

The Story of the Club-Footed Grocer

Round the Fire - VI

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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VI.—THE STORY OF THE CLUB-FOOTED GROCER.


BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

MY uncle, Mr. Stephen Maple, had been at the same time the most successful and the least respectable of our family, so that we hardly knew whether to take credit for his wealth or to feel ashamed of his position. He had, as a matter of fact, established a large grocery in Stepcy which did a curious mixed business, not always, as we had heard, of a very savoury character, with the riverside and scaffolding people. He was ship's chandler, provision merchant, and, if rumour spoke truly, some other things as well. Such a trade, however lucrative, had its drawbacks, as was evident when, after twenty years of prosperity, he was savagely assaulted by one of his customers and left for dead, with three smashed ribs and a broken leg, which mended so badly that it remained for ever three inches shorter than the other. This incident seemed, not naturally, to disgust him with his surroundings, for, after the trial, in which his assailant was condemned to fifteen years of penal servitude, he retired from his business and settled in a lonely part of the North of England, whence, until that morning, we had never once heard of him—not even upon the death of my father, who was his only brother. My mother read his letter aloud to me:

"If your son is with you, Ellen, and if he is as stout a lad as he promised for when last I heard from you, then send him up to me by the first train after this comes to hand. He will find that to serve me will pay him better than the engineering, and if I pass away (though, thank God, there is no reason to complain as to my health) you will see that I have not forgotten my brother's son. Congleton is the station, and then a drive of four miles to Greta House, where I am now living. I will send a trap to meet the seven o'clock train, for it is the only one which stops here. Mind that you send him, Ellen, for I have very strong reasons for wishing him to be with me. Let bygones be bygones if there has been anything between us in the past. If you should fail me now you will live to regret it."

We were seated at either side of the breakfast table, looking blankly at each other and wondering what this might mean, when there came a ring at the bell, and the maid walked in with a telegram. It was from Uncle Stephen.

"On no account let John get out at Congleton," said the message. "He will find trap waiting seven o'clock evening train Stepping Bridge, one station further down line. Let him drive not me, but Garth Farm House—six miles. There will receive instructions. Do not fail; only you to look to."



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"That is true enough," said my mother. "As far as I know, your uncle has not a friend in the world, nor has he ever deserved one. He has always been a hard man in his dealings, and he held back his money from your father at a time when a few pounds would have saved him from ruin. Why should I send my only son to serve him now?"

But my own inclinations were all for the adventure.

"If I have him for a friend, he can help me in my profession," I argued, taking my mother upon her weakest side.

"I have never known him to help any one yet," said she, bitterly. "And why all this mystery about getting out at a distant station and driving

to the wrong address? He has got himself into some trouble and he wishes us to get him out of it. When he has used us he will throw us aside as he has done before. Your father might have been living now if he had only helped him."

But at last my arguments prevailed, for, as I pointed out, we had much to gain and little to lose, and why should we, the poorest members of a family, go out of our way to offend the rich one?

My bag was packed and my cab at the door, when there came a second telegram.

"Good shooting. Let John bring gun. Remember Stedding Bridge, not Congleton." And so, with a gun-case added to my luggage and some surprise at my uncle's insistence, I started off upon my adventure.

The journey lies over the main Northern Railway as far as the station of Camfield, where one changes for the little branch line which winds over the fells.

In all England there is no harsher or more impressive scenery. For two hours I passed through desolate rolling plains, rising at places into low, stone-littered hills, with long, straight outcrops of jagged rock showing upon their surface.

Here and there little grey-roofed, grey-walled cottages huddled into villages, but for many miles at a time no house was visible nor any sign of life save the scattered sheep which wandered over the mountain sides.

It was a depressing country, and my heart grew heavier and heavier as I neared my journey's end, until at last the train pulled up at the little village of Stedding Bridge, where my uncle had told me to alight.

A single ramshackle trap, with a country lout to drive it, was waiting at the station.

"Is this Mr. Stephen Maple's?" I asked.

The fellow looked at me with eyes which were full of suspicion.

"What is your name?" he asked, speaking a dialect which I will not attempt to reproduce.

"John Maple."

"Anything to prove it?"

I half raised my hand, for my temper is none of the best, and then I reflected that the fellow was probably only carrying out the directions of

my uncle. For answer I pointed to my name printed upon my gun-case.

