

The Brown Man's Servant

By W. W. Jacobs

The shop of Solomon Hyams stood in a small thoroughfare branching off the Commercial Road. In its windows unredeemed pledges of all kinds, from old-time watches to seamen's boots, appealed to all tastes and requirements. Bundles of cigars, candidly described as "wonderful," were marked at absurdly low figures, while silver watches endeavoured to excuse the clumsiness of their make by describing themselves as "strong workmen's." The side entrance, up a narrow alley, was surmounted by the usual three brass balls, and here Mr Hyams' clients were wont to call. They entered as optimists, smiled confidently upon Mr Hyams, argued, protested shrilly, and left the establishment pessimists of a most pronounced and virulent type.

None of these things, however, disturbed the pawnbroker. The drunken client who endeavoured to bail out his Sunday clothes with a tram ticket was accommodated with a chair, while the assistant went to hunt up his friends and contract for a speedy removal; the old woman who, with a view of obtaining a higher advance than usual, poured a tale of grievous woe into the hardened ears of Mr Hyams, found herself left to the same invaluable assistant, and, realising her failure, would at once become cheerful and take what was offered. Mr Hyams' methods of business were quiet and unostentatious, and rumour had it that he might retire at any time and live in luxury.

It was a cold, cheerless afternoon in November as Mr Hyams, who had occasional hazy ideas of hygiene, stood at his door taking the air. It was an atmosphere laden with soot and redolent of many blended odours, but after the fusty smell of the shop it was almost health-giving. In the large public-house opposite, with its dirty windows and faded signboards, the gas was already being lit, which should change it from its daylight dreariness to a resort of light and life.

Mr Hyams, who was never in a hurry to light up his own premises, many of his clients preferring the romantic light which comes between day and night for their visits, was about to leave the chilly air for the warmth inside, when his attention was attracted by a seaman of sturdy aspect stopping and looking in at his window. Mr Hyams rubbed his hands softly. There was an air of comfort and prosperity about this seaman, and the pawnbroker had many small articles in his window, utterly useless to the man, which he would have liked to have sold him.

The man came from the window, made as though to pass, and then paused irresolute before the pawnbroker.

"You want a watch?" said the latter genially. "Come inside."

Mr Hyams went behind his counter and waited.

"I don't want to buy nothing, and I don't want to pawn nothing," said the sailor. "What do you think o' that?"

Mr Hyams, who objected to riddles, especially those which seemed to be against business, eyed him unfavourably from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"We might have a little quiet talk together," said the seaman, "you an' me; we might do a little bit o' business together, you an' me. In the parler, shall we say, over a glass o' something hot?"

Mr Hyams hesitated. He was not averse to a little business of an illicit nature, but there rose up vividly before him the picture of another sailor who had made much the same sort of proposal, and, after four glasses of rum, had merely suggested to him that he should lend him twenty pounds on the security of an I.O.U. It was long since, but the memory of it still rankled.

“What sort of business is it?” he inquired.

“Business that’s too big for you, p’raps,” said the sailor with a lordly air. “I’ll try a bigger place. What’s that lantern-faced swab shoving his ugly mug into the daylight for?”

“Get off,” said the pawnbroker to the assistant, who was quietly and unobtrusively making a third. “Mind the shop. This gentleman and I have business in the parlour. Come this way, sir.

He raised the flap of the counter, and led the way to a small, untidy room at the back of the shop. A copper kettle was boiling on the fire, and the table was already laid for tea. The pawnbroker, motioning his visitor to a dingy leather armchair, went to a cupboard and produced a bottle of rum, three parts full, and a couple of glasses.

“Tea for me, said the seaman, eyeing the bottle wistfully.

The pawnbroker pricked up his ears. “Nonsense, ‘he said, with an attempt at heartiness, “a jolly fellow like you don’t want tea. Have some o’ this.”

“Tea, confound yer!” said the other. “When I say tea, I mean tea.

The pawnbroker, repressing his choler, replaced the bottle, and, seating himself at the table, reached over for the kettle, and made the tea. It was really a pleasing picture of domestic life, and would have looked well in a lantern slide at a temperance lecture, the long, gaunt Jew and the burly seaman hobnobbing over the blameless teapot. But Mr Hyams grew restless. He was intent upon business; but the other, so far as his inroads on the teapot and the eatables gave any indication, seemed to be bent only upon pleasure. Once again the picture of the former sailor rose before Mr Hyams’ eyes, and he scowled fiercely as the seaman pushed his cup up for the fourth time.

“And now for a smoke,” said his visitor, as he settled back in his chair. “A good ‘un, mind. Lord, this is comfort! It’s the first bit o’ comfort I’ve ‘ad since I come ashore five days ago.

The pawnbroker grunted, and producing a couple of black, greasy-looking cigars, gave one to his guest. They both fell to smoking, the former ill at ease, the latter with his feet spread out on the small fender, making the very utmost of his bit of comfort.

“Are you a man as is fond of asking questions?” he said at length.

“No,” said the pawnbroker, shutting his lips illustratively. “Suppose,” said the sailor, leaning forward intently— “suppose a man came to you an’ ses there’s that confounded assistant of yours peeping through the door.”

The pawnbroker got up almost as exasperated as the seaman, and, after rating his assistant through the half-open door, closed it with a bang, and pulled down a small blind over the glass.

“Suppose a man came to you,” resumed the sailor, after the pawnbroker had seated himself again, “and asked you for five hundred pounds for something. Have you got it?”

