

The Whistling Omelette

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CONCEIVE my position. Night was falling very shrewd, with rain coming up black from the sea. I could hardly see my way a yard before and not at all behind, and the moor was full of break-neck places hid among the heather. I had no impulse in me but just to sit down and swear, only the moor seemed too lonely for my own voice.

I was a fool to have left Plymouth on such a day of cloud-rack and coming storm. There seemed nothing a man might do for shelter. I roamed the moor like a lost sheep, and I believe I would have welcomed a prison-breaking convict from Princes Town, so lonely was I. My flask was empty of comfort, there was never a match in any pocket of my coat, and I was sorely hungry.

There seemed no chance of succour, and I was beginning to think I should spend a merry night alone upon the moor, when I ran hard up against the stone wall of a house. The house stood up alone in the middle of the moor, with no garden or fence to shield it, and I felt my way round, no great distance, till I came to a door, upon which I beat lustily. The door opened and the light ran out of it, cutting the darkness with a golden knife. I heard a voice asking me to enter, but at first I could not see from whom it came because my eyes were blinded.

Illustration:

The door opened and the light ran out of it.

When I had gone in and was seated by the fire, I saw my entertainer was a man well set up and of a good carriage, but curious in face. It was difficult to determine whether he was a young man or an old one. His hair was grey, verging on white indeed, and his face was lined, but his eyes were a young man's eyes and his skin was healthy and clear. The room itself was furnished like a monk's cell. The floor was bare of carpet, there were no pictures on the walls, and there were only three articles of furniture, two chairs and a table, all of massive build, clamped to the floor.

I never saw such an empty room. A few books lay about the floor, and a shelf on the wall bore some eating-utensils and a loaf of bread. I was beginning to thank my entertainer, when he started violently and began to tremble.

"You will think my request a strange one," he said, "but believe me, I am not mad, and you would confer a favour upon me. Might I ask you to place your walking-stick in the further corner of the room."

I was taken aback by his request and his evident discomposure, but I could not afford to quarrel with the warmth and chance of supper, so I did as he desired, looking at him in amazement. When I had returned to my chair by the fire and he was at the other seat by the table, he apologised and said, "My request will seem very strange to you, sir, and this bare room and lonely dwelling-place must also have aroused your wonder. I can explain them both, and have nothing to hide, and if you will help yourself to any food and wine that is upon the shelf, I will tell you my story. First, however, I will replenish the fire."

He took a log from a pile by the hearth—I noticed he handled it very gingerly—and placed it on the flames. Then he told me the following story.

The Adventure of the Whistling Omelette.

AYLMER FACINORIOUS was a young musician of some promise and of a sunny, happy disposition. Throughout his life he made it his business to be always pleasant with himself, and though his earnings were not far from meagre he kept a bright face, and when he could not afford to purchase a cigar vowed that there was nothing like a pipe. He lived in Chelsea among the artists, and in the evening at winter time, in some big studio where the firelight flickered on the walls and his friends sat silent, he would often sit at the piano and improvise sound-pictures for them or play to them some dainty dance of old gold and green by Grieg.

Among the circle of artists with whom he lived there were two girls who shared a flat together, and with one of them, Audrey Anderson, he fell violently in love. Audrey was ready to be won, and promised to marry him, but as she had very little money, and Aylmer had none at all, it was obvious that they must wait.

Wait they did for more than three years, and at the end of that time, though they were more in love than ever, they were both as poor as before. They wanted to be married very much, and the sacred and close communion of husband and wife seemed the only thing in the world; but as neither of them were very brilliant at their work, they could not find a way to the most modest eldorado. Hope deferred made their heart—for they had but one between them—very sick indeed, and Audrey began to grow pale and to fret. Aylmer, in desperation, produced the trashiest of songs, which, despite the large numbers that he could easily produce, still failed to bring him any prospect of a sufficient income.

ONE evening, bright and fair to most of the world, but very gloomy to Aylmer, after a weary and fruitless round of visits to music dealers, he turned into a little restaurant in Soho. Audrey was in the country, and London seemed more than usually grim and unfriendly to the young man. A chance in his wanderings

brought him by this place, where he had often been very happy with his sweetheart over a simple dinner and a bottle of cheap claret.

The small room upstairs was almost empty, for it was early, and Aylmer noticed only two people as he pushed open the swing doors—an old gentleman who was a *habitué* of the place and a stranger who sat at a table by the window. As the night was rather hot and the window was open, Aylmer took a seat at the same table, and after a minute or two found himself in easy talk with his *vis-à-vis*. The stranger, a tall, thin-faced man with a mass of red hair pushed back from a singularly high forehead, introduced himself at once as Mr. Paul Bullo, scientific investigator, late of Kansas City and now of London.

He seemed to take it for granted that their friendship was a settled thing, and plunged at once into an animated conversation on a variety of intimate subjects. He told Aylmer all about his early struggles in the Western States, how he had worked at any job that he could find in order to feed and clothe himself, while all his spare hours and many of his nights were spent in ceaseless scientific experiments. A small invention connected with the working of railroad signals had brought him enough money to send him East, and he had become a workman in Mr. Edison's laboratory. From this point his progress in scientific knowledge had been very rapid, and at the age of thirty-three he found himself one of Edison's right-hand men, and possessed of a reputation that made him known to the first scientific circles of Europe.

It was a few years after this that his uncle, Rupert Hocker, met with a violent death at the hands of his own workmen who were out on strike, and left him the whole of his immense fortune and a partnership in the great pork-packing industry of Hocker, Sweetman and Bock, Chicago, Ill. Mr. Bullo had immediately sold his share in the business, as he inherited from his mother's family a suspicion of Jewish blood which made him disinclined to be prominently connected with the bacon trade. Possessed at last of the means to gratify every desire, he had spent ten years in extended travel round the world, visiting in turn every laboratory and scientist of repute. Then, when near upon his fiftieth year, he had settled in London to spend the rest of his life producing new inventions and elaborating those which he had already conceived.

