

The Fantastic Horror of the Cat in the Bag

THE Great North Road wound away like a flat, steel-grey ribbon. Up it, with the sun and wind behind them, two black specks moved swiftly. To the yokel in charge of the hay-wagon they were only two of 'they dratted motor-cyclists,' as they barked and zoomed past him in rapid succession. A little farther on, a family man, driving delicately with a two-seater side-car, grinned as the sharp rattle of the o.h.v. Norton was succeeded by the feline shriek of an angry Scott Flying-Squirrel. He, too, in bachelor days, had taken a side in that perennial feud. He sighed regretfully as he watched the racing machines dwindle away northwards.

At that abominable and unexpected S-bend across the bridge above Hatfield, the Norton man, in the pride of his heart, turned to wave a defiant hand at his pursuer. In that second, the enormous bulk of a loaded charabanc loomed down upon him from the bridgehead. He wrenched himself away from it in a fierce wobble, and the Scott, cornering melodramatically, with left and right foot-rests alternately skimming the tarmac, gained a few triumphant yards. The Norton leapt forward with wide-open throttle. A party of children, seized with sudden panic, rushed helter-skelter across the road. The Scott lurched through them in drunken swerves. The road was clear, and the chase settled down once more.

It is not known why motorists, who sing the joys of the open road, spend so much petrol every week-end grinding their way to Southend and Brighton and Margate, in the stench of each other's exhausts, one hand on the horn and one foot on the brake, their eyes starting from their orbits in the nerve-racking search for cops, corners, blind turnings, and cross-road suicides. They ride in a baffled fury, hating each other. They arrive with

shattered nerves and fight for parking places. They return, blinded by the headlights of fresh arrivals, whom they hate even worse than they hate each other. And all the time the Great North Road winds away like a long, flat, steel-grey ribbon—a surface like a race-track, without traps, without hedges, without side-roads, and without traffic. True, it leads to nowhere in particular; but, after all, one pub is very much like another.

The tarmac reeled away, mile after mile. The sharp turn to the right at Baldock, the involute intricacies of Biggleswade, with its multiplication of sign-posts, gave temporary check, but brought the pursuer no nearer. Through Tempsford at full speed, with bellowing horn and exhaust, then, screaming like a hurricane past the R.A.C. post where the road forks in from Bedford. The Norton rider again glanced back; the Scott rider again sounded his horn ferociously. Flat as a chessboard, dyke and field revolved about the horizon.

The constable at Eaton Socon was by no means an anti-motor fiend. In fact, he had just alighted from his push-bike to pass the time of day with the A.A. man on point duty at the cross-roads. But he was just and God-fearing. The sight of two maniacs careering at seventy miles an hour into his protectorate was more than he could be expected to countenance—the more, that the local magistrate happened to be passing at that very moment in a pony-trap. He advanced to the middle of the road, spreading his arms in a majestic manner. The Norton rider looked, saw the road beyond complicated by the pony-trap and a traction-engine, and resigned himself to the inevitable. He flung the throttle-lever back, stamped on his squealing brakes, and skidded to a standstill. The Scott, having had notice, came up mincingly, with a voice like a pleased kitten.

‘Now, then,’ said the constable, in a tone of reproof, ‘ain’t you got no more sense than to come drivin’ into the town at a ‘undred mile an hour. This ain’t Brooklands, you know. I never see anything like it.’ ‘Ave to take your names and numbers, if *you* please. You’ll bear witness, Mr Nadgett, as they was doin’ over eighty.’

The A.A. man, after a swift glance over the two sets of handle-bars to assure himself that the black sheep were not of his flock, said, with an air of impartial accuracy, ‘About sixty-six and a half, I should say, if you was to ask me in court.’

‘Your lordship will excuse me,’ he said firmly, ‘but your lordship’s face is all over charcoal.’

‘Black but comely,’ said Lord Peter, ‘but I submit to your reproof. How clever we’ve all been. How topping everything is. How rich you are going to be. How late it is and how hungry I am. Yes, Bunter, I will wash my face. Is there anything else I can do for anybody while I feel in the mood?’

‘If your lordship would be so kind,’ said Mr Bunter, producing a small paper from his pocket, ‘I should be grateful if you could favour me with a South African quadruped in six letters, beginning with Q.’

