

# Benlian

By Oliver Onions

## I

It would be different if you had known Benlian. It would be different if you had had even that glimpse of him that I had the very first time I saw him, standing on the little wooden landing at the top of the flight of steps outside my studio door. I say “studio”; but really it was just a sort of loft looking out over the timber-yard, and I used it as a studio. The real studio, the big one, was at the other end of the yard, and that was Benlian’s.

Scarcely anybody ever came there. I wondered many a time if the timber-merchant was dead or had lost his memory and forgotten all about his business; for his stacks of floorboards, set criss-crosswise to season (you know how they pile them up) were grimy with soot, and nobody ever disturbed the rows of scaffold-poles that stood like palisades along the walls. The entrance was from the street, through a door in a billposter’s hoarding; and on the river not far away the steamboats hooted, and, in windy weather, the floorboards hummed to keep them company.

I suppose some of these real, regular artists wouldn’t have called me an artist at all for I only painted miniatures, and it was trade-work at that, copied from photographs and so on. Not that I wasn’t jolly good at it, and punctual too (lots of these high-flown artists have simply no idea of punctuality); and the loft was cheap, and suited me very well. But, of course, a sculptor wants a big place on the ground floor; it’s slow work, that with blocks of stone and marble that cost you twenty pounds every time you lift them; so Benlian had the studio. His name was on a plate on the door, but I’d never seen him till this time I’m telling you of.

I was working that evening at one of the prettiest little things I’d ever done: a girl’s head on ivory, that I’d stippled up just like . . . oh, you’d never have thought it was done by hand at all. The daylight had gone, but I knew that “Prussian” would be about the colour for the eyes and the bunch of flowers at her breast, and I wanted to finish.

I was working at my little table, with a shade over my eyes; and I jumped a bit when somebody knocked at the door—not having heard anybody come up the steps, and not having many visitors anyway. (Letters were always put into the box in the yard door.)

When I opened the door, there he stood on the platform; and I gave a bit of a start, having come straight from my ivory, you see. He was one of these very tall, gaunt chaps, that make us little fellows feel even smaller than we are; and I wondered at first where his eyes were, they were set so deep in the dark caves on either side of his nose. Like a skull, his head was; I could fancy his teeth curving round inside his cheeks; and his zygomatics stuck up under his skin like razor-backs (but if you’re not one of us artists you’ll not understand that). A bit of smoky, greenish sky showed behind him; and then, as his eyes moved in their big pits, one of them caught the light of my lamp and flashed like a well of lustre.

He spoke abruptly, in a deep, shaky sort of voice.

“I want you to photograph me in the morning,” he said. I supposed he’d seen my printing-frames out on the window-sash some time or other.

“Come in,” I said. “But I’m afraid, if it’s a miniature you want, that I’m retained—my firm retains me—you’d have to do it through them. But come in, and I’ll show you the kind of thing I do—though you ought to have come in the daylight . . .”

He came in. He was wearing a long, grey dressing-gown that came right down to his heels and made him look something like a Noah's-ark figure. Seen in the light, his face seemed more ghastly bony still; and as he glanced for a moment at my little ivory he made a sound of contempt—I know it was contempt. I thought it rather cheek, coming into my place and—He turned his cavernous eyeholes on me.

“I don't want anything of that sort. I want you to photograph me. I'll be here at ten in the morning.”

So, just to show him that I wasn't to be treated that way, I said, quite shortly, “I can't. I've an appointment at ten o'clock.”

“What's that?” he said—he'd one of these rich deep voices that always sound consumptive.

“Take that thing off your eyes, and look at me,” he ordered.

Well, I was awfully indignant.

“If you think I'm going to be told to do things like this—” I began.

“Take that thing off,” he just ordered again.

I've got to remember, of course, that you didn't know Benlian. *I* didn't then. And for a chap just to stalk into a fellow's place, and tell him to photograph him, and order him about . . . but you'll see in a minute. I took the shade off my eyes, just to show him that *I* could browbeat a bit too.

I used to have a tall strip of looking-glass leaning against my wall; for though I didn't use models much, it's awfully useful to go to Nature for odd bits now and then, and I've sketched myself in that glass, oh, hundreds of times! We must have been standing in front of it, for all at once I saw the eyes at the bottom of his pits looking rigidly over my shoulder. Without moving his eyes from the glass, and scarcely moving his lips, he muttered:

“Get me a pair of gloves, get me a pair of gloves.”