“Not here,” said the pawnbroker suspiciously. “I don’t keep any money on the premises.

“You could get it, though?” suggested the other.

“We’ll see,” said the pawnbroker; “five hundred pounds is a fortune—five hundred pounds, why it takes years of work—five hundred pounds—”

“I don’t want no blessed psalms,” said the seaman abruptly; “but, look here, suppose I wanted five hundred pounds for something, and you wouldn’t give it. How am I to know you wouldn’t give information to the police if I didn’t take what you offered me for it?”

The pawnbroker threw up his huge palms in virtuous horror.

“I’d mark you for it if you did,” said the seaman menacingly, through his teeth. “It ‘ud be the worst day’s work you ever did. Will you take it or leave it at my price, an’ if you won’t give it, leave me to go as I came?”

“I will,” said the pawnbroker solemnly.

The seaman laid his cigar in the tray, where it expired in a little puddle of tea, and, undoing his coat, cautiously took from his waist a canvas belt. In a hesitating fashion he dangled the belt in his hands, looking from the Jew to the door, and from the door back to the Jew again. Then from a pocket in the belt he took something wrapped in a small piece of dirty flannel, and, unrolling it, deposited on the table a huge diamond, whose smouldering fires flashed back in many colours the light from the gas.

The Jew, with an exclamation, reached forward to handle it, but the sailor thrust him back.

“Hands off,” he said grimly. “None of your ringing the changes on me.

He tipped it over with his finger-nail on the table from side to side, the other, with his head bent down, closely inspecting it. Then, as a great indulgence, he laid it on the Jew’s open palm for a few seconds.

“Five hundred pounds,” he said, taking it in his own hands again.

The pawnbroker laughed. It was a laugh which he kept for business purposes, and would have formed a valuable addition to the goodwill of the shop.

“I’ll give you fifty,” he said, after he had regained his composure.

The seaman replaced the gem in its wrapper again.

“Well, I’ll give you seventy, and risk whether I lose over it,” continued the pawnbroker.

“Five hundred’s my price,” said the seaman calmly, as he placed the belt about his waist and began to buckle it up.

“Seventy-five,” said the pawnbroker persuasively.

“Look here,” said the seaman, regarding him sternly, “you drop it. I’m not going to haggle with you. I’m not going to haggle with any man. I ain’t nojudge o’ diamonds, but I’ve ‘ad cause to know as this is something special. See here.”

He rolled back the coat sleeve from his brawny arm, and revealed a long, newly healed scar.

“I risked my life for that stone,” he said slowly. “I value my life at five hundred pounds. It’s likely worth more than as many thousands, and you know it. However, good-night to you, mate. How much for the tea?”

He put his hand contemptuously in his trouser pocket, and pulled out some small change.

“There’s the risk of getting rid of the stone,” said the pawnbroker, pushing aside the proffered coin. “Where did it come from? Has it got a history?”

“Not in Europe it ain’t,” said the seaman. “So far as I know, you an’ me an’ one other are the only white men as know of it. That’s all I’m going to tell you.”

“Do you mind waiting while I go and fetch a friend of mine to see it?” inquired the pawnbroker. “You needn’t be afraid,” he added hastily. “He’s a respectable man and as close as the grave.

“I’m not afraid,” said the seaman quietly. “But no larks, mind. I’m not a nice man to play them on. I’m pretty strong, an’ I’ve got something else besides.”

He settled himself in the armchair again, and accepting another cigar, watched his host as he took his hat from the sideboard.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” said the latter somewhat anxiously. “You won’t go before I come?”

“Not me,” said the seaman bluntly. “When I say a thing I stick to it. I don’t haggle, and haggle, and—” he paused a moment for a word, “and haggle,” he concluded.

Left to himself, he smoked on contentedly, blandly undisturbed by the fact that the assistant looked in at the door occasionally, to see that things were all right. It was quite a new departure

for Mr Hyams to leave his parlour to a stranger, and the assistant felt a sense of responsibility so great that it was a positive relief to him when his master returned, accompanied by another man.

“This is my friend,” said Mr Hyams, as they entered the parlour and closed the door. “You might let him see the stone.

The seaman took off his belt again, and placing the diamond in his hand held it before the stranger who, making no attempt to take it, turned it over with his finger and examined it critically.

“Are you going to sea again just yet?” he inquired softly.

“Thursday night,” said the seaman. “Five hundred is my price; p’raps he told you. I’m not going to haggle.”

“Just so, just so,” said the other quietly. “It’s worth five hundred.”

“Spoke like a man,” said the seaman warmly.

“I like to deal with a man who knows his own mind,” said the stranger, “it saves trouble. But if we buy it for that amount you must do one thing for us. Keep quiet and don’t touch a drop of liquor until you sail, and not a word to anybody.”

“You needn’t be afraid o’ the licker,” said the sailor grimly. “I shan’t touch that for my own sake.”

“He’s a teetotaler,” explained the pawnbroker. “He’s not.” said the seaman indignantly. “Why won’t you drink, then?” asked the other man. “Fancy,” said the seaman drily, and closed his mouth. Without another word the stranger turned to the pawnbroker, who, taking a pocket-book from his coat, counted out the amount in notes. These, after the sailor had examined them in every possible manner, he rolled up and put in his pocket, then without a word he took out the diamond again and laid it silently on the table. Mr Hyams, his fingers trembling with eagerness, took it up and examined it delightedly.