NOTE.—The solution of the cross-word will be found at the end of the book.

On the centre of the library table lay a huge and venerable Bible—reverend in age and rooled leather binding. Lord Peter's hands caressed it, for a noble old book was like a song to his soul. Sobered by its beauty, they turned the yellow pages over:

'In the clefts of the rocks, in the secret places of the stairs.'

'Miss Marryat,' said his lordship, 'if your Uncle's will is not concealed in the staircase, then—well, all I can say is, he's played a rotten trick on us,' he concluded lamely.

'Shall we try the main staircase, or the little one up to the porch?'

'Oh, the main one, I think. I hope it won't mean pulling it down. No. Somebody would have noticed if Uncle Meleager had done anything drastic in that way. It's probably quite a simple hiding-place. Wait a minute. Let's ask the housekeeper.'

Mrs Meakers was called, and perfectly remembered that about nine months previously Mr Finch had pointed out to her a 'kind of a crack like' on the under surface of the staircase, and had had a man in to fill it up. Certainly, she could point out the exact place. There was the mark of the plaster filling quite clear.

'Hurray!' cried Lord Peter. 'Bunter—a chisel or something. Uncle Meleager, Uncle Meleager, we've got you! Miss Marryat, I think yours should be the hand to strike the blow. It's your staircase, you know—at least, if we find the will, so if any destruction has to be done it's up to you.'

Breathless they stood round, while with a few blows the new plaster flaked off, disclosing a wide chink in the stonework. Hannah Marryat flung down hammer and chisel and groped in the gap.

'There's something,' she gasped. 'Lift me up; I can't reach. Oh, it is! it is! it is! And she withdrew her hand, grasping a long, sealed envelope, bearing the superscription:

Positively the LAST Will and Testament of Meleager Finch.

Miss Marryat gave a yodel of joy and flung her arms round Lord Peter's neck.

Mary executed a joy-dance. 'I'll tell the world,' she proclaimed.

'Come and tell mother!' cried Miss Marryat.

Mr Bunter interposed,

'Look here, you blighter,' said the Scott man indignantly to the Norton man, 'why the hell couldn't you stop when you heard me hoot? I've been chasing you with your beastly bag nearly thirty miles. Why can't you look after your own rotten luggage?'

He indicated a small, stout bag, tied with string to his own carrier.

'That?' said the Norton man, with scorn. 'What do you mean? It's not mine. Never saw it in my life.'

This bare-faced denial threatened to render the Scott rider speechless.

'Of all the—' he gasped. 'Why, you crimson idiot, I saw it fall off, just the other side of Hatfield. I yelled and blew like fury. I suppose that overhead gear of yours makes so much noise you can't hear anything else. I take the trouble to pick the thing up, and go after you, and all you do is to race off like a lunatic and run me into a cop. Far lot of thanks one gets for trying to be decent to fools on the road.'

'That ain't neither here nor there,' said the policeman. 'Your licence, please, sir.'

'Here you are,' said the Scott man, ferociously flapping out his pocket-book. 'My name's Walters, and it's the last time I'll try to do anybody a good turn, you can lay your shirt.'

'Walters,' said the constable, entering the particulars laboriously in his notebook, 'and Simpkins. You'll ave your summonses in doo course. It'll be for about a week 'ence, on Monday or thereabouts, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Another forty bob gone west,' growled Mr Simpkins, toying with his throttle. 'Oh, well, can't be helped, I suppose.'

'Forty bob?' snorted the constable. 'What do *you* think? Furious driving to the common danger, that's wot it is. You'll be lucky to get off with five quid apiece.'

'Oh, blast!' said the other, stamping furiously on the kick-starter. The engine roared into life, but Mr Walters dexterously swung his machine across the Norton's path.

'Oh, no, you don't,' he said viciously. 'You jolly well take your bleeding bag, and no nonsense. I tell you, I *saw* it fall off.'

'Now, no language,' began the constable, when he suddenly became aware that the A.A. man was staring in a very odd manner at the bag and making signs to him.

“Ullo,” he demanded, “wot’s the matter with the—bleedin’ bag, did you say? ‘Ere, I’d like to ‘ave a look at that ‘ere bag, sir, if you don’t mind.”