"Yes, yes, that is right. It's John Maple, sure enough!" said he, slowly spelling it out. "Get in, maister, for we have a bit of a drive before us."

The road, white and shining, like all the roads in that limestone country, ran in long sweeps over the fells, with low walls of loose stone upon either side of it.

The huge moors, mottled with sheep and with boulders, rolled away in gradually ascending curves to the misty sky-line. In one place a fall of the land gave a glimpse of a grey angle of distant sea.

Bleak and sad and stern were all my surroundings, and I felt, under their influence, that this curious mission of mine was a more serious thing than it had appeared when viewed from London.

This sudden call for help from an uncle whom I had never seen, and of whom I had heard little that was good, the urgency of it, his reference to my physical powers, the excuse by which he had ensured that I should bring a weapon, all hung together and pointed to some vague but sinister meaning.

Things which appeared to be impossible in Kensington became very probable upon these wild and isolated hillsides.

At last, oppressed with my own dark thoughts, I turned to my companion with the intention of asking some questions about my uncle, but the expression upon his face drove the idea from my head.

He was not looking at his old, unclipped chestnut horse, nor at the road along which he was driving, but his face was turned in my direction, and he was staring past me with an expression of curiosity and, as I thought, of apprehension.

He raised the whip to lash the horse, and then dropped it again, as if convinced that it was useless. At the same time, following the direction of his gaze, I saw what it was which had excited him.

A man was running across the moor. He ran clumsily, stumbling and slipping among the stones; but the road curved, and it was easy for him to cut us off.

As we came up to the spot for which he had been making, he scrambled over the stone wall and stood waiting, with the evening sun shining on his brown, clean-shaven face.

He was a burly fellow, and in bad condition, for he stood with his hand on his ribs, panting and blowing after his short run. As we drove up I saw the glint of earrings in his ears.

"Say, mate, where are you bound for?" he asked, in a rough but good-humoured fashion.

"Farmer Purcell's, at the Garth Farm," said the driver.

"Sorry to stop you," cried the other, standing aside; "I thought as I would hail you as you passed, for if so be as you had been going my way I should have made bold to ask you for a passage."

His excuse was an absurd one, since it was evident that our little trap was as full as it could be, but my driver did not seem disposed to argue. He drove on without a word, and, looking back, I could see the stranger sitting by the roadside and cramming tobacco into his pipe.

"A sailor," said I.

"Yes, maister. We're not more than a few miles from Morecambe Bay," the driver remarked.

"You seemed frightened of him," I observed.

"Did I?" said he, drily; and then, after a long pause, "Maybe I was." As to his reasons for fear, I could get nothing from him, and though I asked him many questions he was so stupid, or else so clever, that I could learn nothing from his replies. I observed, however, that from time to time he swept the moors with a troubled eye, but their huge brown expanse was unbroken by any moving figure. At last in a sort of cleft in the hills in front of us I saw a long, low-lying farm building, the centre of all those scattered flocks.

"Garth Farm," said my driver. "There is Farmer Purcell himself," he added, as a man strolled out of the porch and stood waiting for our arrival. He advanced as I descended from the trap, a hard, weather-worn fellow with light blue eyes, and hair and beard like sun-bleached grass.

"In his expression I read the same surly ill-will which I had already observed in my driver. Their malevolence could not be directed towards

a complete stranger like myself, and so I began to suspect that my uncle was no more popular on the north-country fells than he had been in Stepney Highway.

"You're to stay here until nightfall. That's Mr. Stephen Maple's wish," said he, curtly. "You can have some tea and bacon if you like. It's the best we can give you."

I was very hungry, and accepted the hospitality in spite of the churlish tone in which it was offered. The farmer's wife and his two daughters came into the sitting-room during the meal, and I was aware of a certain curiosity with which they regarded me.

It may have been that a young man was a rarity in this wilderness, or it may be that my attempts at conversation won their goodwill, but they all three showed a kindness in their manner. It was getting dark, so I remarked that it was time for me to be pushing on to Greta House.

"You've made up your mind to go, then?" said the older woman.

"Certainly. I have come all the way from London."

"There's no one hindering you from going back there."

"But I have come to see Mr. Maple, my uncle."

"Oh, well, no one can stop you if you want to go on," said the woman, and became silent as her husband entered the room.