It was a funny thing to ask for; but I got him a pair of my gloves from a drawer. His hands were shaking so that he could hardly get them on, and there was a little glistening of sweat on his face, that looked like the salt that dries on you when you've been bathing in the sea. Then I turned, to see what it was that he was looking so earnestly and profoundly at in the mirror. I saw nothing except just the pair of us, he with my gloves on.

He stepped aside, and slowly drew the gloves off. I think *I* could have bullied *him* just then. He turned to me.

“Did that look all right to you?” he asked.

“Why, my dear chap, whatever ails you?” I cried.

“I suppose,” he went on, “you couldn't photograph me to-night—now?”

I could have done, with magnesium, but I hadn't a scrap in the place. I told him so. He was looking round my studio. He saw my camera standing in a corner.

“Ah!” he said.

He made a stride towards it. He unscrewed the lens, brought it to the lamp, and peered attentively through it, now into the air, now at his sleeve and hand, as if looking for a flaw in it. Then he replaced it, and pulled up the collar of his dressing-gown as if he was cold.

“Well, another night of it,” he muttered; “but,” he added, facing suddenly round on me, “if your appointment was to meet your God Himself, you must photograph me at ten to-morrow morning!”

“All right,” I said, giving in (for he seemed horribly ill). “Draw up to the stove and have a drink of something and a smoke.”

“I neither drink nor smoke,” he replied, moving towards the door.

“Sit down and have a chat, then,” I urged; for I always like to be decent with fellows, and it was a lonely sort of place, that yard.

He shook his head.

“Be ready by ten o’clock in the morning,” he said; and he passed down my stairs and crossed the yard to his studio without even having said “Good night.”

Well, he was at my door again at ten o’clock in the morning, and I photographed him. I made three exposures; but the plates were some that I’d had in the place for some time, and they’d gone off and fogged in the developing.

“I’m awfully sorry,” I said; “but I’m going out this afternoon, and will get some more, and we’ll have another shot in the morning.”

One after the other, he was holding the negatives up to the light and examining them. Presently he put them down quietly, leaning them methodically up against the edge of the developing-bath.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Thank you,” he said; and left me.

After that, I didn’t see him for weeks; but at nights I could see the light of his roof-window, shining through the wreathing river-mists, and sometimes I heard him moving about, and the muffled knock-knocking of his hammer on marble.

## II

Of course I did see him again, or I shouldn’t be telling you all this. He came to my door, just as he had done before, and at about the same time in the evening. He hadn’t come to be photographed this time, but for all that it was something about a camera—something he wanted to know. He’d brought two books with him, big books, printed in German. They were on Light, he said, and Physics (or else it was Psychics—I always get those two words wrong). They were full of diagrams and equations and figures; and, of course, it was all miles above my head.

He talked a lot about “hyper-space,” whatever that is; and at first I nodded, as if I knew all about it. But he very soon saw that I didn’t, and he came down to my level again. What he’d come to ask me was this: Did I know anything, of my own experience, about things “photographing through”? (You know the kind of thing: a name that’s been painted out on a board, say, comes up in the plate.)

Well, as it happened, I *had* once photographed a drawing for a fellow, and the easel I had stood it on had come up through the picture; and I knew by the way Benlian nodded that that was the kind of thing he meant.

“More,” he said.

I told him I’d once seen a photograph of a man with a bowler hat on, and the shape of his crown had showed through the hat.

“Yes, yes,” he said, musing; and then he asked: “Have you ever heard of things not photographing at all?”

But I couldn’t tell him anything about that; and off he started again, about Light and Physics and so on. Then, as soon as I could get a word in, I said, “But, of course, the camera isn’t Art.” (Some of my miniatures, you understand, were jolly nice little things.)

“No—no,” he murmured absently; and then abruptly he said: “Eh? What’s that? And what the devil do *you* know about it?”

“Well,” said I, in a dignified sort of way, considering that for ten years I’ve been—”

“Chut! . . . Hold your tongue,” he said, turning away.