“You’ve got it a bargain,” said the seaman. “Good-night, gentlemen. I hope, for your sakes, nobody’ll know I’ve parted with it. Keep your eyes open, and trust nobody. When you see black, smell mischief. I’m glad to get rid of it.”

He threw his head back, and, expanding his chest as though he already breathed more freely, nodded to both men, and, walking through the shop, passed out into the street and disappeared.

Long after he had gone, the pawnbroker and his friend, Levi, sat with the door locked and the diamond before them, eagerly inspecting it.

“It’s a great risk,” said the pawnbroker. “A stone like that generally makes some noise.”

“Anything good is risky,” said the other somewhat contemptuously. “You don’t expect to get a wind-fall like that without any drawback, do you?”

He took the stone in his hand again, and eyed it lovingly. “It’s from the East somewhere,” he said quietly. “It’s badly cut, but it’s a diamond of diamonds, a king of gems.”

“I don’t want any trouble with the police,” said the pawnbroker, as he took it from him.

“You are talking now as though you have just made a small advance on a stolen overcoat,” said his friend impatiently. “A risk like that and you have done it before now—is a foolish one to run, the game is not worth the candle. But this—why it warms one’s blood to look at it.”

“Well, I’ll leave it with you,” said the pawnbroker. “If you do well with it I ought not to want to work any more.

The other placed it in an inside pocket, while the owner watched him anxiously.

“Don’t let any accident happen to you to-night, Levi,” he said nervously.

“Thanks for your concern,” said Levi, grimacing. “I shall probably be careful for my own sake.”

He buttoned up his coat and, drinking a glass of hot whisky, went out whistling. He had just reached the door when the pawnbroker called him back.

"If you like to take a cab, Levi," he said, in a low voice so that the assistant should not hear, "I'll pay for it."

"I'll take an omnibus," said Levi, smiling quietly. "You're getting extravagant, Hyams. Besides, fancy the humour of sitting next to a pickpocket with this on me."

He waved a cheery farewell, and the pawnbroker, watching him from the door, scowled angrily as he saw his lighthearted friend hail an omnibus at the corner and board it. Then he went back to the shop, and his everyday business of making advances on flat-irons and other realisable assets of the neighbourhood.

At ten o'clock he closed for the night, the assistant hurriedly pulling down the shutters that his time for recreation might not be unduly curtailed. He slept off the premises, and the pawnbroker, after his departure, made a light supper, and sat revolving the affairs of the day over another of his black cigars until nearly midnight. Then, well contented with himself, he went up the bare, dirty stairs to his room and went to bed, and, despite the excitement of the evening, was soon in a loud slumber, from which he was aroused by a distant and sustained knocking.

II

At first the noise mingled with his dreams, and helped to form them. He was down a mine, and grimy workers with strong picks were knocking diamonds from the walls, diamonds so large that he became despondent at the comparative smallness of his own. Then he awoke suddenly and sat up with a start, rubbing his eyes. The din was infernal to a man who liked to do a quiet business in an unobtrusive way. It was a knocking which he usually associated with the police, and it came from his side door. With a sense of evil strong upon him, the Jew sprang from his bed, and, slipping the catch, noiselessly opened the window and thrust his head out. In the light of a lamp which projected from the brick wall at the other end of the alley he saw a figure below.

"Hulloa!" said the Jew harshly.

His voice was drowned in the noise.

"What do you want?" he yelled. "Hulloa, there! What do you want, I say?"

The knocking ceased, and the figure, stepping back a little, looked up at the window.

"Come down and open the door," said a voice which the pawnbroker recognised as the sailor's.

"Go away," he said, in a low, stern voice. "Do you want to rouse the neighbourhood?"

"Come down and let me in," said the other. "It's for your own good. You're a dead man if you don't."

Impressed by his manner the Jew, after bidding him shortly not to make any more noise, lit his candle, and, dressing hurriedly, took the light in his hand and went grumbling downstairs into the shop.

"Now, what do you want?" he said through the door.

"Let me in and I'll tell you," said the other, "or I'll bawl it through the keyhole, if you like."

The Jew, placing the candle on the counter, drew back the heavy bolts and cautiously opened the door. The seaman stepped in, and, as the other closed the door, vaulted on to the counter and sat there with his legs dangling.

"That's right," he said, nodding approvingly in the direction of the Jew's right hand. "I hope you know how to use it."

“What do you want?” demanded the other irritably, putting his hand behind him. “What time o’ night do you call this for turning respectable men out of their beds?”

“I didn’t come for the pleasure o’ seeing your pretty face again, you can bet,” said the seaman carelessly. “It’s good nature what’s brought me here. What have you done with that diamond?”

“That’s my business,” said the other. “What do you

“I told you I sailed in five days,” said the seaman. “Well, I got another ship this evening instead, and I sail at 6 a.m. Things are getting just a bit too thick for me, an’ I thought out o’ pure good nature I’d step round an put you on your guard.”

“Why didn’t you do so at first?” said the Jew, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Well, I didn’t want to spoil a bargain,” said the seaman carelessly. “Maybe, you wouldn’t have bought the stone if I had told you. Mind that thing don’t go off, I don’t want to rob you. Point it the other way.”

“There was four of us in that deal,” he continued, after the other had complied with his request. “Me an’ Jack Ball and Nosey Wheeler and a Burmese chap; the last I see o’ Jack Ball he was quiet and peaceful, with a knife sticking in his chest. If I hadn’t been a very careful man I’d have had one sticking in mine. If you ain’t a very careful man, and do what I tell you, you’ll have one sticking in yours.”

