

The Indian Lamp-Shade

By E. G. Swain

What has been already said of Mr. Batchel will have sufficed to inform the reader that he is a man of very settled habits. The conveniences of life, which have multiplied so fast of late, have never attracted him, even when he has heard of them. Inconveniences to which he is accustomed have always seemed to him preferable to conveniences with which he is unfamiliar. To this day, therefore, he writes with a quill, winds up his watch with a key, and will drink no soda-water but from a tumbling bottle with the cork wired to its neck.

The reader accordingly will learn without surprise that Mr. Batchel continues to use the reading-lamp he acquired 80 years ago as a Freshman in College. He still carries it from room to room as occasion requires, and ignores all other means of illumination. It is an inexpensive lamp of very poor appearance, and dates from a time when labour-saving was not yet a fine art. It cannot be lighted without the removal of several of its parts, and it is extinguished by the primitive device of blowing down the chimney. What has always shocked the womenfolk of the Batchel family, however, is the lamp's unworthiness of its surroundings. Mr. Batchel's house is furnished in dignified and comfortable style, but the handsome lamp, surmounting a fluted brazen column, which his relatives bestowed upon him at his institution, is still unpacked.

One of his younger and subtler relatives succeeded in damaging the old lamp, as she thought, irretrievably, by a well-planned accident, but found it still in use a year later, most atrociously repaired. The whole family, and some outsiders, had conspired to attack the offending lamp, and it had withstood them all.

The single victory achieved over Mr. Batchel in this matter is quite recent, and was generally unexpected. A cousin who had gone out to India as a bride, and that of Mr. Batchel's making, had sent him an Indian lamp-shade. The association was pleasing. The shade was decorated with Buddhist figures which excited Mr. Batchel's curiosity, and to the surprise of all his friends he set it on the lamp and there allowed it to remain. It was not, however, the figures which had reconciled him to this novel and somewhat incongruous addition to the old lamp. The singular colour of the material had really attracted him. It was a bright orange-red, like no colour he had ever seen, and the remarks of visitors whose experience of such things was greater than his own soon justified him in regarding it as unique. No one had seen the colour elsewhere; and of all the tints which have acquired distinctive names, none of the names could be applied without some further qualification. Mr. Batchel himself did not trouble about a name, but was quite certain that it was a colour that he liked; and more than that, a colour which had about it some indescribable fascination. When the lamp had been brought in, and the curtains drawn, he used to regard with singular pleasure the interiors of rooms with whose appearance he was unaccustomed to concern himself. The books in his study, and the old-fashioned solid furniture of his dining room, as reflected in the new light, seemed to assume a more friendly aspect, as if they had previously been rigidly frozen, and had now thawed into life. The lamp-shade seemed to bestow upon the light some active property, and gave to the rooms, as Mr. Batchel said, the appearance of being wide-awake.

These optical effects, as he called them, were especially noticeable in the dining room, where the convenience of a large table often induced him to spend the evening. Standing in a favourite attitude, with his elbow on the chimney-piece, Mr. Batchel found increasing pleasure in

contemplating the interior of the room as he saw it reflected in a large old mirror above the fireplace. The great mahogany sideboard across the room, seemed, as he gazed upon it, to be penetrated by the light, and to acquire a softness of outline, and a sort of vivacity, which operated pleasantly upon its owner's imagination. He found himself playfully regretting, for example, that the mirror had no power of recording and reproducing the scenes enacted before it since the close of the 18th century, when it had become one of the fixtures of the house. The ruddy light of the lamp-shade had always a stimulating effect upon his fancy, and some of the verses which describe his visions before the mirror would delight the reader, but that the author's modesty forbids their reproduction. Had he been less firm in this matter we should have inserted here a poem in which Mr. Batchel audaciously ventured into the domain of Physics. He endowed his mirror with the power of retaining indefinitely the light which fell upon it, and of reflecting it only when excited by the appropriate stimulus. The passage beginning

The mirror, whilst men pass upon their way,
Treasures their image for a later day,

might be derided by students of optics. Mr. Batchel has often read it in after days, with amazement, for, when his idle fancies came to be so gravely substantiated, he found that in writing the verses he had stumbled upon a new fact—a fact based as soundly, as will soon appear, upon experiment, as those which the text-books use in arriving at the better-known properties of reflection.