He told Aylmer all about his house in Bloomsbury Square, and the many strange conceits that it contained. He said that with his marvellous system of electrical machines he needed but the assistance of a cook and engineer to supply him with every detail of modern luxury, and told how, by the pressure of a finger, he could gratify his ear with the sweetest music, or dream for a space to the sound of life-like imitations of singing birds. Sometimes he would please his eye with moving pictures caught by the camera from all the countries of the globe. His house was his own world to him, he said, and he rarely went out among men save on those rare intervals when the noiseless forms that flitted across his picture sheets seemed to shame him into the confession that even the happiest of recluses must now and then rub shoulders with mankind.

He told the story of his life in a brisk and graphic manner, eating and drinking meanwhile with a rapidity and precision that were almost mechanical.

Aylmer listened with extreme interest, rarely interrupting the course of the narrative save for an occasional exclamation of surprise and wonder as Mr. Bullo

detailed with extraordinary lucidity his invention and working of some new engine or apparatus. At the end of his recital the American paused, seeming to invite a return of confidences, and Aylmer, who was greatly attracted by the man's personality, poured out the details of his own life struggle, his love, and the apparent hopelessness of the future.

When he had finished, and the little restaurant, which during their talk had been crowded, was now empty again, Mr. Bullo spoke.

"And now," said he, "our dinner has been much spoiled by our talk; will you join me in an omelette which they make for me according to a special recipe of my own. I can promise you that you will like it."

Aylmer acquiesced, and in a few minutes the patron himself appeared with the omelette, which he placed before Mr. Bullo in a manner which was at once deferential and awe-stricken.

"Would you oblige me by cutting it," said Mr. Bullo, "It is a conceit of mine to prefer my guest to do that duty on the occasions that I have this particular dish."

Aylmer drew the knife, quickly across the steaming omelette, when suddenly it emitted a loud strident whistle, and rearing itself upon its end began to pirouette daintily round the dish.

"A little invention of my own," said the millionaire in a delighted tone. "You see it is quite simple," and capturing the spinning confection, he withdrew a tiny glittering object. "This is all," he said; "your knife surprised the mechanism, and you see the result. I have made an especial study of mechanical jests as applied to cooked dishes, and frequently amuse my friends in this fashion. Last Christmas Day, I had a plum-pudding, out of which, when opened, mechanical dickie-birds, painted to represent the feathered songsters of all countries, flew to different perches about the room and warbled for upwards of twenty minutes. It was a pretty prank. And now I must be upon my way. Here is my card. Should you feel inclined to visit me, I have a plan which with the aid of a little courage on your part may place you in a position to be speedily married." He summoned the waiter, and, despite Aylmer's protestations, insisting on paying the bill for the two dinners, left the room very quietly.

Three times was the young musician in imminent peril of being run over as he made his way to Piccadilly Circus to find his omnibus. The indefinite promise of the millionaire following on the wonderful stories that he told, produced an extraordinary exhilaration in Aylmer's mind, and he drifted through the crowded streets realising nothing but the beautiful future he was planning in his own thoughts. At last, after the pole of an omnibus had grazed his shoulder, and he felt the hot, strong breath of the horses upon his cheek, he pulled himself together, and as a relief to his feelings was extravagant to the extent of a long telegram to Audrey. He smiled to see how the amatory wording of it stiffened the good post-mistress's cheek to a frigid displeasure.

HE judged it best not to be too impatient in his visit to Mr. Bullo, and it was not till nearly a week had passed that one wet, clammy summer's evening found him on the doorstep of the house in Bloomsbury Square. The door opened suddenly, and Aylmer was confronted with a large hall somewhat bare of furniture. As there was no servant to be seen, he stood upon the threshold for a

moment not quite knowing what to do, until he saw an arm of wood shoot out from the wall bearing in its fingers a card with the legend "Up one flight of stairs and the first door to the right."

He followed the directions nervously, bearing in mind the many mechanical pleasantries of whose existence about the house Mr. Bullo had apprised him. He reached the door, and, as his foot touched the mat it opened and he walked into a room entirely bare of furniture, save for one arm-chair by the fire, in which Mr. Bullo was sitting. The latter welcomed the young man with a great show of enthusiasm, and pressing a knob in the elaborately carved mantelpiece, caused a panel in the wall to swing back. Out of the opening another arm-chair ran upon wheels, easily and noiselessly, while it was followed by a small table bearing bottles and glasses.

"Here is sherry," said Mr. Bullo, "or if you prefer it, spirits. Supper will be ready in one minute, and you must be contented with a cold feast, for though I thought you would come to-night, I could not be certain of the hour."

They fell to talk, and Aylmer was presently astounded to see a band of rats run quickly across the floor and disappear into holes that opened to receive them. They were pursued by a pair of magnificent cats, and Aylmer could hear the rattle of the mechanism as they nosed about the holes.

Illustration:

They were pursued by a pair of magnificent cats.

Mr. Bullo clapped his hands. "You must excuse me," he said, "for my childishness in thus forcing my wonders upon your notice, but they are so dear to me, and it is such a pleasure to have a new audience for their exhibition."

In a few more minutes there was a faint sound of a bugle coming from the lower part of the house. Mr. Bullo stamped his foot twice, and almost immediately the floor parted in the centre and a magnificently-appointed table covered with the choicest of viands rose into sight. "I must apologise once more," said Mr. Bullo, "for this somewhat antique device, which smacks, I admit, of the Christmas pantomime, but I have tried in vain to invent a new one which should work with the like simplicity. At any rate, here is supper."