“Speak a little more plainly,” said the Jew. “Come into the parlour, I don’t want the police to see a light in the shop.”

“We stole it,” said the seaman, as he followed the other into the little back parlour, “the four of us, from—”

“I don’t want to know anything about that,” interrupted the other hastily.

The sailor grinned approvingly, and continued: “Then me an’ Jack being stronger than them, we took it from them two, but they got level with poor Jack. I shipped before the mast on a barque, and they came over by steamer and waited for me.”

“Well, you’re not afraid of them?” said the Jew interrogatively. “Besides, a word to the police—”

“Telling ’em all about the diamond,” said the seaman. “Oh, yes. Well, you can do that now if you feel so inclined. They know all about that, bless you, and, if they were had, they’d blab about the diamond.”

“Have they been dogging you?” inquired the pawnbroker.

“Dogging me!” said the seaman. “Dogging’s no word for it. Wherever I’ve been they’ve been my shadders. They want to hurt me, but they’re careful about being hurt themselves. That’s where I have the pull of them. They want the stone back first, and revenge afterwards, so I thought I’d put you on your guard, for they pretty well guess who’s got the thing now. You’ll know Wheeler by his nose, which is broken.”

“I’m not afraid of them,” said the Jew, “but thank you for telling me. Did they follow you here?”

“They’re outside, I’ve no doubt,” said the other; “but they come along like human cats—leastways, the Burmah chap does. You want eyes in the back of your head for them almost. The Burmese is an old man and soft as velvet, and Jack Ball just afore he died was going to tell me something about him. I don’t know what it was; but, pore Jack, he was a superstitious sort o’ chap, and I know it was something horrible. He was as brave as a lion, was Jack, but he was afraid o’ that little shrivelled-up Burmese. They’ll follow me to the ship to-night. If they’ll only come close enough, and there’s nobody nigh, I’ll do Jack a good turn.”

“Stay here till the morning,” said the Jew.

The seaman shook his head. "I don't want to miss my ship," said he; "but remember what I've told you, and mind, they're villains, both of them, and if you are not very careful, they'll have you, sooner or later. Good-night!"

He buttoned up his coat, and leading the way to the door, followed by the Jew with the candle, opened it noiselessly, and peered carefully out right and left. The alley was empty.

"Take this," said the Jew, proffering his pistol.

"I've got one," said the seaman. "Good-night!"

He strode boldly up the alley, his footsteps sounding loudly in the silence of the night. The Jew watched him to the corner, and then, closing the door, secured it with extra care, and went back to his bedroom, where he lay meditating upon the warning which had just been given to him until he fell asleep.

Before going downstairs next morning he placed the revolver in his pocket, not necessarily for use, but as a demonstration of the lengths to which he was prepared to go. His manner with two or three inoffensive gentlemen of colour was also somewhat strained. Especially was this the case with a worthy Lascar, who, knowing no English, gesticulated cheerfully in front of him with a long dagger which he wanted to pawn.

The morning passed without anything happening, and it was nearly dinnertime before anything occurred to justify the sailor's warning. Then, happening to glance at the window, he saw between the articles which were hanging there a villainous face, the principal feature of which being strangely bent at once recalled the warning of the sailor. As he looked the face disappeared, and a moment later its owner, after furtively looking in at the side door, entered quietly.

"Morning, boss," said he.

The pawnbroker nodded and waited.

"I want to have a little talk with you, boss," said the man, after waiting for him to speak.

"All right, go on," said the other.

"What about 'im?" said the man, indicating the assistant with a nod.

"Well, what about him?" inquired the Jew.

"What I've got to say is private," said the man. The Jew raised his eyebrows.

"You can go in and get your dinner, Bob," he said. "Now, what do you want?" he continued. "Hurry up, because I'm busy."

"I come from a pal o' mine," said the man, speaking in a low voice, "him what was 'ere last night. He couldn't come himself, so he sent me. He wants it back."

"Wants what back?" asked the Jew.

"The diamond," said the other.

"Diamond? What on earth are you talking about?" demanded the pawnbroker.

"You needn't try to come it on me," said the other fiercely. "We want that diamond back, and, mind you, we'll have it."

"You clear out," said the Jew. "I don't allow people to come threatening me. Out you go."

"We'll do more than threaten you," said the man, the veins in his forehead swelling with rage. "You've got that diamond. You got it for five 'undred pound. We'll give you that back for it, and you may think yourself lucky to get it."

"You've been drinking," said the Jew, "or somebody's been fooling you."

"Look here," said the man with a snarl, "drop it. I'm dealing fair an' square by you. I don't want to hurt a hair of your head. I'm a peaceable man, but I want my own, and, what's more, I can get it. I got the shell, and I can get the kernel. Do you know what I mean by that?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," said the Jew. He moved off a little way, and, taking some tarnished spoons from a box, began to rub them with a piece of leather.

"I daresay you can take a hint as well as anybody else," said the other. "Have you seen that before?"

He threw something on the counter, and the Jew started, despite himself, as he glanced up. It was the sailor belt.

"That's a hint," said the man with a leer, "and a very fair one.

The Jew looked at him steadily, and saw that he was white and nervous; his whole aspect that of a man who was running a great risk for a great stake.

"I suppose," he said at length, speaking very slowly, "that you want me to understand that you have murdered the owner of this."

"Understand what you like," said the other with sullen ferocity. "Will you let us have that back again?"

"No," said the Jew explosively. "I have no fear of a dog like you; if it was worth the trouble I'd send for the police and hand you over to them."

