

Strange Disappearance of a Baronet

By Algernon Blackwood

His intrinsic value before the Eternities was exceedingly small, but he possessed most things the world sets store by—presence, name, wealth—and, above all, that high opinion of himself which saves it the bother of a separate and troublesome valuation. Outside these possessions he owned nothing of permanent value, or that could decently claim to be worthy of immortality. The fact was he had never even experienced that expansion of self commonly known as generosity. No apology, however, is necessary for his amazing adventure, for these same Eternities who judged him have made their affidavit that it was They who stripped him bare and showed himself—to himself.

It all began with the receipt of that shattering letter from his solicitors. He read and re-read it in his comfortable first-class compartment as the express hurried him to town, exceedingly comfortable among his rugs and furs, exceedingly distressed and ill at ease in his mind. And in his private sitting-room of the big hotel that same evening Mr. Smirles, more odious even than his letter, informed him plainly that this new and unexpected claimant to his title and estates was likely to be exceedingly troublesome—“even dangerous, Sir Timothy! I am bound to say, since you ask me, that it might be wise to regard the future—er—with a different scale of vision than the one you have been accustomed to.”

Sir Timothy practically collapsed. Instinctively he perceived that the lawyer’s manner already held less respect: the reflection was a shock to his vain and fatuous personality. “After all, then, it wasn’t me he worshipped, but my position, and so forth . . .!” If this nonsense continued he would be no longer “Sir Timothy,” but simply “Mister” Puffe, poor, a nobody. He seemed to shrink in size as he gazed at himself in the mirror of the gorgeous, flamboyantly decorated room. “It’s too preposterous and absurd! There’s nothing in it! Why, the whole County would go to pieces without me!” He even thought of making his secretary draft a letter to the Times—a letter of violent, indignant protest.

He was a handsome, portly man, with a full-blown vanity justified by no single item of soul or mind; not unkind, so much as empty; created and kept alive by the small conventions and the ceaseless contemplation of himself, the withdrawal of which might be expected to leave him flat as a popped balloon. . . . Such a mass of pompous conceit obscured his vision that he only slowly took in the fact that his very existence was at stake. His thoughts rumbled on without direction, the sense of loss, however, dreadfully sharp and painful all the time, till at length he sought relief in something he could really understand. He changed for dinner! He would dine in his sitting-room alone. And, meanwhile, he rang for the remainder of his voluminous luggage. But it was vastly annoying to his diminishing pride to discover that the gorgeous Head Porter (he remembered now having vaguely recognised him in the hall) was the same poor relation to whom he had denied help a year ago. The vicissitudes of life were indeed preposterous. He ought to have been protected from so ridiculous an encounter. For the moment, of course, he merely pretended not to see him—certainly he did not commend the excellently quick delivery of the luggage. And to praise the young fellow’s pluck never occurred to him for one single instant.

“The house Valet, please,” he asked of the waiter who answered the bell soon afterwards—and then directed somewhat helplessly the unpacking of his emporium of exquisite clothes. “Yes, take everything out—everything,” he said in reply to the man’s question—rather an

extraordinary, almost insolent question when he came to reflect upon it, surely: "Is it worth while, perhaps, sir . . .?" It flashed across his dazed mind that the Head Porter had made the very same remark to his subordinate in the passage when he asked if "everything" was to come in. With a shrug of his gold-braided shoulders that poor relation had replied, "Seems hardly worth while, but they may as well all go in, yes."

And, with the double rejoinder perplexingly in his mind, Sir Timothy turned sharply upon the valet.

But the thing he was going to say faded on his lips. The man, holding out in his arms a heap of clothes, suits and what not, seemed so much taller than before. Sir Timothy had looked down upon him a moment ago, whereas now their eyes stared level. It was passing strange.

"Will you want these, sir?"

"Not to-night, of course."

"Want them at all, I meant, sir?"

Sir Timothy gasped. "Want them at all? Of course! What in the world are you talking about?"

"Beg pardon, sir. Didn't know if it was worth while now," the man said, with a quick flush. And, before the pompous and amazed baronet could get any words between his quivering lips, the man was gone. The waiter, Head Waiter it was, answered the bell almost immediately, and Sir Timothy found consolation for his injured feelings in discussing food and wine. He ordered an absurdly sumptuous meal for a man dining alone. He did so with a vague feeling that it would spite somebody, perhaps he hardly knew whom. "The Pol Roger well iced, mind," he added with a false importance as the clever servant withdrew. But at the door the man paused and turned, as though he had not heard. "Large bottle, I said," repeated the other. The Head Waiter made an extraordinary gesture of indifference. "As you wish, Sir Timothy, as you wish!" And he was gone in his turn. But it was only the man's adroitness that had chosen the words instead of those others: "Is it really worth while?"