With every fresh incident I felt that I was moving in an atmosphere of mystery and peril, and yet it was all so intangible and so vague that I could not guess where my danger lay.

I should have asked the farmer's wife point-blank, but her surly husband seemed to divine the sympathy which she felt for me, and never again left us together.

"It's time you were going, mister," said he at last, as his wife lit the lamp upon the table.

"Is the trap ready?"

"You'll need no trap. You'll walk," said he.

"How shall I know the way?"

"William will go with you."

William was the youth who had driven me up from the station. He was waiting at the door, and ho shouldered my gun-case and bag.

I stayed behind to thank the farmer for his hospitality, but he would have none of it.

"I ask no thanks from Mr. Stephen Maple nor any friend of his," said he, bluntly. "I am paid for what I do. If I was not paid I would not do it. Go your way, young man, and say no more." He turned rudely on his heel and re-entered his house, slamming the door behind him.

It was quite dark outside, with heavy black clouds drifting slowly across the sky. Once clear of the farm inclosure and out on the moor I should have been hopelessly lost if it had not been for my guide, who walked in front of me along narrow sheep-tracks? which were quite invisible to me.

Every now and then, without seeing anything, we heard the clumsy scuffling of the creatures in the darkness. At first my guide walked swiftly and carelessly, but gradually his pace slowed down, until at last he was going very slowly and stealthily, like one who walks light-footed amid imminent menace.

This vague, inexplicable sense of danger in the midst of the loneliness of that vast moor was more daunting than any evident peril could be, and I had begun to press him as to what it was that he feared, when suddenly he stopped and dragged me down among some gorse bushes which lined the path.

His tug at my coat was so strenuous and imperative that I realized that the danger was a pressing one, and in an instant I was squatting down beside him as still as the bushes which shadowed us.

It was so dark there that I could not even see the lad beside me.

It was a warm night, and a hot wind puffed in our faces. Suddenly in this wind there came something homely and familiar—the smell of burning tobacco.

And then a face, illuminated by the glowing bowl of a pipe, came floating towards us. The man was all in shadow, but just that one dim halo of light with the face which filled it, brighter below and shading away into darkness above, stood out against the universal blackness. A thin, hungry face, thickly freckled with yellow over the cheek bones, blue, watery eyes, an ill-nourished, light-coloured moustache, a peaked yachting cap— that was all that I saw. He passed

us, looking vacantly in front of him, and we heard the steps dying away along the path.

"Who was it?" I asked, as we rose to our feet.



"SAY, MATE, WHERE ARE YOU BOUND FOR?"

"I don't know."

The fellow's continual profession of ignorance made me angry.

"Why should you hide yourself, then?" I asked, sharply.

"Because Maister Maple told me. He said that I were to meet no one. If I met any one I should get no pay."

"You met that sailor on the road?"

"Yes, and I think he was one of them."

"One of whom?"

"One of the folk that have come on the fells. They are watchin' Greta House, and Maister Maple is afeard of them. That's why he wanted us to keep clear of them, and that's why I've been a-trying to dodge 'em."

Here was something definite at last. Some body of men were threatening my uncle. The sailor was one of them. The man with the peaked cap— probably a sailor also—was another. I bethought me of Stepney Highway and of the murderous assault made upon my uncle there. Things were fitting themselves into a connected shape in my mind when a light twinkled over the fell, and my guide informed me that it was Greta. The place lay in a dip among the moors, BO that one was very near it before one saw it. A short walk brought us up to the door.

I could see little of the building save that the lamp which shone through a small latticed window showed me dimly that it was both long and lofty. The low door under an overhanging lintel-was loosely fitted, and light was bursting out on each side of it. The inmates of this lonely house appeared to be keenly on their guard, for they had heard our footsteps, and we were challenged before we reached the door.

"Who is there?" cried a deep-booming voice, and urgently, "Who is it, I say? "

"It's me, Maister Maple. I have brought the gentleman."

There was a sharp click, and a small wooden I shutter flew open in the door. The gleam of a lantern shone upon us for a few seconds. Then the shutter closed again; with a great rasping of locks and clattering of bars, the door was opened, and I saw my uncle standing framed in that vivid yellow square cut out of the darkness.

He was a small, thick man, with a great rounded, bald head and one thin border of gingery curls.

