

# An Experience

By Richard Marsh

## I. BEFORE DINNER

“I was walking along the shore towards Goring. It was pitch dark. The tide was out. I could see the wet sands gleaming in the darkness. Far out at sea were the lights of two fishing-boats. And that was all. On the landward side there was not a glimmer. The place was a howling wilderness. It was just as though I were alone in space. A keen north-west breeze was blowing. I could hear the moan of the receding waves. The sound seemed to come from miles away. It was cold.”

The speaker paused. He seemed to be describing, when he continued, a scene which was actually at that moment taking place before his eyes.

“I suppose that my thoughts, like the scene, were sombre. Perhaps a touch of the eeriness of my surroundings had got into my veins. It may have done. I believe it had. For as I walked along I began to be haunted by a curious fancy—the fancy that I was not alone. It was absurd. There was not a sound. There was no one else in sight. But there it was—the feeling that someone else was close at hand. I told myself it was absurd. I even stopped, and as I peered about me in the gloom I called myself hard names. But when I again went on with me there went the fancy too. And—”

Again the speaker paused. We were in the public room of the hotel. At that hour, with the exception of him and me, the great room was deserted. We were seated at a little table which was before a window. The twilight was gathering. The gas was not yet lighted. The room was in shadow. As he leaned forward and laid his hand lightly on my wrist I was conscious of a feeling which positively amounted to a shudder. As he himself had said, the thing was absurd; but there it was.

“And I had not gone fifty yards, when I heard a footstep at my side.”

The statement contained nothing which could in itself be called in any way remarkable, but, to use a commonplace, as he uttered it I felt my blood turn cold.

“Just one footstep—the sound of a foot falling softly on the pebbly ground. It was close to my side, on my right. I turned and looked. There was no one there. I told myself I was deluded, that my imagination, preternaturally alert, was playing me a trick. I went on. I had not gone a dozen feet when the footstep came again. I said to myself—

“ ‘You are a fool, my friend. Your brain is over-excited. You are just in that state of mind in which fancy plays one tricks.’

“But the footstep came again. This time there were two of them—the sound of two feet falling rhythmically, just for all the world as though someone were walking at my side and keeping pace with me. I walked on, seeming to pay no heed. I asked myself if by any chance the thing could be an echo. As I was endeavouring to turn the matter over in my mind someone touched me on my right arm.

“I started—I don’t mind owing to you I started. With an exclamation I turned round. There was no one there.”

The speaker withdrew his hand from my wrist. He raised it to his brow.

“I confess that when I perceived that there was no one there I was amazed. The touch had been so real. And yet, after all, perhaps my imagination was again to blame. I went on. I walked

perhaps another dozen yards. Then it came again—the touch! Although I was half expecting it, I wheeled round in a sort of rage, and saw a face staring at me in the darkness.

“My friend—although you are a stranger, sir, to me, I trust you will forgive me if I say my friend—I am free to own that I felt as though my heart had ceased to beat. The face was quite distinct, although I could not make up my mind if it was the face of a man or a devil. As I looked at it it vanished.”

The stranger drew a long breath. He paused again. For my own part I see no reason to conceal the fact that I was glad he did. He had such a horrible way of telling what I saw bade fair to be a “horrible tale,” that I should have been glad if he had paused for good. Although, for some cause, I felt incapable of putting this desire of mine into words, it was not lessened by a suspicion which was dawning on me that the stranger was scarcely in his sober senses. He seemed to read my thoughts.

“You think that I was mad. Or, at least, that I was in one of those conditions of mind and of body in which hallucinations crowd upon the mind. For the moment I thought so too. I walked on at an increased pace, determined to throw off the curious sense of depression which seemed to weigh me down. The place was solitary. The air was fresh; the breeze was keen. It would be easy to relieve the fever which I supposed was in my brain; but my expectation was not realised. The steps went with me, the touch was on my arm, the face came back again. It was impossible this time to doubt that it was a face, for I saw now that it was attached to a body, and that the body was that of a man. He was quite close to me, within twelve inches, and he held my arm firmly in his grip. There was no mistake about that grip, for there are the finger marks still upon my skin. But where he had come from, out of the darkness, was more than I could understand.

