

"Why do you look at me so?" he said quickly. "Is there aught amiss, sir?"

"Everything is amiss, poor Gilbert," said John Jewell sadly. "You have been in great danger, and it is not yet past."

"Danger?" echoed the boy in surprise. "Anyone may be set upon by cutpurses!"

"Those were no ordinary rogues," said the goldsmith, his brow drawn into a deep frown. "'Twas these papers they wanted, and your young life with them!"

Mistress Jewell entered the room at that moment, and as she listened to the story was deeply sympathetic to Gilbert. It struck her as wonderful that the boy should have tramped from far away in Kent. She treated the stranger with deep respect. But Gilbert made light of his troubles.

"I am turned fifteen," he said, "and as strong as a horse."

Dame Jewell raised her hands.

"Why!" she cried. "If I but foot it as far as the Mall, to look at the great ladies and see the King's Majesty, I can scarce set toe to floor for a whole day after."

"Where learned you to handle the rapier, Master Gilbert?" asked the goldsmith, looking curiously at the hilt of a fine sword which the boy had stood in a corner of the chamber.

"The weapon was my unknown father's," replied Gilbert, "and he who taught me was an old soldier, named Gregory Firebrace, who would come to our part in the summer time, and stay two months, and even three, being a friend of my guardian."

The goldsmith took out his tablet and set the name down carefully.

"I should like to have speech with Gregory Firebrace," he said. "Know you not where he may be found?"

"Alas, no, sir! He came not at all last year; and Master Chantry shook his head when I spoke of him, and said he was not well pleased with Gregory, and that he would not come any more."

"You do not think him dead?" questioned the goldsmith.

"No, sir; but rather in some sad disgrace that Master Chantry could not bring his mind to forgive, though he was usually very tender to all men."

"Humph!" said John Jewell, glancing across the table at his wife. "We will try and find him one of these days."

And Master John Jewell held up a very impressive finger as he turned to the fire.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

How Gilbert Nameless Found very Comfortable Quarters

SIMON BARBICAN tried the front door of the stairs, re-lit the lamp, and gave the fire a kick with his square-toed shoe that startled it into great life of red and gold sparks.

"Now, Master Gilbert," he said, rubbing his hands, "I'll show you some vastly pretty things."

And as he spoke he touched a spring that

made a square of the brown panelling open like a cupboard.

Within were silver flagons, with handles cunningly wrought in the shape of human figures; ewers and dishes, gilt and parcel-gilt; great loving-cups, that would be handed round at feasts, with wonderful embossings on them of Bacchus and old Silenus, and combats between centaurs and amazons. Here a mirror, daintily chased; there a clasp for a courtier's cloak, set with gems. The lamplight shone on them, and they flashed emerald and ruby and golden topaz.

"They are very beautiful," said Gilbert Nameless.

"And here is a sight that will please you even better," said Simon, with something of professional pride, as he opened another cupboard, and showed a case of rapiers, the hilts cut and graven with all manner of devices, and the blades damascened with Latin mottoes.

"What is that dull noise I hear?" asked Gilbert, listening.

"The rush of the tide through the arches," replied Simon. "Sometimes it shakes the house to the very chimney-pots; but one soon gets used to it. If you're a fisherman you can angle from the pantry and catch beauties. There are worse places than the old Bridge!"

Gilbert, looking round the low, long chamber, half shop, half workroom, with its panelled walls, its benches and braziers, its cheery red curtains and warm fire, was quite of Simon's opinion already. And as Simon

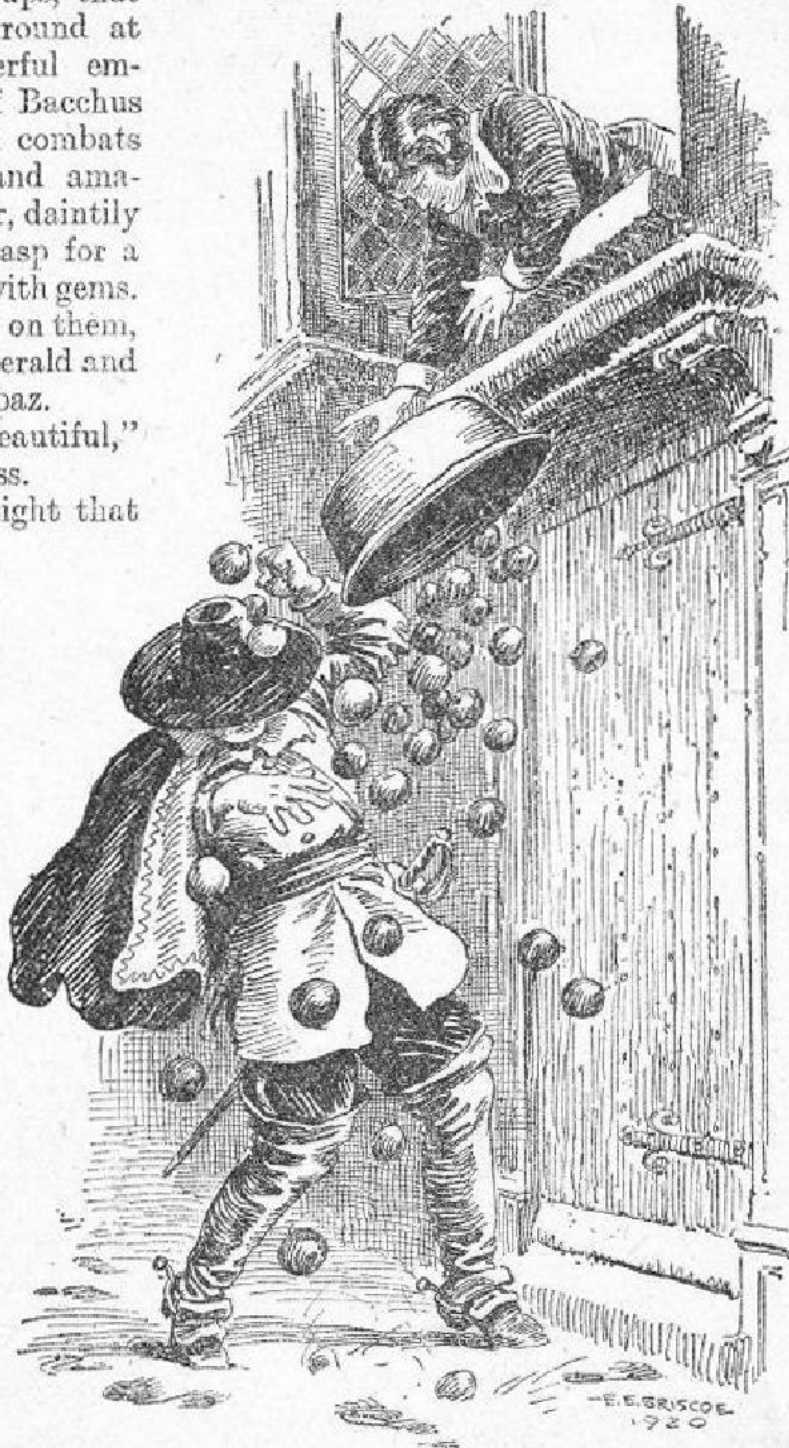
opened the outer door, with the object of raising the shutter-flap outside, the chill air made the wanderer feel something more than content with his unexpected quarters.

A man who had passed and re-passed the house several times in the last hour—a cloaked man with a fiery moustache, on which the frost had congealed his breath—slunk back at the withdrawing of the bolts, and took up his position in the street end, whence he could see Simon Barbican's movements.

Simon scraped the snow out of the hinges and lifted the shutter, while Gilbert screwed the bolt on the inside.

The boy in black was rather clumsy, and Simon, holding the heavy flap upright, called his instructions from

the darkness. The watcher below made frantic efforts to see into the room, listening all the while for the approach of any pedestrian.



The man sprang back, and the apples poured in a shower about his ears. (See page 195)

At length Gilbert succeeded with his task, and Simon, stooping down, scooped up a handful of snow, pressed it into a hard ball, and, aiming at random, sent it whizzing into the street and over the bay, missing the watcher by a hair's breadth, as he flattened himself against the corner.

The door of the goldsmith's house closed with a dull bang. The bolts slid into their places, and the gabled front presented a black mass against the black sky, relieved only by a lighted window in one of the upper storeys.

"A plague on the jackanapes!" growled the cloaked man at the corner. "I have learned nothing after all, and taken a chill into the bargain! I would much like to meet that saucy prentice under the shadow of a dark wall one night. His chance shot nearly told!"

And, pulling his cloak about him, he glided across the open space, passed the goldsmith's dwelling, and vanished in the darkness.

The lads went back into the large room again, and drew two stools to the fire.

"Simon," said Gilbert, "you shall teach me to use your weapon, and I will show you all that Gregory Firebrace taught me. Hark! Did you hear that?"

Simon rose noiselessly to his feet, and held up his hand. Someone was tampering with the outer door!

"Stay where you are," whispered Simon. "I will be back in a few minutes."

He slipped his shoes off and stole upstairs, Gilbert remaining by the fire, with his eyes fixed on the door.

There was a strange, low sound, and, though the pendant bell did not ring, the spring swayed up and down, showing that there was pressure on the stout panels from without.

The apprentice gained the upper floor, crept past the sitting-room—where the goldsmith and his wife were talking earnestly over the contents of the mysterious package—and entered the kitchen.

A candle guttered on the table, with a thief in the wick, and Priscilla, the apple-cheeked maid, sat on a hard wooden chair, sound asleep, a huge earthenware bowl full of apples beside her, which she had been peeling against

making the mincemeat for the approaching Christmas.

Simon did not wake her, but went to the window, which was immediately above the shop door.

It was a long window of leaded panes, and Simon opened the middle lattice inch by inch, and peeped down.

It was a very dark night, and there was a carved cornice above the doorway, but he could see something projecting beyond it against the snow—something that kept appearing and disappearing.

Someone was busy, but what they were about, and who they were, Simon had to discover.

He leaned as far as he could into the night, sending a little avalanche of snow from the sill on to the cornice, and presently a man stepped back and listened.

The apprentice saw that the projection had been the point of the man's sword under his cloak, and, as he stood there, looking towards the roadway, Simon was seized with a sudden idea.

At the first alarm the rogue—he must be a rogue, perforce, who behaved in such a way—would hurriedly make off, and they would be none the wiser. If he could drop anything upon him and stun him, there would be a chance to secure him straight away. So Simon slipped back into the kitchen and looked about him.

The first thing his eyes rested upon was the huge earthenware bowl of apples, and the apprentice's eyes danced with delight.

Without rousing the sleeping maid, he lifted it in his strong arms and rested it silently on the sill.

It was now necessary to creep out on the ledge, in order to come directly over the man; and, trembling, lest he should alarm him before he was in the position for the throw, Simon set his knee on the sill, and wormed himself forward inch by inch.

All would have been well but for the tired Priscilla. The cold wind fluttered the candle, and played directly upon her, and of a sudden she woke with a terrific sneeze.

So unexpected was the sound that Simon started, and, tipping the bowl, an apple rolled

away, and fell plump on the crown of the listener's beaver.

Simon gave a gasp of rage, and hurled the heavy missile. But the man sprang back and the apples poured in a shower about his ears, and the bowl crashed with a thud into the white drift, as he ran like a hare round the corner of the house.

Simon had exerted so much force that he lost his balance, grabbed wildly at the slippery edge, and hurtled over into space, while Priscilla screamed a thousand murders, and fires, and thieves, and fainted away, and the astonished goldsmith rushed into the kitchen.

"What, in Heaven's name, is happening, woman?" cried Master John Jewell, looking from the prostrate maid to the open window.

The reply came from without, and was in Simon's voice. The apprentice had landed in three feet of snow, that had drifted against the house front, and now stood craning his neck under the window, calling "Master!" in great excitement.

"Open the door, master! I have discovered something, and they may return!" said Simon, making a trumpet of his hands.

"Zounds, we are having fine times indeed," muttered the goldsmith, hastening downstairs, where he met Gilbert, armed with Simon's cudgel.

Between them they drew the bolts, and flung the door wide, Gilbert holding the lamp above his head, and John Jewell carefully presenting the muzzle of his blunderbuss against the darkness.

"Hist master!" said Simon Barbican, pointing to the outside of the great door. "What do you make of this?"

"This" was an auger sticking in the panel.

"Odds life!" cried the goldsmith. "Robbers! Nay, they would have tried the lock, and this is the door's very heart!"

"He was too quick for me, master, and fled towards the City," said Simon, brushing the snow from his blue breeches, and stamping his stockinged feet. "An I may get into my shoes, I will trace him by his footprints."

"Useless," murmured the goldsmith. "Moreover, I see an inkling of it all." And he looked at Gilbert. "'Tis part and parcel of your business, my young friend. Whoever

made this hole, did it to pry into our household, and to find whether you are here or not."

Gilbert hung his head.

"Let me go, Master Jewell," he faltered. "I must not bring trouble to you by my presence."

"Listen to the innocent!" said worthy Master Jewell. "And where would you go, pray? Into the snow? No, Gilbert. You can more than earn your keep by helping Simon, and no one knows what a year may bring. Does the plan promise to please you?"

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Gilbert, unable to find words.

The worthy man stepped to the cupboard stairs, and, Simon, having collected such of the apples as he could pick out of the snow, and made all safe once more, carried his bowl up to the kitchen, where Priscilla was indulging in mild hysterics, and Mistress Jewell burning feathers.

"Simon," said Gilbert, when the apprentice returned, "who lives in the next house?"

"Eli Nethersole, who plies the same calling as my master, but with whom we have as little to do as needs be, since he is not reputed over honest in his dealings. But why do you ask?"

"Because just now, when I heard you drop into the snow, and the man ran past the windows, I thought a door closed, and the footfalls ceased."

Simon looked at him for a moment, thinking profoundly, and went to the table on which the goldsmith had placed the auger.

"Whew!" he whistled. "Look here!" And he pointed to initials cut in the wooden handle, "E. N." "What concern can Master Nethersole have in your affairs?"

"How can I tell?" replied Gilbert sadly. "All the world seems to know about myself."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

How Master Jewell Prepared for a Journey and Decided that Gilbert Nameless should go with Him

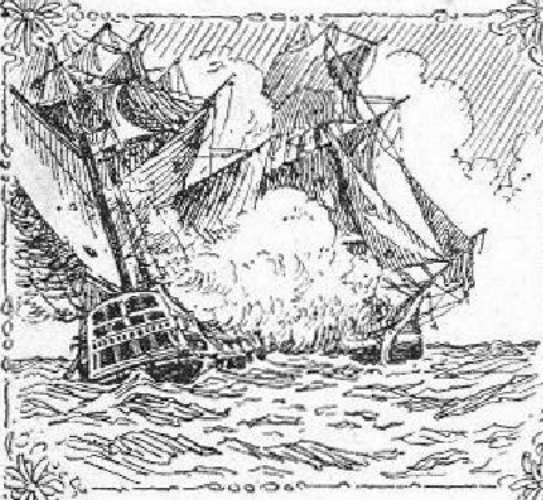
WHEN Gilbert opened his eyes the next morning the sun was shining on the snow that had fallen overnight.

He sprang out of bed and, breathing on

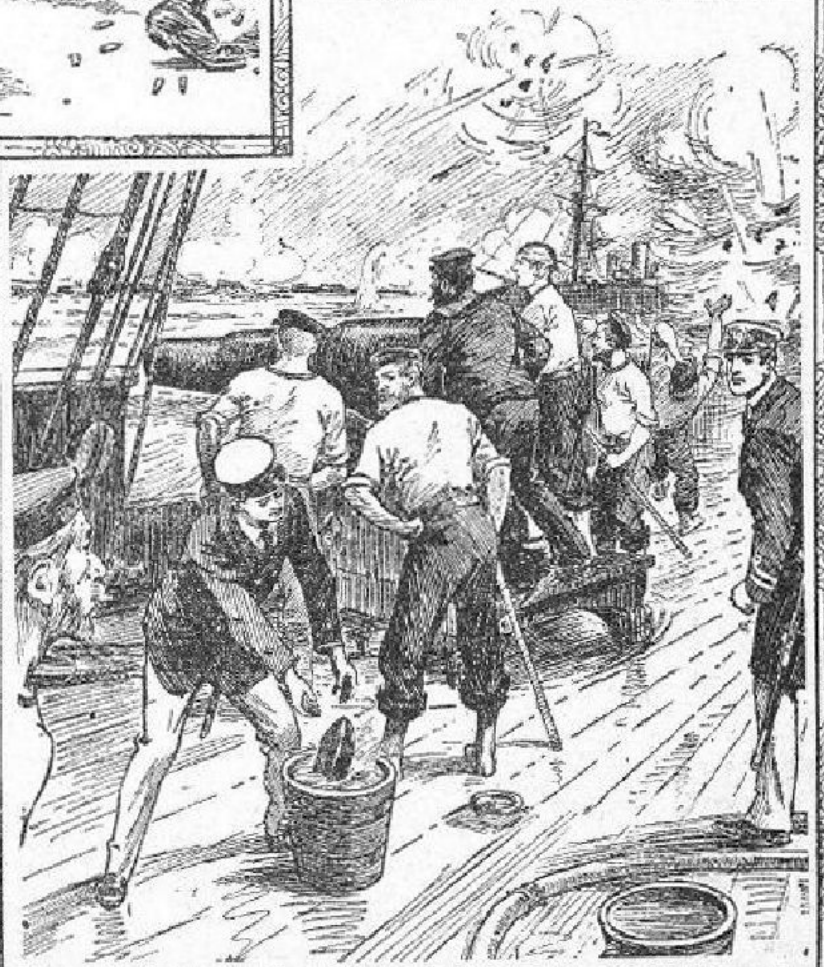
Famous Fights for the Flag



The Zulu War, 1879. The defence of Rorke's Drift. Lieuts. Chard and Bromhead with 139 men (35 of whom were wounded) successfully defended the post against over four thousand Zulus.



The Bombardment of Alexandria, July 11th, 1882. Midshipman Cochrane, at the risk of being blown to pieces, picked up a live Egyptian shell and plunged it into a bucket of water, to extinguish the fuse.



one pane, rubbed a peephole and looked forth. The river was flowing grey and swollen with the melted snow, and was then uncrossed by any bridges but the one on which he stood.

"Ha, you are awake at last!" said Simon Barbican cheerily; putting his head into the room. "Master Jewell bade me let you lie as long as you liked. I have been up and doing these three hours.

"When you have dressed, breakfast is ready. I'll tell you what we've discovered afterwards," said Simon.

"Discovered?"

"Yes," and Simon lowered his voice, although there was no necessity, as the shop was empty. "You were right about the man last night."

"How?"

"That he went no farther than next door," said Simon. "The traces are distinct in the snow; and they are not those of Gideon Bilge, because his feet are the largest you ever saw in your life, and turn outwards like a turnspit's. Of course, I ought to tell you that Gideon Bilge is Eli Nethersole's apprentice, and the most sneaking, cunning dog that lives on the bridge."

As soon as Gilbert was dressed the two boys presented themselves at the breakfast table.

Very motherly was Dame Jewell, for her heart melted towards the friendless boy, and many were the questions with which she plied him, heaping his plate bountifully at the same time, until, the meal over, they rose to withdraw, and John Jewell called for his thick walking-shoes, bidding Priscilla to warm his mantle thoroughly.

"And where go you?" asked Dame Jewell.

"To the person you wot of, my dear. 'Twere well that this arrival of young Master Gilbert should be made known to those who may be of good to him. 'Tis too well spread abroad already among his enemies."

Simon Barbican paused in the doorway of the sitting-room and cleared his throat.

"Well, Simon, what is it?" said the goldsmith. "You have work enough in the polishing of the tankard for Master Pepys to last until I return, and Gilbert will keep you company."

"'Tis not that, master," said Simon. "I

fear me that your honour has forgotten that the plate for Sir Rufus Pontifex was promised delivery to-day, and 'tis a long ride these winter times, with the light gone upon four o'clock and the road perilous at the best of seasons."

"A murrain on it!" cried Master John Jewell. "My mind must be wool-gathering, I think! Sir Rufus must indeed have the plate, for a promise is a promise—mark you that, my young friend! Priscilla, take thee back these shoes, and in their stead set down my great riding-boots and the cloak-furs that they be ready against my coming. Simon, we will to the strong-room and bring up the dishes, and Gilbert shall carry the lantern."

Master John Jewell drew out a great bunch of keys, and led the way to a door, which he opened, admitting them to another stair, which had several doors in its descent, each of which had to be duly unlocked before they reached the last door of all, that opened with a great master-key and a little master-key, one at either end of a steel bar.

Simon carried a horn-lantern, and Gilbert followed, very much interested.

"We are ten feet below the water now," said the goldsmith, as he placed his hand on the lock. "You can feel the tremble of the stream very plainly. Yet my vault is as dry as the roof of St. Paul's yonder."

The strong-room was a large vault of stone, filled with chests and shelves, and contained great value in the shape of plate and money, and the various articles sent there by the wealthy customers of Master Jewell.

"Ha, Gilbert," said the good-natured man, "there is stowed away in these cloths and dingy boxes enough gold to buy the bridge from one end to the other! Some day you shall see a portion of our treasures. But now hold the light higher, that we may select Sir Rufus's plate from the rest. When I have shown your package and its contents to a certain gentleman for his opinion, I shall place them here, where it will puzzle the cleverest rogues in London to come at them."

Simon Barbican, who had brought a basket with him, laid several heavy pieces of silver within it and returned to the stairs.

Master Jewell locked the vault carefully,

and, bringing up the rear, fastened the doors in turn, until at length they emerged on the landing of the house once more.

"Can you ride, Gilbert?" said he.

"Marry, sir, I can ride well, and never wanted for a horse in Kent yonder!" said Gilbert smiling.

"So be it," said the goldsmith. "Simon, bid Jasper Jenkins step in as usual, and order three stout beasts to be before the door without delay. Meanwhile, I fancy that the boots I had for Dominic Sly will not be over large for Gilbert."

Simon's eyes sparkled at the prospect of the ride, which always promised adventure, and while Dame Jewell produced various articles necessary to the journey the apprentice took his beloved cudgel and ran off upon his errand.

The boots fitted Gilbert to a hair. The good Dame muffled him in a huge woollen comforter, and found him a capital pair of gauntlets, and by the time Simon returned Gilbert and the goldsmith were swathed and wrapped like two polar bears, and waiting for him.

Sir Rufus Pontifex's plate, consisting of eight massive silver dishes, beautifully embossed, and several tankards, engraved with armorial bearings, were carefully placed in many coverings of soft leather and laid in stout saddle-bags.

Three brace of long pistols were loaded and primed, and Master John Jewell girt a rapier on his left hip, while Gilbert resumed his unknown father's sword.