‘It’s nothing to do with me,’ said Mr Walters, handing it over. ‘I saw it fall off and—’ His voice died away in his throat, and his eyes became fixed upon one corner of the bag, where something damp and horrible was seeping darkly through.

‘Did you notice this ‘ere corner when you picked it up?’ asked the constable. He prodded it gingerly and looked at his fingers.

‘I don’t know—no—not particularly,’ stammered Walters. ‘I didn’t notice anything. I—I expect it burst when it hit the road.’

The constable probed the split seam in silence, and then turned hurriedly round to wave away a couple of young women who had stopped to stare. The A.A. man peered curiously, and then started back with a sensation of sickness.

‘Ow, Gawd!’ he gasped. ‘It’s curly—it’s a woman’s.’

‘It’s not me,’ screamed Simpkins. ‘I swear to heaven it’s not mine. This man’s trying to put it across me.’

‘Me?’ gasped Walters. ‘Me? Why, you filthy, murdering brute, I tell you I saw it fall off your carrier. No wonder you blinded off when you saw me coming. Arrest him, constable. Take him away to prison—’

‘Hullo, officer!’ said a voice behind them. ‘What’s all the excitement? You haven’t seen a motor-cyclist go by with a little bag on his carrier, I suppose?’

A big open car with an unnaturally long bonnet had slipped up to them, silent as an owl. The whole agitated party with one accord turned upon the driver.

‘Would this be it, sir?’

The motorist pushed off his goggles, disclosing a long, narrow nose and a pair of rather cynical-looking grey eyes.

‘It looks rather—’ he began; and then, catching sight of the horrid relic protruding from one corner, ‘In God’s name,’ he enquired, ‘what’s that?’

‘That’s what we’d like to know, sir,’ said the constable grimly.

‘H’m,’ said the motorist, ‘I seem to have chosen an uncommonly suitable moment for enquirin’ after my bag. Tactless. To say now that it is not my bag is simple, though in no way convincing. As a matter of fact, it

Uncle Meleager says, we must “look a little farther back than that.” Here you are. Now, then.’

‘But it doesn’t say what chapter.’

‘So it doesn’t. I mean, nor it does.’

‘And, anyhow, all the chapters are too short.’

‘Damn! Oh! Here, suppose we just count right on from the beginning—one, two, three—’

‘Seventeen in chapter one, eighteen, nineteen—this must be it.’

Two fair heads and one dark one peered excitedly at the small print, Bunter hovering decorously on the outskirts.

‘O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the steep place.’

‘Oh, dear!’ said Mary, disappointed, ‘that does sound rather hopeless. Are you sure you’ve counted right? It might mean anything.’

Lord Peter scratched his head.

‘This is a bit of a blow,’ he said. ‘I don’t like Uncle Meleager half as much as I did. Old beast!’

‘After all our work!’ moaned Mary.

‘It must be right,’ cried Miss Maryat. ‘Perhaps there’s some kind of an anagram in it. We can’t give up now!’

‘Bravo!’ said Lord Peter. ‘That’s the spirit. ‘Fraid we’re in for another outburst of frivolity, Miss Maryat.’

‘Well, it’s been great fun,’ said Hannah Maryat.

‘If you will excuse me,’ began the deferential voice of Bunter.

‘I’d forgotten you, Bunter,’ said his lordship. ‘Of course you can put us right—you always can. Where have we gone wrong?’

‘I was about to observe, my lord, that the words you mention do not appear to agree with my recollection of the passage in question. In my mother’s Bible, my lord, it ran, I fancy, somewhat differently.’

Lord Peter closed the volume and looked at the back of it.

‘Naturally,’ he said, ‘you are right again, of course. This is a Revised Version. It’s your fault, Miss Maryat. You would have a Revised Version. But can we imagine Uncle Meleager with one? No. Bring me Uncle Meleager’s Bible.’

‘Come and look in the library,’ cried Miss Maryat, snatching him by the hand and running. ‘Don’t be so dreadfully calm.’

The most remarkable part of the search—or so Lord Peter thought—was its effect on Miss Maryat. At first she hovered disconsolately on the margin, aching with wounded dignity, yet ashamed to dissociate herself from people who were toiling so hard and so cheerfully in her cause.

‘I think that’s so-and-so,’ Mary would say hopefully.