“We looked at each other, as I judge, for seconds, then I found my voice.

“ ‘Who are you?’

“He laughed. My friend”—again the stranger, leaning across the little table, laid his hand upon my wrist. I wished he wouldn’t—“it is so easy to speak of certain things, it is so hard to bring them home to a listener’s mind. That man’s laughter froze the marrow in my bones. As he laughed he vanished into space. I could hear his laughter even after he himself had gone; and though I could see nothing there, and no one, I still felt his touch upon my arm, and could hear him laughing at my side.

“It was some seconds before I realised the fact that he had disappeared—it was hard to realise it while I yet was conscious of that iron grip. But at last I tore myself away, and, performing a right-about face, I returned towards the Worthing lights.”

The stranger indulged in another of his ominous pauses. Taking out his handkerchief, he wiped his fingers and the palms of his hands. My situation reminded me of the wedding guest “fixed” by the ancient mariner. I hoped his tale was nearly done. There was an uncanniness about his tone which I am unable to describe.

“But, as I went, the steps went with me. The touch continually returned upon my arm. I quickened. The steps were quickened too. I slowed. The steps were slowed. I broke into a run. The steps ran with me. They were sometimes in front, and sometimes behind; sometimes on my left, and sometimes on my right; sometimes, as I live and breathe, above me in the air. And the laughter came and went. And the man, my friend, the man came and vanished—vanished and came. The man! The man!”

Placing his elbows on the table, the stranger hid his face within his hands. Even in the twilight I could see him shudder. Had I followed my natural impulse I should have risen to my feet and sneaked from the room. But I felt that he might catch me in the act. While I hesitated, feeling that

I could have said a good deal—only I couldn't—the stranger removed his hands. His face looked ghastly white.

“That was three nights ago. Time enough, you say, to have forgotten my illusions. My friend”—I wished most heartily that he would not persist in calling me his friend—“that man, his laugh, and his steps have been with me at intervals ever since. In the darkness and in the light, in public and in private, in the street and in my room. I am listening and watching all the time. My friend, do you not hear his laughter? Listen! There are footsteps on the stairs!”

Again the stranger, leaning over the table, caught me by the wrist.

I may mention, in order that you may thoroughly understand how entire had been the absence of enjoyment with which I had listened to the stranger's pleasing little anecdote, that I have a constitutional objection to stories of the supernatural. As a child, merely to come across the words “ghost story” was to fill me with a sense of sickening repulsion. There was a time in my life when if a person had insisted on pouring into my unwilling ears a tale of “spooks,” that person would have enjoyed the idiomatic pleasure of seeing me “driven into fits.” Even now on such subjects I am of an extremely nervous temperament, and by the time the stranger had got so far I was not sure, of my own knowledge, if I was standing on my head or heels. When he grasped my wrist I felt as I may safely say I never felt before. I was speechless.

“Listen! Those are his footsteps coming up the stairs. One, two! One, two! Can you not hear them coming, step by step?”

I distinctly could hear something, and the feelings with which I heard it are altogether indescribable. Suddenly the stranger's manner changed. He loosed my wrist. He rose to his feet. Almost unconsciously I rose with him.

“Listen! He is gone! Ha! Someone else is coming. But it is not he.”

It was not “he,” unless “he” was the waiter. That functionary had come to light the gas. He seemed startled when he saw us standing there—and well he might have been. To see two men standing facing each other across a narrow table, with faces as white as sheets, trembling like leaves—I know that I could feel my knees going pit-a-pat one against the other—was a sight calculated to cause a surprise even in a waiter's breast. But he held his peace. He lit the gas. He drew the blinds. He went away.