It was a fine head, the head of a thinker, but his large white face was heavy and commonplace, with a broad, loose-lipped mouth and two hanging dewlaps on either side of it. His eyes were small and restless, and his light-coloured lashes were continually moving. My mother had said once that they reminded her of the legs of a woodlouse, and I saw at the first glance what she meant.

I heard also that in Stepney he had learned the language of his customers, and I blushed for our kinship as I listened to his villainous accent.

"So, nephew," said he, holding out his hand. "Come in, come in, man, quick, and don't leave the door open. Your mother said you were grown a big lad, and, my word, she 'as a right to say so. 'Ere's a 'alf-crown for you, William, and you can go back again. Put the things down. 'Ere, Enoch, take Mr. John's things, and see that 'is supper is on the table."

As my uncle, after fastening the door, turned to show me into the sitting- room, I became aware of his most striking peculiarity.

The injuries which he had received some years ago had, as I have already remarked, left one leg several inches shorter than the other. To atone for this he wore one of those enormous

wooden soles to his boots which are prescribed by surgeons in such cases. He walked without a limp, but his tread on the stone flooring made a curious clack-click, clack-click, as the wood and the leather alternated. Whenever he moved it



was to the rhythm of this singular castanets.

The great kitchen, with its huge fireplace and carved settle corners, showed that this dwelling was an oldtime farmhouse. On one side of the room a line of boxes stood all corded and packed.

The furniture was scant and plain, but on a trestle-table in the centre some supper, cold meat, bread, and a jug of beer was laid for me. An elderly manservant, as manifest a Cockney as his master, waited upon me, while my uncle, sitting in a corner, asked me many questions as to my mother and myself.

When my meal was finished he ordered his man Enoch to unpack my gun. I observed that two other guns, old rusted weapons, were leaning against the wall beside the window.

"It's the window I'm afraid of," said my uncle, in the deep, reverberant voice which contrasted oddly with his plump little figure. "The door's safe against anything short of dynamite, but the window's a terror. Hi! hi!" he yelled, "don't walk across the light! You can duck when you pass the lattice."

"For fear of being seen?" I asked.

"For fear of bein' shot, my lad. That's the trouble. Now, come an' sit beside me on the

trestle 'ere, and I'll tell you all about it, for I can see that you are the right sort and can be trusted."

His flattery was clumsy and halting, and it was evident that he was very eager to conciliate me. I sat down beside him, and he drew a folded paper from his pocket.

It was a Western Morning News, and the date was ten days before. The passage over which he pressed a long, black nail was concerned with the release from Dartmoor of a convict named Elias, whose term of sentence had been remitted on account of his defence of a warder who had been attacked in the quarries. The whole account was only a few lines long.

"Who is he, then?" I asked.

My uncle cocked his distorted foot into the air. "That's 'is mark!" said he. "'E was doin' time for that. Now 'e's out an' after me again."

"But why should he be after you?"

"Because 'e wants to kill me. Because 'e'll never rest, the worrying devil, until 'e 'as 'ad 'is revenge on me. It's this way, nephew! I've no secrets from you. 'E thinks I've wronged 'im. For argument's sake we'll suppose I 'ave wronged 'im. And now 'im and 'is friends are after me."

"Who are his friends?"

My uncle's boom sank suddenly to a frightened whisper. "Sailors!" said he. "I knew they would come when I saw that 'ere paper, and two days ago I looked through that window and three of them was standin' lookin' at the 'ouse. It was after that that I wrote to your mother. They've marked me down, and they're waitin' for 'im."

"But why not send for the police?"

My uncle's eyes avoided mine.

"Police are no use," said he. "It's you that can help me."

"What can I do?"

"I'll tell you. I'm going to move. That's what all these boxes are for. Everything will soon be packed and ready. I 'ave friends at Leeds, and I shall be safer there. Not safe, mind you, but safer. I start to-morrow evening, and if you will stand by me until then I will make it worth your while. There's only Enoch and me to do everything, but we shall 'ave it all ready, I promise you, by to-morrow evening. The cart will

be round then, and you and me and Enoch and the boy William can guard the things as far as Congleton station. Did you see anything of them on the fells?"

"Yes," said I; "a sailor stopped us on the way."

"Ah, I knew they were watching us. That was why I asked you to get out at the wrong station and to drive to Purcell's instead of comin' 'ere. We are blockaded—that's the word."

"And there was another," said I, "a man with a pipe."

"What was 'e like?"