And her brother would reply enthusiastically, ‘Holed it in one, old lady. Good for you! We’ve got it this time, Miss Maryat’—and explain it.

And Hannah Maryat would say with a snort:

‘That’s just the childish kind of joke Uncle Meleager would make.’

Gradually, however, the fascination of seeing the squares fit together caught her, and, when the first word appeared which showed that the searchers were definitely on the right track, she lay down flat on the floor and peered over Lord Peter’s shoulder as he grovelled below, writing letters in charcoal, rubbing them out with his handkerchief and mopping his heated face, till the Moor of Venice had nothing on him in the matter of blackness. Once, half scornfully, half timidly, she made a suggestion; twice, she made a suggestion; the third time she had an inspiration. The next minute she was down in the *mêlée*, crawling over the tiles flushed and excited, wiping important letters out with her knees as fast as Peter could write them in, poring over the pages of Roget, her eyes gleaming under her tumbled black fringe.

Hurried meals of cold meat and tea sustained the exhausted party, and towards sunset Peter, with a shout of triumph, added the last letter to the square.

They crawled out and looked at it.

‘All the words can’t be clues,’ said Mary. ‘I think it must be just those four.’

‘Yes, undoubtedly. It’s quite clear. We’ve only got to look it up. Where’s a Bible?’

Miss Maryat hunted it out from the pile of reference books. ‘But that isn’t the name of a Bible book,’ she said. ‘It’s those things they have at evening service.’

‘That’s all you know,’ said Lord Peter. ‘I was brought up religious, I was. It’s Vulgate, that’s what that is. You’re quite right, of course, but, as

is not mine, and I may say that, if it had been, I should not have been at any pains to pursue it.’

The constable scratched his head.

‘Both these gentlemen—’ he began.

The two cyclists burst into simultaneous and heated disclaimers. By this time a small crowd had collected, which the A.A. scout helpfully tried to shoo away.

‘You’ll all ‘ave to come with me to the station,’ said the harassed constable. ‘Can’t stand ‘ere ‘oldin’ up the traffic. No tricks, now. You wheel them bikes, and I’ll come in the car with you, sir.’

‘But supposing I was to let her rip and kidnap you,’ said the motorist, with a grin. ‘Where’d you be? Here,’ he added, turning to the A.A. man, ‘can you handle this ouft?’

‘You bet,’ said the scout, his eye running lovingly over the long sweep of the exhaust and the rakish lines of the car.

‘Right. Hop in. Now, officer, you can toddle along with the other suspects and keep an eye on them. Wonderful head I’ve got for detail. By the way, that foot-brake’s on the fierce side. Don’t bully it, or you’ll surprise yourself.’

The lock of the bag was forced at the police-station in the midst of an excitement unparalleled in the calm annals of Earton Socoon, and the dreadful contents laid reverently upon a table. Beyond a quantity of cheese-cloth in which they had been wrapped, there was nothing to supply any clue to the mystery.

‘Now,’ said the superintendent, ‘what do you gentlemen know about this?’

‘Nothing whatever,’ said Mr Simpkins, with a ghastly countenance, ‘except that this man tried to palm it off on me.’

‘I saw it fall off this man’s carrier just the other side of Hatfield,’ repeated Mr Walters firmly, ‘and I rode after him for thirty miles trying to stop him. That’s all I know about it, and I wish to God I’d never touched the beastly thing.’

‘Nor do I know anything about it personally,’ said the car-owner, ‘but I fancy I know what it is.’

‘What’s that?’ asked the superintendent sharply.

'I rather imagine it's the head of the Finsbury Park murder—though, mind you, that's only a guess.'

'That's just what I've been thinking myself,' agreed the superintendent, glancing at a daily paper which lay on his desk, its headlines lurid with the details of that very horrid crime, 'and, if so, you are to be congratulated, constable, on a very important capture.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the gratified officer, saluting.

'Now I'd better take all your statements,' said the superintendent. 'No, no; I'll hear the constable first. Yes, Briggs?'

The constable, the A.A. man, and the two motor-cyclists having given their versions of the story, the superintendent turned to the motorist.

'And what have you got to say about it?' he enquired. 'First of all, your name and address.'

The other produced a card, which the superintendent copied out and returned to him respectfully.