As for Simon, he slipped the leather thong of his bludgeon over his wrist, and the maid Priscilla announced that the horses had arrived.

Jasper Jenkins, a quiet, clean-shaven man of forty, with shoulders, that were well nigh too broad for the front door, coughed gently to proclaim his presence, and the goldsmith bade his brother-in-law enter.

"Jasper Jenkins, 'tis a bitter cold morning, and you had better join us in this stirrup-cup of hot cordial that my dame has prepared with her own hands," said the goldsmith, with a smile of welcome. "Any news, Jasper?"

"Ay, and ill news, John," said the goldsmith's brother-in-law, holding the steaming

goblet under his nose and inhaling the odour of spices.

"How? What is amiss?"

"Two Frenchmen are dead in Drury Lane, hard by the street of Long Acre, and 'tis said they had the plague," said Jasper Jenkins, swallowing a draught and looking hard at the goldsmith.

Master Jewell stayed his cup midway to his lips and grew very grave.

"Heaven grant the rumour be an idle one!" he said. "We want not that among us again!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

A Ride in the Days of King Charles II., and how our Travellers fared on the Way

VERY picturesque was the vista of old London Bridge on that frosty morning as they rode along the narrow way.

Tall houses lined the track on either side with a profusion of gables and jutting ledges and quaint doors.

It may have been coincidence that about the time our three travellers reached the top of Fish Street Hill, a man left the door of Eli Nethersole's shop and hurried at a quick pace towards the gate at the bridge end.

He looked up the hill, muttered something in French, and turned along a narrow street leading westward, quickening his steps to a run, and holding his cloak up in both hands that it should not impede his legs, which were encased in brown riding boots with heavy spurs.

It may have been a further coincidence that, some half-hour later, the same man, accompanied by two others, came on horseback through Cornhill, and turned along Bishops-gate in the direction taken by the goldsmith and his companions.

When they got out into the fields, the three men fell to staring at the snow, and slackened their pace as they examined the tracks.

A waggon had entered the City, another had left it, and the deep wheel-ruts crossed in several places. The out-going vehicle they found embedded not far away, and the first of the party hailed the disconsolate driver, who was standing thigh deep in a heavy drift,



Eli Nethersole thrust the candle into the opening, and tapped with his thin, crooked fingers.
(See page 212)

waiting for his mate, who had gone for assistance.

"Good-morrow, friend," said the rider. "Hast seen aught of three horsemen upon this road?"

"Call you it a road?" snapped the waggoner testily. "I'd as lief taken my wain over a ploughed field! And how I am to come to Hertford I know not! Yes, there went three riders by not long since, a plague upon them! For they would not stay to help me, saying they had business brooking no delay."

"And so have we," said his questioner, spurring on. "Come, Silas Double and Black Humphrey, we must overtake our birds and then keep them in sight until we have them in the net!"

From which remark, delivered over his shoulder, as he put his horse through the drifted snow, it will be seen that there was something more than coincidence in it all.

Now, as every Londoner knows, there are two roads forking at Shoreditch Church—one to the right, leading towards Hackney, the other passing on through Kingsland.

The three men, assuming that our travellers would take the former way, turned off to the right, and rode hard. Master Jewell and his escort kept straight on, intending to cross the Lea at Tottenham Ferry.

"Whither are we bound?" asked Gilbert, as they paused to adjust the saddlebags and tighten the girths of the goldsmith's horse.

"Sir Rufus Pontifex has a fine old mansion

beyond Loughton, which is on the borders of the Forest of Epping," said Simon.

They dismounted at the Ferry Boat Inn; and Gilbert was not sorry to stamp his feet and bring some life into them, for the air was keen as a razor, and they had been in the saddle several hours already.

In the corners of their holsters, and in sundry nooks of their apparel, Dame Jewell had bestowed cold viands and flasks of drinkables; but the odour of a smoking joint of beef filling the inn at the moment of their entrance, the goldsmith bade mine host lay knives for three.

"And what of the roads?" inquired Master John Jewell, with his mouth full. "Hast heard aught of robbery of late?"

"'Tis said the freebooters are over bold about Waltham, and in the neighbourhood of Epping Town," replied mine host; "but there has been nothing amiss hereabouts for some while, and we hope the rogues have gone farther into the woods."

"'Tis well!" said the goldsmith, with relief in his voice, as he eyed his wallets that bulged with their contents.

The horses rested, the reckoning paid, they mounted once more, and rode at a quick trot towards the little village of Walthamstow.

Near the cross-roads John Jewell pulled his steed to a walk, and bent his gaze upon a black spot ahead.

"Simon, is that a horseman under the elm trees?"

"'Tis so, master; still, we are three to one."

John Jewell knew the roads well, and the spectacle of a cloaked figure on a sorry nag caused him to make a sudden change in his direction.

Instead of proceeding towards the Woodford Road, which lay straight ahead, he jerked a warning with his elbow, and turned off to the left up Blackhorse Lane, a few yards before he reached the man.

"The snow will be heavy on the hill-top, master," ventured the apprentice, riding alongside him.

"No matter! I liked not the look of yonder fellow, Simon, and I doubt me if he may not be a scout, since none would elect to

sit like a statue on such a bitter day," replied the goldsmith.

About the time that our three friends swung into the highway at Salsbury Hill, and took the road towards Chingford, the other three, by dint of hard riding, had reached the lane leading to Hale End, so that both parties were travelling in a parallel direction, with perhaps a mile of wood and waste between them.

Master John Jewell's spirits had risen considerably, since more than half the journey was now accomplished in safety, and when they had rested on the hill of the beautiful old church, and their horses' flanks ceased to heave he cried:

"Forward! We shall reach our journey's end in an hour, and come back the lighter."

"Now, an the choice had rested with me," whispered Simon Barbican, "I had not taken this road. But 'tis done now, and we can only hope that there are no rogues between this and Loughton, which is a wild stretch of forest land."

Gilbert, who had enjoyed the journey vastly, patted his holsters and smiled.

"Ay, well enough, if we were on the way back," said the apprentice; "but I am thinking of Sir Rufus Pontifex and his silver dishes."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than his horse floundered, stumbled for a couple of yards, and came to a stand.

"Stay, master!" he called.

And the goldsmith reined in, as Simon jumped down into the snow, to find that one of his horse's hind shoes had wrenched off and twisted into the form of a letter "S," adhering firmly to the hoof by a couple of nails.

"The plague upon it!" muttered Simon Barbican.

"Call not upon the plague, Simon," said his master in a tone of reproof. "We may have that upon us sooner than we reck. There is a blacksmith in the village yonder, and he will repair the damage with all speed."

Simon tugged at the shoe, but it was some time before he could remove it; and when they reached the smithy they found a party of horsemen stamping their feet, while the smith roughed their steeds.

They were a merry crew, and John Jewell's



GILBERT'S DESPERATE RIDE TO LONDON
(See page 204)

brow cleared when he heard that they were travelling in the same direction; being, in fact, four gentlemen upon a visit to Sir Rufus Pontifex, and three farmers of Epping, who had joined company for safety in crossing the forest.

It was straightway agreed that our friends should go with them, and the blacksmith, in high good humour at so much unexpected custom, regaled them with stories of the robbers that haunted the woodland glades and impenetrable recesses.

"You will ride ten in your company, sir, and that is a goodly number," said the smith, driving home the last nail. "Still, I would show your pistols, for all that; and now the horse is ready, and I wish you all God-speed, and may you not fall in with Captain Quartermaine!"

"Hold, good fellow! Who may he be!" cried one of the gentlemen, pausing with his toe in the stirrup.

"The leader of the most daring band of them all, your honour!" said the smith, standing in the doorway, with his bare arms akimbo, and the ruddy glow from the forge flooding the snow at his feet. "He is a lean man, and hath a red moustache, and 'tis at High Beech, over the plain yonder, that they say he makes his lair."

"Zounds!" quoth the gentleman, getting astride, and drawing his cloak about him. "I have some acquaintance with Lauderdale and Buckingham, and when I return to London, I will make known the manners and customs of the neighbourhood. 'Tis great shame that such things are permitted!"

The little cavalcade moved off in the direction of the forest, Master John Jewell and his companions in the centre of them, and each man held a long pistol in his right hand, and kept sharp watch on every side.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

The Ambush and its Consequences

CAPTAIN QUARTERMAINE ground his teeth, as he pointed across the open track beyond the wood, where our travellers were rapidly making their way.

The robber watched the glint of the after-

noon sun on the pistol-barrels, and marked the heavier gait of the horses that carried the laden wallets.

"'Twas an opportunity in a hundred!" he said savagely. "What can have detained Firebrace and the rest? We must now wait until they return, which may be to-morrow, and the air cold enough to freeze brandy in a bottle! Come, lads! Let us to Wilder's Dell, and make a fire! Those idiots will seek us there, and find us in the sweetest of tempers!"

Quartermaine touched his horse with a spur, as the travellers disappeared in a belt of trees, and, followed by Silas Double and Black Humphrey, rode down the slope and struck into a beech wood.

"'Tis but an hour's journey to Sir Rufus Pontifex," said Black Humphrey, when they had ridden some little distance. "If they return to-night they have the choice of two roads."

"Both of which I shall watch as a cat watches a bird," replied Quartermaine. "I have a scheme that will pay us better than a few paltry platters and silver mugs. Besides, as you know, there will be a hundred guineas from my lord when the boy is dead!"

"And the scheme, captain?" said Silas Double, ducking his head to avoid a low branch.

"'Tis to hold the fat goldsmith to ransom, Silas. I warrant me Dame Jewell will part with a thousand pounds to save her apple-cheeked spouse from a red-hot ramrod. What think you?"

The two ruffians laughed heartily, and their laughter echoed through the frozen wood.

The next moment a curious, piping whistle came from some low ground beyond the trees.

"'Tis old Firebrace, a murrain on him!" said the captain. "Ho, there, Gregory, you ancient sinner! What, in the fiend's name, kept you from the tryst? A right rich booty passing under our very noses, and lost because you were not at the glade end!"

A very tall, lean man scrambled up through the frozen bushes, followed by four others, and approached the mounted party.

"The fault was not mine, captain," he said, in a deep voice that seemed to issue

from a throat of brass. "Your message came late, and bore two readings."

"How? The Green Glade—was that not enough?"

"Scarcely, since it hath two ends, and we lay at the other one, which we had but time to reach when the travellers rode by."

"Pest, and we not five hundred paces away!" said Quartermaine. "Well, 'tis done, and we must repair the loss when they return. Come all of you to Wilder's Dell, where we will light a fire, and I will unfold a fresh plan!"

They wound along a path of frozen snow, brushing through the bushes, all ablaze with scarlet holly-berries, and finally reached a deep, secluded hollow, where a pile of dead wood had been stacked under a white elm, and the ashes of a spent fire showed the place to be one of their secret haunts.

The afternoon sky was glowing with the peculiar pink flush so common to a winter landscape, and the gloom of the silent woods had deepened into a twilight dusk when they issued forth again, leaving the fire banked up, and the three horses tethered.

Gregory Firebrace looked more like a wolf than ever, and walked with a long, loping stride that increased the resemblance.

A few whispered words that had passed between Silas Double and the man with no thumbs had caught his ears as they sat by the fire, and Gregory Firebrace was boiling internally.

He regarded Quartermaine from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, and the huge hands, that he had thrust into his pockets for warmth, were tightly clenched.

"Halt, boys!" said the captain, as they came to a spot where two roads from London town joined into one.

"The sun hath an angry fire in his eye," said Master John Jewell, gazing across the darkening woods. "We must push on, boys, for to stand benighted in this desolate waste is a thing not at all to my mind!"

The road was broad at that place, and they rode three abreast, Gilbert in the middle.

Master Jewell had duly received payment from Sir Rufus for the silver, which had

charmed him mightily, and to Simon Barbican the goldsmith had entrusted the bag of money, arguing that should they fall in with thieves they would not trouble themselves to rob an apprentice when his master was by.

The bag reposed inside Simon's jacket, and the trio had come at a quick trot from Pontifex Park, the snow being less troublesome in that quarter.

"'Twill be dark as a vault, master, before we get to the smithy," said Simon Barbican; "but 'tis nigh upon full moon to-night."

"And if the worthy smith minds not, we will wait there for its rising," returned the goldsmith. "'Twere well now to draw our pistols, for a few yards ahead I see the trees very thick, and a likely spot for any rogues to lurk!"

They each pulled out a long, steel-mounted weapon, and, the better to keep up their courage, and also that it might help to scare any evildoer, the goldsmith began to converse in a loud voice.

"We have somewhat outdistanced the others of our party," he said boldly. "At the top of yonder hill we will draw rein and abide their coming."

Gilbert and Simon smiled at each other, for there was in truth no party at all, and, having reached the point where the roads forked, they took the right-hand way.

"They must have been gay days," continued the goldsmith, almost shouting, as an almost indescribable shiver went over him, for which he could not account. "They must have been brave times when Harry the Eighth came a-hunting here, and 'tis pity the chase isn't continued, for 'twould be fine sport!"

"The chase is continued, my good sir, but we hunt rich goldsmiths to-day instead of timid deer!" And the voice rang out like a trumpet. "Pull in, sirs, or I will not answer for anything that may happen!"

In the gathering dusk four figures suddenly rose out from the bushes, black against the disappearing rim of the blood-red sun, and four pistols covered the travellers. For an instant all three checked their steeds, but only for an instant.

"Ride for it! The rogues are afoot!"



All through that night the old soldier kept faithful ward. Passengers across the bridge quickened their steps as he raised a warning hand. (See page 224)

shouted John Jewell, clapping the spurs in. "Forget not what I said to you, Simon!"

And, firing his weapon point-blank into the group, the goldsmith galloped forward up the hill.

"Fool!" said the same voice; and another pistol-shot rang out.

Jewell's horse sank heavily on its knees, and flung its rider on to the frozen snow, and out leapt the four ruffians upon Gilbert and the apprentice.

Gilbert fired, and one of the men uttered a cry of pain; but Quartermaine seized Gilbert's rein, and, forcing the horse back upon its haunches, dropped his smoking weapon and drew out his sword.

"Fly, Simon—fly!" cried the prostrate

goldsmith, as he struggled to his feet, only to be felled by a heavy blow, and pounced upon by two robbers.

"Ha, you young dog," said the man with the red moustache, "you escaped me last night, but to-day——"

He did not finish his sentence, for Gregory Firebrace smote him with a pistol-butt from behind, and Quartermaine dropped senseless.

"I thought so," muttered the old wolf, with a strange gleam in his eyes and a hasty glance about him. "Go, Master Gilbert, ride like the wind, and ask no questions! I will seek you! Quick, take the road yonder before the others come!"

And he struck the boy's horse over the croup.

Simon Barbican, who had ridden to Gilbert's aid and witnessed the action, lowered his terrible cudgel, seeing that the gaunt figure seemed to be bent on befriending the lad, and, as Gilbert's horse started away at a mad gallop, the bewildered apprentice followed him, ducking on to his holsters as the other gang fired a volley from the bank and jumped down into the road.

A loud cry came after the boys on the still air, and it was Silas Double who spoke.

"The horses, men!" he shouted. "We must follow them, if we ride all night!"

"Did you hear what the rogue said?" cried Simon, as he came abreast of Gilbert, both horses galloping neck and neck down the frozen road.

"Ay, that did I!" answered Gilbert, between his set teeth. "And more than that, the tall man who felled the leader was Gregory Firebrace, who taught me to use the sword. How comes he among these knaves, I wonder?"

Simon made no reply, having his own ideas on the subject; but, looking back under his arm, he saw several of the robbers streaming across the snow as hard as they could run, evidently to intercept them farther on.

A belt of dense woodland grew on the left of the road, and beyond it was a wide glade, dotted here and there with bushes.

They pulled in here, but the respite was short. Angry voices were heard. Simon was for riding on. There were repeated whistles. Simon knew that daylight would show their tracks, and that there were no more desperate men than the outlaws whose aim was to murder Gilbert.

Therefore the two lads pushed on, to stop on a sudden as a black form loomed up in the darkness.

Simon had started, but laughed the next moment, and pointed to the east.

"'Tis the moon rising," he said. And sure enough the great silver orb came rolling over the distant tree-tops, and poured a flood of brilliant radiance over the forest. "Now we can find a safe lair. Quick, Gilbert! Follow me closely, and we shall soon be in safety—of a sort," he added.

And Simon Barbican headed for a hill whose sides were clothed with dense undergrowth.

His eyes scanned the ground in search of footprints, but the snow was untrodden.

"No one has been this way," he said, "and, in truth, 'tis rough going for anything larger than a coney. See, below is the very spot we seek—a deep hollow, with the high banks all around it, and snug from the wind as it is from observation."

The next moment they stood with their horses in the centre of a dell, plunged in profound shadow.

Above their heads the rising moon showed a circle of stunted oaks and hornbeams, like sentinels on the bank-top, and across the level space at the bottom of the hollow lay a fallen tree, which time and decay had turned into touchwood.

"Good luck, Gilbert! We are in luck's way!" said the apprentice gaily. "Tie the horses to yonder bough, while I find my tinder-box, and we'll have a fire right soon!"

Gilbert jerked the rein over the crook of a bough.

"Someone is coming!" he whispered, pointing to the animals. "Look!"

"How do you know that?" said Simon, under his breath.

"By the mare's ears, and by the way she sniffs the wind. Are there any wolves in the wood, think you?"

Once there rang on the still air the snap of a twig; then the silence became greater than ever, until a strange thing happened.

They sprang round, for the voice had come from the other side of the dell.

"Master Gilbert, do not fire!" it said.

And the long, lean figure of Gregory Firebrace drew his right hand behind him and looked down on the ground.

"I know not that you should take my hand, Master Gilbert," said the old soldier. "I am a broken man, and an outcast these many months."

"I care not what you may be, you are ever my friend!" cried Gilbert, flushing. "No doubt you have a tale to tell, and so have I."

And the impetuous boy seized the old man's knotted paw, and grasped it warmly.

"Well, since you will have it so, Master Gilbert," he said gravely; "but first tell me how you came here, and who is your companion."

Simon took stock of the tall figure, while Gilbert made Gregory Firebrace acquainted, in as few words as possible, of the events of the last two days.

"Dead!" said Gregory Firebrace. "Master Chantry dead! Then you know now—he told you with his last breath who you are?"

"Nay, that he did not!" replied Gilbert, his lips trembling. "Master Jewell, who has so strangely befriended me, alone knows the secret."

"Not so!" said the old soldier, in a dull tone of rage. "There is yet another who hath good cause. And now I understand why the scoundrel Quartermaine wished to slay you awhile ago; and he it was who lay in wait for you on London Bridge. Oh, the rogue! The double rogue! But I will thwart him!"

Simon's eye kindled as he watched the old man's face. The wrath was genuine, and there was so much honesty in the scarred, war-worn visage that Simon's brow relaxed.

"Tell us, Master Firebrace," said he, "what are we to do?"

The old man's toothless mouth wrinkled into a smile.

"That is what I am here to tell you," he said, "if you will trust a broken man and an outlaw."

"I'll answer for that," exclaimed Gilbert. "But you are wounded! Your wrist is all a-bleeding!"

"A scratch, boy!"

The boys had now fished Dame Jewell's parcels out of their holsters, and unfolded quite a store of cooked meat, a pasty, and several slices of white bread, and the trio lost no time in breaking their fast.

Gregory Firebrace relapsed into silence, which he suddenly broke, looking at the nameless boy with a strange glitter in his eye.

"I knew your father, Master Gilbert," he said, in a voice that was something louder than a whisper. "This much may I tell you, and no more. He was the captain of my troop. I was his corporal; and the first milk that passed your lips was warmed in my helmet over just such a fire as this."

The eyes of the listening boys opened very wide at these words, and the old man smiled at his ancient memories.

"It was," he went on, "who carried you in a corner of my mantle to good Parson Chantry; and you know how every year I came to stay with him, and taught you things that the parson could not. You have not forgotten my lessons, Master Gilbert?"

And he touched the rusty rapier at his side.

"I am getting old now, but in my day few have been better at feats of arms and the use of the sword," said Gregory Firebrace, "and when the wars were over, and the Lord-Protector held the reins, I gained a livelihood by teaching others how to defend themselves. My fame spread, and though I gained many broad pieces, still I made enemies, who were jealous of my skill."

"Many of the gay lords and gallant gentlemen who returned with King Charles at the Restoration became my pupils, and fortune seemed to smile upon me, until the rising of the Fifth Monarchy men under Venner, the mad cooper."

"On the day of their wild attempt, my cloak and beaver were stolen from the tavern where I was dining, and one of the foes wore it openly in their midst, to my speedy undoing."

The old soldier's brows knitted into a terrible frown as he spoke.

"I had been seen, they said, in Fetter Lane, arm-in-arm with Venner himself. I had fired upon a constable who had followed the rioters to their hiding-place on Hampstead Heath; and when the Life Guards cut them down in Wood Street I was again seen, inciting desperate resistance, escaping mysteriously when on the point of being captured, and leaving my cloak in their hands."

"They sent to arrest me, and 'twas only by the aid of a great lord—whom I will not name—that I got away."

"But surely, Gregory," exclaimed Gilbert, the hot colour rushing to his cheeks, "you are not a robber?"

The old man looked down and sighed deeply.

"No," he said, squaring his shoulders; "unless to snare a fat buck maketh a man such. I never laid hand on a gold piece in my life that belonged not to myself. But I have been forced to help those that are robbers—ay,

and cut-throats, too! And now you know the worst, Master Gilbert."

Gregory Firebrace rose from the tree-trunk.

"We have talked enough; it is time to act," he said gruffly. "I am going to discover in which of their hiding-places Master Jewell is to be found. I may be gone several hours. There is no telling. Keep, both of you, in the hollow until you hear the bark of a fox repeated thrice. That will be my signal."

They watched him scramble up the bank, and the next moment he had disappeared.

He paused on the bed of a rivulet, whose course wound like a serpent of ice through the wood, and a distant sound came to his ear.

"Horsemen on the road!" he said to himself. "I were well to gain sight of them before I go farther."

The clatter of hoofs grew louder, and four horsemen went across the glade.

"Quartermaine, Silas Double, Oliver, and the doctor!" murmured the old wolf in the beech-root. "Ho, ho! They are for London, and Master Jewell is in the Hill Hole!"

Gregory Firebrace lifted his face to the dark sky above him and laughed noiselessly, after a silent manner he had.

"'Tis wondrous well!" he thought, smiling. "Yet I marvel that Quartermaine should lodge him there and I abroad; for though 'tis the securest spot of all, 'tis the easiest to come to if you know the way. And I know the way! Ha, ha! Old Gregory Firebrace knows the way perhaps better than any man living!"