"Thin face, freckles, a peaked—"

My uncle gave a hoarse scream.

"That's 'im! that's 'im! 'e's come! God be merciful to me, a sinner!" He went click-clacking about the room with his great foot like one distracted. There was something piteous and baby-like in that big bald head, and for the first time I felt a gush of pity for him.

"Come, uncle," said I, "you are living in a civilized land. There is a law that will bring these gentry to order. Let me drive over to the county police-station to-morrow morning and I'll soon set things right."

But he shook his head at me.

"'E's cunning and 'e's cruel," said he. "I can't draw a breath without thinking of him, cos 'e buckled up three of my ribs. 'E'll kill me this time, sure. There's only one chance. We must leave what we 'ave not packed, and we must be off first thing tomorrow mornin'. Great God, what's that!"

A tremendous knock upon the door had reverberated through the house and then another and another. An iron fist seemed to be beating upon it. My uncle collapsed into his chair. I seized a gun and ran to the door.

"Who's there?" I shouted.

There was no answer.

I opened the shutter and looked out.

No one was there.

And then suddenly I saw that a long slip of paper was protruding through the slit of the door. I held it to the light. In rude but vigorous handwriting the message ran:—

"Put them out on the doorstep and save your skin."

"What do they want?" I asked, as I read him the message.

"What they'll never 'ave! No, by the Lord, never!" he cried, with a fine burst of spirit.

"'Ere, Enoch! Enoch!"

The old fellow came running to the call.

"Enoch, I've been a good master to you all my life, and it's your turn now. Will you take a risk for me?"

I thought better of my uncle when I saw how readily the man consented. Whomever else he had wronged, this one at least seemed to love him.

"Put your cloak on and your 'at, Enoch, and out with you by the back door. You know the way across the moor to the Purcells'. Tell them that I must 'ave the cart first thing in the mornin', and that Purcell must come with the shepherd as well. We must get clear of this or we are done. First thing in the mornin', Enoch, and ten pound for the job. Keep the black cloak on and move slow, and they will never see you. We'll keep the 'ouse till you come back."

It was a job for a brave man to venture out into the vague and invisible dangers of the fell, but the old servant took it as the most ordinary



"THE PASSAGE WAS FULL OF STUBBORN SAILORS."

of messages. Picking his long, black cloak and his soft hat from the hook behind the door, he was ready on the instant. We extinguished the small lamp in the back passage, softly unbarred the back door, slipped him out, and barred it up again. Looking through the small hallwindow, I saw his black garments merge instantly into the night.

"It is but a few hours before the light comes, nephew," said my uncle, after he had tried all the bolts and bars. "You shall never regret this night's work. If we come through safely it will be the making of you. Stand by me till mornin', and I stand by you while there's

breath in my body. The cart will be 'ere by five. What isn't ready we can afford to leave be'ind. We've only to load up and make for the early train at Congleton."

"Will they let us pass?"

"In broad daylight they dare not stop us. There will be six of us, if they all come, and three guns. We can fight our way through. Where can they get guns, common, wandering seamen? A pistol or two at the most. If we can keep them out for a few hours we are safe. Enoch must be 'alfway to Purcell's by now."

"But what do these sailors want?" I repeated. "You say yourself that you wronged them."

A look of mulish obstinacy came over his large, white face.

"Don't ask questions, nephew, and just do what I ask you," said he. "Enoch won't come back 'E'll just bide there and come with the cart. 'Ark, what is that?"

A distant cry rang from out of the darkness, and then another one, short and sharp like the wail of the curlew.

"It's Enoch!" said my uncle, gripping my arm. "They're killin' poor old Enoch."

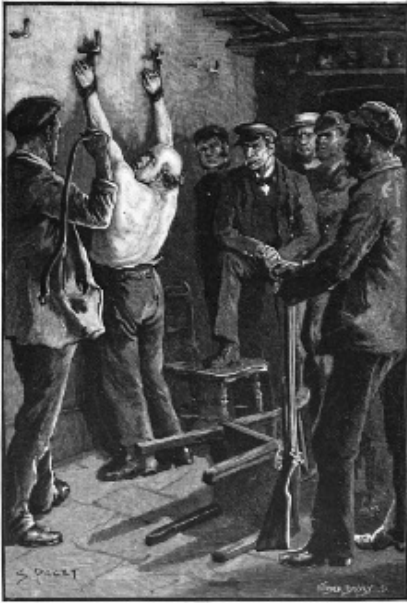
The cry came again, much nearer, and I heard the sound of hurrying steps and a shrill call for help.