THEY both did excellent justice to the feast before them. Never in his life had Aylmer tasted such delicately cooked foods or sipped such rare wines, so that when the supper-table gave way to another loaded with fruits, sweets from New York and Paris, and the most expensive kinds of cigars, he was in the best possible humour to accede to any proposition, however hazardous, that his host might put to him.

During the meal itself nothing extraordinary had taken place, but at dessert, Mr. Bullo's face took on once more the deprecatory smile that Aylmer had begun to recognise as herald of impending wonders. Leaning forward he appeared to touch some spring concealed among the flowers. Immediately a little fountain tinkled in the centre of the table, music from a hidden orchestra floated about their ears, while upon a great silver dish three bananas rose upon end, and began lustily to

buffet themselves upon a pineapple, which, throwing out long tentacles, defended itself sturdily from its foes.

"Well," said Mr. Bullo, "I have played the magician enough. Now, come into my study, which is entirely free from mechanical tricks, and we will talk over the plan that I am about to propose to you."

The study was a small room, very comfortable, and Aylmer, who was beginning to experience a nervousness whenever he saw Mr. Bullo stretch out his hand, was relieved to see the whisky and tobacco produced without any appeal to science. The millionaire lost no time in opening the subject.

"At Lower Edmonton," he said, "hard by the cottage where the late Mr. Charles Lamb wrote many of his instructive essays, there is a house. This house is my property, and on it I have spent five years and many thousands of pounds. It contains, and I am not boasting, the most perfect products now existing of applied mechanics. It is, sir, a *trick-house!*"

Mr. Bullo's voice had quite lost its earlier tone of banter, and he looked very shrewdly at his young guest as he continued.

"The tricks are not of the same pleasant and harmless nature as those with which I have this evening entertained you, but are in some cases serious attacks upon the person, and many of the things that may happen in this house are sufficient to try the nerves and courage of the bravest and most alert man who should venture to pass a night there. In fact, no one has ever done so since the machinery has been in working order, and I am prepared to offer £20,000 to the man who shall stay in that house three whole days and nights and come out alive. None of the traps I have laid are necessarily fatal. It is a fair bet. A brave man against the products of a scientist's brain and twenty thousand pounds if he wins. Do you take me, young sir? and do you think there is any one who will pit himself against my brains for so large a sum of money? Yourself, for instance. You have no money and yet you are very anxious for marriage. Will you go to my house, and try for the £20,000? As you stand, what is your future? It is the worst of all penury, genteel penury. If you marry, your love may make you happy for a time despite the odds, but you are a man of the world, and you must know the inevitable end. A family, possible sickness, a sordid struggle for life, and gradual starvation. Now look at the other picture—the bid for freedom, let us call it. Three bad days and nights—possibly not so very bad, as I may be over-confident of my machinery—then the £20,000 for you when you come out; nearly £800 a year, marriage, and lifelong happiness with Audrey. Come, I will give you three days to decide. You need not be afraid of being defrauded. Everything shall be in order; my solicitor will draw up an agreement for us to sign. To-day is the seventh, on the tenth I shall expect an answer. I think you will be my man."

AYLMER was silent for quite ten minutes. The clock ticked feverishly, seeming to hurry rather than to measure time; and Mr. Bullo, crouched in his chair, was watching intently, an extraordinary brilliance in his eyes.

"You say that none of the tricks are designedly fatal; you give me your word on that?" the young man said at last.

"I pledge you my word of honour!" said the millionaire, jumping up with outstretched hand. "The scheme sounds wild and mad, I own, but it is my hobby. I

have always been madly fascinated by machinery. If you went careless and unprepared anything might happen, but going as you do, awake to every chance, you have no business to be killed. You'll get badly frightened, no doubt, but that's all!"

"I suppose you won't give me any idea of what may happen?" said Aylmer.

"That wouldn't be fair!" answered Mr. Bullo, with a chuckle. "I cannot do that! I will say, however, that there is nothing like pasteboard ghosts or tricks with limelight. Everything is purely mechanical. It is simply a big mechanical joke; rather a dangerous one, perhaps, but then there is a big compensation. But wait a minute, I will introduce you to Mr. Willy, my engineer; he has been my right-hand, man in carrying out the scheme."

He pressed a bell, and in a few seconds the door opened and Mr. Willy appeared. He was a small man, broad, and brown of face, with extremely deep lines round his eyes and mouth. His eyes, which twinkled incessantly, were bright blue, and as he spoke the Welsh accent rapped sharp and crisp upon the ear. He was wiping the oil from his fingers with a tattered cloth as he entered the room, and he apologised to Mr. Bullo for his grimy condition.

"Look you, sir, I have made her fly at last," he cried, and producing a mechanical owl from one of his capacious pockets he cast it up in the air. The solemn bird circled twice round the room, and then perching on the mantelshelf said "Mister Willy" three times, and in the most natural manner in the world.

Mr. Bullo ran to it at once and patted it lovingly. "Thank you, Willy, thank you!" he cried. "We shall soon have the whole animal kingdom. I have an idea for a giraffe which—but I forget. There is more serious work toward. Let me introduce you to my young friend, Mr. Aylmer Facinorious, who is very likely going to stay at Lever Lodge and try for my guineas."

Mr. Willy shot a quick, cunning smile at his master, but the latter's face did not move.

"Tell him, Willy," he went on, "that he isn't going to be killed, only frightened and perhaps a trifle bruised,—eh, Willy?"

Mr. Willy fumbled with the piece of cotton waste that he still held in his hand, and looked from one man to the other before he answered. All his movements were very quick and jerky and the especial twinkle of his eye and the endless quivering of his shoulders gave him the appearance, which was quite false, of a nervous man. "Oh no, sir," he answered: "believe me, sir, indeed there will be no danger of life whatever."