He was seated in his dining room one frosty evening in January. His chair was drawn up to the fire, and the upper part of the space behind him was visible in the mirror. The brighter and clearer light thrown down by the shade was shining upon his book. It is the fate of most of us to receive visits when we should best like to be alone, and Mr. Batchel allowed an impatient exclamation to escape him, when, at nine o'clock on this evening, he heard the door-bell. A minute later, the boy announced "Mr. Mutcher," and Mr. Batchel, with such affability as he could hastily assume, rose to receive the caller. Mr. Mutcher was the Deputy Provincial Grand Master of the Ancient Order of Gleaners, and the formality of his manner accorded with the gravity of his title. Mr. Batchel soon became aware that the rest of the evening was doomed. The Deputy Provincial Grand Master had come to discuss the probable effect of the Insurance Act upon Friendly Societies, of which Mr. Batchel was an ardent supporter. He attended their meetings, in some cases kept their accounts, and was always apt to be consulted in their affairs. He seated Mr. Mutcher, therefore, in a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, and gave him his somewhat reluctant attention.

"This," said Mr. Mutcher, as he looked round the room, "is a cosy nook on a cold night. I cordially appreciate your kindness, Reverend Sir, in affording me this interview, and the comfort of your apartment leads me to wish that it might be more protracted."

Mr. Batchel did his best not to dissent, and as he settled himself for a long half-hour, began to watch the rise and fall, between two lines upon the distant wall-paper of the shadow of Mr. Mutcher's side-whisker, as it seemed to beat time to his measured speech.

The D.P.G.M. (for these functionaries are usually designated by initials) was not a man to be hurried into brevity. His style had been studiously acquired at Lodge meetings, and Mr. Batchel knew it well enough to be prepared for a lengthy preamble.

"I have presumed," said Mr. Mutcher, as he looked straight before him into the mirror, 'to trespass upon your Reverence's forbearance, because there are one or two points upon this new Insurance Act which seem calculated to damage our long-continued prosperity—I say long-

continued prosperity," repeated Mr. Mutchet, as though Mr. Batchel had missed the phrase. "I had the favour of an interview yesterday," he went on, "with the Sub-Superintendent of the Perseverance Accident and General (these were household words in circles which Mr. Batchel frequented, so that he was at no loss to understand them), and he was unanimous with me in agreeing that the matter called for careful consideration. There are one or two of our rules which we know to be essential to the welfare of our Order, and yet which will have to go by the board—I say by the board—as from July next. Now we are not Medes, nor yet Persians"—Mr. Mutchet was about to repeat "Persians" when he was observed to look hastily round the room and then to turn deadly pale. Mr. Batchel rose and hastened to his support; he was obviously unwell. The visitor, however, made a strong effort, rose from his chair at once, saying "Pray allow me to take leave," and hurried to the door even as he said the words. Mr. Batchel, with real concern, followed him with the offer of brandy, or whatever might afford relief. Mr. Mutchet did not so much as pause to reply. Before Mr. Batchel could reach him he had crossed the hall, and the door-knob was in his hand. He thereupon opened the door and passed into the street without another word. More unaccountably still, he went away at a run, such as ill became his somewhat majestic figure, and Mr. Batchel closed the door and returned to the dining-room in a state of bewilderment. He took up his book, and sat down again in his chair. He did not immediately begin to read, but set himself to review Mr. Mutchet's unaccountable behaviour, and as he raised his eyes to the mirror he saw an elderly man standing at the sideboard.

Mr. Batchel quickly turned round, and as he did so, recalled the similar movement of his late visitor. The room was empty. He turned again to the mirror, and the man was still there—evidently a servant—one would say without much hesitation, the butler. The cut-away coat, and white stock, the clean-shaven chin, and close-trimmed side-whiskers, the deftness and decorum of his movements were all characteristic of a respectable family servant, and he stood at the sideboard like a man who was at home there.