There he was, talking to me again, just as if I'd asked him in to bully me. But you've got to be decent to a fellow when he's in your own place; and by-and-by I asked him, but in a cold, off-hand sort of way, how his own work was going on. He turned to me again.

"Would you like to see it?" he asked.

"*Aha!*" thought I, "he's got to a sticking-point with his work! It's all very well," I thought, "for you to sniff at my miniatures, my friend, but we all get stale on our work sometimes, and the fresh eye, even of a miniature-painter . . ."

"I shall be glad if I can be of any help to you," I answered, still a bit huffish, but bearing no malice.

"Then come," he said.

We descended and crossed the timber-yard, and he held his door open for me to pass in.

It was an enormous great place, his studio, and all full of mist; and the gallery that was his bedroom was up a little staircase at the farther end. In the middle of the floor was a tall structure of scaffolding, with a stage or two to stand on; and I could see the dim ghostly marble figure in the gloom. It had been jacked up on a heavy base; and as it would have taken three or four men to put it into position, and scarcely a stranger had entered the yard since I had been there, I knew that the figure must have stood for a long time. Sculpture's weary, slow work.

Benlian was pottering about with a taper at the end of a long rod; and suddenly the overhead gas-ring burst into light. I placed myself before the statue—to criticise, you know.

Well, it didn't seem to me that he needed to have turned up his nose at my ivories, for I didn't think much of his statue—except that it was a great, lumping, extraordinary piece of work. It had an outstretched arm that, I remember thinking, was absolutely misshapen—disproportioned, big enough for a giant, ridiculously out of drawing. And as I looked at the thing this way and that, I knew that his eyes in their deep cellars never left my face for a moment.

"It's a god," he said by-and-by.

Then I began to tell him about that monstrous arm; but he cut me very short.

"I say it's a god," he interrupted, looking at me as if he would have eaten me. "Even you, child as you are, have seen the gods men have made for themselves before this. Half-gods they've made, all good or all evil (and then they've called them the Devil). This is *my* god—the god of good and of evil also."

"Er—I see," I said, rather taken aback (but quite sure he was off his head for all that). Then I looked at the arm again; a child could have seen how wrong it was. . . .

But suddenly, to my amazement, he took me by the shoulders and turned me away.

"That'll do," he said curtly. "I didn't ask you to come in here with a view to learning anything from you. I wanted to see how it struck you. I shall send for you again—and again—"

Then he began to jabber, half to himself.

"Bah!" he muttered. "Is that all?" they ask before a stupendous thing. Show them the ocean, the heavens, infinity, and they ask, 'Is that all?' If they saw their God face to face they'd ask it! . . . There's only one Cause, that works now in good and now in evil, but show It to them and they put their heads on one side and begin to appraise and patronise It! . . . I tell you, what's seen at a glance flies away at a glance. Gods come slowly over you, but presently, ah! they begin to grip you, and at the end there's no fleeing from them! You'll tell me more about my statue by-and-by! . . . What was that you said?" he demanded, facing swiftly round on me. "That arm? Ah, yes; but we'll see what you say about that arm six months from now! Yes, the arm. . . . Now be off!" he ordered me. "I'll send for you again when I want you!"

He thrust me out.

“An asylum, Mr. Benlian,” I thought as I crossed the yard, “is the place for you!” You see, I didn’t know him then, and that he wasn’t to be judged as an ordinary man is. Just you wait till you see. . . .

And straight away, I found myself vowing that I’d have nothing more to do with him. I found myself resolving that, as if I were making up my mind not to smoke or drink—and (I don’t know why) with a similar sense that I was depriving myself of something. But, somehow, I forgot, and within a month he’d been in several times to see me, and once or twice had fetched me in to see his statue.

In two months I was in an extraordinary state of mind about him. I was familiar with him in a way, but at the same time I didn’t know one scrap more about him. Because I’m a fool (oh, yes, I know quite well, now, what I am) you’ll think I’m talking folly if I even begin to tell you what sort of a man he was. I don’t mean just his knowledge (though I think he knew everything—sciences, languages, and all that) for it was far more than that. Somehow, when he was there, he had me all restless and uneasy; and when he wasn’t there I was (there’s only the one word for it) jealous—as jealous as if he’d been a girl! Even yet I can’t make it out. . . .

