

The Lost Club

By Arthur Machen

One hot afternoon in August a gorgeous young gentleman, one would say the last of his race in London, set out from the Circus end, and proceeded to stroll along the lonely expanse of Piccadilly Deserta. True to the traditions of his race, faithful even in the wilderness, he had not bated one jot or tittle of the regulation equipage; a glorious red and yellow blossom in his woolly and exquisitely-cut frock coat proclaimed him a true son of the carnation; hat and boots and chin were all polished to the highest pitch; though there had not been rain for many weeks his trouser-ends were duly turned up, and the poise of the gold-headed cane was in itself a liberal education. But ah! the heavy changes since June, when the leaves glanced green in the sunlit air, and the club windows were filled, and the hansoms flashed in long processions through the streets, and girls smiled from every carriage.

The young man sighed; he thought of the quiet little evenings at the Phoenix, of encounters of the Row, of the drive to Hurlingham, and many pleasant dinners in joyous company. Then he glanced up and saw a bus, half-empty, slowly lumbering along the middle of the street, and in front of the "White Horse Cellars" a four-wheeler had stopped still (the driver was asleep on his seat), and in the "Badminton" the blinds were down. He half expected to see the Briar Rose trailing gracefully over the Hotel Cosmopole; certainly the Beauty, if such a thing were left in Piccadilly, was fast asleep.

Absorbed in these mournful reflections the hapless Johnny strolled on without observing that an exact duplicate of himself was advancing on the same pavement from the opposite direction; save that the inevitable carnation was salmon colour, and the cane a silver-headed one, instruments of great magnifying power would have been required to discriminate between them. The two met; each raised his eyes simultaneously at the strange sight of a well-dressed man, and each adjured the same old-world deity.

"By Jove! old man, what the deuce are you doing here?"

The gentleman who had advanced from the direction of Hyde Park Corner was the first to answer.

"Well, to tell the truth, Austin, I am detained in town on—ah—legal business. But how is it you are not in Scotland?"

"Well, it's curious; but the fact is, I have legal business in town also."

"You don't say so? Great nuisance, ain't it? But these things must be seen to, or a fellow finds himself in no end of a mess, don't you know?"

"He does, by Jove! That's what I thought."

Mr. Austin relapsed into silence for a few moments.

"And where are you off to, Phillipps?"

The conversation had passed with the utmost gravity on both sides. At the joint mention of legal business, it was true, a slight twinkle had passed across their eyes, but the ordinary observer would have said that the weight of ages rested on those unruffled brows.

"I really couldn't say. I thought of having a quiet dinner at Azario's. The Badminton is closed, you know, for repairs or somethin', and I can't stand the Junior Wilton. Come along with me, and let's dine together."

"By Jove! I think I will. I thought of calling on my solicitor, but I dare say he can wait."

“Ah! I should think he could. We’ll have some of that Italian wine—stuff in salad oil flasks—you know what I mean.”

The pair solemnly wheeled round, and solemnly paced towards the Circus, meditating, doubtless, on many things. The dinner in the little restaurant pleased them with a grave pleasure, as did the Chianti, of which they drank a good deal too much; “quite a light wine, you know,” said Phillipps, and Austin agreed with him, so they emptied a quart flask between them, and finished up with a couple of glasses apiece of Green Chartreuse. As they came out into the quiet street smoking vast cigars, the two slaves to duty and “legal business” felt a dreamy delight in all things, the street seemed full of fantasy in the dim light of the lamps, and a single star shining in the clear sky above seemed to Austin exactly of the same colour as Green Chartreuse. Phillipps agreed with him. “You know, old fellow,” he said, “there are times when a fellow feels all sorts of strange things—you know, the sort of things they put in magazines, don’t you know, and novels. By Jove, Austin, old man, I feel as if I could write a novel myself.”