"Very well," said Aylmer. "I will let you know, Mr. Bullo, before the week is out. I have not to my knowledge ever made an enemy. I am, therefore, disinclined to believe that you should have any wish to take my life. It is, as you say, Mr. Willy, a great deal of money, and I am a fairly desperate man. The possession of this money would ensure the happiness of my life, and I think that I shall go to your house. Well, I will say good night. Thank you very much, Mr. Bullo, for your most excellent supper and the entertaining evening that you have given me. Mr. Willy, I have no doubt we shall meet again. Good night."

WHEN he was outside in the open air he drew a deep breath and turned once to look up at the gloomy house. All the windows were brilliantly lighted, and

he could see, sharply silhouetted against one of the blinds the black figures of Mr. Bullo and Mr. Willy, each holding a wine-glass. At the same moment the sound of loud brazen music, mocking music it seemed, came out over the square. It was a sudden flourish of trumpets, and when it ceased he could hear the panting of a gas-engine in the cellar.

He set himself to walk home, for at this time the omnibuses and trains had ceased running and he had no money for a cab. The wet mist which he had left outside when he entered the house was now gone, and the pavements were bright and clean as his footsteps struck echoes from the flags. He enjoyed his long walk, and as every step took him further from Bloomsbury he felt the more determined to brave the unknown terrors of the house at Edmonton, and the more certain that he would come victorious from the ordeal. There were but few wayfarers at that hour of the night, and when, at Hyde Park Corner, the dawn came, he stood and watched for a while.

He slept but little and sat alone all the next day waiting for Audrey, who was coming home in the evening. He had made up his mind that he would tell her nothing of his dangerous purpose, but would pretend an engagement to play at a provincial concert to explain his three days' absence. He felt supremely confident in himself, but as the hour of his sweetheart's coming drew nearer he found it hard to repress a feeling of nervousness, a fear of some untimely accident that should take him for ever from Audrey. At six o'clock he went to Paddington, and presently the great engine glided majestically into the station at the head of its train. By a lucky chance the carriage in which Audrey was drew up exactly opposite where he was standing, and in a moment his lady was in his arms.

Neither of them could ever see why they should not embrace in a station. As Audrey herself said, "We love each other, so what *does* anything else matter?"

When they were in the cab Aylmer forgot everything for a time. To have her little slim hand in his—with the tyranny of a lover he had made her take off her glove—to be close to her in a little world of their own, to watch her sweet face all aglow with tenderness and trust, this indeed was the great thine in life.

"Darling," he said, "love of my heart, I can think of nothing but you. Oh, I have wanted you so. How splendid when we shall always be together for ever and ever. It's awfully strange, but I don't want any companionship but yours—just to be with you, that is all."

Then Audrey asked him the question that she always asked him because it was so sweet to hear his protestations. "Darling, will you always love me—when I am old and ugly, even?"

So for half-an-hour they prattled like children, hand in hand. They at least knew the best life has to give. To them, though they had little else, was given the supreme and inexpressible joy.

The cab spun rapidly through the pleasant streets of the West End, and the drive came to an end all too soon for the lovers. Aylmer gave up Audrey to Miss Chilmaid, the girl with whom she lived, and, promising to be back later in the evening, went home to a solitary dinner.

It was not until after they had been together for more than an hour that he dared to tell her of his prospective absence. The thought of lying to this sweet, good girl was horrible to him, and when at last he summed up enough courage to

announce his concert engagement at Ipswich, and the probability of his being away for three days, it was with bald words and a blushing face.

Audrey said very little. She was sorry to be parted from him so soon again, but engagements of any sort were rare and had to be welcomed with considerable joy. Soon afterwards they said good-night, and Aylmer wrote to Mr. Bullo accepting his challenge in the matter of the house, and suggesting a meeting on the following day for the drawing up of a proper agreement. He said that on the day after he would be ready to go to Edmonton. He received a telegram from Mr. Bullo in the morning, and at three o'clock was closeted with him in the private room of Mr. Hartley, a solicitor, in Chancery Lane.

THE formalities were few and quickly despatched, so that by half-past four Aylmer was once more in Mr. Bullo's house. It had been decided that he was to go to Edmonton at once with Mr. Willy, and to dine in Bloomsbury Square before setting out.

Dinner was agreeably free from mechanical pleasantries, and at eight o'clock Mr. Bullo rang for Mr. Willy, and the three went into the study for a final drink and cigar before the commencement of the adventure. At half-past eight Mr. Bullo rose from his chair, and, going to the young man, shook him warmly by the hand.

"The time has come, my young friend," he said, "let me thank you again for your acceptance of my wager. You are a man, I can see, and I doubt my machines will frighten you but little. We shall see, and believe me, Mr. Facinorous, it will be with the greatest pleasure that I shall hand you my cheque on Friday. Now I commend you to the guidance of Mr. Willy. He will leave you in Lever Lodge and will set the machine in action. At midnight exactly on Friday. Au revoir, Mr. Facinorous, and good luck."

THEY were not long about their journey, for Mr. Bullo's carriage whirled them quickly to the station and the train started immediately. When they arrived at Edmonton, Mr. Willy explained that the house was close at hand, and they set out for it on foot. Lever Lodge was a square and compact building of not at all a forbidding aspect, standing in a pleasant garden that was surrounded by a red-brick wall.

Mr. Willy walked with Aylmer up the gravel path that led from the garden gate to the front door, and, turning the lock with a latch-key, showed the young man into a brilliantly-lighted hall, and then, bidding him a rood evening, banged the door behind him.

The First Day.