And he knew how unsettled he’d got me; and I’ll tell you how I found that out.

Straight out one night, when he was sitting up in my place, he asked me: “Do you like me, Pudgie?” (I forgot to say that I’d told him they used to call me Pudgie at home, because I was little and fat; it was odd, the number of things I told him that I wouldn’t have told anybody else.)

“Do you like me, Pudgie?” he said.

As for my answer, I don’t know how it spurted out. I was much more surprised than he was, for I really didn’t intend it. It was for all the world as if somebody else was talking with my mouth.

“*I loathe and adore you!*” it came; and then I looked round, awfully startled to hear myself saying that.

But he didn’t look at me. He only nodded.

“Yes. Of good and evil too—” he muttered to himself. And then all of a sudden he got up and went out.

I didn’t sleep for ever so long after that, thinking how odd it was I should have said that.

Well (to get on), after that something I couldn’t account for began to come over me sometimes as I worked. It began to come over me, without any warning, that he was thinking of me down there across the yard. I used to *know* (this must sound awfully silly to you) that he was down yonder, thinking of me and doing something to me. And one night I was so sure that it wasn’t fancy that I jumped straight up from my work, and I’m not quite sure what happened then, until I found myself in his studio, just as if I’d walked there in my sleep.

And he seemed to be waiting for me, for there was a chair by his own, in front of the statue.

“What is it, Benlian?” I burst out.

“Ah!” he said. . . . “Well, it’s about that arm, Pudgie; I want you to tell me about the arm. Does it look so strange as it did?”

“No,” I said.

“I thought it wouldn’t,” he observed. “But I haven’t touched it, Pudgie—”

So I stayed the evening there.

But you must not think he was always doing that thing—whatever it was—to me. On the other hand, I sometimes felt the oddest sort of release (I don’t know how else to put it). . . . like when, on one of these muggy, earthy-smelling days, when everything’s melancholy, the wind freshens up suddenly and you breathe again. And that (I’m trying to take it in order, you see, so that it will

be plain to you) brings me to the time I found out that *he* did that too, and knew when he was doing it.

I'd gone into his place one night to have a look at his statue. It was surprising what a lot I was finding out about that statue. It was still all out of proportion (that is to say, I knew it must be—remembered I'd thought so—though it didn't annoy me now quite so much. I suppose I'd lost *my* fresh eye by that time). Somehow, too, my own miniatures had begun to look a bit kiddish; they made me impatient; and that's horrible, to be discontented with things that once seemed jolly good to you.

Well, he'd been looking at me in the hungriest sort of way, and I looking at the statue, when all at once that feeling of release and lightness came over me. The first I knew of it was that I found myself thinking of some rather important letters my firm had written to me, wanting to know when a job I was doing was going to be finished. I thought myself it was time I got it finished; I thought I'd better set about it at once; and I sat suddenly up in my chair, as if I'd just come out of a sleep. And, looking at the statue, I saw it as it had seemed at first—all misshapen and out of drawing.

The very next moment, as I was rising, I sat down again as suddenly as if somebody had pulled me back.

Now a chap doesn't like to be changed about like that; so, without looking at Benlian, I muttered a bit testily, "Don't, Benlian

Then I heard him get up and knock his chair away. He was standing behind me.

"Pudgie," he said, in a moved sort of voice, "I'm no good to you. Get out of this. Get out—"

"No, no, Benlian!" I pleaded.

"Get out, do you hear, and don't come again! Go and live somewhere else—go away from London—don't let me know where you go—"

"Oh, what have I done?" I asked unhappily; and he was muttering again.

"Perhaps it would be better for me too," he muttered; and then he added, "Come, bundle out!"

So in home I went, and finished my ivory for the firm; but I can't tell you how friendless and unhappy I felt.

Now I used to know in those days a little girl—a nice, warm-hearted little thing, just friendly you know, who used to come to me sometimes in another place I lived at and mend for me and so on. It was an awful long time since I'd seen her; but she found me out one night—came to that yard, walked straight in, went straight to my linen-bag, and began to look over my things to see what wanted mending, just as she used to. I don't mind confessing that I was a bit sweet on her at one time; and it made me feel awfully mean, the way she came in, without asking any questions, and took up my mending.