'A bag of mine, containing some valuable jewellery, was stolen from my car yesterday, in Piccadilly,' began the motorist. 'It is very much like this, but has a cipher lock. I made enquiries through Scotland Yard, and was informed to-day that a bag of precisely similar appearance had been cloak-roomed yesterday afternoon at Paddington, main line. I hurried round there, and was told by the clerk that just before the police warning came through the bag had been claimed by a man in motor-cycling kit. A porter said he saw the man leave the station, and a loiterer observed him riding off on a motor-bicycle. That was about an hour before. It seemed pretty hopeless, as, of course, nobody had noticed even the make of the bike, let alone the number. Fortunately, however, there was a smart little girl. The smart little girl had been dawdling round outside the station, and had heard a motor-cyclist ask a taxi-driver the quickest route to Finchley. I left the police hunting for the taxi-driver, and started off, and in Finchley I found an intelligent boy-scout. He had seen a motor-cyclist with a bag on the carrier, and had waved and shouted to him that the strap was loose. The cyclist had got off and tightened the strap, and gone straight on up the road towards Chipping Barnet. The boy hadn't been near enough to identify the machine—the only thing he knew for certain was that it wasn't a Douglas, his brother having one of that sort. At Barnet I got an odd little story of a man in a motor-coat who had staggered into a pub

7.X.

We heap up many with toil and trouble,
And find that the whole of our gain is a bubble.

12.X.

Add it among the hidden things—
A fishy tale to light it brings.

I.XI.

'Lions,' said a Gallic critic, 'are not these.'
Benevolent souls—they'd make your heart's blood freeze.

II.XI.

An epithet for husky fellows,
That strand, all robed in greens and yellows.

I.XII.

Whole without holes behold me here,
My meaning should be wholly clear.

IO.XII.

Running all around, never setting foot to floor,
if there isn't one in this room, there may be one next door.

I.XIII.

Ye gods! think also of that goddess' name
Whose might two hours on end the mob proclaim.

4.XIII.

The Priest uplifts his voice on high,
The choristers make their reply.

I4.XIII.

When you've guessed it, with one voice
You'll say it was a golden choice.

I.XIV.

Shall learning die amid a war's alarms?
I, at my birth, was clasped in iron arms.

IO.XIV.

At sunset see the labourer now
Loose all his oxen from the plough.

I.XV.

Without a miracle it cannot be—
At this point, Solver, bid him pray for thee!

II.XV.

Two thousand years ago and more
(just as we do to-day),
The Romans saw these distant lights—
But, oh! how hard the way!

- I.IV. Lo! at a glance
The Spanish gipsy and her dance.
- 10.IV. Bring me skin and a needle or a stick—
A needle does it slowly, a stick does it quick.
- I.V. It was a brazen business when
King Phalaris made these for men.
- II.V. This king (of whom not much is known),
By Heaven's mercy was o'erthrown.
- 2.VI. 'Bid [Greek: 'on kai mé 'on] farewell? Nay, in this
The sterner Roman stands by that which is.
- 7.VI. This the termination is
Of many minds' activities.
- 12.VI. I mingle on Norwegian shore,
With ebbing water's backward roar.
- 6.VII. I stand, a ladder to renown,
Set 'twixt the stars and Milan town.
- I.VIII. Highest and lowliest both to me lay claim,
The little hyssop and the king of fame.
- 'That makes that point about the squares clear,' said Mary.
'I think it's even more significant,' said her brother.
- 9.VIII. This sensible old man refused to tread
The path to Hades in a youngster's stead.
- 6.IX. Long since, at Nature's call, they let it drop,
Thoughtlessly thoughtful for our next year's crop.
- 2.X. To smallest words great speakers greatness gives;
Here Rome propounded her alternative.

with a ghastly white face and drunk two double brandies and gone out and ridden off furiously. Number?—of course not. The barmaid told me. *She* didn't notice the number. After that it was a tale of furious driving all along the road. After Hatfield, I got the story of a road-race. And here we are.'

'It seems to me, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'that the furious driving can't have been all on one side.'