When he had gone, the stranger, turning, fixed his glance again on me. As he did so I was conscious that his glance had on me a very curious effect. I felt that I could not escape it. It held me with a species of fascination. As I had never seen the man in my life before, he was in the most literal sense of the word a stranger. I had been sitting in solitary state, in the half-light of the autumnal afternoon, looking out upon the sea. He had come in and found me there. Coming to the table at which I sat, he had entered into conversation—conversation which had drifted into that exhilarating little story of his stroll towards Goring. In the imperfect light I had not been able to make out what manner of man he was. Now I saw—though, I own, still dimly—that he was tall—unusually tall, with striking, clean-shaven face, and a remarkable pair of eyes. His manner, too, was singularly impressive—I protest that I found it so, at any rate. Raising his arm, he pointed at me with the index finger of his right hand.

“You see, it is light, but I still watch and listen. I know that he will come. Did I not say so? Hark! Do you not hear the steps coming up the stairs? It is the man!”

As before, I heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Supremely silly though it was—and, worst of all, I knew that it was silly—the sound made me feel sick.

“See! The door is opening.”

I turned. The door was opening, apparently of its own accord, for it stood wide open, and there was no one there. I stood staring like a fool for some seconds, I imagine, when the stranger, leaning forward, almost whispered in my ear—

“It is the man!”

It was a man, for at that instant a man came in. He was a great ungainly-looking fellow. He appeared to me to be deformed. He had the ugliest head and face I ever saw upon a pair of shoulders. He slouched rather than walked. He wore no cap, and his hair was in the wildest disarray. His dress—he wore a sort of nondescript fisherman’s costume—was anything but suited to the place in which he was. He stood just within the door, staring at me with half-sullen, half-ferocious eyes. With an effort which surprised myself, I drew myself together.

“Don’t talk nonsense!” I cried. “There is nothing strange about the man. He is only a fisherman. He has doubtless business with someone here in the hotel.”

The stranger only said—“He comes this way.”

He did, moving towards us across the room with an awkward method of progression, which curiously recalled the movements of a crab. He advanced to within three feet of where we were. Had I chosen I might have reached out and touched him with my hand.

“He is gone!”

It seems absurd to write it, but he was, and from before our eyes.

“The door has closed!”

It had, with a sullen bang. Where the man had gone to or who had closed the door were problems which at the moment I did not attempt to solve. The stranger drew himself up straight. There was a ring of triumph in his tone.

“Was it a delusion? Am I mad?”

A minute before I should have been prepared to say he was. Then I was more than half inclined to think that we, both of us, were mad together. As I was trying to collect my scattered senses—they were very scattered senses, too!—the stranger whirled round with a vigour and suddenness which were anything but soothing.

“He has you by the arm!”

As he spoke, a grip fastened on my arm which compressed the limb as if it were being held within an iron vice. I turned, half in terror, half in pain. The man was standing on my left, grasping me with his hideous paw, though how he had got there, unless he came through the solid wall, is more than I can say. I struck out at him in a spasm of sudden rage; but, before the blow could reach him, he was gone.

“You heard his laughter!”

Did I? Didn’t I! It was ringing in my ears, although the man himself had fled—an unearthly peal, such as we might fancy coming from a fiend in hell.

“Ring the bell,” I gasped. “For God’s sake ring the bell!”

“What good can that do? That will not keep him from us. He comes to me when I am in the crowded street. Ssh! He is here!”

He was; this time upon my right. He stood at a distance of some five or six feet, eyeing me with a savage leer. I gazed at him transfixed. He seemed to take a malignant pleasure in my evident distress. After a momentary pause he put his hand into his blouse, and drew from it a knife. It was a long, thin knife such as butchers use. He looked alternately at the knife and at me. Then, holding it in his left hand, he began to smooth it upon the palm of his right.

“I wonder,” whispered the stranger, “if it is for your throat or mine.”

I really didn't know—I won't say I didn't care, but I certainly had no disposition to inquire. The man continued to draw the knife backwards and forwards on the palm of his hand, fixing on me, all the time, a glance of peculiar malignancy.

“Put up that knife!” I said.

“Knife!” he answered, in a sort of echo.

“Do you hear? Put away that knife!”

“Knife!” he echoed.

I advanced towards him with a degree of decision which filled me with amazement.