Several times he stopped, and while he felt the ground with one hand, he drew a long knife from his belt with the other.

It was evident that there was danger very near.

All at once he bent into a crouching position, with his knees up to his chin, and cowered under the snow-laden canopy of a large holly.

Two men stepped into view from the other side of the same bush, and stood looking down the slope. The old wolf could have touched the nearest of the pair had he but stretched forth one of his long paws.

"A plaguey cold night for the watch!" said one of the men, who carried a musket in the hollow of his arm.

"'T would be hot enough if we slept, lad," said his companion, with a short laugh. "There will be the mischief to pay as it is over this business, you mark my words! I think the captain has taken leave of his senses!"

"Black Humphrey swears that he wounded him," said the first man.

"Which is very little consolation to us, since he killed him not outright!" sneered the other.

"Well, Quartermaine says that there is a thousand pounds in the stroke, and has gone to get it."

Then silence fell again, and the old soldier rose to his feet, stiff with the intense cold.

"A narrow shave, by my word!" said he. "Had I been a stride further on, there would have been a fight for life! I must find out how many of the gang are within, and then 'twill be matter for the justices, though my own neck be in peril, as the rogue truly said!"

It was about three in the morning—the darkest and coldest of all hours—and Gilbert was dozing, with his head sunk upon his knees. Simon Barbican suddenly shook him by the arm, and the nameless boy started, and suddenly grasped his sword.

A fox barked, not far away, three times.

"'Tis Master Firebrace, Gilbert!" whispered Simon. "Here he comes!"

And as they sprang out to meet him the old wolf came down the slope, and then fell a-laughing in his noiseless way.

"Didst think me lost or captured, lads?" said Gregory, holding his gigantic hands over the embers. "I have discovered the prisoner, and have counted his guard. There are eleven rascals in Hill Hole, and the captain is not expected to return till to-morrow night!"

"And what chance have we of releasing him?" asked Simon, smoothing his cudgel caressingly.

Their honours the justices must help us, and at daybreak we will set out for Pontifex Park. Sir Rufus is a man of action and courage. And now I will go to sleep!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

How Sir Rufus Pontifex took the matter in hand, and mustered his Merry Men for the storming of Hill Hole

IN the centre of Pontifex Park, whose moss-grown palings divided it from the forest, stood Pontifex Hall, and upon the steps of the terrace stood Sir Rufus Pontifex himself, just dismounted from his bay roadster.

A group of gallant gentlemen, all laughing heartily, and clapping their gloved hands to bring some warmth into them, had followed their host up the terrace, and eight steaming horses



At the first pass the old man's blade slid like a lightning flash through the shoulder of Crimson Cloak, who staggered backward.

(See page 230)

were slanting out their necks below, and champing their bits, and thinking, no doubt,

of the cosy stables and the well-filled mangers
"Marry, 'twas a great ride!" cried Si

Rufus, a stout, ruddy man of fifty, in a green riding-cloak and silver spurs. "Within, lads—within! And if the dinner be not serving and the wine heated, we will hang our butler as a warning to the rest!"

There was no need to smite the broad door with his riding-whip, which the knight had raised for the purpose, for the aforesaid butler threw it wide, and, looking over his master's shoulder across the park, made a gesture with his hand.

"They are coming again, Sir Rufus," said the butler enigmatically—"the three of them!"

"The more the merrier!" cried the jovial knight. "Set three extra platters, and lay down extra claret; but don't stay between the fire and my divinity any longer, else will I roll thee in the snow, my fat retainer!"

The butler, used to his master's moods, stood aside, and whispered:

"Tis not guests, Sir Rupert, but the old man who cured Green Apple of the distemper last spring, and who lives in the forest, and two lads with him. They would not say their business, though they have been here three times to-day."

Sir Rufus turned and saw Gregory Firebrace coming up the avenue with a long, lean stride, Gilbert and Simon on either hand.

"Bring them in. I will see them before we eat," said the knight.

"Your honour's pardon, Sir Rufus," said Gregory. "I crave a word with you, if I may out with it before these gentlemen!"

Sir Rufus was half out of his green coat, and turned to the door, his arms still in its sleeves.

"Roar away, old bull of Bashan!" said Sir Rufus. "Whose dog is dead?"

"None is dead, yet, your worship," said Gregory Firebrace; "but one you have some interest in is in peril. Master Jewell, after leaving your house last evening, fell into the hands of some desperate rogues, and is even now captive not two miles away."

Sir Rufus stamped with anger.

"These outrages are beyond endurance!" he cried. "Not only are my deer carried off under my very nose, but my visitors are kidnapped almost in sight of my park gates! The king shall hear of this!"

"Will your worship help Master Jewell?" broke in Gregory.

"Help him? Of course we will help him!" roared the knight. "Am I not a justice of the peace? Help him, quotha! Where is he? And how many are there?"

"There are eleven, and he is in a place to which I can conduct you, so that we may fall on them without their knowledge," replied the old man.

"I fear me you know too much of these fellows, my good man," said Sir Rufus, shaking his finger at the messenger. "No matter; you saved my favourite hound, and I am grateful. What's the best time to catch them?"

"After dark, Sir Rufus, about the sinking of the moon; they keep slack ward then."

"After dark be it. Eleven, you say? Gentlemen, we are eight of us, and can muster twenty stout fellows from the stables. What say you? Let us draw the corks first, and the badgers afterwards. Are you willing?"

The guests one and all raised a shout of glee, and, bidding Gregory and his two companions betake them to the kitchen, Sir Rufus Pontifex led the way into the famous dining-chamber.

At nine of the clock the gentlemen rose, and set their wigs straight, removed their spurs, lest the jingle might betray them, muffled themselves in their cloaks, and took each man his pistols and his sword.

In a few minutes the party issued forth on to the terrace, and wound down the avenue.

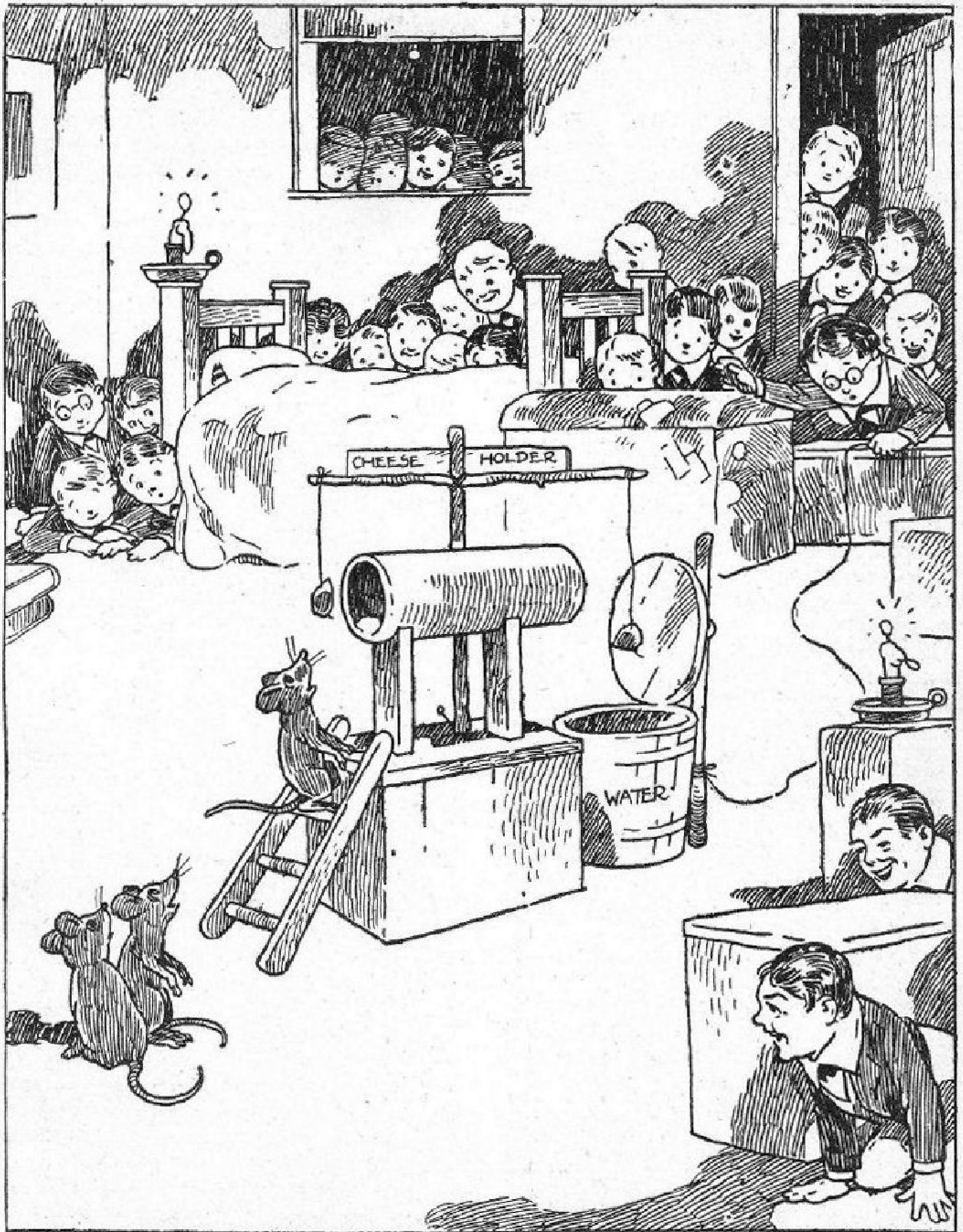
Gregory Firebrace and the two lads went first, and after them came Sir Rufus Pontifex and the gentlemen, the stable-men bringing up the rear with a goodly supply of torches, and horn-lanterns unlighted, and a choice assortment of old guns, pitchforks, and every weapon they could lay their hands on.

The rawness in the keen wind that whistled through the trees of the avenue told Gregory that it would snow again before morning.

The moon was low down behind the silent woods, and the night was unusually dark.

"Hush, gentlemen, please!" said Gregory, stopping suddenly, when they had traversed nearly a mile of the way. "Heard you that?"

THE INVENTIONS OF SMITH MINOR



A PATENT SCHEME FOR CATCHING MICE IN DORMITORIES

A pistol-shot echoed in the distance in the pirection of Hill Hole.

"What can be happening?" said Sir Rufus, in a whisper.

"That is more than I can tell, sir," said the old wolf.

"Your pardon, old man!" said the gentleman whom Sir Rufus had addressed as Sir Harry. "Don't you think it were as well to explain what we must do? These woods are as dark as pitch, and we run as great a risk of shooting the trees or each other as of slaying the robbers."

Gregory Firebrace smiled in the darkness; but when he spoke his tone was perfectly respectful.

"Sir Harry Lovelock," he said, "you say well, and I will tell you what I know of Hill Hole, which is probably more than the robbers know themselves, for I have a way of getting into it that they never dreamed of."

The gentlemen crowded round him, and listened with great eagerness. They were warm with their walk and the wine they had drank, and were so full of courage and excitement that they began to finger their pistols a little dangerously for the safety of each other.

"About five hundred yards in a straight line," said Firebrace, pointing away in the blackness of the night, "there is a hill covered with fine beeches. The hill is steep on all sides but one, and round its base stretches a continuous circle of high holly-trees. They are so dense that no living creature would attempt to force his way through them. And in the centre of that natural wall, is Hill Hole. The hole is a dip in the hill, the dip itself large enough to hold fifty men with ease."

"Down the sloping bank, from the edge of the hollow to the shrubs at its foot, there are two paths, each wide enough for two men to walk abreast. A great holly-bough conceals these exits, and is removed and replaced by any passing in or out. At the top of the banks at the end of the paths, there stand two sentinels night and day, and, so artfully are the approaches concealed, that, once inside the holly-screen, they snap their finger at the whole world, and count themselves as secure as rats in the barn."

"Well, gentlemen," said Sir Rufus, "you

hear what this good fellow has told us. Who is for the rabbit-hole and who is for the holly?"

The idea of crawling thirty feet under ground, upon hands and knees, somewhat cooled the ardour of these gay fellows. No one spoke.

"By your worship's leave," said Gregory Firebrace, again smiling in the darkness, "my two companions, myself, your honour, and three others, will suffice for the burrow."

"I am with you, Firebrace," said bold Sir Rufus.

The dull, red light of the fire in the outer hollow showed through the square entrance, and Simon could trace the outline of the stable, now empty of horses.

"Give me your hand," whispered Gregory Firebrace; "and remember that the slightest noise will undo us."

The old man thrust his legs through the hole and, with a rapier between his teeth, lowered himself to arm's length, and dropped without a noise.

Simon followed suit, and the moment after stood beside him, ankle-deep in a litter of dry fern.

It was then Gilbert's turn, and Sir Rufus Pontifex, with more agility, than his girth would seem to justify, scrambled down, and drew a prodigious sigh of relief.

"Hist!" murmured Gregory Firebrace. "Someone is speaking!"

Sir Rufus put up his hand to stay the serving-men, and all listened as if their lives depended upon it. They could not distinguish the words, but it was evident that the robbers round the fire outside were talking among themselves.

"Wait!" breathed Gregory Firebrace; and he slipped towards the opening.

He was back again in a moment, and what he had to tell was imparted in an almost voiceless whisper.

"There are five of them," he said, "and they are on the alert. I trust our friends below have not given the alarm. Let the men come down, and we will fall upon them!"

Two of the grooms accomplished the descent in safety, but while the third was yet hanging midway between the burrow and the floor of

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

How various people returned to Old London Bridge, and Eli Nethersole rubbed his hands

the stable, a volley of pistols startled the echoes without, and the voice of Sir Harry Lovelock was heard exclaiming:

"Down with your arms, dogs! Resistance is useless!"

A fearful uproar arose from the fire, and as Gilbert and Simon Barbican sprang through the opening, they saw the five men leap for the bank-top.

"Yield, rogues—yield!" cried Simon Barbican, rushing in pursuit.

The robbers then turned, and, with dreadful oaths, plunged down the path out of sight.

A tremendous commotion was taking place now.

One piercing scream rose above it all, and Sir Harry's voice was heard exclaiming:

"I have you dead as a doornail, my friend!"

Simon Barbican, realising that the robbers must be trapped, followed no further than the bank-top; and old Gregory Firebrace, with a triumphant grin, checked himself as he reached the fire.

"We can well leave them to the others," he said. "Let us now look to Master Jewell!"

He turned, and ran back into the opening in the bank, after thrusting a torch into the fire.

The flambeau flared up, and the reflection of the earthen walls of the subterranean chambers showed the gigantic roots that protruded here and there.

The stable was empty; the storehouse he did not trouble about; but, seizing the rough wicket that secured the door of the sleeping apartment, he wrenched it open, locked though it was, and went in, Simon Barbican at his elbow.

"Empty!" said the old wolf, in a tone of surprise. "We have drawn blank."

Gregory Firebrace's jaw dropped, and he looked at Sir Rufus Pontifex.

"Search the place high and low!" he cried, lighting another torch, and examining every hole and corner, as Sir Harry's party poured into the hollow.

Hill Hole was empty; the goldsmith had gone!

It was early morning, and Gideon Bilge yawned prodigiously as he began to unbar Eli Nethersole's front door. Eli Nethersole followed the same calling as his neighbour, John Jewell, but with this difference—while the one was an honest man, the other was a rogue, and supplemented his income by usury.

Gideon Bilge gave vent to a terrific yawn, that well-nigh dislocated his jaw, and drew back the last remaining bolt. He started, and gave a cry, for, no sooner had he done this when the door was thrown violently open, sending him spinning back a yard or more, and a freshly shaven man darted in, closed the door behind him, and said no word until he had shot all the bolts once more in their places. Having done this, he turned partly round, and looked at Gideon.

Gideon was on the watch—as usual.

Quartermaine seemed amused by the impression he had created. He had placed his prisoner, the goldsmith, in a safe place, right in the heart of the Thieves' Quarter—that Alsatia he, the chief of the rogues, knew so well.

Quartermaine stamped upstairs and told Eli all.

"We reached Smithfield with the goldsmith two hours since," said the robber. "Now, let's see your work, Eli. 'Tis important that we make a clean sweep of John Jewell's strong-room before forty-eight hours have passed!"

Eli Nethersole lighted his candle, and led the way down a flight of well-worn oak steps into the vaults underneath the shop.

The first chamber into which they came was empty; but, unlocking the little door at the far end, Nethersole stooped his head, and the captain, following, found himself in a small inner chamber, where they could distinctly hear the murmuring of the tide.

"We are ten feet below the river," said the usurer, "and there is my handiwork."

He pointed to the wall. It was built of stone blocks, roughly cemented together, each block of considerable thickness, and a heavy

enough load for one man to carry. Five of these portions of the ancient masonry of the bridge had been prised from the wall by a heavy iron crowbar, and a yawning hollow showed where they had been.

Eli Nethersole thrust a candle into the opening, and tapped with his thin, crooked fingers.

"Brickwork, Quartermaine—brickwork!" he said. "It will take but little time to clear it out, and beyond that there is an inner casing of wood, which will not detain us long."

Quartermaine, his face showing symptoms of keen interest, took the candle from the usurer's hand, and examined the cavity minutely.

"There is one thing to be remembered," he said, speaking in a whisper. "The moment our chisels fall upon that inner panelling, the work must be pushed forward, and the thing done in a few hours. As yet, I do not see that Jewell's household can have a suspicion of our intent."

Meanwhile Sir Rufus Pontifex, Sir Harry Lovelock, the worthy saddler, and our hero were narrating the history of their night's exploit to Dame Jewell.

There was something very pathetic in the table duly laid for five, showing how confident the good dame had been that morning would produce the absent one. Her face was very white and drawn, and she listened, without seeming to hear, as Sir Rufus Pontifex did his best to reassure her in his earnest tones.

"'Tis a strange thing, madam," said Sir Rufus—"a mighty strange thing. But men do not disappear in our days. In the bad times it was so. But all that is changed with the return of his gracious Majesty. Sir Harry and I are going straight to Whitehall, and we will state such a case before the King as shall speedily restore your husband."

"You are very kind, gentlemen," said Dame Jewell, nervously twisting the corner of her snow-white pinner. "It passes my poor comprehension, for John had not an enemy in the world, and no man, whether it be on the bridge or in the City, or in the King's palace itself, was better thought of, or more deserved it."

She let her gaze rest on the stolid face of her

brother, as if mutely appealing to him for assistance.

"You must be of good cheer, Barbara," said Master Jasper Jenkins. "As Sir Rufus says, a good citizen like John Jewell cannot be spirited away all in a moment, and I shall never rest until I have discovered him and brought the rogues to justice."

Dame Jewell's bosom began to heave like a tumultuous sea, and her mouth commencing to twitch in a manner that savoured of an unmistakable breakdown, Sir Rufus and Sir Harry bowed themselves out with all the haste they could, and rode away to seek justice, if any could be found in the land.

Jasper did his best to cheer up his sister.

Meanwhile Gilbert was reproaching himself for bringing trouble on the house, while Simon went to answer the door, for an old tinker with a tray of glittering wares was outside.

"Lord save us!" cried Simon. "It is Master Firebrace!"

The tinker chuckled. He knew his disguise was sure, and that he would not encounter such sharp eyes as Simon's.

"I wish to speak to Master Jenkins," he said, "and without attracting attention."

And Gregory Firebrace, looking down at himself, laughed after his noiseless fashion.

"My house is in Gracious Street," said the saddler. "I will take care that we have pot and pan to mend. If you learn anything, come thither, and should I be absent, say your say to my good wife. She and I are one."

"That is as it should be," said Gregory Firebrace, with a sigh. "To-morrow I may have news. Meanwhile I need not urge you to watch. And as for you, Master Gilbert, take my advice and keep well within doors. Remember you are in peril of your life. If you must go forth, let it be with Simon Barbican or Master Jenkins here."

The old tinker picked up his glittering bundle once more, and went slowly out.

He limped slowly along down a narrow winding street, of a sort we should call picturesque, but which must have been terribly uncomfortable and unhealthy to live in in the days of King Charles II.

It was ancient ground to Gregory Firebrace,

and to a great many people who, like the old soldier, were upon the border-line that separates respectability from rascality in various forms. The spot was also holy in the sense that the spot was a sanctuary for evil-doers.

At the bottom the street widened into a little square, with a frozen pump in the centre of it, and at one corner with a quaint, rambling building with a signboard projecting from its front like a miniature gallows-arm. Upon the board, in letters half defaced by time and grime, one might have read the name of the tavern. There was something significant in it, being that of the Goat and Rope; but Gregory Firebrace did not trouble himself to cast an eye upon it. He knew it well, and had been there hundreds of times before in very different disguise.

Two steps led into the common-room, and the lame tinker negotiated them carefully, and, sitting down upon the nearest settle, called for a tankard of ale.

A slovenly drawer supplied his wants, and then returned to the other end of the room to look over the shoulders of a group of men who were playing tric-trac.

A bright fire burned in the centre of the room.