So she sat doing my things, and I sat at my work, glad of a bit of company; and she chatted as she worked, just jolly and gentle and not at all reproaching me.

But as suddenly as a shot, right in the middle of it all, I found myself wondering about Benlian again. And I wasn't only wondering; somehow I was horribly uneasy about him. It came to me that he might be ill or something. And all the fun of her having come to see me was gone. I found myself doing all sorts of stupid things to my work, and glancing at my watch that was lying on the table before me.

At last I couldn't stand it any longer. I got up.

"Daisy," I said, "I've got to go out now."

She seemed surprised.

"Oh, why didn't you tell me I'd been keeping you!" she said, getting up at once.

I muttered that I was awfully sorry. . . .

I packed her off. I closed the door in the hoarding behind her. Then I walked straight across the yard to Benlian's.

He was lying on a couch, not doing anything.

"I know I ought to have come sooner, Benlian," I said, "but I had somebody with me."

"Yes," he said, looking hard at me; and I got a bit red.

"She's awfully nice," I stammered; "but you never bother with girls, and you don't drink or smoke—"

"No," he said.

"Well," I continued, "you ought to have a little relaxation; you're knocking yourself up." And, indeed, he looked awfully ill.

But he shook his head.

"A man's only a definite amount of force in him, Pudgie," he said, "and if he spends it in one way he goes short in another. Mine goes—there." He glanced at the statue. "I rarely sleep now," he added.

"Then you ought to see a doctor," I said, a bit alarmed. (I'd felt sure he was ill.)

"No, no, Pudgie. My force is all going there—all but the minimum that can't be helped, you know. . . . You've heard artists talk about 'putting their soul into their work,' Pudgie?"

"Don't rub it in about my rotten miniatures, Benlian," I asked him.

"You've heard them say that; but they're charlatans, professional artists, all, Pudgie. They haven't got any souls bigger than a sixpence to put into it. . . . You know, Pudgie, that Force and Matter are the same thing—that it's decided nowadays that you can't define matter otherwise than as 'a point of Force'?"

"Yes," I found myself saying eagerly, as if I'd heard it dozens of times before.

"So that if they could put their souls into it, it would be just as easy for them to put their *bodies* into it? . . ."

I had drawn very close to him, and again—it was not fancy—I felt as if somebody, not me, was using my mouth. A flash of comprehension seemed to come into my brain.

"*Not that, Benlian?*" I cried breathlessly.

He nodded three or four times, and whispered. I really don't know why we both whispered.

"*Really that, Benlian?*" I whispered again.

"Shall I show you? . . . I tried my hardest not to, you know, . . ." he still whispered.

"Yes, show me!" I replied in a suppressed voice. "Don't breathe a sound then! I keep them up there. . . ."

He put his finger to his lips as if we had been two conspirators; then he tiptoed across the studio and went up to his bedroom in the gallery. Presently he tiptoed down again, with some rolled-up papers in his hand. They were photographs, and we stooped together over a little table. His hand shook with excitement.

"You remember this?" he whispered, showing me a rough print.

It was one of the prints from the fogged plates that I'd taken after that first night.

"Come closer to me if you feel frightened, Pudgie," he said. "You said they were old plates, Pudgie. No no; the plates were all right; it's *I* who am wrong!"

"Of course," I said. It seemed so natural.

"This one," he said, taking up one that was numbered "1," "is a plain photograph, in the flesh, before it started; *you* know! Now look at this, and this—"

He spread them before me, all in order.

“2” was a little fogged, as if a novice had taken it; on “8” a sort of cloudy veil partly obliterated the face; “4” was still further smudged and lost; and “5” was a figure with gloved hands held up, as a man holds his hands up when he is covered by a gun. The face of this one was completely blotted out.

And it didn't seem in the least horrible to me, for I kept on murmuring, “Of course, of course.”

Then Benlian rubbed his hands and smiled at me.

“I'm making good progress, am I not?” he said.

“Splendid!” I breathed.

“Better than you know, too,” he chuckled, “for you're not properly under yet. But you will be, Pudgie, you will be—”

“Yes, yes! . . . Will it be long, Benlian?”

“No,” he replied, “not if I can keep from eating and sleeping and thinking of other things than the statue—and if you don't disturb me by having girls about the place, Pudgie.”