“You think you can frighten us. You play your tricks very well, but take my advice and don't go too far. Put up that knife or give it to me!”

His only answer was to raise the weapon threateningly in the air.

“Take care!” cried the stranger; “he will stab you.”

“We shall see.”

I sprang at him; we grappled. He struggled fiercely in my arms, then he collapsed as if he were a bladder—there was nothing there. But, at my feet, his knife was lying on the ground.

“He has left his knife,” said the stranger. I saw that plainly; it was the only thing there was to see. “Pick it up.”

I picked it up. I examined it as I held it in my hand. The thing was real enough, but where had its owner gone? I carried it to the table. I laid it down. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my brow. I was conscious that the stranger's eyes were on me all the time. I was conscious, too, that my brain was in a whirl. I felt as if all these things were happening in a dream; that they were but fictions; that I was in a nightmare from which, if I could but make an effort, I should awake. It seemed to me that some function of the brain had ceased to do its work, that something had snapped. Was I mad? I had read somewhere that the state of madness was rendered worse by the fact that madmen were themselves aware, though perhaps but vaguely, of their condition. Was it possible that I, without a moment's warning, had crossed the border-line which divides the sane man from the mad? Were we, then, a pair of lunatics?

The knife was real enough, there was no question about that. I eyed it keenly as it lay upon the table, as ugly a looking weapon as one would care to see. I put out my hand to take it up. I already had it by the handle, when it was snatched away. Again that appalling laughter rang in my ears. Looking up, there was the owner back again.

When I perceived that this was the case I endeavoured, so to speak, to steady my mind. Was the thing an optical delusion? Was I the victim of hallucination? Such an explanation seemed opposed to common sense, yet I had sense enough to know that the facts, as they appeared, were more in opposition still.

I turned to the stranger.

“Are you sure that there is someone there?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Are not you?”

“Frankly, I am not. But I should like to be.”

“Suppose you go and take him by the hand.”

“I will.”

The man had resumed his previous occupation of drawing the flat side of the knife backwards and forwards upon his open palm. I advanced towards him with outstretched hand.

“Will you not shake hands?”

He immediately grasped my hand in his, and, advancing his knife, drew the sharp edge across the back of my knuckles. As he did so he laughed. I snatched my hand away. He had cut the skin so that the blood flowed freely. It was an act of wanton savagery.

“You cur!”

I applied my handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood. Immediately the white linen showed a vivid stain. As I was reflecting on this unpleasant proof of the man’s corporality—and of the corporality of his knife—the door opened, and my wife came in. My first impulse, when I saw her enter, was to get her out again. The idea of her remaining, even for a second, in the same room with such a ruffian was unendurable. I hurried to her.

“Ada, come away!”

I was about to take her by the hand and lead her from the room. But she, drawing back a little, looked at me with apparent surprise.

“Why? What do you want? The dinner-bell will ring in a minute.”

“Never mind the dinner-bell. We will wait for that below. I do not wish you to remain with that man.”

“Man? What man? Do you mean the gentleman who is standing at the table?”

Turning, I saw that she was looking at the stranger. But between him and us was the fellow with the knife. He was still smoothing the blade upon his palm, and still glaring at me with his malignant leer.

I dropped my voice. “Not that one; the other.”

“The other? What do you mean?”

Stretching out my hand, I removed my handkerchief so that she could see the wound, from which the blood still trickled.

“Look what he has done with that knife of his. The fellow is unsafe. Come with me. I mean to send for the police.”

I could not tell if it was my words, or the sight of my wound, or the sight of the man, which caused her to shrink away from me. A startled look was on her face.

“Raymond, what are you talking about? There is no one here except this gentleman and you.”

The stranger interposed.

“There has been someone here. But he has gone. Now we are alone.”

I looked. It was as he said—the man had gone. But, as before, where or how was more than I could say. I knew enough of his peculiarities to be aware that the fact of his having gone was no guarantee that he would not immediately return.

## II. AT DINNER

While I was hesitating what to do, my wife, moving to the stranger, broke into an animated conversation. It seemed to me that her manner was a trifle forced. Her words came to me as though I heard them in a dream.