AYLMER paused for a moment irresolute. The hall was large and almost bare of furniture. The very emptiness of the place seemed sinister, and cold fear suddenly claimed the young man as her own. Through a tall window opposite to him he could see the moon floating peacefully among soft clouds, and the mellow sound of lowing cattle came at intervals over the fields. He was seized with a

frantic desire to get out into the world, and, turning back, he shook at the door. There were no apparent means for opening it. Locks and bolts it appeared to have none, and he was forced to accept the situation and realise that he was really a prisoner in this house of fantastic horrors. He stood there, his stick poised as in self-defence, while the loud ticks of a tall clock seemed to mock him with their cold regularity. Nothing happened, and he remembered that Mr. Willy had told him he would find food and wine in a lower room, and that, should sleep oppress him, there was a sleeping chamber prepared upon the upper floor. He walked a little down the hall, placing his feet very gingerly.

A rack fitted with clips for sticks and umbrellas stood against the wall, and he placed his stick in one of them. To his unutterable surprise, as he did so, the stick was caught up by the clip and struck him two violent blows upon the face.

He stumbled back smarting with pain and fell against the opposite wall. His walking-stick, a light malacca cane, fell back into the rack with a rattle and the vestibule was as silent as before. The unexpectedness of the thing frightened him for a moment, but he soon remembered that it was not very dreadful after all. He resolved to try and unravel the mystery, and very carefully he went up to the rack and quickly grasped the cane. To his surprise it came out quite easily, and when he felt the clip he found it apparently a fixture with no trace of anything unusual about it. Puzzled and smarting, yet admiring the cleverness of the apparatus, he walked down the hall in search of food.

He came to some stairs which led downwards, and tightly grasping the banisters, for he had thoughts of a possible trap-door beneath his feet, he went down to the bottom. The stairway and the passage at the foot of it were all brilliantly-lighted by electricity. There were several doors in the passage, and while he was hesitating which he should open, his eyes fell upon one of them to which a card was nailed bearing the words "*Supper. First Day.*"

He opened it without mishap, and a comfortable room discovered itself with a cold supper neatly set forth upon a table in the centre. Everything looked particularly inviting. Aylmer began to remember the genial eccentricities of the millionaire, and to think that possibly there was not much in the wager after all, and that this might be but a fantastic method of doing him a service.

He sat down with much satisfaction before a bottle of sherry and a cold duck, making a very hearty supper. Only one mechanical pleasantry disturbed his feast, and this partook of the nature of a comedy, and did not fail to afford him some amusement. About half-way through the meal the mustard-pot—a handsome utensil of silver—opened its lid and remarked something that bore a suspicious resemblance to Mr. Bullo's "twenty thousand pounds," and then, with a sudden cackle of laughter, shut with a click.

Thoughts of the phonograph immediately came into Aylmer's mind, and his suspicions became a certainty when he found that the pot was fixed to the table. After supper he found some excellent cigarettes on the mantelshelf, and seating himself in a roomy chair was soon enjoying the luxury of the post-prandial tobacco. His mind was mellowed by his meal, and he allowed his eyes to wander lazily round the handsome room. He was pleased to see a small piano in the corner, with a richly-carved case of ebony, and when he had finished his cigarette he went over to it, thinking to pass an hour pleasantly with Chopin.

He began a nocturne of which the first few notes were struck entirely upon the base and treble notes, leaving the central octaves untouched. Then, when he touched a black note in the centre of the instrument the first attempt upon his life was made by the hellish ingenuity of Mr. Bullo. As his finger descended on a key in the very centre of the board a sharp report sounded in his ears, and he felt something like a red-hot iron touch his cheek, while simultaneously a quantity of smoke curled out from a carved boss in the front of the piano. His cheek began to bleed profusely where it had been grazed by a bullet, and with a sick horror in his veins he staggered to the table and poured himself out a glass of wine. Had the aim of the concealed pistol which he had unconsciously fired been directed an inch more to the right his brain would have been penetrated, and he would have been lying a corpse upon the carpet!

He sat down again upon the chair, and began to realise to what he had pledged himself. His former cheerful thoughts were violently dispelled, and he began to see with unmistakable clearness that he was in a house of horror, from which it was unlikely he would ever emerge. Little things in Mr. Bullo's manner came back to him with a new significance, and were made plain in the light of his recent experience. He felt sure that he was doomed, and with that thought came the thought of his love, Audrey. The anguish was unspeakable. He had said a long farewell to those dark eyes and small caressing hands. His fingers went to his watch-chain, where he had fastened a little golden cross which she had given him.

As he sat still with bowed head, grasping the charm, he began to repress and control the agony that was surging over him. His pain began to condense in his soul and turn to strong purpose. At length he rose up proudly, still grasping the little cross. "I will be a man," he said out loud, as if challenging the watchful engines which lay waiting all around him. "If I die, I will die as a man; if I live, Fortune is kind to me. Even if I die I shall see Audrey again somehow, and it's not long to wait."

Then with a firm step and smoking a fresh cigarette, he left the room and went up the stairs into the hall. His manhood had come back, and he felt prepared to endure and contend with anything. He saw by the clock that it was very late, and the excitement of the day had left him weary, so he determined to find a bed and sleep. Accordingly he mounted the stairs warily. When he reached the top of the stairs he looked back into the hall, and even as he did so the electric light faded away as if he were being watched by some unseen intelligence. The landing on which he stood was still lit, and resolutely suppressing fear he walked round it, surveying the closed doors in turn. On the door which was to his right hand as he ascended he found the following label:

BEDROOM. FIRST NIGHT.

HE stood upon the mat hesitating whether to go in or not, when there was a rattle in the lintel. Turning sharply towards the sound, he saw a little shelf had fallen down on which was a note addressed to him by name. He took it up and found it ran as follows:

My Dear Facinorious,

You are no doubt by this lime thoroughly frightened, and imagine it is my fixed intention to kill you. Now listen. There is no reason why you should die. I do not deny that there are plenty of possibilities that you may unwarily fall into one of the many traps set for you. That is a part of the wager between us—a wager which is a fair and above-board one. On the other hand, I assert with absolute sincerity that by unceasing watchfulness you may win the wager unharmed. I am not, I repeat, the bloody-minded monster you imagine me to be.