Another object, just visible above the frame of the mirror, caused Mr. Batchel to look round again, and again to see nothing unusual. But what he saw in the mirror was a square oaken box some few inches deep, which the butler was proceeding to unlock. And at this point Mr. Batchel had the presence of mind to make an experiment of extraordinary value. He removed, for a moment, the Indian shade from the lamp, and laid it upon the table, and thereupon the mirror showed nothing but empty space and the frigid lines of the furniture. The butler had disappeared, as also had the box, to re-appear the moment the shade was restored to its place.

As soon as the box was opened, the butler produced a bundled handkerchief which his left hand had been concealing under the tails of his coat. With his right hand he removed the contents of the handkerchief, hurriedly placed them in the box, closed the lid, and having done this, left the room at once. His later movements had been those of a man in fear of being disturbed. He did not even wait to lock the box. He seemed to have heard someone coming.

Mr. Batchel's interest in the box will subsequently be explained. As soon as the butler had left, he stood before the mirror and examined it carefully. More than once, as he felt the desire for a closer scrutiny, he turned to the sideboard itself, where of course no box was to be seen, and returned to the mirror unreasonably disappointed. At length, with the image of the box firmly impressed upon his memory, he sat down again in his chair, and reviewed the butler's conduct, or as he doubted he would have to call it, misconduct. Unfortunately for Mr. Batchel, the contents of the handkerchief had been indistinguishable. But for the butler's alarm, which caused him to be moving away from the box even whilst he was placing the thing within it, the mirror

could not have shewn as much as it did. All that had been made evident was that the man had something to conceal, and that it was surreptitiously done.

“Is this all?” said Mr. Batchel to himself as he sat looking into the mirror, “or is it only the end of the first Act?” The question was, in a measure, answered by the presence of the box. That, at all events would have to disappear before the room could resume its ordinary aspect; and whether it was to fade out of sight or to be removed by the butler, Mr. Batchel did not intend to be looking another way at the time. He had not seen, although perhaps Mr. Mutcher had, whether the butler had brought it in, but he was determined to see whether he took it out.

He had not gazed into the mirror for many minutes before he learned that there was to be a second Act. Quite suddenly, a woman was at the sideboard. She had darted to it, and the time taken in passing over half the length of the mirror had been altogether too brief to show what she was like. She now stood with her face to the sideboard, entirely concealing the box from view, and all Mr. Batchel could determine was that she was tall of stature, and that her hair was raven-black, and not in very good order. In his anxiety to see her face, he called aloud, “Turn round.” Of course, he understood, when he saw that his cry had been absolutely without effect, that it had been a ridiculous thing to do. He turned his head again for a moment to assure himself that the room was empty, and to remind himself that the curtain had fallen, perhaps a century before, upon the drama—he began to think of it as a tragedy—that he was witnessing. The opportunity, however, of seeing the woman’s features was not denied him. She turned her face full upon the mirror—this is to speak as if we described the object rather than the image—so that Mr. Batchel saw it plainly before him; it was a handsome, cruel-looking face, of waxen paleness, with fine, distended, lustrous, eyes. The woman looked hurriedly round the room, looked twice towards the door, and then opened the box.

“Our respectable friend was evidently observed,” said Mr. Batchel. “If he has annexed anything belonging to this magnificent female, he is in for a bad quarter of an hour.” He would have given a great deal, for once, to have had a sideboard backed by a looking glass, and lamented that the taste of the day had been too good to tolerate such a thing. He would have then been able to see what was going on at the oaken box. As it was, the operations were concealed by the figure of the woman. She was evidently busy with her fingers; her elbows, which showed plainly enough, were vibrating with activity. In a few minutes there was a final movement of the elbows simultaneously away from her sides, and it shewed, as plainly as if the hands had been visible, that something had been plucked asunder. It was just such a movement as accompanies the removal, after a struggle, of the close-fitting lid of a canister.