"They are after 'im!" cried my uncle, rushing to the front door. He picked up the lantern and flashed it through the little shutter. Up the yellow funnel of light a man was running frantically, his head bowed and a black cloak fluttering behind him. The moor seemed to be alive with dim pursuers.

"The bolt! The bolt!" gasped my uncle. He pushed it back whilst I turned the key, and we swung the door open to admit the fugitive. He dashed in and turned at once with a long yell of triumph. "Come on, lads! Tumble up, all hands, tumble up! Smartly there, all of you!"

It was so quickly and neatly done that we were taken by storm before we knew that we were attacked. The passage was full of rushing sailors. I slipped out of the clutch of one and ran for my gun, but it was only to crash down on to the stone floor an instant later with two of them holding on to me. They were so deft and quick that my hands were lashed together even while I

struggled, and I was dragged into the settle corner, unhurt but very sore in spirit at the cunning with which our defences had been forced



and the ease with which we had been overcome. They had not even troubled to bind my uncle, but he had been pushed into his chair, and the guns had been taken away. He sat with a very white face, his homely figure and absurd row of curls looking curiously out of place among the wild figures who

surrounded him.

There were six of them, all evidently sailors. One I recognized as the man with the earrings whom I had already met upon the road that evening. They were all fine, weather-bronzed bewhiskered fellows. In the midst of them, leaning against the table, was the freckled man who had passed me on the moor. The great black cloak which poor Enoch had taken out with him was still hanging from his shoulders. He was of a very different type from the others —crafty, cruel, dangerous, with sly, thoughtful eyes which gloated over my uncle. They suddenly turned themselves upon me and I never knew how one's skin can creep at a man's glance before.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Speak out, or we'll find a way to make you."

"I am Mr. Stephen Maple's nephew, come to visit him."

"You are, are you? Well, I wish you joy of your uncle and of your visit too. Quick's the word, lads, for we must be aboard before morning. What shall we do with the old 'un?"

"Trice him up Yankee fashion and give him six dozen," said one of the seamen.

"D'you hear, you cursed Cockney thief? We'll beat the life out of you if you don't give back what you've stolen. Where are they? I know you never parted with them."

My uncle pursed up his lips and shook his head, with a face in which his fear and his obstinacy contended.

"Won't tell, won't you? We'll see about that! Get him ready, Jim!"

One of the seamen seized my uncle, and pulled his coat and shirt over his shoulders. He sat lumped in his chair, his body all creased into white rolls which shivered with cold and with terror.

"Up with him to those hooks."

There were rows of them along the walls where the smoked meat used to be hung. The seamen tied my uncle by the wrists to two of these. Then one of them undid his leather belt.

"The buckle end, Jim," said the captain. "Give him the buckle."

"You cowards," I cried; "to beat an old man!"

"We'll beat a young one next," said he, with a malevolent glance at my corner. "Now, Jim, cut a wad out of him!"

"Give him one more chance!" cried one of the seamen.

"Aye, aye," growled one or two others. "Give the swab a chance!"

"If you turn soft, you may give them up for ever," said the captain. "One thing or the other! You must lash it out of him; or you may give up what you took such pains to win and what would make you gentlemen for life— every man of you. There's nothing else for it. Which shall it be?"

"Let him have it," they cried, savagely.

"Then stand clear!" The buckle of the man's belt whined savagely as he whirled it over his shoulder.

But my uncle cried out before the blow fell. "I can't stand it!" he cried. "Let me down!"

"Where are they, then?"

"I'll show you if you'll let me down." They cast off the handkerchiefs and he pulled his coat over his fat, round shoulders. The seamen stood round him, the most intense curiosity and excitement upon their swarthy faces.

"No gammon!" cried the man with the freckles. "We'll kill you joint by joint if you try to fool us. Now then! Where are they?"

"In my bedroom."

"Where is that?"

"The room above."

"Whereabouts?"

"In the corner of the oak ark by the bed."

The seamen all rushed to the stair, but the captain called them back.

"We don't leave this cunning old fox behind us. Ha, your face drops at that, does it? By the Lord, I believe you are trying to slip your anchor. Here, lads, make him fast and take him along!"