“Beautiful weather, hasn’t it been? Quite lovely. I have had such a delicious walk along the shore towards Goring.”

“It is a charming walk towards Goring—especially at night.”

I have never been that way at night. I should think it’s rather lonely, isn’t it? Raymond, what are you standing there for? You look as though you were moonstruck. Come here, do.”

“I—I was thinking.”

“Very civil of you. Come here.”

I went to her. She was on my left, the stranger on my right. All at once he whispered in my ear—

“He has come back again.”

I whirled right round. He had—the man. He was at that moment coming through the door. Moving rapidly across the room, he came straight to me. He held out to me his knife.

“Confound you!” I exclaimed.

I clenched my fist to strike at him. The stranger tapped me on the shoulder. “He has gone!”

He had—in front of me was Charlie Oates. Oates laughed.

“What’s the matter? You look ferocious. Do you want to murder me?”

“Oates! You!”

“Of course it’s me! Didn’t you know me? I thought that I was recognisable.”

“Of course, I know you. Only I didn’t see you coming. You took me by surprise.” I glanced uneasily about the room.

Where had that scoundrel gone? My wife laid her hand upon my arm. From her tone I perceived she was uneasy.

“Raymond, are you unwell?”

“I am quite well. Only this sort of thing is rather startling.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Don’t you call it startling when a man comes and goes in this eccentric manner?”

My wife was silent. Looking at her, I saw that her eyes were open at their widest.

“Are you alluding to me?” asked Oates with a laugh. “I wasn’t aware that my comings and goings could be called eccentric.”

“Of course I wasn’t. But there’s the dinner-bell! I’ll just run upstairs and attend to my hand.”

“What is the matter with your hand?” asked Ada.

“Can’t you see?”

I held it out in front of me. The stranger spoke.

“There is nothing the matter with your hand.”

There wasn’t—or, at least, there didn’t seem to be.

“Well,” I cried, “this is the very latest! Talk about the quickest thing in cures! And—why, there isn’t even a stain upon my handkerchief! What’s become of all the blood?” I turned to the stranger. “You saw him draw his knife across my knuckles.”

My wife struck in—“Saw who draw his knife across your knuckles? Raymond, what are you talking about?” She addressed the stranger. “What is he talking about?”

The stranger bowed.

“You should know better than I!” As he bowed I distinctly saw him wink at me. I presumed that he intended to convey a hint that it would be just as well to keep our little adventure to ourselves. I took what I believe in sporting circles is called “the tip.”

“Come along, Ada; they will have begun dinner before we get there.”

Unceremoniously I slipped her arm through mine. Before this several other persons had put in an appearance. They, with one accord, were moving towards the dining-room. Among them were Oates and the stranger. But the wife hung back.

“Raymond, do you think you had better go down to dinner?”

“My good child, what do you mean? I’m starving!”

“But—are you sure you are quite well?”

“I’m well enough; but—” I glanced after the stranger. His back was turned to me. He was going through the doorway, with Oates at his side. “The fact is, I have had an adventure. It has a little upset me.”

“What sort of an adventure?”

“Rather a curious one. I will tell you about it afterwards.”

“Why not tell me about it now, Raymond? You make me feel concerned; you seem so strange.”

I was hesitating whether I should or should not tell her there and then, when a voice said, speaking, as it appeared, quite close to my ear—

“Come down to dinner!”

I turned with a start.

“By Jove!” I cried. “Who was that?”

“Who was what? I heard nothing. There is no one here. Raymond, what is wrong?”

“There is nothing wrong. Only I—I suppose I’m hungry. Don’t let’s stop here, my dear; let’s get downstairs.”

I did not wait for her reply; I gave her no chance to make one. I am afraid I almost dragged her from the room. Catching her arm tightly in mine, I moved quickly towards the door before she had an opportunity to speak. I fancy that my method of proceeding took her breath away. I hurried with her down the stairs, and into the dining-room, in a style which must have led anyone who watched our progress to suppose that we were afraid that, if we did not make haste, all the dinner would be gone. I placed her in a seat.