"Call them," said the other; "do; I'll wait. But, mark my words, if you don't give us the stone back you're a dead man. I've got a pal what half that diamond belongs to. He's from the East, and a bad man to cross. He has only got to wish it, and you're a dead man without his raising a finger at you. I've come here to do you a good turn; if he comes here it's all up with you."

"Well, you go back to him," jeered the Jew; "a clever man like that can get the diamond without going near it seemingly. You're wasting your time here, and it's a pity; you must have got a lot of friends."

"Well, I've warned you," said the other, "you'll have one more warning. If you won't be wise you must keep the diamond, but it won't be much good to you. It's a good stone, but, speaking for myself, I'd sooner be alive without it than dead with it."

He gave the Jew a menacing glance and departed, and the assistant having by this time finished his dinner, the pawnbroker went to his own with an appetite by no means improved by his late interview.

III

The cat, with its forepaws tucked beneath it, was dozing on the counter. Business had been slack that morning, and it had only been pushed off three times. It had staked out a claim on that counter some five years before, and if anything was required to convince it of the value of the possession it was the fact that it was being constantly pushed off. To a firm-minded cat this alone gave the counter a value difficult to overestimate, and sometimes an obsequious customer fell into raptures over its beauty. This was soothing, and the animal allowed customers of this type to scratch it gently behind the ear.

The cat was for the time the only occupant of the shop. The assistant was out, and the pawnbroker sat in the small room beyond, with the door half open, reading a newspaper. He had read the financial columns, glanced at the foreign intelligence, and was just about to turn to the leader when his eye was caught by the headline, "Murder in Whitechapel."

He folded the paper back, and, with a chilly feeling creeping over him, perused the account. In the usual thrilling style it recorded the finding of the body of a man, evidently a sailor, behind a hoarding placed in front of some shops in course of erection. There was no clue to the victim,

who had evidently been stabbed from behind in the street, and then dragged or carried to the place in which the body had been discovered.

The pockets had been emptied, and the police, who regarded the crime as an ordinary one of murder and robbery, entertained the usual hopes of shortly arresting the assassins.

The pawnbroker put the paper down, and drummed on the table with his fingers. The description of the body left no room for doubt that the victim of the tragedy and the man who had sold him the diamond were identical. He began to realise the responsibilities of the bargain, and the daring of his visitor of the day before, in venturing before him almost red-handed, gave him an unpleasant idea of the lengths to which he was prepared to go. In a pleasanter direction it gave him another idea; it was strong confirmation of Levi's valuation of the stone.

"I shall see my friend again," said the Jew to himself, as he looked up from the paper. "Let him make an attempt on me and we'll see."

He threw the paper down, and, settling back in his chair, fell into a pleasing reverie. He saw his release from sordid toil close at hand. He would travel and enjoy his life. Pity the diamond hadn't come twenty years before. As for the sailor, well, poor fellow, why didn't he stay when he was asked?

The cat, still dozing, became aware of a strong, strange odour. In a lazy fashion it opened one eye, and discovered that an old, shrivelled-up little man, with a brown face, was standing by the counter. It watched him lazily, but warily, out of a half-closed eye, and then, finding that he appeared to be quite harmless, closed it again.

The intruder was not an impatient type of customer. He stood for some time gazing round him; then a thought struck him, and he approached the cat and stroked it with a masterly hand. Never, in the course of its life, had the animal met such a born stroker. Every touch was a caress, and a gentle thrum, thrum rose from its interior in response.

Something went wrong with the stroker. He hurt. The cat started up suddenly and jumped behind the counter. The dark gentleman smiled an evil smile, and, after waiting a little longer, tapped on the counter.

The pawnbroker came from the little room beyond, with the newspaper in his hand, and his brow darkened as he saw the customer. He was of a harsh and dominant nature, and he foresaw more distasteful threats.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded abruptly.

"Morning, sir," said the brown man in perfect English; "fine day."

"The day's well enough," said the Jew.

"I want a little talk with you," said the other suavely, "a little, quiet, reasonable talk."

"You'd better make it short," said the Jew. "My time is valuable."

The brown man smiled, and raised his hand with a deprecatory gesture. "Many things are valuable," said he, "but time is the most valuable of all. And time to us means life."

The Jew saw the covert threat, and grew more irritable

"Get to your business," he said sharply.

The brown man leant on the counter, and regarded him with a pair of fierce, brown eyes, which age had not dimmed.

"You are a reasonable man," he said slowly, "a good merchant. I can see it. But sometimes a good merchant makes a bad bargain. In that case what does the good merchant do?"

"Get out of here," said the Jew angrily.

"He makes the best of it," continued the other calmly, "and he is a lucky man if he is not too late to repair the mischief. You are not too late."

The Jew laughed boisterously.

“There was a sailor once made a bad bargain,” said the brown man, still in the same even tones, “and he died of grief.”

He grinned at this pleasantry until his face looked like a cracked mask.

“I read in this paper of a sailor being killed,” said the Jew, holding it up. “Have you ever heard of the police, of prison, and of the hangman?”

“All of them,” said the other softly.

“I might be able to put the hangman on the track of the sailor’s murderer,” continued the Jew grimly.

The brown man smiled and shook his head. “You are too good a merchant,” he said; “besides, it would be very difficult.”

“It would be a pleasure to me,” said the Jew.

“Let us talk business like men, not nonsense like children,” said the brown man suddenly. “You talk of hangmen. I talk of death. Well, listen. Two nights ago you bought a diamond from a sailor for five hundred pounds. Unless you give me that diamond back for the same money I will kill you.