“What next?” said Mr. Batchel, as he observed the movement, and interpreted it as the end of the operation at the box. “Is this the end of the second Act?”

He was soon to learn that it was not the end, and that the drama of the mirror was indeed assuming the nature of tragedy. The woman closed the box and looked towards the door, as she had done before; then she made as if she would dart out of the room, and found her movement suddenly arrested. She stopped dead, and, in a moment, fell loosely to the ground. Obviously she had swooned away.

Mr. Batchel could then see nothing, except that the box remained in its place on the sideboard, so that he arose and stood close up to the mirror in order to obtain a view of the whole stage, as he called it. It showed him, in the wider view he now obtained, the woman lying in a heap upon the carpet, and a grey-wigged clergyman standing in the doorway of the room.

“The Vicar of Stoneground, without a doubt,” said Mr. Batchel. “The household of my reverend predecessor is not doing well by him; to judge from the effect of his appearance upon

this female, there's something serious afoot. Poor old man," he added, as the clergyman walked into the room.

This expression of pity was evoked by the Vicar's face. The marks of tears were upon his cheeks, and he looked weary and ill. He stood for a while looking down upon the woman who had swooned away, and then stooped down, and gently opened her hand.

Mr. Batchel would have given a great deal to know what the Vicar found there. He took something from her, stood erect for a moment with an expression of consternation upon his face; then his chin dropped, his eyes showed that he had lost consciousness, and he fell to the ground, very much as the woman had fallen.

The two lay, side by side, just visible in the space between the table and the sideboard. It was a curious and pathetic situation. As the clergyman was about to fall, Mr. Batchel had turned to save him, and felt a real distress of helplessness at being reminded again that it was but an image that he had looked upon. The two persons now lying upon the carpet had been for some hundred years beyond human aid. He could no more help them than he could help the wounded at Waterloo. He was tempted to relieve his distress by removing the shade of the lamp; he had even laid his hand upon it, but the feeling of curiosity was now become too strong, and he knew that he must see the matter to its end.

The woman first began to revive. It was to be expected, as she had been the first to go. Had not Mr. Batchel seen her face in the mirror, her first act of consciousness would have astounded him. Now it only revolted him. Before she had sufficiently recovered to raise herself upon her feet, she forced open the lifeless hands beside her and snatched away the contents of that which was not empty; and as she did this, Mr. Batchel saw the glitter of precious stones. The woman was soon upon her feet and making feebly for the door, at which she paused to leer at the prostrate figure of the clergyman before she disappeared into the hall. She appeared no more, and Mr. Batchel felt glad to be rid of her presence.

The old Vicar was long in coming to his senses; as he began to move, there stood in the doorway the welcome figure of the butler. With infinite gentleness he raised his master to his feet, and with a strong arm supported him out of the room, which at last, stood empty.

"That, at least," said Mr. Batchel, "is the end of the second Act. I doubt whether I could have borne much more. If that awful woman comes back I shall remove the shade and have done with it all. Otherwise, I shall hope to learn what becomes of the box, and whether my respectable friend who has just taken out his master is, or is not, a rascal." He had been genuinely moved by what he had seen, and was conscious of feeling something like exhaustion. He dare not, however, sit down, lest he should lose anything important of what remained. Neither the door nor the lower part of the room was visible from his chair, so that he remained standing at the chimney-piece, and there awaited the disappearance of the oaken box.

So intently were his eyes fixed upon the box, in which he was especially interested, that he all but missed the next incident. A velvet curtain which he could see through the half-closed door had suggested nothing of interest to him. He connected it indefinitely, as it was excusable to do, with the furniture of the house, and only by inadvertence looked at it a second time. When, however, it began to travel slowly along the hall, his curiosity was awakened in a new direction. The butler, helping his master out of the room ten minutes since, had left the door half open, but as the opening was not towards the mirror, only a strip of the hall beyond could be seen. Mr. Batchel went to open the door more widely, only to find, of course, that the vividness of the images had again betrayed him. The door of his dining-room was closed, as he had closed it after Mr. Mutcher, whose perturbation was now so much easier to understand.