They wandered aimlessly on, not quite knowing where they were going, turning from one street to another, and discoursing in a maudlin strain. A great cloud had been slowly moving up from the South, darkening the sky, and suddenly it began to rain, at first slowly with great heavy drops, and then faster and faster in a pitiless, hissing shower; the gutters flooded over, and the furious drops danced up from the stones. The two walked on as fast as they could, whistling and calling “Hansom!” in vain; they were really getting very wet.

“Where the dickens are we?” said Phillipps. “Confound it all I don’t know. We ought to be in Oxford Street.”

They walked on a little farther, when suddenly, to their great joy, they found a dry archway, leading into a dark passage or courtyard. They took shelter silently, too thankful and too wet to say anything. Austin looked at his hat; it was a wreck; and Phillipps shook himself feebly, like a tired terrier.

“What a beastly nuisance this is,” he muttered: “I only wish I could see a hansom.”

Austin looked into the street; the rain was still falling in torrents; he looked up the passage, and noticed for the first time that it led to a great house, which towered grimly against the sky. It seemed all dark and gloomy, except that from some chink in a shutter a light shone out. He pointed it out to Phillipps, who stared vacantly about him, then exclaimed:

“Hang it! I know where we are now. At least, I don’t exactly know, you know, but I once came by here with Wylliams, and he told me there was some club or somethin’ down this passage; I don’t recollect exactly what he said. Hullo! why there goes Wylliams. I say, Wylliams, tell us where we are!”

A gentleman had brushed past them in the darkness and was walking fast down the passage. He heard his name and turned round, looking rather annoyed.

“Well, Phillipps, what do you want? Good evening, Austin; you seem rather wet, both of you.”

“I should think we were wet; got caught in the rain. Didn’t you tell me once there was some club down here? I wish you’d take us in, if you’re a member.”

Mr. Wylliams looked steadfastly at the two forlorn young men for a moment, hesitated, and said:

“Well, gentlemen, you may come with me if you like. But I must impose a condition; that you both give me your word of honour never to mention the club, or anything that you see while you are in it, to any individual whatsoever.”

“Certainly not,” replied Austin; “of course we shouldn’t dream of doing so, should we, Phillipps?”

“No, no; go ahead, Wylliams, we’ll keep it dark enough.”

The party moved slowly down the passage till they came to the house. It was very large and very old; it looked as though it might have been an embassy of the last century. Wylliams whistled, knocked twice at the door, and whistled again, and it was opened by a man in black.

“Friends of yours, Mr. Wylliams?”

Wylliams nodded and they passed on.

“Now mind,” he whispered, as they paused at a door, “you are not to recognize anybody, and nobody will recognize you.”

The two friends nodded, and the door was opened, and they entered a vast room, brilliantly-lighted with electric lamps. Men were standing in knots, walking up and down, and smoking at little tables; it was just like any club smoking-room. Conversation was going on, but in a low murmur, and every now and then someone would stop talking, and look anxiously at a door at the other end of the room, and then turn round again. It was evident that they were waiting for someone or somebody. Austin and Phillipps were sitting on a sofa, lost in amazement; nearly every face was familiar to them. The flower of the Row was in that strange club-room; several young noblemen, a young fellow who had just come into an enormous fortune, three or four fashionable artists and literary men, an eminent actor, and a well-known canon. What could it mean? They were all supposed to be scattered far and wide over the habitable globe, and yet here they were. Suddenly there came a loud knock at the door; and every man started, and those who were sitting got up. A servant appeared.

“The President is awaiting you, gentlemen,” he said, and vanished.

One by one the members filed out, and Wylliams and the two guests brought up the rear. They found themselves in a room still larger than the first, but almost quite dark. The president sat at a long table and before him burned two candles, which barely lighted up his face. It was the famous Duke of Dartington, the largest landowner in England. As soon as the members had entered he said in a cold hard voice: “Gentlemen, you know our rules; the book is prepared. Whoever opens it at the black page is at the disposal of the committee and myself. We had better begin.” Someone began to read out the names in a low distinct voice, pausing after each name, and the member called came up to the table and opened at random the pages of a big folio volume that lay between the two candles. The gloomy light made it difficult to distinguish features, but Phillipps heard a groan beside him, and recognized an old friend. His face was working fearfully, the man was evidently in an agony of terror.