“I'm awfully sorry,” I said contritely.

“All right, all right; ssh! . . . This, you know, Pudgie, is my own studio; I bought it; I bought it purposely to make my statue, my god. I'm passing nicely into it; and when I'm quite passed—quite passed, Pudgie—you can have the key and come in when you like.”

“Oh, thanks awfully,” I murmured gratefully.

He nudged me.

“What would they think of it, Pudgie—those of the exhibitions and academies, who say ‘their souls are in their work’? What would the cacklers think of it, Pudgie?”

“Aren't they fools!” I chuckled.

“And I shall have *one* worshipper, shan't I, Pudgie?”

“Rather!” I replied. “Isn't it splendid! . . . Oh, need I go back just yet?”

“Yes, you must go now; but I'll send for you again very soon. . . . You know I tried to do without you, Pudgie; I tried for thirteen days, and it nearly killed me! That's past. I shan't try again. Now off you trot, my Pudgie—”

I winked at him knowingly, and came skipping and dancing across the yard.

### III

It's just silly—that's what it is—to say that something of a man doesn't go into his work.

Why, even those wretched little ivories of mine, the thick-headed fellows who paid for them knew my touch in them, and once spotted it instantly when I tried to slip in another chap's who was hard up. Benlian used to say that a man went about spreading himself over everything he came in contact with—diffusing some sort of influence (as far as I could make it out); and the mistake was, he said, that we went through the world just wasting it instead of directing it. And if Benlian didn't understand all about those things, I should jolly well like to know who does! A chap with a great abounding will and brain like him, it's only natural he should be able to pass himself on, to a statue or anything else, when he really tried—did without food and talk and sleep in order to save himself up for it!

“A man can't both *do* and *be*,” I remember he said to me once. “He's so much force, no more, and he can either make himself with it or something else. If he tries to do both, he does both imperfectly. I'm going to do *one* perfect thing.” Oh, he was a queer chap! Fancy, a fellow making a thing like that statue, out of himself, and then wanting somebody to adore him!

And I hadn't the faintest conception of how much I did adore him till yet again, as he had done before, he seemed to—you know—to take himself away from me again, leaving me all alone, and so wretched! . . . And I was angry at the same time, for he'd promised me he wouldn't do it again. . . . (This was one night, I don't remember when.)

I ran to my landing and shouted down into the yard.

"Benlian! Benlian!"

There was a light in his studio, and I heard a muffled shout come back.

"Keep away—keep away—keep away!"

He was struggling—I knew he was struggling as I stood there on my landing—struggling to let me go. And I could only run and throw myself on my bed and sob, while he tried to set me free, who didn't want to be set free . . . he was having a terrific struggle, all alone there. . . .

(He told me afterwards that he *had* to eat something now and then and to sleep a little, and that weakened him—strengthened him—strengthened his body and weakened the passing, you know.)

But the next day it was all right again. I was Benlian's again. And I wondered, when I remembered his struggle, whether a dying man had ever fought for life as hard as Benlian was fighting to get away from it and pass himself.

The next time after that that he fetched me—called me—whatever you like to name it—I burst into his studio like a bullet. He was sunk in a big chair, gaunt as a mummy now, and all the life in him seemed to burn in the bottom of his deep eye-sockets. At the sight of him I fiddled with my knuckles and giggled.

"You *are* going it, Benlian!" I said.

"Am I not?" he replied, in a voice that was scarcely a breath.

"You *meant* me to bring the camera and magnesium, didn't you?" (I had snatched them up when I felt his call, and had brought them.)

"Yes. Go ahead."

So I placed the camera before him, made all ready, and took the magnesium ribbon in a pair of pincers.

"Are you ready?" I said; and lighted the ribbon.

The studio seemed to leap with the blinding glare. The ribbon spat and spluttered. I snapped the shutter, and the fumes drifted away and hung in clouds in the roof.

"You'll have to walk me about soon, Pudgie, and bang me with bladders, as they do the opium-patients," he said sleepily.

"Let me take one of the statue now," I said eagerly.

But he put up his hand.

"No no. *That's* too much like testing our god. Faith's the food they feed gods on, Pudgie. We'll let the S.P.R. people photograph it when it's all over," he said. "Now get it developed."