The curtain continued to move across the narrow opening, and explained itself in doing so. It was a pall. The remains it so amply covered were being carried out of the house to their resting-place, and were followed by a long procession of mourners in long cloaks. The hats they held in their black-gloved hands were heavily banded with crêpe whose ends descended to the ground, and foremost among them was the old clergyman, refusing the support which two of the chief mourners were in the act of proffering. Mr. Batchel, full of sympathy, watched the whole procession pass the door, and not until it was evident that the funeral had left the house did he turn once more to the box. He felt sure that the closing scene of the tragedy was at hand, and it proved to be very near. It was brief and uneventful. The butler very deliberately entered the room, threw aside the window-curtains and drew up the blinds, and then went away at once, taking the box with him. Mr. Batchel thereupon blew out his lamp and went to bed, with a purpose of his own to be fulfilled upon the next day.

His purpose may be stated at once. He had recognised the oaken box, and knew that it was still in the house. Three large cupboards in the old library of Vicar Whitehead were filled with the papers of a great law-suit about tithes, dating from the close of the 18th century. Amongst these, in the last of the three cupboards, was the box of which so much has been said. It was filled, so far as Mr. Batchel remembered, with the assessments for poor's-rate of a large number of landholders concerned in the suit, and these Mr. Batchel had never thought it worth his while to disturb. He had gone to rest, however, on this night with the full intention of going carefully through the contents of the box. He scarcely hoped, after so long an interval, to discover any clue to the scenes he had witnessed, but he was determined at least to make the attempt. If he found nothing, he intended that the box should enshrine a faithful record of the transactions in the dining-room.

It was inevitable that a man who had so much of the material of a story should spend a wakeful hour in trying to piece it together. Mr. Batchel spent considerably more than an hour in connecting, in this way and that, the butler and his master, the gypsy-looking woman, the funeral, but could arrive at no connexion that satisfied him. Once asleep, he found the problem easier, and dreamed a solution so obvious as to make him wonder that the matter had ever puzzled him. When he awoke in the morning, also, the defects of the solution were so obvious as to make him wonder that he had accepted it; so easily are we satisfied when reason is not there to criticise. But there was still the box, and this Mr. Batchel lifted down from the third cupboard, dusted with his towel, and when he was dressed, carried downstairs with him. His breakfast occupied but a small part of a large table, and upon the vacant area he was soon laying, as he examined them, one by one, the documents which the box contained. His recollection of them proved to be right. They were overseers' lists of parochial assessments, of which he soon had a score or more laid upon the table. They were of no interest in themselves, and did nothing to further the matter in hand. They would appear to have been thrust into the box by someone desiring to find a receptacle for them.

In a little while, however, the character of the papers changed. Mr. Batchel found himself reading something of another kind, written upon paper of another form and colour.

“Irish bacon to be had of Mr. Broadley, hop merchant in Southwark.”

“Rasin wine is kept at the Wine and Brandy vaults in Catherine Street.”

“The best hones at Mr. Forsters in Little Britain.”

There followed a recipe for a “rhumatic mixture,” a way of making a polish for mahogany, and other such matters. They were evidently the papers of the butler.

Mr. Batchel removed them one by one, as he had removed the others; household accounts followed, one or two private letters, and the advertisement of a lottery, and then he reached a closed compartment at the bottom of the box, occupying about half its area, The lid of the compartment was provided with a bone stud, and Mr. Batchel lifted it off and laid it upon the table amongst the papers. He saw at once what the butler had taken from his handkerchief. There was an open pocket-knife, with woeful-looking deposits upon its now rusty blade. There was a delicate human finger, now dry and yellow, and on the finger a gold ring,

Mr. Batchel took up this latter pitiful object and removed the ring, even now, not quite easily. He allowed the finger to drop back into the box, which he carried away at once into another room. His appetite for breakfast had left him, and he rang the bell to have the things cleared away, whilst he set himself, with the aid of a lens, to examine the ring.