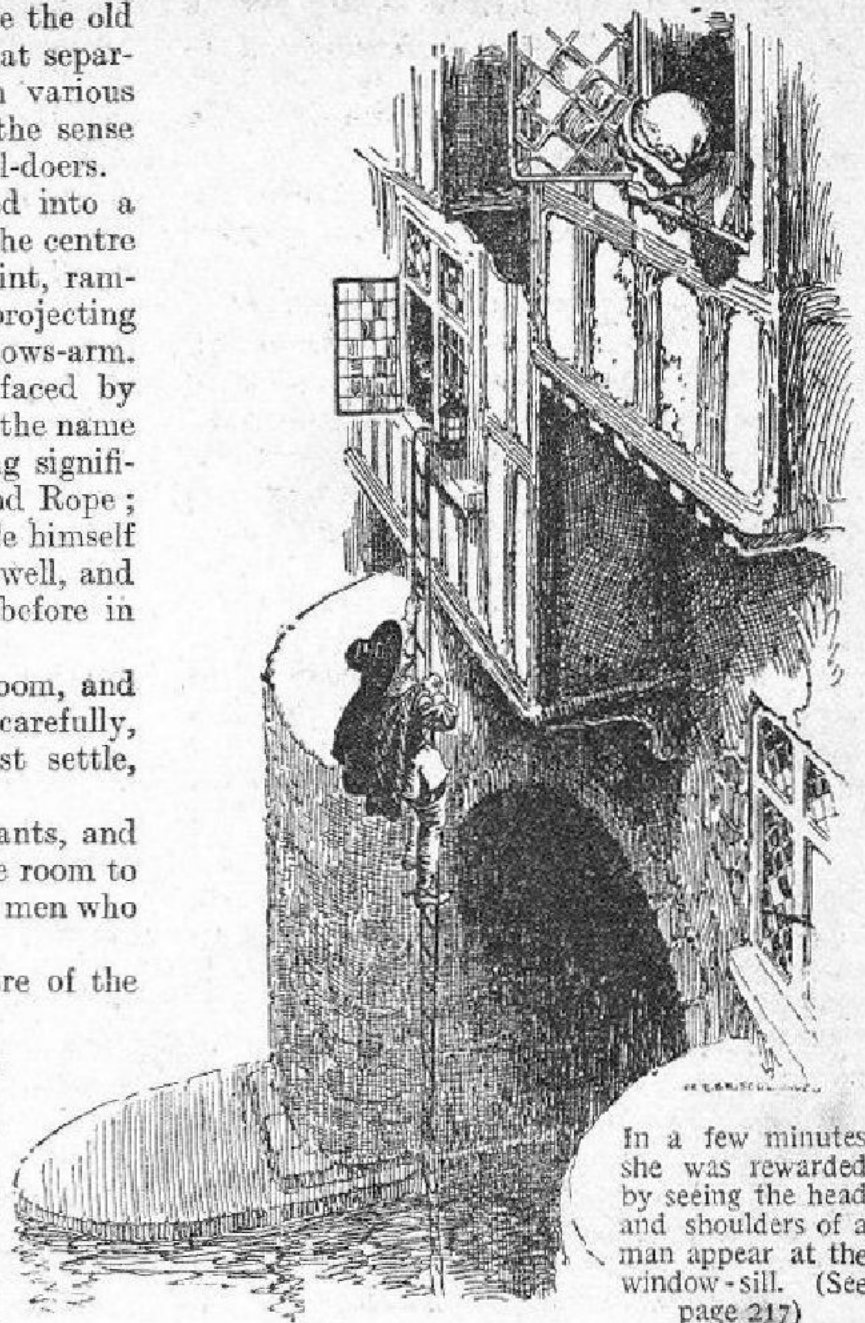
There were a score of folk within as many yards of him who would have answered any question Gregory Firebrace cared to put to them—folk he had helped in the days of his prosperity; men he had rescued from tight places and awkward situations. But if it once got breathed about that the old swordsman was in Alsatia, Quartermaine and his gang would find a ready means of discharging him.

When the gamesters had finished, and one or two of them had left the tavern, the landlord sauntered over to the place where Gregory Firebrace was seated, and looked at him curiously.

"You are a slow feeder, my friend," he said.

"I have fewer teeth than I once had, mine host," said the old man in a faint voice.

The door opened suddenly, and Captain Quartermaine entered, bringing in a cold blast of air with him, and a pile of snow on



the sole of each boot. He went right through into the inner room, and spoke for some minutes with the landlord; then a dirty cloth was laid on a gate-legged table, which Gregory could see from where he sat. A steaming joint of beef was carried thither from the kitchen, and the captain and mine host seated themselves and ate ravenously.

"Tom," said the landlord, when they had devoured enough for three ordinary mortals, "a platter, a knife, and a flask of red canary."

These things were brought in by one of the drawers, a yellow-visaged man with a cut across the forehead. Gregory Firebrace had

THE SIGHTS OF GREYFRIARS

THE HEAD'S STUDY



A TERRIFYING sight is this
To every old offender,
Who, having erred and done amiss,
His sorrow comes to render.
The Head sits there, in solemn state,
To deal out retribution;
He lectures culprits who await
The pangs of execution!

I'd rather dream of marble halls
Than Dr. Locke's apartment,
Where victims have emitted squalls
And wondered what each smart meant!
I'd sooner be in some quaint hut,
Uncarpeted and muddy,
Than find myself securely shut
In Dr. Locke's grim study!

I know that study like a book,
Its sights are most arresting;
In every corner, if you look,
A pliant cane is resting!
I see the bookcase, tall and grim,
Where much forgotten lore is
(Including Rudyard Kipling's "Kim"
And other curious stories!)

I do not love thee, dismal place!
Quite obvious is the reason;
I've often stood there in disgrace,
For breaking bounds, or treason.
In fact, when Dr. Locke's stern glance
Descends upon these verses
He'll send for me; so in advance
I'll crave his tender mercies!

been present during the fracas in which Tom had sustained the hurt.

The landlord carved off a portion of the juicy beef, placed a slice of bread beside it, filled a long-stemmed glass with the red wine, and rose from his seat. The drawer closed the door of the inner room, but Gregory Firebrace heard the jingle of the captain's spurs, and a moment after the sound of two men ascending the wooden staircase.

"Ho, ho!" muttered the lame tinker to himself. "For whom is that repast being conveyed to the upper rooms? Is it possible that I have lighted upon my man so soon?"

Firebrace left the inn and made an inspection. The roof communicated with other roofs, the attic windows were closely shuttered on the inside. It did not do to trust one's neighbours in such a locality, but as the tinker watched, one of the shutters was opened, and for a moment he saw Quartermaine's face looking down into the little square.

The snow continued, and still the attic window remained open. It was perhaps a quarter of an hour, to be particular, and then the shutter closed again, and the tinker came out of the mouth of the alleyway.

"So," said he, "there is someone up there whom they find it necessary to feed. I cannot think that it is Master Jewell, but that remains to be discovered. Now to get me a lodging in some house from whence I can gain the roofs, and carry my investigation further."

He paused a moment with his eyes half-closed, and then walked across the little square, and rapped on a door in the corner.

A thin, pale-faced woman unfastened the bolt, and peered at him. At the sight of his bundle she shook her head, and was closing the door again, when Gregory Firebrace put his foot against it, and said in a faint voice:

"Your pardon, madam, but I am but newly come into this place, and searching for a lodging. Any hole will do for me where I can lay my old bones out of reach of this snow-storm."

"My attic is empty," she said; "but it is a poor place in very truth."

"A poor place is well fitted for a poor man," said the tinker. And as he passed in he once more laughed that silent laugh of his.

THE NINTH CHAPTER

How my Lord Mountmarmaduke Showed that he had more than Common Interest in the Welfare of Master John Jewell

MY Lord Mountmarmaduke, a fair young nobleman who played upon the lute to the Merry Monarch, got out of a coach at Temple Bar, and wrapped in a scarlet mantle, lined with costly fur, took his way into Alsatia.

It was growing dusk, and the narrow street, so full of pitfalls for the unwary, offered no obstruction to the courtier, who threaded them as quickly as if they had been the corridors of Whitehall. He pushed open the door of the Goat and Rope, as a man would who was perfectly acquainted with the place, ducked his head to avoid crushing the feathers in his hat, took the two steps as a matter of course, and, without looking right or left, went straight to the inner room. Captain Quartermaine was there alone, and the coming of my lord was evidently expected.

The captain arose, placed a leather-covered chair near the bright log-fire, and, motioning towards a bright array of flasks and bottles on the table, said :

"Will my lord be pleased to take anything?"

"No, Quartermaine," said the nobleman, standing with his back to the blaze, and shaking the snow from his cloak. "I have little time to stay here, and we will to business. Have you spoken to our man yet?"

"I have broached the subject as your lordship directed," said Quartermaine, "but with little success. The goldsmith is a man of experience, and not without courage, and I fear we are playing a very dangerous game."

"'Tis your own fault, Quartermaine. You had the chance to kill the boy, and you missed it. Again, over there in the forest, when fortune played directly into your hands, you missed it a second time. Now I am going to have a say in matters. Where is he?"

"I will conduct your lordship to his room," said the captain. He took a key from his pocket and accompanied Mountmarmaduke up the stairs with a candle in each hand.

At the door of a room in the attic the cap-

tain stopped, placed one of the candles on the rickety floor, put the key in the lock, and went in. The candle cast a wavering light about the little apartment, which was bitterly cold, and, huddled up on the edge of the pallet bed, sat Master John Jewell, his chin in his hand, and an expression of deep thought on his face as he looked up.

"I have brought you a visitor, Master Jewell," said Quartermaine, putting candles on the table, and closing the door carefully. "Your imprisonment may cease in an hour as you wish it."

My Lord Mountmarmaduke's face had gone a trifle pale as he crossed the threshold, and now grew red as he felt the goldsmith's eyes upon him.

"I am sorry, sir," said the nobleman, speaking hurriedly, but gradually gaining his composure. "I am sorry to see you here, and regret the discomfort in which I find you. To cut a long story short, a certain youth has come to your house, bearing a certain packet of papers, which he lodged in your hands. You will have to decide on two things, Master Jewell—whether that boy dies, or whether you hand those papers to me. There is no other alternative, and I put it to you quite openly, with Captain Quartermaine as a witness."

"I shall not give you the papers, my Lord Mountmarmaduke," said John Jewell quietly; "and the boy is in the hands of those who will protect him. This outrage of keeping me in durance vile must cease ere many hours are passed. I doubt not even now my friends are taking such steps as shall free me by the morrow. The papers you cannot lay your hands upon, and if you kill me, my lawyer will find them in due course; and, though I am but a poor citizen, and not a great lord, nothing will save you from the common hangman."

Quartermaine drew Mountmarmaduke aside, and whispered earnestly in his ear. My lord's face, which had grown as white as marble, now resumed its colour, and he laughed a hard, unmusical laugh, and turned to the goldsmith with a sneer upon his lips.

Was it the wind that jarred the shutter, or was there someone on the roof outside?

"You live on London Bridge, Master Jewell," said he, "and doubtless you have keys to your strong-room. Forgive me if my question seems somewhat impertinent, but are those keys to your pouch at the present moment?"

The goldsmith looked fixedly at him, and made no reply.

Was it the wind that shook the heavy shutter for the second time as the door closed? We shall see.

"Barbara," said Jasper Jenkins, his face very solemn, "I want to look into the strong-room."

"My good Jasper," said Dame Jewell, "I have already told you that I have not the keys. John always carries them on his person, and where he is now there they must be."

"I care not one groat about them," said Jasper Jenkins, in a very decided tone. "Look into that vault I must, for I have very grave suspicions."

"Lawks!" said Dame Jewell. "And what is the matter now?"

Jenkins was a long-headed man. He told his sister his suspicions.

"Eli Nethersole is up to no good," he said. "I want to inspect your vaults and find out what is being done next door."

It was an easy matter to find a locksmith. The saddler went out, to return with a burly man who stooped.

"An old friend of mine, Barbara," he said to his sister. "He can be trusted not only to keep our secret, but to force any lock in London town. Show us the doors, and Martin Horley shall take them one by one."

Martin Horley was a man with a merry eye, and a face well-nigh as black as a sweep's. He produced a bag full of keys and strange instruments in use by locksmiths, and followed Dame Jewell to a heavy oak panel in the wall of a sitting-room.

"This one I can open myself," she said, pressing on the right-hand bottom corner.

The panel swung back, and showed a dark opening.

"There is the first floor," said the good dame, "and I warrant me you will have your work cut out for you, Master Horley!"

"We shall see—we shall see!" said the locksmith cheerily. "Jasper, will you hold the candle for me?"

"That will I, Martin," said the saddler, laughing; "though 'tis few men can hold the candle to thee at this business."

The locksmith knelt down, scrutinised the door closely and its fastenings, and rattled his bag as a prisoner rattles his chains. In five minutes the door opened, and Martin Horley looked at Dame Jewell with a sly smile.

A flight of steps led them to another door, which gave Master Horley more trouble; but eventually that flew open under his magic touch, and three strides along a narrow passage brought them to a third obstacle. He placed a steel instrument in the lock, turned it one way and then the other, and shook his head dubiously.

"There is an hour's work here," said Martin Horley; "and I should like another candle."

It was about this time that Gideon Bilge came shambling along the bridge once more. His hands were thrust deep in his pockets, and he was whistling. At every few paces he looked over his shoulder, as though someone were following him, and he smiled maliciously the while. When he reached his master's door he paused, with his hand on the latch, and cast a cunning look at the corner where Simon Barbican was standing.

"If you stay there all night," said Gideon Bilge, chuckling to himself, "you will catch nothing—unless it is a cold."

And then, tapping with his knuckles, the door was opened from within, and the apprentice disappeared.

Simon waited some time, but the bridge was deserted. It was not a night when they would choose to be abroad who had no serious business. When his feet were so numb that he could scarcely feel them, Simon stole across to his master's house once more, and made his report to the saddler.

Master Horley had succeeded in forcing the third obstacle, and they were getting very near to the vault itself.

Now, the maid Priscilla, who was trembling with excitement at all this mystery and marvellous happening, found herself unable to keep still. If she sat down she had to get up



He thrust the packet into his breast, and stole away out of the strong room. (See page 243)

again. If she went into one room she forthwith walked aimlessly into another. And at last, for no reason at all, she opened one of the lattice windows and looked out.

It was a dark night, and the river was running strongly through the arch beneath the house. Blocks of ice swirled in the current, and grated one against the other, sometimes piling in a great heap against the stone piers, and, coming away suddenly with a mighty crash, went swirling away down stream.

The sound of the rushing water, which she could not see, exercised a strange fascination for Priscilla, and as she looked down she became aware that a lantern had been placed on the sill of one of the windows of Eli Nethersole's house. It was a dim affair at best, being a lantern of Charles the Second's period; but it was an unusual thing, and Priscilla's slow wits fell a-wondering why it had been placed there. Presently, out of the darkness of the bosom of the river, the sound of a whistle came up to the watching maid. The whistle was answered by another, as a hand

raised the lantern, and swung it to and fro. Then she saw several hands protruded from the Nethersole window--hands that seemed to be dropping something into the river, and that something a rope ladder.

There was a grinding sound below, and the grate of a boat-hook against the masonry; then another whistle, and all was still.

"I wish Simon Barbican were here," said Priscilla to herself. "I should like to call him, but I do want to watch."

And so she watched, and in a few minutes was rewarded by seeing the head and shoulders of a man appear at the window-sill, and again those hands coming forth to help him in. He was followed by two others at short intervals. Another whistle went out into the night, and when the lantern had been withdrawn she heard the window close.

"It was a good thought of yours that we should come by water, Eli," said Captain Quartermaine, rubbing his hands. "Is it possible that the folk next door suspect you?"

"I know not why they should," said Eli Nethersole, with his crackling laugh, "except that, under the circumstances, they might suspect anybody—even the King himself."

"Ha, ha, Eli!" said the captain. "If you knew what I know you would find more truth in those words than you think. It is not convenient for his gracious Majesty that neighbour Jewell should be discovered just now, and the search will not be very hot for him from Whitehall. Still, it was as well, as I said before, that we should enter by this way. How goes the work?"

"So well," said the usurer, "that we have but to take the panelling out, and John Jewell's strong-room is at our mercy."

"Then let us to work," said the robber. "I left our friend in safe keeping, and he had but cold comfort from my lord, I can assure you."

They went down into the usurer's shop, and proceeded at once into the vault. The hole in the wall had been increased to the height of a man, and was fully a yard in width. Fragments of brick and mortar covered the floor, and, by the light of their candles, the newcomers saw that the usurer had spoken truth. A screen of stout oak planks alone separated them from the object of their nefarious search.

"How long, Hugh?" said Quartermaine, turning to the man who had been helping Silas Double. "You are a carpenter by trade, and can best tell us how to proceed."

"I have looked very carefully, captain," said Long Hugh, "and this panelling is mighty strong. Nothing remains but to saw through it, and the saw must be well oiled, for it will make no little noise."

While Eli Nethersole went upstairs to search for oil, Long Hugh took up the usurer's auger with a view to testing the thickness of the panel, and, working dexterously, had soon bored a hole through the woodwork.

They waited breathlessly as he withdrew the instrument, and then the next moment clapped their hands on the guttering candles, and extinguished them simultaneously. A ray of light shone through the hole, and there were people in Master Jewell's strong room talking loudly.

"Ten thousand furies!" muttered Quartermaine, pulling Silas Double out of the way, and applying his eye to the orifice. The others crowded behind him, and held their breaths, and but for the intense darkness of the vault they would have seen that his face grew white as death.

"Not a word—not a sound!" he whispered hoarsely, as he turned to them, "There must be witchcraft here. John Jewell himself is in that room!"

Captain Quartermaine, baffled in all his plans, leaned heavily against the wall, with a strange feeling at his heart.

"Go back all of you," he whispered. "After this, no one knows what may happen. Make the best of your way to the tavern. I will stay here and listen apace." And, placing his ear to the augerhole, this is what he heard.

John Jewell stood in the centre of his strong-room, a candle in one hand and his left arm round Dame Barbara's waist; while Jasper Jenkins, the locksmith, and Simon Barbican, each holding a light, were peering in every cranny and crevice, and sounding upon the walls with the palms of their hands.

"Well, my friends," said the goldsmith, "'tis indeed a strange business, to say the truth. I hardly know whether I stand upon my head or my heels. The adventures of the past few days have crowded so thick and fast one upon the other, and the peril I have escaped was so very deadly, that my mind was in a whirl, and I realised little else but the Providence that has preserved me."

Dame Barbara was sobbing gently, and held very tightly to her good man, as though she was afraid he might be spirited away from her at any moment.

It so chanced that the rogues in the adjoining house had chosen a spot ill-suited to their purpose in one way, but very fortunate in another. Three great chests, piled one upon another, had their backs to the wall at the exact spot where they had made their excavation; consequently, though the saddler and Simon prodded and pounded every available inch of the panelling, they did not reach the spot which by its hollow sound would have revealed the whole business.

One touch on the place where the robber was listening greedily would have produced a hollow sound like a drum. But, by one of those strange chances, that was the only spot they did not test.

"I cannot help thinking," said the goldsmith, "that your fears are groundless. Everything here is as it should be; and though I believe our neighbour to be a bad man, I cannot think him guilty of such an act of treachery as you suggest, Jasper."

Jasper Jenkins looked at his brother-in-law steadily.

"All that I can say is that I heard the knocking," said the saddler. "It shook my very bed."

"And yet," said the goldsmith, "we find nothing."

"If you are a wise man, brother, you will visit this vault oftener than you have done in the past. I am still suspicious."

"That will I do," said the goldsmith.

And then, applying his eye in place of his ear to the auger-hole, the baffled robber saw the light withdraw from the vault, and the iron-bound door close noiselessly upon its well-oiled hinges.

Quartermaine stepped back into the vault, and nearly overturned Eli Nethersole, who had lingered behind the rest.

"Hang you for an old fool!" hissed the robber. "'Tis useless now he has taken the package away with him, and we may suspend operations for the next six months."

Eli Nethersole replied not a word, but his mind was working.

"Ah, you curse me, do you?" he muttered to himself. "Wait awhile, Quartermaine; wait awhile! The packet is little to me, but the gold and jewels are much, and with my own hands I will do the thing, and what I gain I will keep myself."

In the meantime, on the other side of the stout old wall that divided the houses of the two goldsmiths, a merry party was assembled in John Jewell's cosy room.

"Well, well," said the goldsmith, "it has all ended happily, thanks to Firebrace!"

"We are thankful for your safe return," said Jasper Jenkins, setting down his glass.

"'Tis a fortunate business, but I tell you, John, 'tis not over yet."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the sound of a great uproar came from the bridge without. Everyone half-rose from their chairs, and Simon Barbican flung open the window.

A mighty clamour was borne in upon the wind, and the well-known sound of steel upon steel, the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, the quick stamp of men's feet on the hard ground, and the muffled murmur of several speaking in hoarse voices, told them all that a fierce brawl was in progress under their very noses.

"Ha, rogues! Ho, villains!" rang out a strong voice. "Look to yourself, Sir Harry! There are two upon you!"

"If ever I heard Sir Rufus Pontifex," exclaimed Gregory Firebrace, "I hear him now, and in trouble of no common sort!"

Simon Barbican had not waited for his master's permission, but was out of the room and away downstairs at three leaps and a bound, Gilbert Nameless close on his heels and the saddler following.

Never had honest Simon unfastened those bolts and bars so quickly, and almost as soon as it has taken me to recount it, three figures sprang forth from the goldsmith's door with a loud shout.

Simon Barbican had snatched his formidable staff from its corner; Gilbert Nameless drew his rapier as he ran, while worthy Master Jasper Jenkins, unable in a hurry to find a more serviceable weapon, picked up a four-legged oaken stool, which in his brawny hands would have proved remarkably convincing to any disturber of the king's peace upon whose cranium it chanced to have lighted.

Two gentlemen on horseback, bareheaded and encumbered with heavy riding-cloaks, were hotly beset by five men.

Half-way down the bridge good Sir Rufus and his friend, Sir Harry Lovelock, returning from Whitehall, where they had been unable to see the king, had found themselves suddenly surrounded by five ruffians, evidently bent on plunder.

These were wild times. A century later,

when men journeyed from London to York, they felt it necessary to make their wills; and yet another century nearer to our own travellers were warned not to approach London in the dusk for fear of foot-pads and highwaymen.

In the good year 1664 you carried your life, indeed, in your own hands.

It had chanced that Quartermaine and his four confederates, their purses empty and disappointment rankling in their hearts, had met two horsemen midway between Nethersole's house and the gate at the other end of the bridge.

The hour was late. Good citizens were mostly abed, and when Quartermaine drew his rapier and slunk into the shadow of a house, his companions knew well what he meant and did likewise.

Sir Rufus and Sir Harry, talking loudly as they came, and suspecting nothing, were rudely awakened from their fancied security by rough hands laid upon their bridles and hoarse voices that cried:

"Your money or your lives!"

"I have little money upon me, dogs, and my life will keep a little longer, with your permission!" cried Sir Rufus.

And, both being good horsemen, they spurred themselves clear of the ruffians and had time to draw their own blades.

Quartermaine gave a peculiar whistle, which meant:

"Carry this thing through at all costs!"

And then began a running fight, the gentlemen being at such serious disadvantage on the slippery causeway; and both of them disdaining to cry for the watch, they set to it with a will to defend themselves, like the gallant gentlemen they were. But the night being dark, and the ruffians well-used to this sort of encounter, the knight and his companion found that they had undertaken no easy task.

Windows opened above them, night-capped heads gazed timidly forth, and women screamed shrilly; but none interfered, such things being of frequent occurrence in those good old days.

Sir Harry cut Long Hugh over the cheek, and Silas Double nearly passed out of the

story as Sir Rufus ran him through the shoulder.

"Make for the first opening, Harry; we have no room here!" cried Sir Rufus.

And so, thrusting and parrying, smiting and spurring, they found themselves close to the goldsmith's door, and not sorry at the sudden reinforcement that burst out to their aid.

"Ten thousand curses!" muttered Quartermaine. "Draw off, lads; draw off! There is a fate in all this!"

And he started running like a hare to the Surrey side of the river.

There was one thing about Dick Quartermaine—he knew exactly when to leave off.