“What?” snarled the Jew, drawing his gaunt figure to its full height. “You, you miserable mummy?”

“I will kill you,” repeated the brown man calmly. “I will send death to you—death in a horrible shape. I will send a devil, a little artful, teasing devil, to worry you and kill you. In the darkness he will come and spring out on you. You had better give back the diamond, and live. If you give it back I promise you your life.”

He paused, and the Jew noticed that his face had changed, and in place of the sardonic good-humour which had before possessed it, was now distorted by a devilish malice. His eyes gleamed coldly, and he snapped them quickly as he spoke.

“Well, what do you say?” he demanded.

“This,” said the Jew.

He leant over the counter, and, taking the brown man’s skinny throat in his great hand, flung him reeling back to the partition, which shook with his weight. Then he burst into a laugh as the being who had just been threatening him with a terrible and mysterious death changed into a little weak old man, coughing and spitting as he clutched at his throat and fought for breath.

“What about your servant, the devil?” ask the Jew maliciously.

“He serves when I am absent,” said the brown man faintly. “Even now I give you one more chance. I will let you see the young fellow in your shop die first. But no, he has not offended. I will kill—”

He paused, and his eye fell on the cat, which at that moment spang up and took its old place on the counter. “I will kill your cat,” said the brown man. “I will send the devil to worry it. Watch the cat, and as its death is so shall yours be—unless—”

“Unless?” said the Jew, regarding him mockingly.

“Unless to-night before ten o’clock you mark on your door-post two crosses in chalk,” said the other. “Do that and live. Watch your cat.”

He pointed his lean, brown finger at the animal, and, still feeling at his throat, stepped softly to the door and passed out.

With the entrance of other customers, the pawnbroker forgot the annoyance to which he had been subjected, and attended to their wants in a spirit made liberal by the near prospect of fortune. It was certain that the stone must be of great value. With that and the money he had

made by his business, he would give up work and settle down to a life of pleasant ease. So liberal was he that an elderly Irishwoman forgot their slight differences in creeds and blessed him fervently with all the saints in the calendar.

His assistant being back in his place in the shop, the pawnbroker returned to the little sitting-room, and once more carefully looked through the account of the sailor's murder. Then he sat still trying to work out a problem; to hand the murderers over to the police without his connection with the stolen diamond being made public, and, after considerable deliberation, convinced himself that the feat was impossible.

He was interrupted by a slight scuffling noise in the shop, and the cat came bolting into the room, and, after running round the table, went out at the door and fled upstairs. The assistant came into the room.

"What are you worrying the thing for?" demanded his master.

"I'm not worrying it," said the assistant in an aggrieved voice. "It's been moving about up and down the shop, and then it suddenly started like that. It's got a fit, I suppose.

He went back to the shop, and the Jew sat in his chair half ashamed of his nervous credulity, listening to the animal, which was rushing about in the rooms upstairs.

"Go and see what's the matter with the thing, Bob," he cried.

The assistant obeyed, returning hastily in a minute or two, and closing the door behind him.

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded his master.

"The brute's gone mad," said the assistant, whose face was white. "It's flying about the stairs like a wild thing. Mind it don't get in, it's as bad as a mad dog."

"Oh, rubbish," said the Jew. "Cats are often like that."

"Well, I've never seen one like it before," said the other, "and, what's more, I'm not going to see that again."

The animal came downstairs, scuffling along the passage, hit the door with its head, and then dashed upstairs again.

"It must have been poisoned, or else it's mad," said the assistant. "What's it been eating, I wonder?"

The pawnbroker made no reply. The suggestion of poisoning was a welcome one. It was preferable to the sinister hintings of the brown man. But even if it had been poisoned it was a very singular coincidence, unless indeed the Burmese had himself poisoned it. He tried to think whether it could have been possible for his visitor to have administered poison undetected.

"It's quiet now," said the assistant, and he opened the door a little way.

"It's all right," said the pawnbroker, half ashamed of his fears, "get back to the shop."

The assistant complied, and the Jew, after sitting down a little while to persuade himself that he really had no particular interest in the matter, rose and went slowly upstairs. The staircase was badly lighted, and halfway up he stumbled on something soft. He gave a hasty exclamation and, stooping down, saw that he had trodden on the dead cat.

IV

At ten o'clock that night the pawnbroker sat with his friend Levi discussing a bottle of champagne, which the open-eyed assistant had procured from the public-house opposite.

"You're a lucky man, Hyams," said his friend, as he raised his glass to his lips "Thirty thousand pounds! It's a fortune, a small fortune," he added correctively.

"I shall give this place up," said the pawnbroker, "and go away for a time. I'm not safe here."

“Safe?” queried Levi, raising his eyebrows.

The pawnbroker related his adventures with his visitors

“I can’t understand that cat business,” said Levi when he had finished. “It’s quite farcical; he must have poisoned it.”

“He wasn’t near it,” said the pawnbroker, “it was at the other end of the counter.

“Oh, hang it,” said Levi, the more irritably because he could not think of any solution to the mystery. “You don’t believe in occult powers and all that sort of thing. This is the neighbourhood of the Commercial Road; time, nineteenth century. The thing’s got on your nerves. Keep your eyes open, and stay indoors; they can’t hurt you here. Why not tell the police?”

“I don’t want any questions,” said the pawnbroker.