*Yours,
Bullo.*

Aylmer read this note with great care. It gave him new courage and he remembered that after all it was his own choice that he was there. The proud resignation that had sustained him gave place to hope, and he began to experience something of the joy of contest, the pleasure of pitting his brains and cunning against the grim and lifeless adversaries awaiting him on every side.

He opened the bedroom door with great caution, and finding the room within was dark, struck a lucifer match upon his heel. Then he saw a gas-bracket by the fireplace, and, advancing slowly towards it, he turned the tap and held the match up to the burner. There was a sudden hissing noise, louder than the ordinary sound of rushing gas, a slight pop the gas ignited, and a long rod of light flashed out at him, hitting him on the shoulder.

In a moment his coat and shirt were a mass of flames. The flame went right through the fabric of his clothes, and scorched the skin beneath, before he could rush back out of its path. Directly he had done so, and was crushing out the life of the fire with one of the bed coverings, the jet of gas flashed back into the bracket, and the room was dark for several seconds. Then the electric light began to glow from a globe in the ceiling.

The pain from the burn was intense, and he sank down on the bed, too conscious of the physical sensation to be very clear as to what had happened. When the first agony was over, and he could suffer with more equanimity, he felt that, despite his resolutions of caution, he had been very foolish. Had he examined the gas-bracket in the first instance, he could not have failed to notice the nozzle which directed the jet of gas, and the unusual appearance of the burner would have warned him from tampering with it. Perils menaced him at every step, and it was only by an almost superhuman prudence that he could save himself.

When he thought of Audrey, his courage became strong again, and the sense of absolute power and resolve that sometimes comes to a man in great peril calmed his nerves. He fell asleep, still thinking of her, and though his wounded cheek and scorched shoulder were very painful, he was little awake during the night.

The Second Day.

The morning was flooding the room with sunlight when he awoke. He could not believe himself to be in peril. The decent, comely room, with its bath full of water standing by the bed, the sun pouring in at the window, the song of the birds

in the garden outside, all combined to make the events of the night before seem some evil dream, which had fled before the sun. His injuries were better, and in every way he felt a man again. At the same time, he could not but think that the ingenuity of Mr. Bullo and Mr. Willy would have foreseen this, and that it behoved him to be very much upon his guard.

He got out of bed, and carefully examined the bath. It was one of those shallow saucer baths, and it seemed as if nothing could possibly be wrong with it. Standing by the side was a cork mat. His first idea was that possibly the liquid in the bath was not water at all, but some acid which might burn him. He put the tip of his finger into it, but found it to be unmistakable water, both to taste and touch. Then it occurred to him to move the bath close to the window, as there seemed some companionship in the birds and green trees outside.

When he caught hold of the rim of the bath to pull it along he found his prudence rewarded. Something was not quite right, for the bath was fixed to the Moor and would not move. When he made this discovery he stepped back, one foot resting upon the cork mat. He fancied for a moment that the mat gave as he trod upon it, and simultaneously he heard most unmistakably a sharp metallic click. He knelt down by the mat, and after an attentive examination found that it had sunk a quarter of an inch into the floor.

He had a strong knife in his pocket, and inserting it in the crack at the edge of the mat was able with its aid to prise it up. It lifted like the lid of a box and disclosed a trough in the flooring full of wheels and shining metal bars. Aylmer could not repress a smile of satisfaction. To find some of the hidden machinery, to see the veritable agents of the trickery, seemed to rob the place of half its terror. These sudden and mysterious occurrences had all the horror of their mystery, and even to have surprised the secret of one of them was a signal victory.

He looked carefully into the aperture, wondering what new attempt upon his life its contents would betray.

It appeared that the pressure of his foot upon the mat had set in motion a lever which had withdrawn a bolt at the end of the trough nearest to the bath. The explanation flashed upon him at once; the bottom of the bath was now held in its place by the frailest of supports sufficient to sustain the weight of the water, and had in fact become simply a trap-door. He resolved to test this, and leaning over the edge of the bath struck the bottom a heavy blow with his fist. There was another click, a rush of water, and the sheet of tin gave way and disappeared with a loud, echoing rattle, laying bare a smooth shaft which seemed to go right down to the cellars of the house. As he leant over he could feel cool air upon his face. The discovery was unnerving, but there was a great exultation in it. Carefully skirting the pit he went to the window and looked out. The window was barred outside, but he could see a large and shady garden full of fine trees and pleasant lawns, as peaceful a place as a man might care to walk in. He resolved to open the window and inhale the morning air with its scents from all the lavender and wall-flowers below.

He had just unfastened the catch and was about to push up the frame when he stopped suddenly. To open a window was so ordinary and simple a thing that he had forgotten his caution. After some consideration he raised it very slowly, carefully avoiding the open space between the sill and the rising window. It was

well that he did so, for when he had raised it some two feet it broke away from his hands and fell back into its place with a heavy clang. Had his hand or fingers been beneath they would have been very badly crushed it not entirely amputated. He had half expected this to happen and it did not startle him very much, so with a superior smile—for he was growing very confident—he took up a light bedroom chair and smashed the glass, letting the delightful air stream into the room.

When he had enjoyed it for a time he went cautiously downstairs into the hall. The clock was striking eight as he came down the stairs, and as the last note died away a card made its appearance on the top, bearing the following legend:

*Breakfast. Second Day. Will be served in number five on the lower floor.
Water may be boiled and tea made without any danger!*

This announcement seemed to promise a truce, and he went carefully down to the passage where on the first night he had supped. He passed the room with the piano, the door standing open as he had left it, and a faint smell of gunpowder still hanging in the air. Number five was comfortably appointed, and the materials for breakfast were upon a table by the window. When he had finished an excellent meal, which was considerably enlivened by the graceful dancing of a penny roll to strains of music which proceeded from an ostensible box of sardines, it was close upon nine.