With a confused trampling of feet they rushed up the stairs, dragging my uncle in the midst of them.

For an instant I was alone. My hands were tied but not my feet. If I could find my way across the moor I might rouse the police and intercept these rascals before they could reach the sea.

For a moment I hesitated as to whether I should leave my uncle alone in such a plight. But I should be of more service to him—or, at the worst, to his property—if I went than if I stayed. I rushed to the hall door, and as I reached it.

I heard a yell above my head, a shattering, splintering noise, and then amid a chorus of shouts a huge weight fell with a horrible thud at my very feet. Never while I live will that squelching thud pass out of my ears.

And there, just in front of me, in the lane of light cast by the open door, lay my unhappy uncle, his bald head twisted on to one shoulder, like the wrung neck of a chicken. It needed but a glance to see that his spine was broken and that he was dead.

The gang of seamen had rushed downstairs so quickly that they were clustered at the door and crowding all round me almost as soon as I had realized what had occurred.

"It's no doing of ours, mate," said one of them to me. "He hove himself through the window, and that's the truth. Don't you put it down to us."

"He thought he could get to windward of us if once he was out in the dark, you see," said another. "But he came head foremost and broke his bloomin' neck."

"And a blessed good job too!" cried the chief, with a savage oath. "I'd have done it for him if he hadn't took the lead. Don't make any mistake, my lads, this is murder, and we're all in it, together. There's only one way out of it, and that is to hang together, unless, as the saying

goes, you mean to hang apart. There's only one witness—"

He looked at me with his malicious little eyes, and I saw that he had something that gleamed—either a knife or a revolver—in the breast of his pea-jacket. Two of the men slipped between us.

"Stow that, Captain Elias," said one of them. "If this old man met his end it is through no fault of ours. The worst we ever meant him was to take some of the skin off his back. But as to this young fellow, we have no quarrel with him—"

"You fool, you may have no quarrel with him, but he has his quarrel with you. He'll swear your life away if you don't silence his tongue. It's his life or ours, and don't you make any mistake."

"Aye, aye, the skipper has the longest head of any of us. Better do what he tells you," cried another.

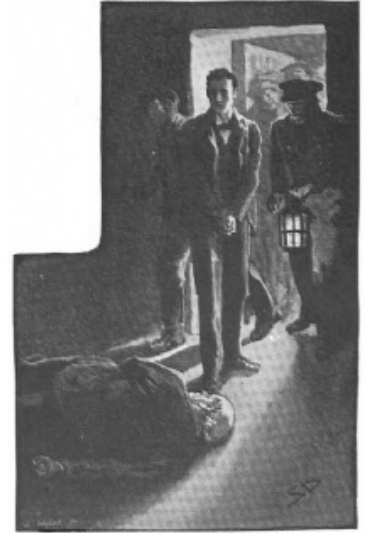
But my champion, who was the fellow with the earrings, covered me with his own broad chest and swore roundly that no one should lay a finger on me.

The others were equally divided, and my fate might have been the cause of a quarrel between them, when suddenly the captain gave a cry of delight and amazement which was taken up by the whole gang.

I followed their eyes and outstretched fingers, and this was what I saw.

My uncle was lying with his legs outstretched, and the club foot was that which was furthest from us. All round this foot a dozen brilliant objects were twinkling and flashing in the yellow light which streamed from the open door.

The captain caught up the lantern and held it to the place. The huge sole of his boot had been shattered in the fall, and it was clear now that it had been a hollow box in which he stowed his valuables, for the path was all sprinkled with precious stones.



"IT'S NO DOING OF OURS, MATE," SAID ONE OF THEM.

Three which I saw were of an unusual size, and as many as forty, I should think, of fair value. The seamen had cast themselves down and were greedily gathering them up, when my friend with the earrings plucked me by the sleeve.

"Here's your chance, mate," he whispered. "Off you go before worse comes of it."

It was a timely hint, and it did not take me long to act upon it. A few cautious steps and I had passed unobserved beyond the circle of light. Then I set off running, falling and rising and falling again, for no one who has not tried it can tell how hard it is to run over uneven ground with hands which are fastened together.

I ran and ran, until for want of breath I could no longer put one foot before the other.

But I need not have hurried so, for when I had gone a long way I stopped at last to breathe, and, looking back, I could still see the gleam of the lantern far away, and the outline of the seamen who squatted round it.