Fortunately for the desperadoes, Sir Harry Lovelock's horse suddenly took to rearing and plunging to the entrance of the narrow street, and by the time its rider had got him down on all fours, the rascals had gone. And deeming, not unnaturally, that they would take to the water in the boat that had brought them, our friends did not pursue.

"Thank you, good fellows," said Sir Rufus, dismounting. "It might have gone hardly with us had you not come when you did. Never have I experienced so determined an attack. I had almost begun to think that one of their number had some personal animus against us, for he pressed me without ceasing."

"Would you know the rogues again, Sir Rufus?" said Simon, in a disappointed voice, regretting that his beloved cudgel had not had an opportunity for distinguishing itself.

"One does not recognise assailants on a night like this," growled Gregory Firebrace. "Yet can I tell you some at least of the rogues. Quartermaine and his gang they were, and I doubt not that, if they recognised you, they were anxious to pay off old scores, and avenge the discovery of Hill Hole."

"Now, a murrain on the fellow!" cried Sir Rufus as John Jewell appeared in the doorway with a lighted lamp. "If I can get at the King, that man shall be hanged!"

And then the worthy baronet, catching sight of the goldsmith, raised his hands in great surprise, and fell back a step.

"What! How now, John Jewell?" he cried.

"At your service, Sir Rufus," said the goldsmith, laughing in spite of himself. "I know your errand. You come to tell me that your search has been fruitless; but, thanks to Heaven, here am I to tell you that further search is unnecessary."

The worthy knight shook John Jewell warmly by the hand, whispering at the same time:

"I want a word with you!"

The goldsmith led him to the further end of the shop, and Sir Rufus's red face became very grave.

"Have you enemies at court, Master Jewell?" he said.

"I have one," said the goldsmith, with a half smile playing about his mouth. "Why do you ask, Sir Rufus? Have you reason for this question that you may tell me?"

"Answer me another first. Know you aught of Lord Mountmarmaduke?"

The goldsmith's eye glittered, and his brow drew down.

"That is the man, Sir Rufus."

"Ah, I thought as much! He stands between you and the King. Here have I been cooling my heels at Whitehall. Told first that his Majesty would see me, then that his Majesty was unwell, and again that his Majesty was not at Whitehall at all, but had gone to Hampton Court. Then I heard the

King's voice, and raised my own. I have drank with him, danced with him, and, between ourselves, lent him more money than I could afford to do, and all to no purpose, though I know he heard me. And on top of that comes my Lord Mountmarmaduke, smiling that cynical smile of his, and playing with

the curls of his yellow wig, and casting upon me such a look, that, by my word, it was all I could do to keep my sword off him!"

"I fear me, Sir Rufus Pontifex," says he, "that his Majesty has business of more importance than the welfare of an obscure goldsmith who has taken of late to meddling with matters that do not concern him!" Whereupon I made my lord a low bow, and asked him by what right he presumed to pass comment upon my business, and how he knew what that business was. He turned a little pale at this, and laid his hand upon his sword; but there was some-

thing in my eye that sent this cockscorn off upon his travels. Ah, I tell you, John Jewell, I have a terrible eye when I like!"

"You have a very warm heart, Sir Rufus," said the goldsmith, "and I thank you for all you have done on my behalf. Some day I shall stand equal with my Lord Mountmarmaduke, then the Court will have a very pretty



"Quick, Simon, the papers!" cried Gilbert. "I have them!" shouted Simon, drawing forth the precious packet. (See page 247)

scandal to amuse it itself with ; but of that I must not speak, even to Sir Rufus Pontifex. But, sir," continued the goldsmith, changing the subject, "will you not do me the honour—you and Sir Harry Lovelock—to come above stairs ? We were even now at supper."

Gilbert, though he had modestly begged to stand excused, brought forth his lute, and finding it well in tune, sang so sweetly that all were enchanted.

"Sir Harry," said John Jewell, in a meaning voice, "time will alone unravel the mystery that surrounds yonder lad. But you are near the mark when you say he would not disgrace the Court. And if all goes well he will one day go there—not as a singer, but in his own right. But for the present he must remain simple Gilbert Nameless"

Those were happy days for Gilbert. Despite the ravages of the Plague in the City, he and Simon found life pleasant as boys will, and it was their delight to go out into the country—into the beautiful district of Tottenham, where Dame Jenkins had friends.

Dainty Prue Jenkins, the saddler's daughter, played the lute, and there were happy times with merry laughter amidst the vales, though ever and anon Gilbert would wax thoughtful as he reflected on the mystery that surrounded his birth. Old Firebrace kept watch and ward, and for a period nothing was heard either of Lord Mountmarmaduke or of Quartermaine and his band. Gilbert was now apprenticed to John Jewell, and had the good opinion of everybody.

THE TENTH CHAPTER

How Everybody's Plans were Suddenly Altered by a very Terrible Happening

A JOVIAL man was Sir Rufus Pontifex, Baronet, and as he came riding down Gracious Street on his magnificent red roan it was like an additional ray of sunshine entering the City.

Sir Rufus cared nothing for the plague, although there were doleful signs of it on every side. Watchmen sat at the doors ; fumigating fires were burning.

Sir Rufus, riding on to the pavement, smote the saddler's door with his riding-whip, and Jasper Jenkins greeted him with a smile.

"Good-morrow to you, Sir Rufus ! Art not afraid of the pestilence ?"

"Fiddlesticks !" cried the baronet, getting off his horse slowly ; for he was a stout man and heavy. "The only thing that I am afraid of is that you have not enough cold ale to quench my raging thirst."

Jasper Jenkins led his visitor into a small room at the back of the shop, and when he had placed tankards upon the table, the baronet bade him be seated.

"'Tis some time since we have met, Jenkins," said he, "and we get no news save of deaths and burials nowadays. What of that young rascal, John Jewell's apprentice ? Has he had any more adventures ?"

"'Tis strange that you should ask of Gilbert," said the saddler gravely. "Gregory Firebrace and I were but now speaking of him. We have some news, and mighty curious news, too ! Know you who the lad is, Sir Rufus ?"

"The day is too hot for riddles, Jasper ; but as likely cub as ever I saw. How do they call him in the pack ?"

"If everyone had their rights, he should be Lord Mountmarmaduke," said the saddler, in a low voice.

The crimson of Rufus's face deepened in colour, and the worthy baronet gave vent to a long whistle.

"Gadzooks !" he cried. "I will take the lad to the Court myself !"

Sir Rufus was so full of the scheme, which grew upon him the more he thought of it, that he paced up and down, declaiming loudly ; and a knock upon the door had to be repeated several times before they paid any attention to it.

At last the saddler lifted the latch and saw Simon Barbican and Gilbert Nameless himself, with so curious an expression upon their faces that the saddler instantly knew that something was amiss.

"Can we have a word with you without delay, Master Jenkins ?" said Simon Barbican, who acted as spokesman. "We have strange news."

The saddler motioned them to enter and closed the door again, to the great disappointment of his apprentices, Dick, Tom and Harry.

Simon Barbican, his face scarlet and his chest heaving like a blacksmith's bellows, and bearing upon his person every trace of having run fast and far, plunged into a story so tangled and incoherent, by reason of his laboured breathing, that Gilbert had to come to the rescue half a dozen times.

Between them they at last unburdened themselves of some very remarkable information, which they had lighted upon by the merest chance.

Quartermaine, Double, Long Hugh and half a dozen other ruffians were to rifle John Jewell's house that night, and, murdering its inmates, were to convey all the silver and money they could find down the river by boat. They were to meet at Eli Nethersole's at ten o'clock, and the attempt was to be made at the first stroke of midnight.

"The first person to acquaint is my brother-in-law," said the saddler. "Since these good lads saw the party in the tavern issue forth, we cannot lay hands on them now. What say you, Sir Rufus? Will you with us to John Jewell's? We will go warily, lest we excite suspicion."

Along the bridge they went, and soon rounded the angle into the opening to gain the goldsmith's door.

Then it was that Jasper Jenkins raised his hands in horror and fell back a pace, and all the others did the same; for upon the door was the fatal red cross, and the words:

"Lord, have mercy upon us."

"My heavens!" exclaimed the saddler, pressing his left hand to his brow and staring, aghast.

"I cannot bid you welcome, friends," said a sorrowful voice from the window above the doorway, as John Jewell looked down upon them with a grave face. "My house is now a house of mourning. Our maid Priscilla, hath the pestilence."

"By my sword," muttered Gregory Firebrace, with a short laugh of triumph, "'tis an ill wind that blows nobody any good! Master Jewell could not have a better pro-

tection than yonder cross against Quartermaine and his band!"

A dead silence fell upon the party. Sir Rufus Pontifex had turned very pale. The old soldier, alone of the little band, recovered his presence of mind.

"Master Jewell," said Gregory Firebrace, in his strong voice, "this is a terrible thing that has befallen you; but, thank Heaven, you have friends outside! All that you need we will supply you with, if you will tie a cord to the basket and lower it from the window. You must have a watchman, too, and I will take that place upon myself."

"Thank you, good friend," said the goldsmith. "God's will be done. Neither my good wife nor myself have much fear, though the thing is here in the midst of us; and we have a good nurse for our poor maid. We have food in plenty, too; for, to say the truth, I realised long ago that this thing might befall us, and have laid in a good store of provisions."

Jasper Jenkins approached a little nearer to the door, and, putting his hands to his mouth, called up:

"There is yet something that you must hear, John, which is the business that brought us here to-day; and, lest it should reach listening ears, we will write you it down and pass it up to you."

Sir Rufus Pontifex drew out his tablets and set forth as briefly as possible the danger that menaced the goldsmith's dwelling.

They waited in silence until the goldsmith had read the message, and a faint smile came into his face as he looked down at them.

"I have little to fear, I think," he said, "with that warning upon the door. Even he you name would not be foolhardy enough to run so great a risk."

"So say I," growled Gregory Firebrace. "But, for all that, good watch shall be kept upon your dwelling."

On the principle that actions speak louder than words, they lost no time in doing what they had to do; and, Simon Barbican having procured a brazier from a neighbour's house, it was duly lighted before the goldsmith's door.

Gregory Firebrace seated himself with his back against the opposing archway, almost at the spot where Gilbert Nameless had been attacked at the commencement of our story, and he kept a sharp eye on Eli Nethersole's door as he puffed at his pipe.

All through that night the old soldier kept faithful ward, but the long hours passed without incident. Passengers across the bridge quickened their steps as he raised a warning hand and hurried by.

The brazier, which he fed from time to time, cast a lurid glow on the house-front.

Eli Nethersole sat up late, wrapped in profound thought, and very early in the morning he aroused his apprentice by going into his room, and sitting on the edge of his trucklebed.

"Gideon," said the usurer, "I am going to repose confidence in you. I am going to let you into a deep secret."

Gideon Bilge sat up, very tousled, and more repulsive than usual in his half-awakened condition.

"You may have seen," said the usurer, crossing his thin legs, and resting a bony elbow on his right knee—"you may have seen that I have spent much time of late in the vaults below."

Gideon, with an air of much innocence, disclaimed any knowledge of the circumstance, although on several occasions he had crept down without his shoes, and witnessed his master's strange proceedings, unknown to Nethersole.

"I have a great scheme, which will make me a rich man, Gideon. You shall be rewarded by some gold pieces!"

Gideon's eyes glittered.

"Gideon," said the usurer, "it will take two nights to carry Jewell's wealth out of the safes, and to lower it into a boat. Maybe there is work for a third night. Your brain is young, and your wits are sharp. How am I to keep the captain at arm's length until we have done the deed?"

Before the old man's words had passed from his cracked lips, Gideon Bilge had the situation at his finger's ends, and he so far forgot himself as to stretch forth his hand and grasp his master by the sleeve.

"I have it—I have it!" said the evil ap-

prentice. "There is but one bolt that will bar any door in the kingdom, and not for three nights only, but for three weeks. The plague cross, master—the plague cross! We will have the pestilence in the house before noon! John Jewell hath the plague—why not we?"

Shortly before noon a trusty man, sent by the saddler, arrived to relieve Gregory Firebrace.

He had not left his post long when Gideon Bilge, his face betraying great exultation and excitement, also turned his steps in the direction of the City, and when he came back he had something in the breast of his jacket, which he carried with great care, grinning from ear to ear as he shambled along towards the usurer's house. The moment he placed his hand upon the latch, Nethersole opened the door.

"I have it, master!" cried Gideon Bilge.

And, unbuttoning his jacket, he drew forth an ominous white placard, with the red cross and pious motto upon it, which was to be seen upon so many doors in that stricken city.

"Good lad!" said the usurer, taking it in his trembling hands, and examining it as though it were a thing of infinite value. "Yes, thou shalt have three pieces, Gideon. Did I say three pieces or two?"

"You said three pieces, master," said Gideon, thrusting his tongue in his cheek, and gazing into the fireplace, where their meagre meal was bubbling in an iron pot.

"We must not place it on the door until night has fallen," said Eli Nethersole. "But let the folk see it in the morning. They are none of them likely to inquire after my health."

"One thing you have forgotten, master," said Gideon. "They must not see anyone leave the house after the cross is once there, and we should buy food."

The old man's face fell at this announcement. The nearer he came to stealing his neighbour's wealth, the more reluctant did he feel to part with a shilling on his own account. But the apprentice's words were too true, and Gideon was again despatched again into the City to buy oatmeal and a little bacon, and sundry articles of diet that were as uninteresting as they were cheap.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

How Gideon Bilge had a little plan of his own, and proceeded to put it into practice with the aid of Long Hugh

"GILBERT," said Simon Barbican, "what do you say to a saunter through the

streets, carrying our clubs with us? For myself I do not fear the infection, and would like to stretch my legs before bed-time."

"I am with you, Simon," said Gilbert. And away they went, keeping to the centre of the streets.

Their thoughts strayed back to the house on the bridge, and at the bottom of Ludgate Hill Simon, suddenly laying his hand on Gilbert's arm, drew him into a shadow of a wall, and said:

"Look yonder!"

Now it chanced when Gideon Bilge returned with the provisions, his loquacious tongue brought forth further disquietude to the heart of his master.

"Sir," said Gideon solemnly, "there is yet one thing more you have not thought of."

Fearing that he would have to put his hand in his pocket again, the usurer turned sharply on his apprentice.

"It is this," said Gideon Bilge. "When we place the cross on the door, and folk see no watchman, they will speak to the authorities, who will send hither, and perhaps search the house, leaving a man in charge without. We must have a watchman of our own, master!"

"You speak truly, you cunning imp!" said Eli Nethersole.

"I have thought of one, master," said Gideon. "Long Hugh has quarrelled with the captain, and for a few pieces would be glad enough to sit down before the fire to-night; and, muffled in a cloak, no one would recognise him."

Eli Nethersole's suspicious nature prompted him to regard his apprentice with keen distrust; and the glance he threw at him set Gideon Bilge a-thinking.

Nethersole weighed the matter carefully in his mind; and knowing that he could trust the bolts and bars on his door, and feeling that there was a great deal of truth in what the apprentice had suggested, at length said:

"Seek him out and bring him hither. While you are gone I will place the cross upon the door, that

he shall find the house plague-stricken when he arrives; and you are nimble enough to



"I have brought you a visitor, Master Jewell," said Quartermaine, putting the candles on the table.
(See page 215)

crawl along the coping of the bridge and enter through the window, so that he will suspect nothing."

Gideon's eyes twinkled; and he nodded approvingly at his master's scheme.

"Mind you," called the usurer, as he let Gideon out of the door, "you must not return until darkness has fallen!"

And Gideon, nodding, shambled off on his quest.

"The old curmudgeon!" he muttered to himself, squinting horribly, as he scowled. "He would doubt his own shadow!" And then he stopped suddenly, and smote himself upon his chest and laughed. His master's suspicion had suggested something to his evil mind. "Why not," thought Gideon Bilge—"why not, forsooth? Here's the gaining of a fortune to-night, and for my share I am to have three pieces of gold—and those grudgingly enough. If Long Hugh be the knave I think him, he and I will share the plunder between us, and Eli Nethersole may hang, as no doubt he ought to have done long ago!"

Gideon found the idea so keenly entertaining that he stopped every now and again and smote himself upon his chest, and buried his ugly face in his misshapen hands, lest anyone should hear the laughter he found it impossible to restrain. His face grinning with a cunning leer, and his fingers working convulsively, he shuffled by the Lud Gate to cross Fleet Ditch, which was spanned by a bridge at that spot; and it was the sight of him that prompted Simon Barbican to stay his course and point to his old enemy as Gideon quickened his steps into a shambling run.

"Where goes yonder rogue, I wonder?" said Simon Barbican. "Something delights him, and, when Gideon Bilge is pleased, it's a sign there's mischief on hand. How say you, Gilbert? Shall we follow him apace, and see on what errand he has been sent?"

"We will," replied Gilbert, in the same low voice. "I dislike the knave as greatly as you do, and I warrant me he is after no good!"

Simon Barbican took the lead, knowing every twisting and turning of the quarter for which the usurer's apprentice was making, and both lads grasped their cudgels as they entered the narrow streets in the neighbour-

hood of Shoe Lane, which even in those days was a second-rate neighbourhood and none too reputable.

Common prudence was on the point of bringing them to a halt, as the marked houses began to multiply to an alarming proportion, when Gideon Bilge suddenly disappeared down a flight of stone steps.

"Ah," said Simon Barbican, "I'll wager a groat he seeks somebody at Moll Fairlight's, which is a tavern frequented by persons who are but a shade better than the rogues of Alsatia, though I believe some honest folk, whose poverty compels them to live in this part, also use the house. Come this way, for it has two doors, and we will enter by the other one."

Diving down a narrow alley—not a little fearful lest they might meet a dead-cart and have to turn back—they found themselves in a very few moments before a long, low window, behind the bull's-eye panes of which shone the light of many candles. A bush hanging over the door proclaimed it to be a tavern, and Simon Barbican walked boldly up to it.

"You have never been in such a place Gilbert," he said, speaking over his shoulder. "You will see some curious folk; but you are not bound to speak to anybody."

They entered a very long room with a very low ceiling, the beams blackened by smoke and grime, and, seating themselves at a table near the door which chanced to be empty, Simon called for a tankard of ale, and scanned the apartment through his half-closed eyelids. Almost at the moment the ale was brought, the door at the far end opened, and Gideon Bilge crept in stealthily, looking to left and right of him to the little groups of men who sat talking and drinking and playing cards.

Simon Barbican pulled his hat over his eyes as Gideon approached down the centre of the room.

"Lean your head on your hand," he said to Gilbert. "We don't want the rogue to recognise us in this place, or we shall see nothing that there may be to be seen."

The usurer's apprentice, however, stopped half-way down the room, and bending forward whispered in the ear of a man who sat moodily

by himself with an empty flagon in front of him. They saw the man start, and place his hand on his sword, and the next moment point to a seat.

Then Gideon Bilge called for ale, and they fell a-talking, with their heads very close together.

Simon Barbican shook his head.

"I do not know the man," said he. "After all, perhaps, there is nothing to discover, but the adventure will while away an hour, after which we must return to Gracious Street."

Let us glide behind the high-backed settle on which Long Hugh was seated, and, straining our ears to the utmost capacity, listen to the wisdom of Gideon Bilge.

"Long Hugh," whispered the evil apprentice, "if I show you where you could steal a thousand pounds to-night, how much would you give me for my share?"

Long Hugh's eyes glittered, and he looked gravely at his companion. The question was so extraordinary that he doubted whether Gideon Bilge might not be jesting. But Gideon's face was intensely serious.

"I would go honest halves with you, lad," said Long Hugh, who, at that moment had not got a penny-piece in his pocket, and knew not for the life of him where to get another one.

"Give me your hand on it," said Gideon.

And when this was done, the usurer's apprentice unfolded a very pretty scheme, which raised the spirits and the heart of Long Hugh to fever-pitch.

In a low whisper, and glancing keenly about him with his squinting eyes, Gideon Bilge told the robber all he had heard from his master that night.

"I know it is true," he said, "for when Eli Nethersole was abroad in the City yesterday, I stole down into the cellar myself with a light and saw the hole, and well-nigh pushed the pannelling in John Jewell's vault, not knowing it had been sawn. The old dog had placed two hinges upon it, so that it opens into our cellar like a door. And there I saw chests, and coffers, and plate wrapped up in fine linen. In short, 'tis not a thousand pounds we shall gain, but nigher upon twenty thousand!"

"Gideon," said Long Hugh, in a hoarse

whisper, "call for another draught! I have not the wherewithal to pay for it, and your news has set my nerves a-shaking. Ha, boy, now can I snap my fingers at Quartermaine and Silas Double, and the rest of them, and you shall snap yours at your old skinflint of a master. But have you thought how I am to get into the house? 'Tis bolted like a prison, as I have seen with mine own eyes."

"Never fear for that," replied Gideon. "All the fastenings are so well oiled that they open without sound, and I will find means to leave the door so that a touch of your hand will open it. The old man has provided sacks and a rope and pulley. He thinks only to get half the spoil away to-night, and to-morrow I am to have a boat under the bridge, into which we shall lower it all."

"You are forgetting something," said Long Hugh. "Do you know that Quartermaine and the others of the band meet at Nethersole's house to-night? Think you he will not recognise me in the watchman, though I masquerade in fifty disguises? No, Gideon; I have a better plan. The cross will keep them out, and you and I must have a boat, too. I will procure one, and pull down to the bridge; you will lower the rope ladder from your window, and by that means I will enter the house. Tell Nethersole you could not find me, and he must rest content."

Long Hugh's scheme appealed to the intelligence of Gideon Bilge, and he grinned his approval.

"I will tell Nethersole," said he, "that I have placed the boats in readiness. He knows that I can clamber up the bridge side as nimble as a monkey."

"Which interesting animal," said Long Hugh, "you strongly resemble."

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

What the robber found on the usurer's door, and how Gregory Firebrace scented fire brewing at Moll Fairlight's

MEANWHILE, at the sign of the Goat and Rope in Alsatia, another band of cloaked and mysterious desperadoes were assembling.

The tryst for Nethersole's had been for ten

o'clock, but long before sunset the band dropped in by one's and two's, and sought the inner room of the tavern. Several of them brought bundles under their cloaks—coils of rope and pieces of sackcloth—destined to hold the goldsmith's treasures when secured.

Quartermaine and Silas Double were the first to arrive; Black Humphrey followed them; and seven others, whose names may be allowed to pass into oblivion, made up the sum total.

"'Tis a pity," said Silas, "that you quarrelled with Long Hugh, captain. He was a handy man and adventurous."

"He was an insolent rogue," said Quartermaine shortly, "and had you not prevented me, I would have slit his wizzard for him."

"As you like—as you like," said little Silas, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But Long Hugh had a headpiece, for all that!"

When it was quite dark, they gathered up their bundles, placed them under their cloaks, saw that their weapons were in order, and filed out of the tavern, one at a time.