There had been three large stones, all of which had been violently removed. The claws of their settings were, without exception, either bent outwards, or broken off. Within the ring was engraved, in graceful italic characters, the name AMEY LEE, and on the broader part, behind the place of the stones

She doth joy double,
And halveth trouble.

This pathetic little love token Mr. Batchel continued to hold in his hand as he rehearsed the whole story to which it afforded the clue. He knew that the ring had been set with such stones as there was no mistaking: he remembered only too well how their discovery had affected the aged vicar. But never would he deny himself the satisfaction of hoping that the old man had been spared the distress of learning how the ring had been removed.

The name of Amey Lee was as familiar to Mr. Batchel as his own. Twice at least every Sunday during the past seven years had he read it at his feet, as he sat in the chancel, as well as the name of Robert Lee upon an adjacent slab, and he had wondered during the leisurely course of many a meandering hymn whether there was good precedent for the spelling of the name. He made another use now of his knowledge of the pavement. There was a row of tiles along the head of the slabs, and Mr. Batchel hastened to fulfil without delay, what he conceived to be his duty. He replaced the ring upon Amey Lee's finger and carried it into the church, and there, having raised one of the tiles with a chisel, gave it decent burial.

Whether the butler ever learned that he had been robbed in his turn, who shall say? His immediate dismissal, after the funeral, seemed inevitable, and his oaken box was evidently placed by him, or by another, where no man heeded it. It still occupies a place amongst the law papers and may lie undisturbed for another century; and when Mr. Batchel put it there, without the promised record of events, he returned to the dining room, removed the Indian shade from the lamp, and, having put a lighted match to the edge, watched it slowly burn away.

Only one thing remained. Mr. Batchel felt that it would give him some satisfaction to visit Mr. Mutcher. His address, as obtained from the District Miscellany of the Order of Gleaners, was 13, Albert Villas, Williamson Street, not a mile away from Stoneground.

Mr. Mutcher, fortunately, was at home when Mr. Batchel called, and indeed opened the door with a copious apology for being without his coat.

"I hope," said Mr. Batchel, "that you have overcome your indisposition of last Tuesday evening."

"Don't mention it, your Reverence," said Mr. Mutcher, "my wife gave me such a talking to when I came 'ome that I was quite ashamed of myself—I say ashamed of myself."

“She observed that you were unwell,” said Mr. Batchel, “I am sure; but she could hardly blame you for that.”

By this time the visitor had been shewn into the parlour, and Mrs. Mutcher had appeared to answer for herself.

“I really was ashamed, Sir,” she said, “to think of the way Mutcher was talking, and a clergyman’s ’ouse too. Mutcher is not a man, Sir, that takes anything, not so much as a drop; but he is wonderful partial to cold pork, which never does agree with him, and never did, at night in partic’lar.”

“It was the cold pork, then, that made you unwell?” asked Mr. Batchel.

“It was, your Reverence, and it was not,” Mr. MUtcher replied, “for internal discomfort there was none—I say none. But a little light ’eaded it did make me, and I could ’ave swore, your Reverence, saving your presence, that I saw an elderly gentleman carry a box into your room and put it down on the sheffoneer.”

“There was no one there, of course,” observed Mr. Batchel.

“No!” replied the D.P.G.M., “there was not; and the discrepancy was too much for me. I hope you will pardon the abruptness of my departure.”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Batchel, “discrepancies are always embarrassing.”

“And you will allow me one day to resume our discourse upon the subject of National Insurance,” he added, when he shewed his visitor to the door.

“I shall not have much leisure,” said Mr. Batchel, audaciously, taking all risks, “until the Greek Kalends.”

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting till it does end,” said Mr. Mutcher, “there is no immediate ’urry.”

“It’s rather a long time,” remarked Mr. Batchel.

“Pray don’t mention it,” answered the Deputy Provincial Grand Master, in his best manner. “But when the time comes, perhaps you’ll drop me a line.”