“Raymond,” she demanded, as I took the chair beside her, “are you mad?”

“That, my dear, is a question which I have seriously asked myself already.”

She looked at me with an expression in her eyes of absolute terror. I pretended not to notice it. They were serving the soup. While they did so, I looked up and down the table. In front of me was the stranger. Something caused me to be aware of it, although I did not see him. I made quite an effort to prevent my eyes travelling in his direction. I ate my soup without once glancing up from my plate. At the same time I was conscious that my wife was not eating hers; I felt that she was watching me. While they were handing round the fish I did glance up. My eyes rested for a moment on the stranger sitting opposite. As they did so he said in a low tone, which yet was distinctly audible to me, “He is here again!”

“Where?”

“Leaning over your shoulder!”

I turned with a shudder of irresistible repugnance. I nearly dashed my head against the scoundrel’s face. He was actually leaning over my shoulder, peering into my face with his hideous leer. I rose from my chair.

“You villain!” I exclaimed.

Although my back was turned to the stranger, I heard him say behind me, “He is gone!”

He was—like a flash of lightning. I sank back into my chair with a feeling of inconceivable amazement.

“Raymond, what are you doing?”

My wife, as she put the question, seemed to be in a state of nervous agitation.

“Nothing. I—I fancy I must have a touch of indigestion.”

I perceived that the tears were standing in her eyes.

“I am sure you are not well.”

“Don’t make a scene, my dear; I am quite well. Only—only this sort of thing is startling.”

“I should think it was.” This I heard the young fellow who was sitting next to me mutter to his friend. “I should say he had got ’em again.”

He appeared to be under the extraordinary impression that I was suffering from the effects of dipsomania, which was agreeable hearing to a man who had all his life been a total abstainer from strong drink. But, saying nothing, and endeavouring to steady my nerves—my hands were trembling—I attacked my fish.

“Don’t you hear him laughing?”

I had scarcely swallowed a mouthful when the stranger put this question to me from across the table. The moment he had put it a peal of horrible laughter rang through the room. I laid down my knife and fork.

“The villain ought not to be allowed in the room. Where is the man?”

The young fellow who had made that uncomplimentary remark about my having “got ’em again” seemed to think that the question was addressed to him.

“What man?” he asked.

“The man who was laughing.”

“Laughing?”

A startled look was on the youngster’s face.

“I assure you the man is unsafe. He has already used his knife to me in a way which proves that he would stick at nothing. Where is he?”

I stood up to see. As I did so an observation was made by a person who was sitting some little distance down the table on the opposite side.

“I don’t fancy the gentleman can be quite well. If he will take the advice of a medical man—I happen to be a medical man—I think that he had better retire to his own apartment.”

I was nettled at this.

“I am obliged to you, sir, but I happen to be in the enjoyment of perfect health. I don’t think it is unreasonable to suggest that the sound of that man’s laughter is calculated to unsettle the strongest nerves.

“But I heard no laughter.”

This was said by an elderly gentleman who was seated next to the person who asserted that he was a medical man.

“In that case I congratulate you. Your hearing, sir, must be dulled. I should say that you are the only person in the room who didn’t. I can only hope that it won’t occur again.”

“I hope I won’t.”

This was from the youngster on my right. There was on his face a look which I did not like. On second thoughts I perceived that he was not moved so much by terror as by a desire to smile. I returned to the consideration of my fish. I was aware that I had created a small sensation. I was also aware that my wife was endeavouring to conceal the fact that she was crying at my side. Before, however, I could find words with which to quiet her, the stranger, leaning across the table, whispered—

“He is back again!”

Down went my knife and fork with something, I fancy, of a clatter.

“Are you sure?”

“Look for yourself and see.”

I sprang to my feet. I searched eagerly round the room. As I rose the young fellow on my right rose with me.

“Steady, old man! Don’t you think you had better take it easy and sit down?”

He was speaking to me as if I were a child. But at that moment I caught sight of the scoundrel leaning with his back against the wall.