There was no need to seek any unfrequented way, for all the streets were silent and deserted in that year of plague. But several times they had to turn aside to avoid the death-cart; even they, hard-hearted ruffians as they were, went in mortal terror of the pestilence.

They were in ignorance of the fatality that had befallen the house of John Jewell, and the first intimation they had of it was the glow from the brazier that outlined the angle of the house and reflected on the opposite side of the open space.

Quartermaine looked at the ominous placard over the goldsmith's house with feelings of dread, but he rightly disbelieved the sign which Eli Nethersole had put up.

"The old rat has some scheme on," he muttered darkly.

He decided to take a boat at the nearest stairs and lie beneath the arch all night to wait developments.

Gregory Firebrace was on the watch, and he had shadowed Gilbert as far as the tavern. The old soldier hoped that Quartermaine would appear, but for once Firebrace hoped in vain.

"I wonder what is in the wind now?" muttered Gregory Firebrace. "Shall I follow those rascals or wait awhile?"

Before he could make up his mind a sudden interruption decided the course he should take.

Gideon Bilge and Long Hugh had left the tavern scarcely five minutes when Simon and Gilbert rose to take their departure, Simon having deemed it were safer to stay where they were as he saw the eyes of a villainous-looking fellow riveted upon him.

"Mark you that man in the faded crimson coat, Gilbert," he muttered. "He has been watching us for some time, and he is now speaking to his neighbour, and pointing in our direction. When the next customer enters, we will go out as though nothing had happened; but the moment the door closes behind us, we should do well to set our best foot foremost until we have gained the Lud Gate at least."

"All right!" replied Gilbert. "I understand your meaning."

And the two lads gripped their cudgels, which they kept out of sight under the table.

Gregory Firebrace saw the man in the crimson cloak point to the two apprentices, and knew him to be a ruffler—which was the cant term for one who pretended to be an old soldier who had served in the Civil War. He saw also that a whisper passed round the company in his immediate vicinity, and that twenty suspicious glances were cast on the two boys.

Gregory Firebrace knew that there was about to be trouble, and loosened his long sword in its sheath. At that moment somebody came in by the door at Gilbert's elbow, and the two apprentices, rising simultaneously, left the tavern, to Gregory Firebrace's great relief.

The next moment, however, "crimson cloak" rose to his feet, as did three or four more, and, from the snatches of slang jargon, Firebrace knew that the apprentices were suspected of being spies.

"'Tis not the first time that I have acted as rearguard," thought Gregory Firebrace to himself. And, jumping to his feet, he strode down the centre of the room, to gain the outer door, and place himself between the two lads and

any pursuit that might be intended. As he passed "crimson cloak," either accidentally or with intention, he jostled him somewhat roughly, looked back over his shoulder, curled his moustache fiercely up, spurned the wooden floor loudly with his heels, and swung out into the dusk.

The instant he had disappeared, a perfect babel of voices rose inside the tavern.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

"Clubs to the rescue!"

As soon as the tavern-door had closed behind them, the two apprentices took to their heels and ran. The streets were so narrow and choked with garbage that at most their speed was but a jog-trot, and every now and then they had to leap a pile of offal that had collected in the centre of the roadway.

It was a very long lane that led from Moll Fairlight's door towards Fleet Ditch, and before they were half-way down it they heard the door bang to again, and knew that someone had come out of the tavern.

"We had better slacken, Gilbert," said Simon Barbican. "It will be easy now to slip into one of these alleys to right or left, whereas if we continue running the rogues will be after us straight away."

Accordingly they fell into a walk, looking back over their shoulders, and again the tavern-door opened, this time to pour forth a crowd of angry men, one of whom carried a torch, as they could see by the wavering light that filled the other end of the lane.

Against the light they also saw a tall figure walking swiftly towards them, and, though they did not know it, that figure was Gregory Firebrace. The old soldier disdained to run, but he had drawn his rapier and folded his cloak round his left arm, to prepare for eventualities.

"Slip in here," whispered Simon Barbican, pointing to a narrow passage.

And, Gilbert following him, they stole down the alley; and, as there were no lights there, they did not recognise Firebrace when he passed the end of it.

"Whoever that be," said Simon, in a low whisper, "those others mean to have his blood. I would not change places with that

man for something. Mark you! They cross the end of the alley now!"

And for an instant the torchlight showed a mob of nearly a score of men with the glitter of arms in their midst, all pursuing in the same direction like a pack of wolves.

The thing was over in a moment, and the hoarse roar of the angry voices died away in the silence.

"If I remember rightly," said Simon Barbican, "this lane will bring us to the bank of the ditch. Come on, Gilbert! The whole air here breathes of the plague, and no one knows who may be lurking in these dark doorways and foul courts."

It was as Simon had said, and another moment had brought them out into the open space that bordered the little River Fleet, which was even in those days a black, polluted stream, and in our own time runs as an enclosed sewer beneath Farringdon Street.

It was growing rapidly dusk, and they paused as they issued from the alley, for not one hundred yards away was the glare of the torch, and a great shout rose up as the solitary figure turned to face his pursuers at the head of a wooden footbridge that crossed the stream.

Gregory Firebrace stood at bay, the moonlight glittering on his formidable weapon, which he flourished in a manner so skilful that it checked the mob for an instant, until those behind pushed the other ones forward, and the fight began in real earnest.

At the first pass, the old man's blade slid like a lightning-flash through the shoulder of "crimson cloak," who staggered backward; and it was Gregory Firebrace's well-known exclamation of triumph that betrayed his identity to the two lads, who watched the brawl from the shadow of the houses.

"Simon," cried Gilbert, "do you recognise that voice?"

"Ha, that I do!" said Simon Barbican. "'Tis worthy Gregory Firebrace, in sore need of aid; and, by the King's crown, he shall have it, too! Yonder tavern disgorges its guests, thanks to the plague closing such places at nine of the clock. Come! Let us see whether there be any good men and true among them!"

And, lifting his voice, Simon Barbican shouted, "Clubs to the rescue!" with all the strength of his powerful young lungs.

The cry was immediately answered by a dozen voices, and Simon Barbican laughed with joy.

"There are friends yonder, Gilbert," he said. "This way, lads! Upon the ruffians! A good citizen shall never be murdered while a London apprentice can raise a cudgel to his assistance!"

And, twirling a formidable staff, and followed by Gilbert, the King of Clubs bounded towards the footbridge, where they were pressing the old man very hard.

He had run two of his assailants through the body, and a third staggered away, holding his hand to his side; but there were nearly twenty of them, and in another minute Gregory Firebrace would have been overpowered and hurled into the black waters beneath.

Before that minute had elapsed, however, Gilbert and Simon and fourteen or fifteen lusty lads arrived at their topmost speed, and

those of the ruffians who had been so anxious to push their front rank upon that terrible rapier now found it necessary to turn and defend themselves.

Cudgel-play, like quarterstaff, has gone out entirely; but it was fine, manly work, though it often resulted in broken heads and limbs

in the bouts that were practised in Finsbury Fields and other apprentice haunts. A strong arm and a quick eye, and a faculty for leaping backwards and forwards, were essential to its proper manipulation, and it was a revelation to Gilbert to see Simon bounding back and forth, and felling his man at each blow he dealt.

"Thanks, good lads!" cried the old soldier. "Down with the dogs!"

And he made his rapier circle viciously in front of him.

The other apprentices shouted their particular cries lustily.

"Come on, Candlewick!

Come on, Bridge boys!"

And they did come on, with the speed of a cavalry charge, whooping and smiting with a will, for since the plague-time there had been little opportunity for the practice of their



Then, for one instant, Eli Nethersole saw two black figures, dimly shown by the horn lantern, clutching each other, and hurtling through space. (See page 234)

favourite weapon. Scarcely three minutes had elapsed from Simon's first cry when the band of ruffians was fleeing for its several lives into its noisesome haunts, with the apprentices of Candlewick and Bridge Wards in hot pursuit.

Four men lay on the ground, two of them slain by Gregory Firebrace, the other pair having cracked heads which would require a good deal of mending, as was always the case when Simon Barbican smote in earnest.

"What means this?" said Gilbert to the old soldier, as he sheathed his rapier.

"Hush, boy! No questions in this place," said Gregory Firebrace, "or I might ask you one in return. It was your presence at Moll Fairlight's that brought all this about, but we will talk of this another time. Thanks, good friends," continued the old soldier to the throng of apprentices who had very quickly rifled the pockets of the fallen rogues, and were now laughing very merrily at the victory of club over steel.

"If you had not come to the rescue, I should have been a dead man now. I am only a poor one, as it stands, and have nothing but empty words with which to reward you."

"We want no reward, sir," said a sturdy apprentice. "We should think foul shame of ourselves if we did not rally to the call of the King of Clubs!"

And at the mention of Simon Barbican's nickname they raised a lusty cheer, which had the effect of bringing a mounted patrol to the mouth of Fleet Street; whereat the apprentices fled across the wooden bridge and sought their homes within the City, their laughter ringing on the air long after the last of them had disappeared.

"Let us go to Gracious Street," said the old soldier gravely, "and tell me how you came to be where I saw you to-night."

Their story was quickly told, and Gregory Firebrace was silent for some minutes, wiping his rapier blade on the flap of his coat before he sheathed it.

"'Tis strange!" he muttered at last, as they mounted Ludgate Hill. "You followed Nethersole's apprentice, and I had sought that tavern having Nethersole in my

mind. I may be wrong, but I believe him to be at the bottom of a good deal of this business, directly or indirectly; and, although we have discovered nothing to-night, I shall not relax my vigilance."

"'Tis a pity," said Gilbert, "that you knew none of those men we despatched to-night."

"As for that," said the old soldier, "they are of little account, being but whipjacks, pads, and rufflers. They are no loss to the City, and it is a pity that the plague has not swept away more of such rogues. Now, here we are at St. Margaret's Church. I'll to Master Jewell's, to take up my watch. Get you both to Gracious Street and to bed, like good lads; and perhaps you had best say naught to Jasper Jenkins of the night's adventure, lest he forbid you forth again."

"I got but one smite at the ruffians!" said Gilbert regretfully.

"'Twas a good one, though, for I saw the man go down like a log!" laughed Simon. "I wish I could master the sword as quickly as you handle the cudgel!"

Gideon and Long Hugh were entirely ignorant of these events. Gideon shuffled off home, full of glee that he had outwitted Eli Nethersole. He was roundly abused by his master, who had repented now of his confidence, though he was far from reckoning that Gideon had been false in the business of Long Hugh's aid.

But, to make all sure, that night Eli drugged the lad's beer.

Long Hugh found Gideon sound as a church when he climbed into the house.

Nethersole, busy counting the sacks, heard the robber, and fled down the stairs with Long Hugh after him, knife in hand.

If ever a man was determined to sell his life dearly, that man was Eli Nethersole. His hand was upon the huge key of the front door, and, had he turned it, in another moment he would have been out upon the bridge, and this story of ours would have possibly had a very different ending.

But the greed of money was strong in the usurer's heart. Before his eyes flashed the gold and the gems, the silver-plate and the

jewel caskets, and he could not bring himself to abandon all these magnificent spoils to the ruffian, whose footsteps sounded louder and louder as he descended.

With an agility astonishing for a man of his years, the usurer darted below.

Long Hugh saw the door close, and the grim smile increased on his face. He held his lantern in front of it, looked carefully at the hinges, saw that it opened outwards into the shop, and, putting his lantern down, he lifted a heavy table, which he placed across the door.

"There, Master Nethersole, you can bide a little by yourself! I have you very safely, and I will return upstairs and see whether I can awake that ugly apprentice-boy of yours, whose help I shall want!"

Long Hugh shook and pummelled the limp form of Gideon Bilge without result. The drug had been very potent—even more so than the usurer had intended—and Gideon Bilge slept the sleep of the just.

Long Hugh, with a curse of irritation, gave it up as a bad job, and returned to the shop below, holding his knife securely in his right hand.

"The old weasel has got some fight left in him yet!" he muttered.

As he reached the foot of the staircase some folk passed along the bridge outside, and Long Hugh paused. The echo of their footsteps died away, and he advanced to the door which he had barricaded.

His hands were upon the table, and in another moment he would have lifted it away, when a sound on the landing above fell upon his ear.

"The fool wakes!" muttered Long Hugh.

But the footfalls that thudded upon the floor overhead were not the footfalls of the usurer's apprentice.

"Is the place haunted?" muttered the robber.

But the next instant a well-known voice broke the silence.

"Come, Black Humphrey," said the voice. "Gideon Bilge is sound asleep. Let us see whether his master has taken the pestilence. If not, the whole thing is a ruse, and Eli Nethersole shall suffer dearly for it!"

It was the voice of Silas Double which spake, and Long Hugh knew that Quartermaine's party had arrived.

"Ten thousand murrains!" muttered the baffled rascal. "I am foiled!"

He made a stride towards the cellar door, but a voice from the stairhead broke the stillness of the house, and, looking back, he saw Silas Double with his pistol raised, looking down at him as he stood in the moonlight.

"Whoever you be, stand where you are!" said Silas Double. "And now answer your name quickly!"

Long Hugh stirred neither hand nor foot. He glared up at the little man, showing his teeth, a picture of baffled villainy.

Black Humphrey approached Silas Double, and, following the direction of his pistol, looked down into the shop.

"Surely," said Black Humphrey, "yonder is Long Hugh!"

"You scoundrel!" cried Silas Double. "What do you here?"

"For the same purpose that brings you, Silas Double," retorted Long Hugh, drawing a pistol from his doubtlet.

Long Hugh raised his weapon with unexpected sharpness and fired full at the man on the stairhead.

Silas Double's cap dropped a yard away, showing the accuracy of Long Hugh's aim.

Silas Double pressed his trigger, and Long Hugh felt a sharp pain in the calf of his right leg. He drew a second pistol and fired at the staircase, the report mingling with that of Silas Double's, who had done the same.

Both men missed in their eagerness, and Long Hugh, having nothing now but his knife to trust to, glanced round for some means of escape.

The front door leading out of the shop was the nearest avenue to freedom, but the bolts and bars, and chains and locks were against his opening it in time. The only other means of escape was by the door that led into the vault, where he knew the usurer to be.

Eli Nethersole, his heart in his mouth, had descended into the vault as fast as his lean shanks could carry him, down a moveable

THE SIGHTS OF GREYFRIARS

THE REMOVE DORMITORY



BOB CHERRY is the first to rise,
He dips his sponge in water,
Then Bunter's slumbering form espies
And rushes to the slaughter.
A sudden splash, and then a shout,
"Yow-ow! You rotter, Cherry!"
"Buck up!" cries Bob, "and tumble
out!
You're lazy, Bunt, very!"

Such is our dormitory at morn,
When cold produces sneezes;
By night, it isn't so forlorn,
We get out plans and wheezes.
"Good-night!" old Wingate's often said,
Then dims the light and goes on,
Not knowing we have gone to bed
With all our merry clothes on!

When Wingate's gone, we tumble out
And, armed with stump and poker,
We march away, and put to rout
The tribe of Horace Coker.
Then back again we softly steal
And to our beds we scatter
As Quelch's voice, in stern appeal
Cries, "Now, boys! What's the
matter?"

And many a merry midnight feast
We've planned and undertaken,
With Billy Bunter shouting "Beast!
What price my eggs-and-bacon?"
Oh, yes, the dorm's a ripping spot
When rising-bell peals out, we're not
A bit inclined to leave it!

wooden stair of eight treads, from the floor of the shop to that of the cellar, and as the usurer set his foot on the stone pavement of the vault an idea came like lightning to his brain.

Seizing the ladder with the strength born of the desperateness of the situation, he carried it from its position and set it against another wall.

It was very dark and silent in the vault, and, with his eyes bent on the door through which he expected the ruffian to pursue him, Eli Nethersole knelt down and groped with his hand. His fingers at length came in contact with an iron ring, and after one or two attempts he wrenched open a large trapdoor in the floor.

It had two flaps, and opening the second one, he exposed a cavity five feet square, through which came the lapping of water against stone masonry.

The trapdoor was in the centre of the arch, and gave directly on to the rushing river underneath the bridge.

"Now, Long Hugh, you may come as soon as you like!" cackled the old man to himself as he stepped back and crouched down at the end of the cellar. "I only wish that Quartermaine and his band would follow you!"

As he muttered this amiable sentiment the pistol-shots in the house fell upon his ears, and the laughter died away from his lips.

"A murrain upon them, they are in the house! But we shall see what we shall see," said Nethersole.

The three reports boomed dully in the silence of the vault, and then the thing that Eli Nethersole most wished for came about on a sudden. The door in the side of the wall was flung violently open, and Long Hugh appeared, lantern in one hand, knife in the other, and behind him came Black Humphrey.

Thinking the stairs to be in their place, Long Hugh made a spring forward in the darkness as Black Humphrey's hand clutched the collar of his coat. Then for an instant Eli Nethersole in the vault beneath, and Silas Double at the door above, saw two black figures, dimly shown by the horn lantern, clutching each other, and hurtling through space.

Silas Double saved himself in the nick of time, and gazing below, marvelling what could have happened, heard a hoarse cry, followed by a tremendous splash far down beneath him, and felt the cool wind of the river waft up into his face.

Black Humphrey sank like a stone. Then he felt Long Hugh clinging to him. The two desperadoes were hauled into a boat by Quartermaine and his men, but there was no safety for long, since the current swung their frail craft on to the fluke of a huge anchor and stove in the boat's side.

Quartermaine and his followers received rough handling from the master of the vessel, but amidst all his troubles the robber chief congratulated himself on having wreaked vengeance on Long Hugh for the latter's treachery, since while in the boat Long Hugh had been thrown overboard.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER

The Hand of Fate

WHEN Long Hugh was flung into the river to meet his fate, the tide immediately carried him towards a group of barges moored some distance from the river bank, and when he recovered consciousness, it was to find himself entangled with a stout rope, which somehow he grasped with one hand.

His head swam, a thousand stars shot before his eyes, but by degrees as his senses returned, he pulled himself along the hawser until he could grasp the gunwale of the barge to which it belonged, and at length lay exhausted upon its deck.

He swooned several times, and half an hour must have elapsed before he found himself listening, with his head raised, to a great commotion on a tall ship anchored just by the barge. The wind was blowing in his direction, and he recognised Quartermaine's voice roaring and howling for mercy. Quartermaine at that moment was undergoing his well-merited punishment, and, mingled with the yells, came the thud of a rope's-end on his naked back. Then there followed a spell of silence, broken by the sound of laughter from the ship's forecastle, and Long Hugh ground his teeth with keen delight that Quar-

termaine should have at last met with some of his deserts.

Long Hugh struggled to his feet, and scrambled across two more barges, and then on to the deck of the big ship. But at this moment the ship's crew came tumbling out of the forecastle, and a cry of amazement burst from the throats of the honest seamen at the sight of Long Hugh's drenched condition, and the fresh scar on his forehead.

Long Hugh's mind was made up in a moment, and, speaking in a tone of great bitterness, he told his story.

"Never mind who I am," said the rogue, "save that I have suffered severely at the hands of yonder man, and was but a little while since knocked on the head and flung into the river by him. If you will come with me, I will tell you where to find another of these pirates, and it is not so far away, either."

"You will go with us?" said the captain.

"I will go with you," said Long Hugh. "Mark you the bridge yonder, and the fourth arch from the north shore. He is in the house of one Nethersole, a usurer, whom these pirates mean to rob. In his cellar you will find him, and if my story be not true, you may hang me on the morrow as high as St. Paul's yonder!"

The seamen whistled, and one of them went to the after-cabin to try the door.

It was ajar. Captain Quartermaine and his gang were gone!

"To the usurer's house, quick!" cried Long Hugh.

The captain shouted a few brief orders, and in a few minutes they were pulling towards the bridge.

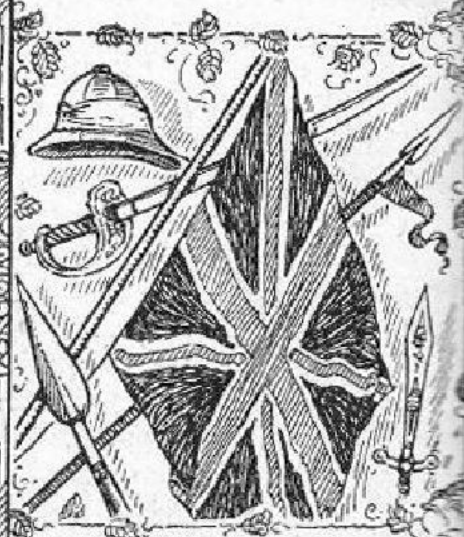
In the meantime, we left Silas Double gazing from the door in the wall through the blackness of the trap in the cellar floor, Eli Nethersole cowering at the other end of the vault, his keen eyes fixed on Double, whilst Gideon Bilge, upstairs on his truckle-bed, was still under the influence of his master's drug.

Silas Double gave a long whistle, intended as a signal to the boatload of ruffians whom he knew to be at the mouth of the arch; but his signal was unheeded, as already Quartermaine and his company were floating down on the

Famous Fights for the Flag



The Battle of Balaclava, October 25th, 1854. The Heavy Brigade, numbering about eight hundred officers and men, charged three thousand Russian Cavalry.



The Indian Mutiny, 1857. Colonel Finnis, of the 11th Native Infantry, stationed at Meerut, was shot down by the men of another regiment whilst he was bravely endeavouring to pacify the mutinous troops.

current to pick up the two men who had made so strange an appearance.

Hearing no response, Double ran back across the shop, up the staircase, and into Gideon's bedroom once more, where, in the moonlight, he saw the river below him, showing no trace of the boat. He deemed that, to avoid observation, they must be under the arch itself, and, descending the rope ladder cautiously until he came to the parapet of the bridge, Silas Double passed along under John Jewell's window to hail his companions. He stopped before he came to the angle of the goldsmith's house, seeing the light of the watch fire telling rosy against the moonlight; and it was well he did, for a sudden clatter of horses' hoofs fell upon his ears, and the voice of Gregory Firebrace.

"What have we here?" thought Silas Double, stretching himself at full length along the parapet, and pushing his short, snubby nose round the corner.

"How now?" muttered the robber. "Sir Rufus Pontifex and the boy Gilbert, booted and spurred and a-horseback, with valises on their saddle, as though for a journey! But it is never too old to learn, Silas, my boy, and we may learn something to-night if we listen long enough."

"Sir Rufus," exclaimed Gregory Firebrace, "what, in the name of Heaven, brings you here at such an hour?"

"Ha, ha!" replied Sir Rufus, laughing. "I come upon the business of our young friend Gilbert here, whom I am about to carry to the King; but first I wish a word with good John Jewell."