As the hour struck there was a whirring, humming noise, and from an aperture which opened in the wall protruded the mouth of a large metal trumpet. Aylmer rightly concluded that the instrument was connected with a phonograph. It gave him the following message in jerky, metallic accents:

Mr. Bullo presents his compliments to Mr. Facinorious, and begs to inform him that he is free to walk in the garden for an hour unmolested. Before ten strikes Mr. Facinorious must be back in the house, or the door will close and the wager be lost!

A second after the instrument had made an end of speaking, and while the trumpet was slowly going back into the wall, the window, together with the space of wall beneath it, swung open in the manner of a door, and the garden, full of scents and brilliant as a pane of stained glass, lay open for him to walk in.

It was inexpressible joy to walk in the garden. As his feet trod the sweet grass of the lawns, and he heard the summer wind dealing delicately with the leaves of the elms, he wept tears of pure relief. Every sunbeam was a smiling ray of hope, he felt sure that before long he would hold Audrey in his arms. There was something of her in every pleasant aspect of the garden. The house itself, seen through the trees, wore such a comfortable presence, and seemed to have such good pride of itself that he would not believe it could be sinister. His body alone remembered. The chatter of the birds seemed to laugh at fear and to dispel it. He consulted his watch frequently in order that he might not be late, and when it showed five minutes to the hour he entered through the opening in the wall. As the gong of the clock beat out ten the window swung into its place, and he was a prisoner again.

The problem before him was how should he spend his time. It would be madness to explore the house, and yet did he remain still in one room it was almost certain that Mr. Bullo would have provided for the contingency. It was idle to suppose that he would be allowed to avoid danger in that way.

He resolved after much consideration to go back to the bedroom. He imagined that he had, in all probability, unmasked its worst horrors, and that he would be safer there than anywhere else. When he came into the hall he saw his stick still in the rack, and conceiving that it might be useful he took it out. The clip turned under his hand, endeavouring to repeat the blow which had assailed him on the first evening. This time, however, he was well prepared and easily prevented a *contretemps*. He went slowly and quietly up the stairs, and when he was a yard or two from the door he stopped, suddenly arrested by the sound of some one moving about the room. The door was half open, and tightly grasping his stick he peeped in. An extraordinary sight met his eyes. From the pit in the centre of the bath projected the top of a steel ladder, and busied at the mantelpiece, with his back to Aylmer, was little Mr. Willy. Aylmer realised that he had found the engineer in the very act of preparing a new trap, and that it was of great importance that he should not himself be seen.

Illustration:

Busied at the mantelpiece, with his back to Aylmer, was little Mr. Willy.

Mr. Willy had a bag of tools, and taking a spanner from it he began to unscrew a bolt at the corner of the great mirror which was over the mantel. When he had taken out two screws the glass swung open on hinges, revealing a cupboard in the wall. In the centre of this space, which was entirely filled with machinery, was a large circle of polished steel from which projected four tubes like gun barrels, which he noticed pointed directly at the pillow of the bed. When he had carefully oiled and cleaned the bars and wheels Mr. Willy went again to the tool basket and took from it a brown-paper parcel. Untying the string, he disclosed four rods of dull steel, each about a foot long and with arrow-heads of the same metal. Taking a dart the engineer rammed it into one of the tubes which projected from the disc, obviously compressing a spring as he did so. When only the head of the dart was visible there was the sound of a catch falling into its rest, a half revolution of the wheels below, and the missile remained in its place.

When he had loaded each of the four tubes in this way the engineer took out a large key. In the corner of the aperture there was a clock face, and moving a finger on an index dial to the hour of two, he wound up the machinery. Then, with a little chuckle of satisfaction, he swung the mirror back into its place, and gathering up his tools slowly disappeared into the shaft.

Aylmer advanced into the room as Mr. Willy's head went down out of sight, and though he did not dare to peer into the pit, he could hear the engineer moving in it like a rabbit in its hole. He realised the ingenuity of the hellish device at once. At two o'clock in the morning, when in the ordinary course of events he would have been peacefully sleeping, the mirror would swing noiselessly aside and the heavy javelins would be discharged at his defenceless form. His luck was stupendous, for

had he not actually seen the preparations no power on earth could have prevented his death.

It was a new idea to think that Mr. Willy, and possibly also Mr. Bullo, were present superintending the progress of their experiment in person, and it was not a pleasant one. For aught he knew his every action was being scrutinised, his every precaution noted and provided for. Still, there was but a day and a-half more to be endured, and he was warned against what he expected would prove to be the greatest peril of the night. The afternoon passed entirely without incident. He did not go into any of the other rooms until eight, when a card on the clock in the hall informed him that dinner was served in a room upon the first floor.

He found the apartment without difficulty, a handsome panelled place with a ceiling of oaken beams. It was the finest room he had yet seen in Lever Lodge, a kind of studio one might have supposed, or perhaps designed for the game of billiards. A small round table was spread with cold viands, and he sat down to it with appetite. He wondered if Mr. Bullo had arranged any pleasantry with the table furniture. So far all his meals had been the scene of some small and harmless mechanical joke. Accordingly when a large willow-pattern dish ran away with a handsome silver tablespoon, he laughed merrily and appreciated to the full this practical illustration of the nursery rhyme. It was, he thought, a kindly humour of Mr. Bullo's, and he laughed again to find himself playing the part of the Little Dog in the childish drama. His amusement was short-lived. The chair which he was occupying was one of those "study chairs" in which the seat is supported by a screw which allows it to revolve at the pleasure of the occupant. He had tried it carefully before sitting in it, and had examined it all over for something suspicious, finding nothing in it that was untoward.