“Look at him! Do you see his knife? I ask you if such a fellow ought to be allowed in the dining-room of a respectable hotel?”

“Certainly not, but they will get in sometimes, don’t you know. Now sit down, do.”

The youngster was still talking to me as if I were a child; he even laid his hand upon my shoulder. Twisting myself free, I fixed on him a glance which caused him to shrink a little back.

“Be so good, sir, as to remove your hand. If you suppose that I am a person with whom you may take liberties you are under a singular delusion. I am a resident in this hotel, and as such I have a right to object to the presence of improper characters. That man there—I can see you! it is no good your dodging behind the waiter!—has been annoying me for a good time. He has been coming and going in a way which will end in making me quite ill. I intend to submit to it no longer; I insist on his removal.”

Many of the diners had risen from the table. The room was in confusion. An old lady exclaimed—

“What is the matter with the man? Is he mad?”

Another old woman replied, speaking behind her hand, but I heard her, in spite of the precautions which she took to prevent me—

“Drink, my dear!”

Someone cried, “Mad as a March hare!”

I faced the speakers. “I regret that any here should think it necessary to insult me. I expected, instead of insult, your support. Surely there is none here who can say that such a man as that is a fit person to be amongst us.”

“Raymond,” cried my wife, “come away with me. Do come!”

“What is the use of that? He is sure to follow me.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised; they do do that at times.”

This was from the youngster on my right. A waiter advanced.

“Come this way, sir.”

“Pray, why?”

“I think you’d better.”

The man’s tone was actually cajoling:

“Do you indeed? I think you had better do your duty and remove that man.”

“What man, sir? I don’t see no man.”

“Don’t you see no man? I allude to that man there—with no hat on, and with the butcher’s knife in his hand.”

The waiter shrank away.

“I—I—don’t know what you’re talking of; I—I shouldn’t think, sir, as you was well.”

The man was too insignificant to bandy words with.

“Bring me the landlord!” I demanded.

“Here is the landlord coming.”

He was; he advanced towards me up the room.

“Landlord, you appear to harbour some very curious characters in your hotel. You see that man there with the butcher’s knife? he has been annoying me for the last hour and more. He has already tried to murder me. Before he actually commits a crime I insist on his removal.”

“He shall be removed at once. You had better come with me. They will have more difficulty in removing him while you are here.”

“Why should that be? Am I not to remain because such a villain as that wishes to drive me out?”

“He’s a very dangerous character; he’s often here. Come along.”

“How dare you try to take my arm! Then if he is often here the fact should be widely known, and you should be prevented from receiving respectable people as your guests. Stand aside, sir! remove your hand! See, he’s coming!”

I fancy the landlord was a little taken by surprise by the way in which I whirled him round.

“There, he’s got upon the table!”

The scoundrel had, right among the plates and dishes.

“Let me get at him! I’ll soon put him off again, knife or no knife.”

I began to climb on the table.

“Now then, look what he’s doing! Catch hold of him, some of you.” I imagined that the landlord’s words referred to the scoundrel who was playing his antics among the plates and dishes; but, to my surprise, they referred to me. At least, I presume so, for, simultaneously, half a dozen persons caught me by the shoulders. I thrust them from me with an effort of strength of which I had not thought I was capable. At the same instant the man sat upon the table, and leaping over their heads, landed on the floor.

“Here he is! Stand back!” I cried.

They stood back, hustling each other in a way which was almost comical. I addressed the individual who was the cause of all the tumult.

“Now, you scamp, I will try conclusions with you. No one else seems disposed to do so, so I will take that office on myself. Out you go.

I advanced to him. He did not flinch. He raised his knife threateningly in the air. But I did not care for that. Running in, I caught him round the waist. I lifted him from his feet. He wound his arms about me. He was strong, but I myself am not a weakling. We struggled furiously. Finding that I could not throw him, I slipped my right hand upwards and caught him with it by the throat. In my rage I was half inclined to choke the life out of him. I could have done it! But, as I compressed my grasp, without an instant’s warning he was gone! I was struggling with a phantom! There was nothing there!