“I mean, just tell them that one or two suspicious characters have been hanging round lately,” said the other. “If this precious couple see that they are watched they’ll probably bolt. There’s nothing like a uniform to scare that sort.

“I won’t have anything to do with the police,” said the pawnbroker firmly.

“Well, let Bob sleep on the premises,” suggested his friend.

“I think I will tomorrow,” said the other. “I’ll have a bed fixed up for him.”

“Why not to-night?” asked Levi.

“He’s gone,” said the pawnbroker briefly. “Didn’t you hear him shut up?”

“He was in the shop five minutes ago,” said Levi.

“He left at ten,” said the pawnbroker.

“I’ll swear I heard somebody only a minute or two back,” said Levi, staring.

“Nerves, as you remarked a little while ago,” said his friend, with a grin.

“Well, I thought I heard him,” said Levi. “You might just secure the door, anyway.

The pawnbroker went to the door and made it fast, giving a careless glance round the dimly-lighted shop as he did so.

“Perhaps you could stay to-night yourself,” he said, as he returned to the sitting-room.

“I can’t possibly, to-night,” said the other. “By the way, you might lend me a pistol of some kind. With all these cut-throats hanging round, visiting you is a somewhat perilous pleasure. They might take it into their heads to kill me to see whether I have got the stone.”

“Take your pick,” said the pawnbroker, going to the shop and returning with two or three secondhand revolvers and some cartridges.

“I never fired one in my life,” said Levi dubiously, “but I believe the chief thing is to make a bang. Which’ll make the loudest?”

On his friend’s recommendation he selected a revolver of the service pattern, and, after one or two suggestions from the pawnbroker, expressed himself as qualified to shoot anything between a chimney-pot and a paving-stone.

“Make your room door fast to-night, and tomorrow let Bob have a bed there,” he said earnestly, as he rose to go. “By the way, why not make those chalk marks on the door just for the night? You can laugh at them tomorrow. Sort of suggestion of the Passover about it, isn’t there?”

“I’m not going to mark my door for all the assassins that ever breathed,” said the Jew fiercely, as he rose to see the other out.

“Well I think you’re safe enough in the house,” said Levi. “Beastly dreary the shop looks. To a man of imagination like myself it’s quite easy to fancy that there is one of your brown friend’s pet devils crouching under the counter ready to spring.”

The pawnbroker grunted and opened the door.

“Poof, fog,” said Levi, as a cloud streamed in. “Bad night for pistol practice. I shan’t be able to hit anything.”

The two men stood in the doorway for a minute, trying to peer through the fog. A heavy, measured tread sounded in the alley; a huge figure loomed up, and, to the relief of Levi, a constable halted before them.

“Thick night, sir,” said he to the pawnbroker.

“Very,” was the reply. “Just keep your eye on my place to-night, constable. There have been one or two suspicious-looking characters hanging about here lately.”

“I will, sir,” said the constable, and moved off in company with Levi.

The pawnbroker closed the door hastily behind them and bolted it securely. His friend’s jest about the devil under the counter occurred to him as he eyed it, and for the first time in his life the lonely silence of the shop became oppressive. He half thought of opening the door again and calling them back, but by this time they were out of earshot, and he had a very strong idea that there might be somebody lurking in the fog outside.

“Bah!” said he aloud, “thirty thousand pounds.”

He turned the gas-jet on full—a man that had just made that sum could afford to burn a little gas—and, first satisfying himself by looking under the counter and round the shop, reentered the sitting-room.

Despite his efforts, he could not get rid of the sense of loneliness and danger which possessed him. The clock had stopped, and the only sound audible was the snapping of the extinguished coals in the grate. He crossed over to the mantelpiece, and, taking out his watch, wound the clock up. Then he heard something else.

With great care he laid the key softly on the mantelpiece and listened intently. The clock was now aggressively audible, so that he opened the case again, and, putting his finger against the pendulum, stopped it. Then he drew his revolver and cocked it, and, with his set face turned towards the door, and his lips parted, waited.

At first—nothing. Then all the noises which a lonely man hears in a house at night. The stairs creaked, something moved in the walls. He crossed noiselessly to the door and opened it. At the head of the staircase he fancied the darkness moved.

“Who’s there?” he cried in a strong voice.

Then he stepped back into the room and lit his lamp. “I’ll get to bed,” he said grimly; “I’ve got the horrors.”

He left the gas burning, and with the lamp in his left hand and the pistol in his right slowly ascended the stairs. The first landing was clear. He opened the doors of each room, and, holding the lamp aloft, peered in. Then he mounted higher, and looked in the rooms, crammed from floor to ceiling with pledges, ticketed and placed on shelves. In one room he thought he saw something crouching in a corner. He entered boldly, and as he passed along one side of a row of shelves could have sworn that he heard a stealthy footfall on the other. He rushed back to the door, and hung listening over the shaky balusters. Nothing stirred, and, satisfied that he must have been mistaken, he gave up the search and went to his bedroom. He set the lamp down on the drawers, and turned to close the door, when he distinctly heard a noise in the shop below. He snatched up the lamp again and ran hastily downstairs, pausing half-way on the lowest flight as he saw a dark figure spreadeagled against the side door, standing on tiptoe to draw back the bolt.

At the noise of his approach, it turned its head hastily, and revealed the face of the brown man; the bolt shot back, and at the same moment the Jew raised his pistol and fired twice.

From beneath the little cloud of smoke, as it rose, he saw that the door stood open and that the figure had vanished. He ran hastily down to the door, and, with the pistol raised, stood listening, trying to peer through the fog.