I developed the plate. The obliteration now seemed complete.

But Benlian seemed dissatisfied.

"There's something wrong somewhere," he said. "It isn't so perfect as that yet—I can feel within me it isn't. It's merely that your camera isn't strong enough to find me, Pudgie."

"I'll get another in the morning," I cried.

"No," he answered. "I know something better than that. Have a cab here by ten o'clock in the morning, and we'll go somewhere."

By half-past ten the next morning we had driven to a large hospital, and had gone down a lot of steps and along corridors to a basement room. There was a stretcher couch in the middle of the

room, and all manner of queer appliances, frames of ground glass, tubes of glass blown into extraordinary shapes, a dynamo, and a lot of other things all about. A couple of doctors were there too, and Benlian was talking to them.

“We’ll try my hand first,” Benlian said by-and-by.

He advanced to the couch, and put his hand under one of the frames of ground glass. One of the doctors did something in a corner. A harsh crackling filled the room, and an unearthly, fluorescent light shot and flooded across the frame where Benlian’s hand was. The two doctors looked, and then started back. One of them gave a cry. He was sickly white.

“Put me on the couch,” said Benlian.

I and the doctor who was not ill lifted him on the canvas stretcher. The green-gleaming frame of fluctuating light was passed over the whole of his body. Then the doctor ran to a telephone and called a colleague. . . .

We spent the morning there, with dozens of doctors coming and going. Then we left. All the way home in the cab Benlian chuckled to himself.

“That scared ’em, Pudgie! “he chuckled. “A man they can’t X-ray—that scared ’em! must put that down in the diary—”

“Wasn’t it ripping!” I chuckled back.

He kept a sort of diary or record. He gave it to me afterwards, but they’ve borrowed it. It was as big as a ledger, and immensely valuable, I’m sure; they oughtn’t to borrow valuable things like that and not return them. The laughing that Benlian and I have had over that diary! It fooled them all—the clever X-ray men, the artists of the academies, everybody! Written on the fly-leaf was “*To My Pudgie.*” I shall publish it when I get it back again.

Benlian had now got frightfully weak; it’s awfully hard work, passing yourself. And he had to take a little milk now and then or he’d have died before he had quite finished. I didn’t bother with miniatures any longer, and when angry letters came from my employers we just put them into the fire, Benlian and I, and we laughed—that is to say, I laughed, but Benlian only smiled, being too weak to laugh really. He’d lots of money, so that was all right; and I slept in his studio, to be there for the passing.

And that wouldn’t be very long now, I thought; and I was always looking at the statue. Things like that (in case you don’t know) have to be done gradually, and I supposed he was busy filling up the inside of it and hadn’t got to the outside yet—for the statue was much the same to look at. But, reckoning off his sips of milk and snatches of sleep, he was making splendid progress, and the figure must be getting very full now. I was awfully excited, it was getting so near. . . .

And then somebody came bothering and nearly spoiling all. It’s odd, but I really forget exactly what it was. I only know there was a funeral, and people were sobbing and looking at me, and somebody said I was callous, but somebody else said, “No, look at him,” and that it was just the other way about. And I think I remember, now, that it wasn’t in London, for I was in a train; but after the funeral I dodged them, and found myself back at Euston again. They followed me, but I shook them off. I locked my own studio up, and lay as quiet as a mouse in Benlian’s place when they came hammering at the door. . . .

And now I must come to what you’ll called the finish—though it’s awfully stupid to call things like that “finishes.”

I’d slipped into my own studio one night—I forget what for; and I’d gone quietly, for I knew they were following me, those people, and would catch me if they could. It was a thick, misty night, and the light came streaming up through Benlian’s roof window, with the shadows of the

window-divisions losing themselves like dark rays in the fog. A lot of hooting was going on down the river, steamers and barges. . . . Oh, I know what I'd come into my studio for! It was for those negatives. Benlian wanted them for the diary, so that it could be seen there wasn't any fake about the prints. For he'd said he would make a final spurt that evening and get the job finished. It had taken a long time, but I'll bet *you* couldn't have passed *yourself* any quicker.