As he was reaching over the table for a cigarette he found himself wrenched suddenly round, and spinning with inconceivable rapidity, the chair rushed up towards the ceiling. The unexpectedness of the whole thing paralysed his forces, and his head was within a foot of a big beam and in a second more would have collided violently with it, when he leapt from the chair and fell. He was thrown with tremendous force full on to the table, completely smashing the woodwork, and he sank, stunned and giddy, among the *débris* of the dinner, and bleeding from half-a-dozen cuts.

He made desperate efforts to keep a clear brain, but it was impossible, and in a few seconds, he entirely lost consciousness.

IT was hours afterwards when his senses came back to him, and, full of pain, he crawled away from the wreck around. His watch showed him that it was three o'clock in the morning, so that he must have been lying motionless where he had fallen for some six hours. Every bone in his body made protest as he moved. The wounds upon his hands throbbed painfully, and the burn upon his shoulder began to trouble him again. At all costs he felt that he must sleep, and, desperate of consequences, he sought his bedroom. When he entered, he saw that the mirror was hanging out from the wall and that the tubes upon the disc were empty. He turned at once to the bed and found, as he had expected, that the darts had been fired. Three of them had penetrated deep into the pillow, and a fourth was buried in the mattress and had only been stopped by the iron of the bedstead beneath.

He was in too parlous a state both of mind and body to care much what happened, and throwing himself upon the end of the bed, he sank into a heavy stupor, in which even the fear of that fearful house could find no part.

The Last Day.

ONCE more the morning came with all its summer splendour, and once more it found Aylmer more hopeful than he had been the night before. He noticed, nevertheless, that his hands shook very much, and he started at every trivial sound. He also found that he had a curious disinclination, a physical disinclination, to touch anything. His hand, stretched out to grasp the bed-rail or a chair, drew itself back without any order from his brain.

In going through the hall on his way to breakfast, he found a letter in the box upon the front door. It was an ordinary letter from the outside world, and he had never been so pleased with a postmark in his life before. It was addressed to "Aylmer Facinorious," and was in the handwriting of Mr. Bullo. It ran:

My Dear Facinorious,

Only one day remains to you, and at twelve o'clock to-night I hope to hand you a little cheque that we know of. Till then be brave, and believe me I have no more sincere wish than that you will be perfectly successful. I must, however, warn you that—as you will no doubt expect—this last day will be the time of greatest trial, of most imminent danger. Also, if you will allow me to give you a hint, I would advise you not to stay too long in any one place.

Bullo.

After breakfast Aylmer was afforded the opportunity of a walk in the garden, and then, as the door in the wall closed on him, began the last terrible hours of the ordeal.

After the plain warning of the letter he did not dare to remain in the breakfast-room, and yet to move about seemed almost equally foolhardy.

It was then that all his confidence finally left him, and he could call no manhood into his brain. He felt that all his former escapes had been vain, that the last act in the drama was at hand, and that the very walls would fall in upon him and crush him rather than let him escape.

His face began to change quickly as the overmastering horror of his position left his brain and went for the first time into his blood. He crept about the house like a hunted creature, tapping the walls and doors with tremulous crooked fingers and laughing softly to himself. A sick thirst began to sand his throat, and his eyes to lose their human look. The letter had utterly unmanned him. With the suddenness of a blow, the terrible strain of the last two days had now its swift effect. He became a piteous, timid thing but little resembling a man as he stole softly round the house. Deep furrows showed themselves in his grey face, his lips scrabbled meaninglessly.

As the hours went on he moved faster and faster, finding it impossible to remain still for a moment. Ever and again he would howl like an animal and beat upon the walls, careless of results. Nothing whatever happened. No single occurrence broke the monotony of fear. About eleven o'clock, when he knew that his trial would last but another hour, his sanity left him. He felt sure that he had but a few minutes to live, that some swift secret stroke would destroy him before midnight.

He ran from lighted room to lighted room, as if something were pursuing him, whimpering as he ran. Mr. Bullo faded from his mind, and he only knew that he was afraid.

Illustration:

He ran from lighted room to lighted room.

THE millionaire had indeed inflicted his last and most fearful horror. There were no more traps in the house, the machinery was all out of gear and the dynamo in the engine-house was stopped and cold. The place was safe for a little child to ramble in, but fear had come to it more surely and completely than before.

When Mr. Bullo and Mr. Willy opened the front door at midnight, they found Aylmer lying motionless upon the floor of the hall.

* * * * *

THUS ends the tale told me by the young gentleman in the house upon the moor, but as the acquaintance begun in so casual a manner has since ripened into a firm friendship, it needs that I say another word or two. Aylmer stayed another fortnight in the lonely house, until his nerves had recovered tone, and Audrey, who was staying at Princes Town—I found her to be the dearest girl—visited him every day. At the end of that time they were married, and both myself and my collaborateur were invited to the wedding, which was a pleasing function. When Aylmer's rich relations found that he had twenty thousand pounds, many of them died and left him large sums, so that he is now very rich indeed. The failure of a famous bank unfortunately deprived Mr. Bullo of his vast wealth. Hearing of this, Aylmer very kindly offered him the position of gatekeeper at Compton, his country house in Hertfordshire. Bullo gladly accepted, and his mechanical pig George, which can sing a comic song in the broadest Hertfordshire, is extremely popular with all the countryside, and a never-failing draw at the village penny readings. Bullo is never tired of relating how when the Prince was shooting in the neighbourhood he asked to see George, the mechanical pig, and expressed himself as pleased with the merry toy.

Of Mr. Willy I can say nothing that is good. He has a small competence, and lives in Bristol, where he spends all his time in the society of a fair florist, who is addicted to the vice of gambling. I do not wish to speak of him.