One by one the members opened the book; as each man did so he passed out by another door. At last there was only one left; it was Phillipps’s friend. There was foam upon his lips as he passed up to the table, and his hand shook as he opened the leaves. Wylliams had passed out after whispering to the president, and had returned to his friends’ side. He could hardly hold them back as the unfortunate man groaned in agony and leant against the table: he had opened the book at the black page. “Kindly come with me, Mr. D’Aubigny,” said the president, and they passed out together.

“We can go now,” said Wylliams, “I think the rain has gone off. Remember your promise, gentlemen. You have been at a meeting of the Lost Club. You will never see that young man again. Good night.”

“It isn’t murder, is it?” gasped Austin.

“Oh no, not at all. Mr. D’Aubigny will, I hope, live for many years; he has disappeared. Good night; there’s a hansom that will do for you.”

The two friends went to their homes in dead silence. They did not meet again for three weeks, and each thought the other looked ill and shaken. They walked drearily, with grave averted faces down Piccadilly, each afraid to begin the recollection of the terrible club. Of a sudden Phillipps stopped as if he had been shot. "Look there, Austin," he muttered, "look at that." The posters of the evening papers were spread out beside the pavement, and on one of them Austin saw in large blue letters, "Mysterious disappearance of a Gentleman." Austin bought a copy and turned over the leaves with shaking fingers till he found the brief paragraph—St. John D'Aubigny, of Stoke D'Aubigny, in Sussex has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Mr. D'Aubigny was staying at Strathdoon, in Scotland, and came up to London, as it is stated, on business, on August 16th. It has been ascertained that he arrived safely at King's Cross, and drove to Piccadilly Circus, where he got out. It is said that he was last seen at the corner of Glass House Street, leading from Regent Street into Soho. Since the above date the unfortunate gentleman, who was much liked in London society, has not been heard of. Mr. D'Aubigny was to have been married in September. The police are extremely reticent."

"Good God! Austin, this is dreadful. You remember the date. Poor fellow, poor fellow!"

"Phillipps, I think I shall go home."

D'Aubigny was never heard of again. But the strangest part of the story remains to be told. The two friends called Wylliams, and charged him with being a member of the Lost Club, and an accomplice in the fate of D'Aubigny. The placid Mr. Wylliams at first stared at the two pale, earnest faces, and finally roared with laughter.

"My dear fellows, what on earth are you talking about? I never heard such a cock-and-bull story in my life. As you say, Phillipps, I once pointed out to you a house said to be a club, as we were walking through Soho; but that was a low gambling club, frequented by German Waiters. I am afraid the fact is that Mario's Chianti was rather too strong for you. However, I will try to convince you of your mistake."

Wylliams forthwith summoned his man, who swore that he and his master were in Cairo during the whole of August, and offered to produce the hotel bills. Phillipps shook his head, and they went away. Their next step was to try and find the archway where they had taken shelter, and after a good deal of trouble they succeeded. They knocked at the door of the gloomy house, whistling as Wylliams had done. They were admitted by a respectable mechanic in a white apron, who was evidently astonished at the whistle; in fact he was inclined to suspect the influence of a "drop too much." The place was a billiard table factory, and had been so (as far as they learnt in the neighbourhood) for many years. The rooms must once have been large and magnificent, but most of them had been divided into three or four separate workshops by wooden partitions.

Phillipps sighed; he could do no more for his lost friend; but both he and Austin remained unconvinced. In justice to Mr. Wylliams, it must be stated that Lord Henry Harcourt assured Phillipps that he had seen Wylliams in Cairo about the middle of August; he thought, but could not be sure, on the 16th; and also, that the recent disappearances of some well-known men about town are patent of explanations which would exclude the agency of the Lost Club.