An unearthly stillness followed the deafening noise of the shots. The fog poured in at the doorway as he stood there hoping that the noise had reached the ears of some chance passerby. He stood so for a few minutes, and then, closing the door again, resolutely turned back and went upstairs.

His first proceeding upon entering his room was to carefully look beneath and behind the heavy, dusty pieces of furniture, and, satisfied that no foe lurked there, he closed the door and locked it. Then he opened the window gently, and listened. The court below was perfectly still. He closed the window, and, taking off his coat, barricaded the door with all the heaviest furniture in the room. With a feeling of perfect security, he complacently regarded his handiwork, and then, sitting on the edge of the bed, began to undress. He turned the lamp down a little, and reloading the empty chambers of his revolver, placed it by the side of the lamp on the drawers. Then, as he turned back the clothes, he fancied that something moved beneath them. As he paused, it dropped lightly from the other side of the bed to the floor.

At first he sat, with knitted brows, trying to see what it was. He had only had a glimpse of it, but he certainly had an idea that it was alive. A rat perhaps. He got off the bed again with an oath and, taking the lamp in his hand, peered cautiously about the floor. Twice he walked round the room in this fashion. Then he stooped down, and, raising the dirty bed hangings, peered beneath.

He almost touched the wicked little head of the brown man's devil, and, with a stifled cry, sprang hastily backward. The lamp shattered against the corner of the drawers, and, falling in a shower of broken glass and oil about his stockinged feet, left him in darkness. He threw the fragment of glass stand which remained in his hand from him, and, quick as thought, gained the bed again, and crouched there, breathing heavily.

He tried to think where he had put the matches, and remembered there were some on the windowsill. The room was so dark that he could not see the foot of the bed, and in his fatuity he had barricaded himself in the room with the loathsome reptile which was to work the brown man's vengeance.

For some time he lay listening intently. Once or twice he fancied that he heard the rustle of the snake over the dingy carpet, and he wondered whether it would attempt to climb on to the bed. He stood up, and tried to get his revolver from the drawers. It was out of reach, and as the bed creaked beneath his weight, a faint hiss sounded from the floor, and he sat still again, hardly daring to breathe.

The cold rawness of the room chilled him. He cautiously drew the bedclothes towards him, and rolled himself up in them, leaving only his head and arms exposed. In this position he began to feel more secure, until the thought struck him that the snake might be inside them. He fought against this idea, and tried to force his nerves into steadiness. Then his fears suggested that two might have been placed in the bed. At this his fears got the upper hand, and it seemed to him that something stirred in the clothes. He drew his body from them slowly and stealthily, and taking them in his arms, flung them violently to the other end of the room. On his hands and knees he now travelled over the bare bed, feeling. There was nothing there.

In this state of suspense and dread time seemed to stop. Several times he thought that the thing had got on the bed, and to stay there in suspense in the darkness was impossible. He felt it over again and again. At last, unable to endure it any longer, he resolved to obtain the matches, and

stepped cautiously off the bed; but no sooner had his feet touched the floor than his courage forsook him, and he sprang hurriedly back to his refuge again.

After that, in a spirit of dogged fatalism, he sat still and waited. To his disordered mind it seemed that footsteps were moving about the house, but they had no terrors for him. To grapple with a man for life and death would be play; to kill him, joy unspeakable. He sat still, listening. He heard rats in the walls and a babel of jeering voices on the staircase. The whole blackness of the room with the devilish, writhing thing on the floor became invested with supernatural significance. Then, dimly at first, and hardly comprehending the joy of it, he saw the window. A little later he saw the outlines of the things in the room. The night had passed and he was alive!

He raised his half-frozen body to its full height, and, expanding his chest, planted his feet firmly on the bed, stretching his long body to the utmost. He clenched his fist, and felt strong. The bed was unoccupied except by himself. He bent down and scrutinised the floor for his enemy, and set his teeth as he thought how he would tear it and mangle it. It was light enough, but first he would put on his boots. He leant over cautiously, and lifting one on to the bed, put it on. Then he bent down and took up the other, and, swift as lightning, something issued from it and, coiling round his wrist, ran up the sleeve of his shirt.

With starting eyeballs the Jew held his breath, and, stiffened into stone, waited helplessly. The tightness round his arm relaxed as the snake drew the whole of its body under the sleeve and wound round his arm. He felt its head moving. It came wriggling across his chest, and, with a mad cry, the wretched man clutched at the front of his shirt with both hands and strove to tear it off. He felt the snake in his hands, and for a moment hoped. Then the creature got its head free, and struck him smartly in the throat.

The Jew's hold relaxed, and the snake fell at his feet. He bent down and seized it, careless now that it bit his hand, and, with bloodshot eyes, dashed it repeatedly on the rail of the bed. Then he flung it to the floor, and, raising his heel, smashed its head to pulp.

His fury passed, he strove to think, but his brain was in a whirl. He had heard of sucking the wound, but one puncture was in his throat, and he laughed discordantly. He had heard that death had been prevented by drinking heavily of spirits. He would do that first, and then obtain medical assistance.

He ran to the door, and began to drag the furniture away. In his haste the revolver fell from the drawers to the floor. He looked at it steadily for a moment, and then, taking it up, handled it wistfully. He began to think more clearly, although a numbing sensation was already stealing over him.

“Thirty thousand pounds!” he said slowly, and tapped his cheek lightly with the cold barrel.

Then he slipped it in his mouth, and, pulling the trigger, crashed heavily to the floor.