Then at last this single point of light went suddenly out, and the whole great moor was left in the thickest darkness.

So deftly was I tied, that it took me a long half-hour and a broken tooth before I got my hands free.

My idea was to make my way across to the Purcells' farm, but north was the same as south under that pitchy sky, and for hours I wandered among the rustling, scuttling sheep without any certainty as to where I was going.

When at last there came a glimmer in the east, and the undulating fells, grey with the morning mist, rolled once more to the horizon, I recognized that I was close by Purcell's farm, and there a little in front of me I was startled to see another man walking in the same direction.

At first I approached him warily, but before I overtook him I knew by the bent back and tottering step that it was Enoch, the old servant, and right glad I was to see that he was living.

He had been knocked down, beaten, and his cloak and hat taken away by these ruffians, and all night he had wandered in the darkness, like myself, in search of help.

He burst into tears when I told him of his master's death, and sat hiccupping with the hard, dry sobs of an old man among the stones upon the moor.

"It's the men of the Black Mogul," he said. "Yes, yes, I knew that they would be the end of 'im."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Well, well, you are one of 'is own folk," said he. "'E 'as passed away; yes, yes, it is all over and done. I can tell you about it, no man better, but mum's the word with old Enoch unless master wants 'im to speak. But his own nephew who came to 'elp 'im in the hour of need—yes, yes. Mister John, you ought to know.

"It was like this, sir. Your uncle 'ad 'is grocer's business at Stepney, but 'e 'ad another business also. 'E would buy as well as sell, and when 'e bought 'e never asked no questions where the stuff came from. Why should 'e? It wasn't no business of 'is, was it? If folk brought him a stone or a silver plate, what was it to 'im where they got it? That's good sense, and it ought to be good law, as I 'old. Any'ow, it was good enough for us at Stepney.

"Well, there was a steamer came from South Africa what foundered at sea. At least, they say so, and Lloyd's paid the money. She 'ad some very fine diamonds invoiced as being aboard of 'er. Soon after there came the brig Black Mogul into the port o' London, with 'er papers all right as 'avin' cleared from Port Elizabeth with a cargo of 'ides. The captain, which 'is name was Elias, 'e came to see the master, and what d'you think that 'e 'ad to sell? Why, sir, as I'm a livin' sinner 'e 'ad a packet of diamonds for all the world just the same as what was lost out o' that there African steamer. 'Ow did 'e get them? I don't know. Master didn't know. 'E didn't seek to know either. The captain 'e was anxious for reasons of 'is own to get them safe, so 'e gave them to master, same as you might put a thing in a bank. But master 'e'd 'ad time to get fond of them, and 'e wasn't over satisfied as to where the Black Mogul 'ad been tradin', or where her captain 'ad got the stones, so when 'e come back for them the master 'e said as 'e thought they were best in 'is own 'ands. Mind I don't 'old with it myself, but that was what master said to Captain Elias in the little back parlour at Stepney. That was 'ow 'e got 'is leg broke and three of his ribs.

"So the captain got jugged for that, and the master, when 'e was able to get about, thought

that 'e would 'ave peace for fifteen years, and 'e came away from London because 'e was afraid of the sailor men; but, at the end of five years, the captain was out and after 'im, with as many of 'is crew as 'e could gather. Send for the perlice, you says! Well, there are two sides to that, and the master 'e wasn't much more fond of the perlice than Elias was. But they fair 'emmed master in, as you 'ave seen for yourself, and they bested 'im at last, and the loneliness that 'e thought would be 'is safety 'as proved 'is ruin. Well, well, 'e was 'ard to many, but a good master to me, and it's long before I come on such another."

One word in conclusion. A strange cutter, which had been hanging about the coast, was seen to beat down the Irish Sea that morning, and it is conjectured that Elias and his men were on board of it.

At any rule, nothing has been heard of them since. It was shown at the inquest that my uncle had lived in a sordid fashion for years, and he left little behind him.

The mere knowledge that he possessed this treasure, which he carried about with him in so extraordinary a fashion, had appeared to be the joy of his life, and he had never, as far as we could learn, tried to realize any of his diamonds.

So his disreputable name when living was not atoned for by any posthumous benevolence, and the family, equally scandalized by his life and by his death, have finally buried all memory of the club-footed grocer of Stepney.