“He is gone!” I exclaimed, looking about to see if there were traces of him left.

“Quite time he was gone.” This, I knew, came from the youth who had been sitting on my right. “If he had not gone I should.”

“Now then, catch hold of him before he has another attack. But don’t use any more force than you can help.”

Incredible though it may seem, the landlord was urging on the waiters to attack me. But before they could realise the atrocity of their employer’s requirements the stranger interposed.

“Excuse me, but I think that this is a case with which I had better deal. Will you kindly, for one moment, leave this gentleman to me?”

“They had better,” I declared. “You seem to be the only sane man here. Anybody would think that in this hotel ruffians with butchers’ knives were not only allowed, but encouraged to do exactly as they please.”

“Look me in the eyes.” I did so, though I certainly did not know why. “Now then! Presto! Bang!”

I don’t know what he did. He did something. It seemed to me that he raised his hand and snapped his fingers in the air. That same second something happened to me, though I really don’t know what. A great weight seemed lifted from me; my brain seemed all at once to clear. It was

as though I had escaped from the toils of some horrid nightmare, as though I had woken all at once from sleep. I looked about me with awakening eyes. I knew that I had been an actor in some sort of dreadful dream. There were the people gathered round. There was the stranger standing just in front of me. He had a slight smile upon his lips. He thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself.”

He produced a folded paper. Unfolding it, he held it up before their eyes. It was a placard, printed in alternative lines of black and red.

“Signor Segundi, the world-renowned prestidigitateur, begs to announce that he will give his celebrated entertainment.”

It ran in some such fashion. It was an advertisement of an entertainment of “magic and mystery” to be given at the Assembly Rooms that very night. The stranger placed his hand against his breast and bowed. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am Signor Segundi, wholly at your service. It has occurred to me that I might vary my little programme with the addition of some slight novelty. Hypnotism, as you are aware, is, as they put it, all the rage. Was it not possible to give my programme a scientific turn? Unfortunately, I am no hypnotist. With the best intentions in the world I have only been able to perform a few experiments upon my wife. In these matters an artist’s wife is regarded with suspicion by the public eye. About an hour ago I entered the room upstairs. I found this gentleman seated in it all alone. Something told me that chance, that unknown quantity, had all at once, so to speak, thrown a subject at my head. The true artist is he who grasps at opportunities. I grasped at mine, and, if I may say so, for the moment was inspired. I told a story about a ghost—a most mysterious ghost—which I met upon the road to Goring. As I proceeded with my narrative I found, to my astonishment, that the subject was being hypnotised before I was myself aware of it. We had a most charming little entertainment quite between ourselves and entirely in private. We have had, as you have seen, an equally charming little entertainment of a more public kind. Ladies and gentlemen, I have to thank you for your kind attention to that portion of our programme which is now concluded.”

The fellow bowed—and ceased. I gasped. He had made of me a laughing-stock—a live advertisement! He turned to me.

“I have to tender you my heartiest thanks, sir, for the generous assistance you have rendered, and which has made the experiment so entirely successful.”

I endeavoured to restrain myself.

“I hope you will consider it equally successful by the time I’ve finished.”

He would have done if they had let me get at him. But Oates and my wife and others intervened. I am not a Bombastes Furioso. I am not, as a rule, a fighting man. But if they had allowed me to get within the reach of that impostor, he should have had as successful a five minutes’ entertainment as he ever enjoyed. As it was, they got him out of the room by one door, and me out of it by another.

“It seems to me,” I observed to my wife, when she and I were alone together, “that if one man is allowed to play hanky-panky with another man, not only against his will, but actually without his knowledge, the liberty of the subject promises to grow smaller by degrees and beautifully less.”

My wife agreed with me.

“I thought you were mad,” she said.

“I am mad; but I will make him madder before I’ve done.”

So I will. I intend to keep a keen lookout for Signor Segundi's "Celebrated Entertainment." When I hear of its being about to take place, I mean to form one of the audience and try on the Signor a little experiment planned and carried out on lines of my own. I hope it will be as successful as his was.