When I got back he was sitting in the chair he'd hardly left for weeks, and the diary was on the table by his side. I'd taken all the scaffolding down from the statue, and he was ready to begin. He had to waste one last bit of strength to explain to me, but I drew as close as I could, so that he wouldn't lose much.

"Now, Pudgie," I just heard him say, "you've behaved splendidly, and you'll be quite still up to the finish, won't you?"

I nodded.

"And you mustn't expect the statue to come down and walk about, or anything like that," he continued. "*Those* aren't the really wonderful things. And no doubt people will tell you it hasn't changed; but you'll know better! It's much more wonderful that I should be there than that they should be able to prove it, isn't it? . . . And, of course, I don't know exactly how it will happen, for I've never done this before. . . . You have the letter for the S.P.R.? They can photograph it if they want. . . . By the way, you don't think the same of my statue as you did at first, do you?"

"Oh, it's wonderful!" I breathed.

"And even if, like the God of the others, it doesn't vouchsafe a special sign and wonder, it's Benlian, for all that?"

"Oh, do be quick, Benlian! I can't bear another minute!"

Then, for the last time, he turned his great eaten-out eyes on me.

"*I seal you mine, Pudgie!*" he said.

Then his eyes fastened themselves on the statue.

I waited for a quarter of an hour, scarcely breathing. Benlian's breath came in little flutters, many seconds apart. He had a little clock on the table. Twenty minutes passed, and half an hour. I was a little disappointed, really, that the statue wasn't going to move; but Benlian knew best, and it was filling quietly up with him instead. Then I thought of those zigzag bunches of lightning they draw on the electric-belt advertisements, and I was rather glad after all that the statue *wasn't* going to move. It would have been a little cheap, that . . . vulgar, in a sense. . . . He was breathing a little more sharply now, as if in pain, but his eyes never moved. A dog was howling somewhere, and I hoped that the hooting of the tugs wouldn't disturb Benlian. . . .

Nearly an hour had passed when, all of a sudden, I pushed my chair farther away and cowered back, gnawing my fingers, very frightened. Benlian had suddenly moved. He'd set himself forward in his chair, and he seemed to be strangling. His mouth was wide open, and he began to make long harsh "*Aaaaah-aaaah's!*" I shouldn't have thought passing yourself was such agony.

And then I gave a scream—for he seemed to be thrusting himself back in his chair again, as if he'd changed his mind and didn't want to pass himself at all. But just you ask anybody: When you get yourself just over half-way passed, the other's dragged out of you, and you can't help yourself. His "*Aaaaah's!*" became so loud and horrid that I shut my eyes and stopped my ears. . . . Minutes that lasted; and then there came a high dinning that I couldn't shut out, and all at once the floor shook with a heavy thump. When all was still again I opened my eyes.

His chair had overturned, and he lay in a heap beside it.

I called "Benlian!" but he didn't answer. . . .

He'd passed beautifully; quite dead. I looked up at the statue. It was just as Benlian had said—it didn't open its eyes, nor speak, nor anything like that. Don't you believe chaps who tell you that statues that have been passed into do that; they don't.

But instead, in a blaze and flash and shock, I knew now for the first time what a glorious thing that statue was! Have you ever seen anything for the first time like that? If you have, you never see very much afterwards, you know. The rest's all piffle after that. It was like coming out of fog and darkness into a split in the open heavens, my statue was so transfigured; and I'll bet if you'd been there you'd have clapped your hands, as I did, and chucked the tablecloth over the Benlian on the floor till they should come to cart that empty shell away, and patted the statue's foot and cried: "*Is it all right, Benlian?*"

I did this; and then I rushed excitedly out into the street, to call somebody to see how glorious it was. . . .

They've brought me here for a holiday, and I'm to go back to the studio in two or three days. But they've said that before, and I think it's caddish of fellows not to keep their word—and not to return a valuable diary too! But there isn't a peephole in my room, as there is in some of them (the Emperor of Brazil told me that); and Benlian knows I haven't forsaken him, for they take me a message every day to the studio, and Benlian always answers that it's "*all right*, and I'm to stay where I am for a bit." So as long as he knows, I don't mind so much. But it is a bit rotten hanging on here, especially when the doctors themselves admit how reasonable it all is. . . . Still, if Benlian says it's "*All right . . .*"