Gregory Firebrace picked up a handful of gravel, and flung it at the window above the doorway. There was no necessity for a second summons, John Jewell, ever a light sleeper, threw open the window, a fur night-robe about his shoulders, and looked down.

"Your pardon, Jewell, if I have disturbed your slumbers," said Sir Rufus, riding his horse underneath the window; "but a certain packet of papers that lies in your strong-room—I need them to particularise." And he jerked his thumb in the direction of Gilbert. "Tell me, my friend—are they all in order? Is there any loophole in point of

law which my lord could advance against the rightful succession? If I speak a little vaguely, you will understand 'tis because I do not wish the neighbours to enter into our plans."

"I admit, Sir Rufus," said the goldsmith, "that your words mystify me; yet can I tell you that the papers are all in order, and the case on its merits is clear."

"That is just what I wanted to know, Jewell, neither more nor less," said Sir Rufus, smacking his thigh. "Jasper Jenkins and I have a little plan afoot, and I am about to carry Gilbert to sing before the King. Once let us interest Charles in the youngster, and I doubt not that we can find means to bring Gilbert to his own inheritance. If ever a man should remember the restoration with pleasure and gratitude, that man should be our Sovereign. You need not look so grave, friend John. I can take care of the lad, and bring him straight into the King's presence."

The goldsmith's face was very serious as the firelight played upon it.

"'Tis not that I am thinking, Sir Rufus," he said. "I would that you could take the packet with you; but that is impossible, since it lies in this plague-stricken house. Where is the Court now?"

"It has left Salisbury, where it is said that a groom has fallen sick of the pestilence, and should now be at Milton," said Sir Rufus. "It is a long ride, and hearing that my lord goes down there almost immediately, I have deemed it better that we set forth this very night. Mark you, your apprentice has his lute before him on the saddle, and his rapier on his thigh."

Now, Silas Double drank in these words greedily. He knew all about my lord Mountmarmaduke—for Silas Double was Quartermaine's most trusted lieutenant—and the rogue instantly saw that here was a great advantage for his master. He lay as flat as a herring on the narrow parapet, and never did man so regret that his pistol was empty. Gilbert, outlined against the watch-fire, presented a splendid mark, and Silas Double groaned internally as that thousand pounds which my lord had offered dangled before his nose, and he unable to secure it.

In the belief that Quartermaine and his

boatload of ruffians lurked beneath the bridge, awaiting his signal that all was clear in Nethersole's house, Silas Double set himself to communicate with the captain, and, working his way backwards with extreme caution, he came at last to the rope-ladder that hung from Gideon Bilge's window, grasping it securely, and descending until the surge of the tide washed over his spur leathers. And then he ventured to whistle softly. Although he repeated his signal several times, there was no response, and not knowing what to make of it, he clambered up again and got through the window into the apprentice's room.

Gideon Bilge began to turn restlessly on his truckle bed, and Silas Double shook him violently. At a loss to understand why the young rascal should slumber so soundly, Silas Double bent down and examined his face, and as Long Hugh had done, he, too, detected the pungent odour of the drug.

At this moment a low whistle came from the window, and Silas Double, turning round suddenly, found Quartermaine grasping the sill and looking in.

"I thought something had befallen you, captain," said Silas Double. "I have been to the bottom of the ladder and whistled myself hoarse at the risk of alarming old Firebrace, whose ears are as sharp as a weasel's."

"Things have befallen us which you shall hear anon, Silas," said Quartermaine, getting into the room. "Where is the usurer?"

"In the vault below, if he is anywhere in the house."

And in a few words Silas Double told him how he and Black Humphrey had pursued Long Hugh, and how his companion and the traitor had vanished through the trap-door.

"That, too, I know all about," said Quartermaine shortly. His temper had not been improved by the flogging that still made his shoulders smart and his shirt stick to them. "Come up, men," he whispered.

And in a few minutes the rest of the gang scrambled in at the window, and Quartermaine took the candle that Silas Double had lighted.

"We have brought lanterns," he said, "well knowing that the old fox would rather go to bed in the dark than burn a farthing candle. At last," he continued, "the thing is in our grasp! We shall all of us be rich before the sun rises. Follow me!"

And, with a hasty step, he passed downstairs into the vault.

"Did you hear that?" said Silas Double, laying a warning hand on Quartermaine arm.

A loud splash came up from the river below. A rat had fallen, as the robbers had done, through the trapdoor.

They paused on the threshold, holding their lanterns at arm's-length; but the light only showed them the dangerous opening below, and the ladder reared against the wall a few yards off.

"Give me a hand, some of you," said Black Humphrey, shouldering his way up to the front. "I will get down and close that accursed pitfall, and put up the ladder again."

"Nethersole," said Quartermaine, in a loud whisper, "there is no need to hide, man. Come out of your corner!"

But there was no response.

Black Humphrey was lowered carefully down, and the two flaps dropped into their places with a dull boom. The ladder once more reared itself in its proper position, and Quartermaine was the first to descend. As a matter of common protection, though he expected no resistance from the feeble old usurer, he had drawn his sword, and, holding the lantern high, went forward, followed by his band. The vault was large and built of solid stone. It echoed to their tread, though they went softly, and the wavering lights of the lanterns made the darkness seem the more intense.

"We shall find him in the strong-room through the wall," said Quartermaine, with a short laugh. "Odds fish! I will spit him like a lark for his treachery, the cunning old dog, with his plague crosses and his double dealing! Here is the entrance, and he has opened the panelling."

He had his foot within the hole, when they saw him suddenly stoop, and Quarter-

maine's keen eyes travelled up the thin, shrunk shanks until they rested on the face of Eli Nethersole, who lay on his back, half in his own cellar and half in his neighbour's. I said his face, but what a face! It was no longer lean as a starving wolf, but puffed and swollen and livid green in the hollows, a trickle of hideous foam from the corners of the mouth, and a terrible purple patch extending in a semi-circle across the forehead.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Quartermaine, in a voice of horror. "He is dead of the plague! Back, for your lives—back! Let me get out!"

And, hurling his way through his terrified followers, he rushed for the ladder.

Bold men and bad as they were, the presence of the pestilence vanquished them bitterly, and they crowded into the shop like a lot of frightened sheep.

Quartermaine was making for the rope-ladder, when overhead he heard the tramping of feet and the voice of Long Hugh, crying:

"They are below! Do you not hear them?"

Casting all precaution to the winds, the baffled band unbarred the shop door, and, as the sailors reached the head of the staircase, they scuttled from the stricken house and fled like men possessed.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER

How our Friends Started upon a very Eventful Errand, and of Certain Happenings in a Certain Cellar

[It was with mingled feelings that our friend Gilbert Nameless rode under the gateway of London Bridge side by side with his worthy patron, Sir Rufus Pontifex. He knew not exactly for what purpose he was being taken to the Court of the Merry Monarch, save that somewhere in the future there lurked a fine inheritance, and, what he valued more highly, a name that he could call his own.

For reasons best known to themselves, Sir Rufus and the saddler had not thought fit to tell the lad who he really was; but they had said enough to set his heart throbbing with keen expectation. Simon Barbican was

in the secret, and Simon Barbican it was who suddenly stepped from the shadow of the wall and came to Gilbert's stirrup.

"I could not let you go, Master Gilbert," said the goldsmith's apprentice, "without bidding you another farewell!"

"Tut, Simon! You will see me again. And why 'Master' Gilbert, pray? To you, my dear friend, I shall always be the same."

"As you will," said Simon, colouring with pleasure and squeezing the hand that Gilbert stretched down to him. "'Tis something in this world to find that there is someone who is not going to change."

"I shall never do so, Simon," said Gilbert, "whatever is in store for me in the future; and if you say another word to that end, I shall feel tempted to smite you over that thick pate of yours!"

"An' you do, Gilbert Nameless," said Simon, with a sly grin, "I'll bring you out of your saddle with one blow!"

And he brandished his cudgel in mock anger.

"Now, you young dogs!" said Sir Rufus. "If you have finished your leave-taking, we will please get on our way."

And, touching his horse with the spur, the baronet set off down the silent street. Gilbert waved his hand as he followed him, and Simon Barbican, with very mingled emotions, placed his cudgel under his arm and returned to Gracious Street.

From the first old Firebrace had foiled and fooled Quartermaine, the man with whose fortunes the old soldier had at one time cast his lot.

Firebrace kept his watch and was fated to see a posse come up to Nethersole's door, enter, and then scud like rabbits as they found the usurer dead from the plague.

The sailors who had raided the house found Long Hugh there, and he, the worst of Quartermaine's gang, received short thrift from them. Long Hugh had guided the mariners to the house on the strength of a lying tale. The robber was too cunning for once. One of the sailors shot out his fist and Long Hugh disappeared through the window of the room into the black waters, to be seen no more.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER

Gilbert and the King

GILBERT was still far from being righted. As the heir to the title and estates of Mountmarmaduke, he had been menaced by his rascally kinsman, who had seized the property. But Sir Rufus Pontifex had the boy's cause at heart, and gained an audience of the Merry Monarch.

"Your Majesty," said the baronet, "I was journeying in these parts with a young friend of mine, and we turned aside to pay our court to you, sire; and I promise your Majesty, if you would have music to-night, my young friend will please you vastly."

So it came about that Gilbert, lute in hand, and accompanied by his jovial patron, went into the King's lodgings a little after sunset, finding much to interest him in the gay courtiers and the pretty ladies, in their silks and satins.

When darkness had fallen, another little band of travellers entered Oxford; and, having stabled their horses, and wiped away the dust of travel, one of their number sought out the Royal quarters, swaggering bravely along, with a cloak of amber velvet on his left shoulder, and a falling band of richest silk at his neck. The pages bowed before him, and my Lord Mountmarmaduke—for it was he—stepped swiftly forward, with all the assurance of a man who knows that he will receive a hearty welcome. When he reached a heavy curtain that fell over the doorway, a sound of music came to his ears. Someone was singing in so sweet a voice that my Lord Mountmarmaduke stopped to listen.

"What have we here?" said he to himself. "Some new French singing boy, I doubt not. By my sword, I have never heard a sweeter voice!"

And, remembering how much he owed to his own vocal powers, my lord's eyebrows contracted a little, as he laid his delicate little white hands on the curtain and pulled it aside.

Gilbert had just finished a ballad, that made the pretty ladies clap their hands with delight. And Charles himself, lying back in a large arm-chair, his legs crossed, applauded rapturously.

The singer sat upon a cushion in the centre

of the room, his fingers straying over the strings of the instrument.

Mountmarmaduke stepped into the doorway, and stood there. His hands still grasped the curtain, and a flush came into his pale cheeks. Gilbert looked round, and their eyes met.

"Zounds!" muttered Mountmarmaduke, the colour fading away, and his cheeks going deathly pale. "What trick is this? This boy in the King's presence! Is it by chance, I wonder, or is there more behind it?"

And, turning upon his heel, my lord let the curtain fall across the doorway, and strode back into the corridor, clenching his fists until the nails entered into the flesh.

Down the carpeted stairs, past the scarlet-clad pages, went my Lord Mountmarmaduke.

The night was falling—a soft, cloudless, summer night, with bright stars twinkling over the old city of Oxford, with its myriad spires and solemn colleges, and the river gurgling away past the water-meadows. It was not far from the King's place to the hostelry of the Four Crowns, and midway between them my lord ran violently against two men, who rounded the corner of the narrow way. All three had their hands on the hilts of their rapiers, as was the fashion in those days, and all three instantly removed them, recognising each other.

"Gadzooks, Quartermaine, we are met!" said my lord. "And you too, Double! Follow me, but at a little distance."

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER

How Gilbert Nameless found a very unexpected protector in the person of King Charles II.

SIR RUFUS PONTIFEX fidgeted in his chair on one side of the fireplace, and the more he thought of matters the more difficult did the situation become.

"Boy," said Sir Rufus, "art sure the door is double-locked?"

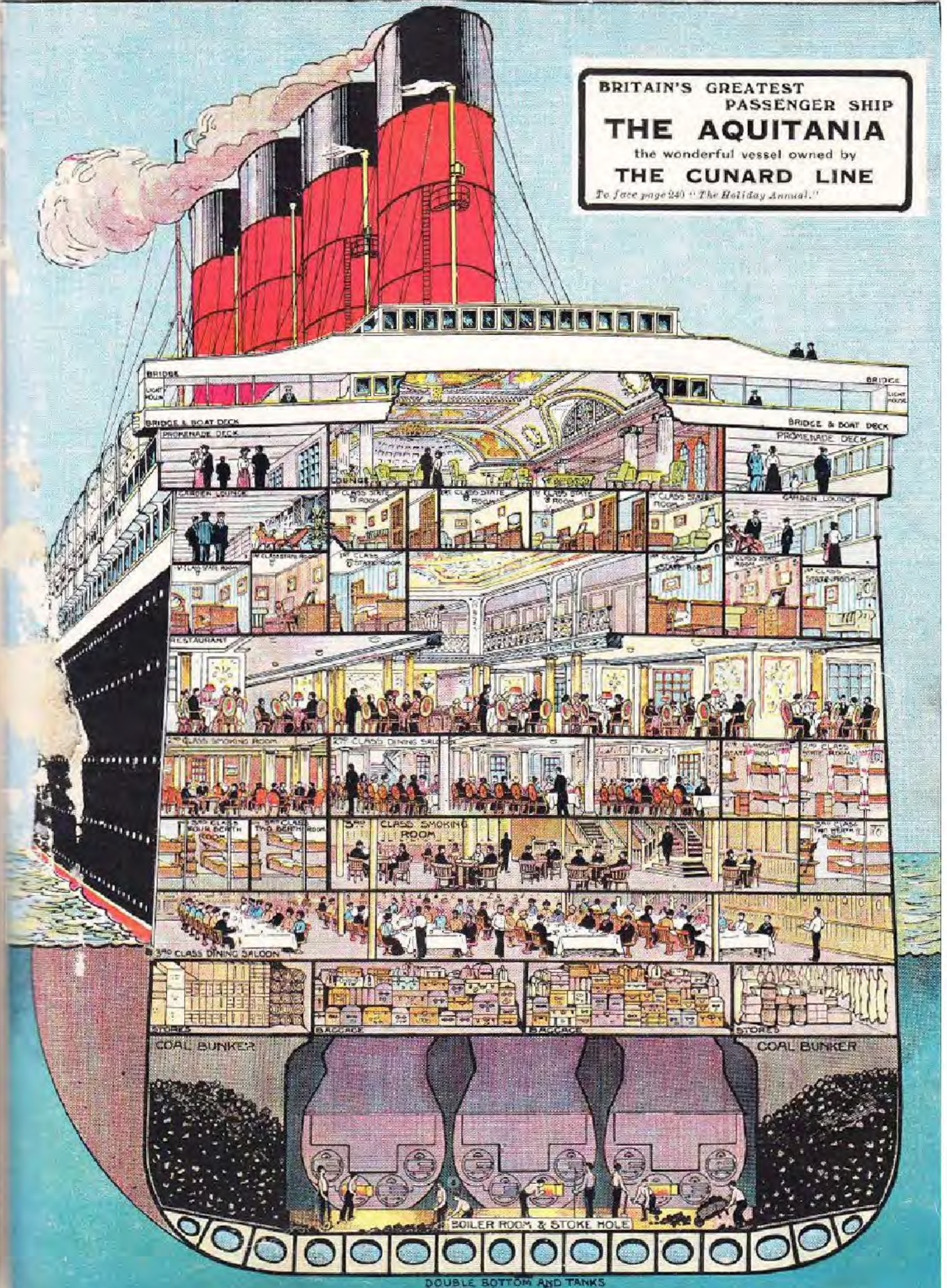
"Quite sure, sir. I have double-locked it four times within the last hour, and it is strong enough, methinks, to resist a regiment of horse. I have no fear!"

Sir Rufus shook his head.

"You're young, boy—you're young, and

BRITAIN'S GREATEST
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To face page 240 "The Holiday Annual."



your enemy, is a desperate man. These old houses are honeycombed with secret passages, and I, for one, shall be right glad to see the morning light ! ”

The baronet got up, and proceeded to pace the room with a heavy, uncertain tread, gazing several times at the window, which looked upon the inn yard, and measuring the distance with his eye to the ground.

He did not see two figures that stole cautiously under the low archway, and disappeared into the stable—two desperate men, who sought this spot till my Lord Mountmarmaduke should presently come to them.

On a sudden Sir Rufus sprang round, and seized his sword. Footsteps were coming up the great oak staircase—half a dozen men, from the sound—with much clamour of voices and striking of sword-sheaths against the panelling. Even Gilbert sprang to his feet and drew his sword, and the next moment there came a violent rapping on the chamber door.

“ I open for no man ! ” cried Sir Rufus sternly.

“ What ! Odds fish ! Is there a corner of my dominion to which I am denied access ? ” said a rather harsh voice, which Sir Rufus instantly recognised. “ Unbar your portal, man, for we have come to make merry with you ! ”

And as Gilbert, at a nod from the astonished baronet, unlocked the door, King Charles II., attended by several lords of the Court, entered the room with a smile on his dark, saturnine features.

“ What ! ” said the King, “ Swords drawn and doors bolted ! What is the meaning of this ? We might be back in the troubled times again, instead of at peace with all men ! ”

“ I crave your pardon, sire,” said the baronet, sheathing his sword ; “ but your Majesty came with so much tumult that we knew not what to expect ! ”

“ Ah, well ! ” said the King, seating himself. “ I am in a merry mood to-night, and in the mind to hear more music ; and since our young friend here is not abed, prithee, let him take his lute and charm us again.”

At the King’s command, Gilbert drew his lute from its case, and, running his fingers deftly over the strings, played “ Crimson Velvet.”

The silvery tones of Gilbert’s voice floated out through the open window, and the two men in the stable crept to the door to listen.

“ Gad’s life ! ” muttered Quartermaine “ The boy pipes exceedingly well ! I would not wager a broken rapier against my lord’s chance, unless we do the deed to-night ! ”

“ They have company above,” said Silas Double.

“ Ay, that they have ; some bloods of the Court, no doubt, turning night into day. What makes my lord tarry, I wonder ? Surely an hour is spent ? ”

The music ceased, and soon the rattle of the dice-box took its place. The King had said aright when he had proclaimed himself in a merry mood.

Gilbert laid down his lute, and sat in a corner, looking on. The scene was new to him. Round the table sat the courtiers, brilliant in silk and satin, and flushed with wine, and soon gold pieces began to change hands with amazing rapidity.

“ Art as good with the rapier as with lute, lad ? ” said my Lord Rochester, turning somewhat suddenly on Gilbert.

“ I have some slight skill, my lord,” said our hero.

“ Ay, and skill he has used to good purpose, as I full know,” said Sir Rufus. “ Art minded to try a bout of fencing, my lord ? ”

“ Nay,” said Rochester ; “ but I am thinking Tim Killigrew looks bitterly disappointed with his cards, and we might pit the lad against him.”

Killigrew, nothing loth, both combatants removed their doublets, and appeared in their shirts.

“ Colonel Legge,” said Charles to a stout officer present, “ I command you to throw up their weapons at the first blood.”

Colonel Legge arose, the chairs were thrust back, and space cleared in the centre of the room. And, drawing his rapier, the old cavalier prepared to do his Majesty’s bidding.

Down below, in the dark stable, Quartermaine and Silas Double listened to the uproar and revelry in the room above. Neither was sufficiently acquainted with the Court to recognise the King’s voice, and both waited impatiently for the coming of my Lord Mount-

marmaduke, and looked anxiously at the eastern sky, dreading the approaching morning before their unholy task should be completed.

"Remember, gentlemen," said the stern voice of Colonel Legge, "you cease on the first blood drawn! The King commands it!"

Killigrew was flushed with wine. Gilbert, a quiet smile on his face, presented a perfect model of lithe, youthful beauty, and there came a twinkling into the eyes of Sir Rufus Pontifex. A pass, a lunge, a fierce parry, a thrust in tierce, and Killigrew's rapier made a circle in the air, and landed on the table, where the point buried itself, and the blade quivered like a terrified thing, until the weight of the steel basket hilt brought it over with a crash. For a moment there was silence, and then tremendous uproar arose from the stable yard beneath, a mighty clatter of feet, a hoarse cry of "Die, dog—die!" and a tremendous oath from a certain nobleman.

"What in the name of Heaven have we here?" cried Charles, as the party above ran to the window and looked down.

"Split you, Quartermaine! Are you blind as a bat? You have run me through the shoulder!" And there was a sound of a man staggering and clutching the posts of the stable door.

"My lord," exclaimed an agitated voice, "we mistook you for one of the watch! Surely it is a strange cloak you are wearing?"

"Ay; and how it came to my room I know not," said Mountmarmaduke faintly. "But I am badly hurt."

"Hold, below there!" cried a voice from the window. "What is going on forward?"

A dead silence followed the King's call, and the three men in the stable yard looked up at the window with no little trepidation.

"Fly! Fly!" whispered the wounded nobleman, sinking to the ground. "They must not find you here. I can easily account for my wound by saying you were footpads, or robbers, or the like."

In the moment of silence that followed upon the flight of the two villains, a low groan came up from the stable-yard.

"Someone is wounded below, there," said Charles. "Some of you gentlemen descend and see who the sufferer may be."

Colonel Legge and the Earl of Rochester, followed by the rest, ran out on to the landing, and so into the courtyard beneath.

"Gad's life!" exclaimed Master Killigrew, as they bent over the figure that lay across the entrance to the stable. "It is my Lord Mountmarmaduke, and badly hit!"

Mountmarmaduke was stretched upon his back, his face very white. He had fainted from the agony of his wound. Lifting him up, they bore him into the inn and laid him on the table.

A doctor was sent for, and when they had stripped my lord of his doublet and shirt the wound was found to be serious.

"Will he die, Master Leech?" said Charles in a cold voice.

"My best endeavours will be employed to avert that dread calamity, your Majesty," said the physician. "I do not think the wound is mortal; but 'twill be some months before his lordship comes to Court again."

The King smiled, and followed by his party, left the inn, and betook him to the royal lodging.

The following morning Jasper Jenkins brought bad news for Gilbert, news which caused Sir Rufus Pontifex to give vent to fierce anger. For the goldsmith's house had been broken into during the night.

John Jewell had gone down to his strong room to find the wall broken away. On the floor of the next cellar a lantern was burning.

And the papers which held the proof of Gilbert's real identity were gone!

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Bargain of Gideon Bilge—And the Start of the Fire of London.

A SLINKING, shambling figure, in a very tattered doublet, and shoes that had more hole than sole to them, took its way into Alsatia, pausing, looking round, hesitating, sometimes halting altogether, and with a face on which the pinch of hunger was writ large.

For months Gideon Bilge had had in his possession documents, the sale of which to the proper person would have made him a rich man for life.