'I admit it,' said the other, 'though I do plead in extenuation that I spared the women and children and hit up the miles in the wide, open spaces. The point at the moment is—'

'Well, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'I've got your story, and, if it's all right, it can be verified by enquiry at Paddington and Finchley and so on. Now, as for these two gentlemen—'

'It's perfectly obvious,' broke in Mr Walters, 'the bag dropped off this man's carrier, and, when he saw me coming after him with it, he thought it was a good opportunity to saddle me with the cursed thing. Nothing could be clearer.'

'It's a lie,' said Mr Simpkins. 'Here's this fellow has got hold of the bag—I don't say how, but I can guess—and he has the bright idea of shoving the blame on me. It's easy enough to *say* a thing's fallen off a man's carrier. Where's the proof? Where's the strap? If his story's true, you'd find the broken strap on my bus. The bag *was* on *his* machine—tied on, tight.'

'Yes, with string,' retorted the other. 'If I'd gone and murdered someone and run off with their head, do you think I'd be such an ass as to tie it on with a bit of twopenny twine? The strap's worked loose and fallen off on the road somewhere; that's what's happened to that.'

'Well, look here,' said the man addressed as 'my lord,' 'I've got an idea for what it's worth. Suppose, superintendent, you turn out as many of your men as you think adequate to keep an eye on three desperate criminals, and we all tool down to Hatfield together. I can take two in my bus at a pinch, and no doubt you have a police car. If this thing *did* fall off the carrier, somebody beside Mr Walters may have seen it fall.'

'They didn't,' said Mr Simpkins.

'There wasn't a soul,' said Mr Walters, 'but how do *you* know there wasn't, eh? I thought you didn't know anything about it.'

'I mean, it didn't fall off, so nobody *could* have seen it,' gasped the other.

'Well, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'I'm inclined to accept your suggestion, as it gives us a chance of enquiring into your story at the same time. Mind you, I'm not saying I doubt it, you being who you are. I've read about some of your detective work, my lord, and very smart I considered it. But, still, it wouldn't be my duty not to get corroborative evidence if possible.'

'Good egg! Quite right,' said his lordship. 'Forward the light brigade. We can do it easily in—that is to say, at the legal rate of progress it needn't take us much over an hour and a half.'

About three-quarters of an hour later, the racing car and the police car loped quietly side by side into Hatfield. Henceforward, the four-seater, in which Walters and Simpkins sat glaring at each other, took the lead, and presently Walters waved his hand and both cars came to a stop.

'It was just about here, as near as I can remember, that it fell off,' he said. 'Of course, there's no trace of it now.'

'You're quite sure as there wasn't a strap fell off with it?' suggested the superintendent, 'because, you see, there must 'a' been something holding it on.'

'Of course there wasn't a strap,' said Simpkins, white with passion. 'You haven't any business to ask him leading questions like that.'

'Wait a minute,' said Walters slowly. 'No, there was no strap. But I've got a sort of a recollection of seeing something on the road about a quarter of a mile farther up.'

'It's a lie!' screamed Simpkins. 'He's inventing it.'

'Just about where we passed that man with the side-car a minute or two ago,' said his lordship. 'I told you we ought to have stopped and asked if we could help him, superintendent. Courtesy of the road, you know, and all that.'

'He couldn't have told us anything,' said the superintendent. 'He'd probably only just stopped.'

'I'm not so sure,' said the other. 'Didn't you notice what he was doing? Oh, dear, dear, where were your eyes? Hullo! here he comes.'

X.14. And so you dine with Borgia? Let me lend You this as a precaution, my poor friend.

I.15. Friendship carried to excess Got him in a horrid mess.

XI.15. Smooth and elastic and, I guess, The dearest treasure you possess.

DOWN.

I.1. If step by step the Steppes you wander through Many of those in this, of these in those you'll view.

'Bunter,' said Lord Peter, 'bring me a whisky-and-soda!'

II.1. If me without my head you do, Then generously my head renew, Or put it to my hinder end— Your cheer it shall nor mar nor mend.

I.11. Quietly, quietly, 'twixt edge and edge, Do this unto the thin end of the wedge.

IO.11. 'Something that hath a reference to my state?' Just as you like, it shall be written straight.

I.111. When all is read, then give the world its due, And never need the world read this of you.

'That's a comfort,' said Lady Mary. 'It shows we're on the right lines.'

4.III. Sing Nunc Dimittis and Magnificat— But look a little farther back than that.

I4.III. Here in brief epitome Attribute of royalty.