From the conversation of his dead master

and Captain Quartermaine at certain odd times, when Gideon's large ears had been glued to keyholes and applied to faulty doors, he had gathered that a certain packet in the possession of John Jewell was one of the chief things my Lord Mountmarmaduke was seeking; and on the night of Eli Nethersole's terrible death, when the swashbucklers and the seamen alike had deserted that haunted house, Gideon Bilge had crept into the cellar, and stolen on tiptoe into that holy of holies, John Jewell's strong-room, and stolen the papers.

He thrust the packet into his breast and stole away out of the strong-room, out into the adjoining cellar, and away out into the night.

At length, by dint of much application—which would have been praiseworthy had it been exercised in an honest cause—Gideon was convinced that the papers had reference to the Mountmarmaduke family; and, driven by the pangs of hunger, he resolved at last to seek my lord and make what bargain he might.

After many inquiries among grooms and horse-boys about the taverns near Whitehall, he learned that Mountmarmaduke had been severely wounded many months before; that he was out of favour at the Court; and was believed to have gone abroad. Then one day Gideon saw the familiar figure of Captain Quartermaine, and following him stealthily, saw him enter the conspirator's old quarters at the sign of the Goat and Rope.

Gideon had no wish to come into contact with Quartermaine again, but he reasoned wisely that the captain would know something of my lord's movements; and on the particular night in question Eli Nethersole's apprentice made his way in fear and trembling to that ruffianly hostelry, having taken the precaution to conceal the packet in his attic before he trusted himself in the presence of the captain.

It was Saturday night, about eleven of the clock, and Gideon Bilge met few pedestrians abroad. The windows of the tavern, however, were lighted up, and though Alsatia had been visited severely by the plague, there were sounds of laughter and revelry as he opened the door. The next moment Gideon Bilge shambled into the inner chamber, to find him-

self in the presence of Quartermaine and Silas Double, who sat at either end of a table, with pewter flagons before them.

"And where have you been all this time?" said the captain. "Unless report lied, your master had good store of money hidden away in his house. But first tell me what brings you here, and what do you want with me?"

Gideon's necessities made him bold.

"It is not so much you, captain, that I want, but my Lord Mountmarmaduke. I have something for his private ear."

"You can pour your news into mine first of all," said Quartermaine, with a short laugh, "and if 'tis worth anything I will pass it on to my lord."

"'Tis worth a great deal," said Gideon Bilge, in a low voice. "Mind you a packet of papers—" he began.

But Quartermaine started to his feet, and smote the table until the flagons jumped.

"That was brought to John Jewell's by Gilbert Nameless?" cried the captain.

"The same," said Gideon Bilge. "What think you, my lord would give for that packet?"

Quartermaine's face grew scarlet with passion and he was about to speak, when the door was thrown open, and a handsome gentleman, in pale blue satin, swung into the room.

"Ah, Quartermaine, you are first at the tryst!" he said. "Good-evening to you, Master Double! Whom have we here in this youngster, whose garments look as though the plague might linger in them?"

"I bring no plague, my lord," said Gideon Bilge boldly, "but great news. I have found a packet of papers that your lordship has long looked for."

Mountmarmaduke started, and turned a questioning glance on Quartermaine, who nodded in reply.

"Unless the rogue lies, my lord, 'tis the papers we seek," he said.

Mountmarmaduke and Quartermaine exchanged a swift glance, and the captain winked expressively.

"What is the value you place on these papers?" said my lord.

"Fifty guineas," said Gideon Bilge, gasping

at his own temerity and the immensity of the sum he named.

My lord smiled.

"If the papers are as you represent them to be," he said, "you shall have fifty guineas."

The alacrity with which my lord uttered these words sharpened Gideon's wits again. He did not doubt that the fifty guineas would be forthcoming, but that he would be allowed to leave Alsatia with them in his pouch he did doubt very much. A sudden thought came to him.

"If your lordship will come with me," he said, "I will produce the packet, on condition that the money is placed in my hands now. If the papers are not what I have said, the money is forfeited, and, if your lordship wills, my life with it."

"Then take him by the sleeve, Double," said my lord rising, "and we will follow you."

It was past midnight when that strange quartette left the Goat and Rope, and the City was sunk in profound repose. Their way led them up to Ludgate Hill, and so through narrow, winding ways which in these days led them to Canning Street, or Cannon Street as we know it now.

"My lord," said Gideon Bilge, "will you come with me now? We are but a stone's-throw from the spot. And the Captain and Master Double must keep watch at the door."

"Do not try my patience too far," said my lord. "I will do as you say."

And he grasped Gideon by the wrist, bidding the others follow them. Gideon quickened his pace, and turned into a narrow alley known as Pudding Lane; but he had not taken two steps forward, when he rose and shrank back, checking the angry exclamation that rose to my lord's lips with a fervent:

"Hush! For pity's sake, my lord, say not a word! Look yonder!"

He faltered, pointing with his trembling hand.

Mountmarmaduke laid his hand on his rapier. And, sure enough, several cloaked figures were to be seen standing in the centre of the alley, apparently waiting for someone.

"That stout man," whispered Gideon Bilge, "is Jasper Jenkins, the saddler, and the tall one beside him is the goldsmith. Gregory

Firebrace leans at the mouth of yonder court, and with him Simon Barbican and Gilbert Nameless himself."

"Perdition!" said Quartermaine, who had come up to them in time to hear these words.

"If there's fire in perdition," said Silas Double, looking upwards, "then perdition it is, captain."

And as he spoke a tongue of red flame shot up close at hand, and illuminated the narrow alley from one end to the other.

The party of watchers at the door of Gideon's lodging wheeled round at the sudden illumination, thereby presenting their backs to the four rogues. They saw at once that it was a fire likely to be of some magnitude, for the fierce east wind blew the flames in a terrific whirl, that threatened to devour the wooden houses on all sides.

They had heard that Gideon Bilge was hiding in this part, and, suspecting him of having the papers, John Jewell and his party were here to make a capture of the young rogue.

"It is at Master Farryner's, the King's baker," said Simon Barbican excitedly.

And one and all raised a great shout of alarm.

For a moment all recollection of the errand upon which they had come was effaced by the sudden danger, and even Mountmarmaduke and his two ruffianly associates stepped into the centre of the alley, astonished by the brilliance of the glare, which now showed far above the roofs. Then it was that Gideon Bilge seized his opportunity, as his lord's grip relaxed on his wrist, and in three bounds he had reached the doorway of his lodging and darted in. This brought the scoundrels to their senses in the instant.

"Quick, follow me!" cried Mountmarmaduke.

And, alarmed by the clatter, Jasper Jenkins turned round, and saw three cloaked forms disappear into the doorway they had just left. The suspicions of Jasper Jenkins were immediately roused.

"Brother-in-law," said he, grasping the goldsmith by the shoulder, "three men have just entered the house we were guarding, and in desperate haste, too. And, to say the truth,

And, without waiting for a reply, the old soldier ran to the doorway and disappeared.

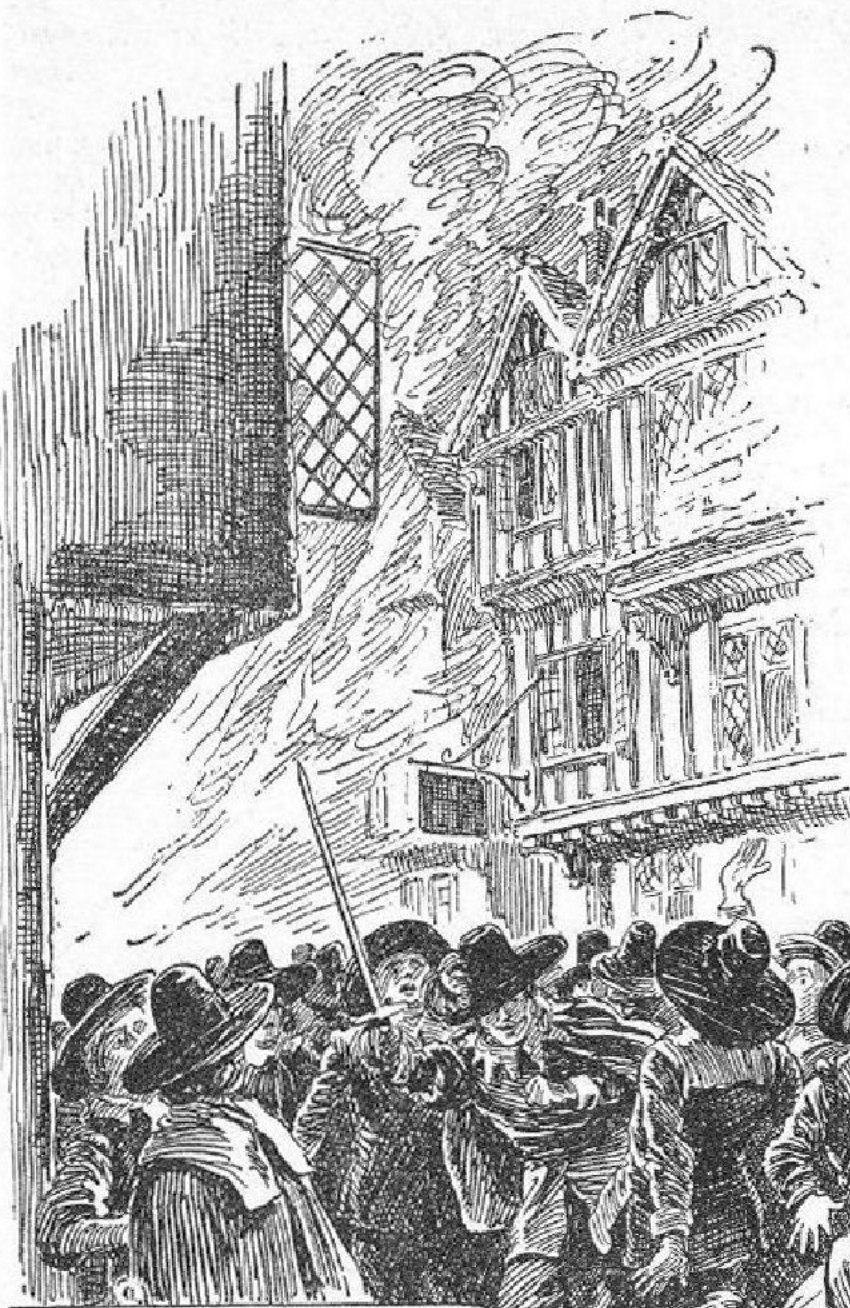
Jasper Jenkins looked right and left. "The fire is two doors away," he said.

"We have yet time to see our business through!"

And, followed by Simon Barbican and Gilbert Nameless, the worthy saddler dashed into the gloom of the doorway.

There was a terrible commotion upstairs, and when they reached Gideon's attic they found that the rogues had made their escape through the roof.

The fire was now raging fiercely, and the four gained the narrow staircase in safety, but on reaching the lane found it one seething mass of flame, and a crowd of excited citizens blocking the other end.



With a howl of terror, Gideon took to his heels and ran.

(See page 246)

though I got but a passing glimpse, the last of them was mighty like the rogue Quartermaine!"

Gregory Firebrace, who had been shading his eyes with his right hand, wheeled round at these words, and drew his sword.

"Jasper Jenkins, if what you say be right, our place is there. Wilt follow me?"

W. E. BRISCOE - 1920 -

Of Quartermaine, or Mountmarmaduke, or the usurer's apprentice there was not a sign, and our friends had to take to their heels to escape the terrific heat, which already scorched their hair and hands. In the doorway of the house at the corner of the alley they crossed Pudding Lane they found John Jewell.

"We have lost them," said Firebrace gruffly. "They have as many lives as a cat!"

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER

The fight in the burning church

GIDEON BILGE wormed his way through the mob, and my Lord Mountmarmaduke, his pale-blue satin very much crumpled by this time, shouldered after him, crying, "Give way, my good people—give way!" in so authoritative a voice that the panic-stricken citizens fell back; and Gideon, looking back over his shoulder, saw the man he most feared almost within arm's length of him. Then Gideon, with a howl of terror, took to his heels and ran.

In spite of my lord's threat and drawn rapier, Gideon Bilge had disappeared when he reached the edge of the crowd, and Mountmarmaduke paused at the angle of St. Margaret's Church. He could see no trace of the evil apprentice—nothing but the houses lit up by the reflection of the fire, and folk hurrying to the scene to add to the confusion.

As he stood, a figure, limping, came round the other corner of the church, and my lord uttered an oath.

"What, you, Quartermaine!" he exclaimed. "I thought you had been taken, or killed, or a thousand things!"

"And I had the same thought of you, my lord," said Quartermaine, whose appearance had not benefitted by his scramble over the roofs; "for I can read failure in your face."

"Ay, curse the man! Everything is against me, Quartermaine!" said Mountmarmaduke. "But, see, the church door is open! Come within and let us take counsel!"

They went into the silent interior of St. Margaret's. Quartermaine sank heavily on to a seat, and rubbed his wounded leg.

"You have cursed me often enough over this business, my lord," he said bitterly;

"but I do not find it proceeding any better when your lordship takes matters in hand."

Now, it happened that our hero and his friend, Simon Barbican, though separated by the rush and confusion, met by chance, opposite that self-same church of St. Margaret's, and drawing a little aside, out of the press, gazed in silence at the tremendous scene before them. The fire was spreading rapidly.

"'Tis a terrible sight," said Gilbert. "It gains every minute, and I fear me the church itself."

They turned instinctively to look at the square building behind them, and Gilbert gave a sudden exclamation of astonishment.

"Is that a face against the window there, Simon?" he said, pointing.

Simon Barbican bent forward like a tiger about to spring.

"It is not only a face, Gilbert," he said, "but it is that of the very man we seek. I should know those ears anywhere. Ah, he has disappeared! Gideon Bilge is inside the church."

Without another word the two boys ran to the porch, and, finding the door set ajar, Simon set his hand warningly, and they both stole within on tiptoe.

Gideon Bilge, still visible against the glare, crouched a few yards away, looking over his shoulder, but not at them. And as they watched they saw him draw something from the breast of his jacket, and place it behind the sculptured figure of a marble tomb. The hands of the two watchers clasped with a significant pressure, and the pressure deepened as a sudden voice fell upon their ears:

"Well, Quartermaine, 'tis no good lingering here. Yonder fire seems to have scorched your wits."

A gruff voice made some inarticulate reply. And Gilbert Nameless, peering cautiously round the corner, gazed up the aisle, to see the two villains not a dozen paces away.

"Simon," said Gilbert, "you marked where yonder rogue placed those papers! Secure them at all costs, while I——"

What he meant to say was interrupted, for Gideon Bilge, still looking very cautiously about, stumbled over a hassock, and raised a mighty clatter, that brought Quartermaine

to his feet. Both rogues looked in the direction of the sound, and, Gideon Bilge, terrified out of his life, darted across the altar-rails in full view of them.

Mountmarmaduke leaped forward like an arrow from a bow.

"Let the rogue go, my lord, for the present!" cried Quartermaine suddenly as he espied Simon and Gilbert.

And, tearing down the aisle, Quartermaine rushed to the church door, which he closed with a dull bang.

For an instant Gideon Bilge was saved, and my lord, with a strange laugh, came towards the pew from which Gilbert and Simon emerged.

Quartermaine, who stood in some fear of Gilbert's sword blade, paused a moment after he had closed the door, and in that moment he saw the slinking form of Gideon Bilge steal to the little archway that led to the church tower, draw the key from the outside, slip within, and lock himself securely in at the foot of the winding stair that led up to the tower top.

"You couldn't have done an unwiser thing!" laughed Quartermaine. "We can find you when we want you. And now, unless my right hand has lost it scunning, John Jewell will be without his apprentices!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Gilbert, confident in his own skill, had advanced to meet his mortal enemy; but Simon Barbican, wishing to leave nothing to chance, closed with my lord at the same time.

Simon's formidable cudgel descended on my lord's left shoulder with a tremendous crash, and Mountmarmaduke's arm fell powerless against his side.

"Have a care, Gilbert!" cried Simon triumphantly. "Leave this lordling to me, and look to the man with the sword!"

Gilbert had only time to wheel round on his heel and fling up Quartermaine's sword. In another instant it would have pierced him through.

In a moment Gilbert's good blade entered Quartermaine's breast, and, with a cry that was half a curse, and with his staring eyes turned in unextinguishable hatred upon our hero, he slipped to the floor.

Gilbert was only just in time to flee down the aisle as the whole of the vast window fell into the church, followed by a terrific burst of flame.

"Quick, Simon, the papers!" cried Gilbert.

"I have them," cried Simon, drawing forth the precious packet.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER

How King Charles was called upon to do justice

SOME few hours after the event recorded in the last chapter, John Jewell, Jasper Jenkins, Gregory Firebrace, and Gilbert and Simon Barbican were standing outside the goldsmith's house.

While the five were standing thus, talking and watching the fire, the heavy tramp of armed men resounded in the street beyond.

"It is the King's guard," said Jasper Jenkins. "I marvel much that the king himself has not been roused."

"See," said Gilbert, "surely my Lord Mountmarmaduke is with them?"

Gregory Firebrace laid his hand on his sword involuntarily as he caught sight of my Lord Mountmarmaduke, but they were not prepared for the extraordinary development that followed. When the armed party came abreast of our friends, who were drawn to one side of the street to let them go by, the officer cried "Halt!" and, drawing a paper from his pocket, made a step towards the goldsmith.

"You are surely Master John Jewell, the goldsmith?" said the officer.

"I am that unfortunate man," was the reply.

"I am sorry, sir," said the officer, "for you are a citizen of good repute, and my regret is the more profound that I have orders to arrest you with the other persons named in this warrant. I beg that you will make no resistance, for the warrant is signed by the king himself."

"There is some mistake here," said John Jewell, in a surprised tone. "Will you, sir, kindly tell me upon what charge I am arrested?"

"The charge, sir, is serious enough," said the captain of the king's regiment. "It is

that you and these persons with you are concerned in the fire that now rages yonder."

"To which fact," said my Lord Mountmarmaduke, "I can myself bear witness." And, emboldened by the presence of the armed soldiery, my lord drew a step nearer to the goldsmith. "The tables are turned, John Jewell!"

"Yes," replied the goldsmith, smiling, "we shall see who wins, my lord! Well, Master Officer, you must do your duty. Put up your sword, Firebrace. Jasper Jenkins, I command you to lay no finger on that man yonder. Our time will come soon enough. Stay with your mistress, Simon," he added, as the apprentice looked from one to another and clutched his cudgel. "This matter will be cleared up before many hours are passed."

In a large, handsome room, with a gaily painted ceiling and long windows looking on to the Thames, sat King Charles II. and his brother James. Standing beside the table, on which his fingers drummed a little nervously, was Lord Mountmarmaduke. Sir Rufus Pontifex was also present.

The guard marched in, and the Duke of York, shading his face with his hand, looked through his fingers at the faces of the prisoners and their accuser. James had his own ideas on the subject, and few things would have pleased him more than to see Mountmarmaduke discomfited.

"Now, Master Jewell," said the King, "the matter before us is unpleasant, and we will be brief. My Lord Mountmarmaduke charges you with complicity in this terrible fire that has burned our good City of London. He came upon you, it seems, with your three companions, issuing from the shop of Master Farryner, our baker, and as you came forth the flames arose likewise. Will you tell us what business took you to that spot at two o'clock on a Sabbath morning?"

"Very readily, your Majesty," said John Jewell, "and none knew our business better than my Lord Mountmarmaduke. We sought a certain packet of papers in which my lord had no uncommon interest. These papers I would crave permission to show your Majesty in private."

The King nodded to the captain of the escort, and the room was instantly cleared.

"Perhaps," said John Jewell, looking at Mountmarmaduke, "'twere better for the moment if my lord retired out of earshot."

Mountmarmaduke, his eyes glowing like live coals, went into a curtained recess, conscious that the Duke of York turned his cold eye upon him with a very obvious sneer.

"I am going to be brief, your Majesty," Jewell said. "The facts I have to offer you are clear. My Lord Mountmarmaduke brings a grave charge against me. I am about to prove in the first place, that my Lord Mountmarmaduke is not my Lord Mountmarmaduke at all. I will ask you, sir, to carry your memory back to that day of the Worcester fight.

"In the ranks of those unhappy men who were so unguided as to oppose your Majesty was Colonel the Earl of Mountmarmaduke, and as you may have heard, he fell by gunshot and died, leaving an only son.

"A corporal of Cromwell's Ironsides caught the earl as he fell from his horse, and this same corporal sought out the orphan boy, and, knowing his father's wishes, Gregory Firebrace cared for the little one, carrying him on his saddle-bow, and when Cromwell returned to London, the corporal conveyed the child into Kent."

Sir Rufus Pontifex saw the head of Mountmarmaduke peering round a curtain, and he marked that the face was livid and the lips blue.

"Master Chantry, finding that a nephew of the late earl's succeeded to the title on your Majesty's ascension, hid the boy's identity from him, and when the good man died he committed him to my care.

"And now comes the grim part of my story. Anxious to secure himself, the usurper hired a band of assassins to do away with the lad who had never harmed him, and ever since he came into my house we have had to guard him night and day."

"You speak glibly," said the King. "How am I to know that this boy you speak of is the rightful son of the rebel earl?"

"With your Majesty's permission, I would

ask that Corporal Gregory Firebrace should be admitted," said John Jewell.

Gregory Firebrace now entered the room, and told his tale with so much outspoken, soldierly bluntness that the King smiled more than once.

"Well, well" said the King, shifting in his chair, "you have cleared yourself of the charge of treason, and I must perforce believe what you tell me about the boy. Produce him, and let me see for myself."

Sir Rufus Pontifex went to the door and led Gilbert forward by the hand.

"Here he is, your Majesty," said the jovial baronet, "still as fine a lad as when he charmed us with his voice at Oxford, and showed you, sir, what he could do with his rapier."

"Bid the captain of the guard come hither, Master Firebrace, and seize the person of that rogue behind the curtain yonder," said the king.

The captain of the guard entered and strode across the room, but when he reached the curtain he stepped back a pace and cried :

"Your Majesty, my lord has gone!"

"Gone! How gone?" said the King.

"Through the window, sire," was the reply.

"Then, Gilbert, Earl of Mountmarmaduke," cried Charles, bursting into a roar of laughter, "I would advise you to hurry down to your estates and take possession before the late owner plays ducks and drakes with them. I myself will see later that the rascal swings for his roguery."

Too overcome to do more than mutter some inarticulate words, Gilbert left the royal presence, and in a few minutes he found himself passing through the privy gardens with his friends, through the red-coated ranks of the guard that had brought him thither under very different case, and so into Whitehall without.