And at that very moment, while Sir Timothy stood there fuming inwardly over the extraordinary words and ways of these people—veiled insolence, he called it—the door opened, and a tall young woman poked her head inside, then followed it with her person. She was dignified, smart even for a hotel like this, and uncommonly pretty. It was the upper housemaid. Full in the eye she looked at him. In her face was a kind of swift sympathy and kindness; but her whole presentment betrayed more than anything else—terror.

"Make an effort, make an effort!" she whispered earnestly. "Before it's too late, make an effort!" And *she* was gone. Sir Timothy, hardly knowing what he meant to do, opened the door to dash after her and make her explain this latest insolence. But the passage was dark, and he heard the swish of skirts far away—too far away to overtake; while running along the walls, as in a whispering gallery, came the words." Make an effort, make an effort!"

"Confound it all, then, I will!" he exclaimed to himself, as he stumbled back into the room, feeling horribly bewildered. "I will make an effort." And he dressed to go downstairs and show himself in the halls and drawing-rooms, give a few pompous orders, assert himself, and fuss about generally. But that process of dressing without his valet was chiefly and weirdly distressing because he had so amazingly—dwindled. His sight was, of course, awry; disordered nerves had played tricks with vision, proportion, perspective; something of the sort must explain why he seemed so small to himself in the reflection. The pier-glass, which showed him full length, he turned to the wall. But, none the less, to complete his toilet, he had to stand upon a footstool before the other mirror above the mantelpiece.

And go downstairs he did, his heart working with a strange and increasing perplexity. Yet, wherever he went, there came that poor relation, the Head Porter, to face him. Always big, he now looked bigger than ever. Sir Timothy Puffe felt somehow ridiculous in his presence. The young fellow had character, pluck, some touch of intrinsic value. For all his failure in life, the Eternities considered him *real*. He towered rather dreadfully in his gold braid and smart uniform—towered in his great height all about the hall, like some giant in his own palace. The other's head scarcely came up to his great black belt where the keys swung and jangled.

The Baronet went upstairs again to his room, strangely disconcerted. The first thing he did as he left the lift was to stumble over the step. The liftman picked him up as though he were a boy. Down the passage, now well lighted, he went quickly, his feet almost pattering, his tread light, and—so oddly short. His importance had gone. A voice behind each door he passed whispered to him through the narrow crack as it cautiously opened, “Make an effort, make an effort! Be yourself, be real, be alive before it's too late!” But he saw no one, and the first thing he did on entering his room was to hide the smaller mirror by turning it against the wall, just as he had done to the pier-glass. He was so painfully little and insignificant now. As the externals and the possessions dropped away one by one in his thoughts, the revelation of the tiny little centre of activity within was horrible. He puffed himself out in thought as of old, but there was no response. It was degrading.

The fact was—he began to understand it now—his mind had been pursuing possible results of his loss of title and estates to their logical conclusion. The idea in all its brutal nakedness, of course, hardly reached him—namely, that, without possessions, he was practically—nil! All he grasped was that he was—*less*. Still, the notion did prey upon him atrociously. He followed the advice of the strange housemaid and “made an effort,” but without marked success. So empty, indeed, was his life that, once stripped of the possessions, he would stand there as useless and insignificant as an ownerless street dog. And the thought appalled him. He had not even enough real interest in others to hold him upright, and certainly not enough sufficiency of self, good or evil, to stand alone before any tribunal. The discovery shocked him inexpressibly. But what distressed him till more was to find a fixed mirror in his sitting-room that he could *not* take down, for in its depths he saw himself shrunken and dwindled to the proportions of a

The knock at the door and the arrival of his dinner broke the appalling train of thought, but rather than be seen in his present diminutive appearance—later, of course, he would surely grow again—he ran into the bedroom. And when he came out again after the waiter's departure he found that his dinner shared the same abominable change. The food upon the dishes was reduced to the minutest proportions—the toast like children's, the soup an egg-cupful, the tenderloin a little slice the size of a visiting-card, and the bird not much larger than a black-beetle. And yet more than he could eat; more than sufficient! He sat in the big chair positively lost, his feet dangling. Then, mortified, frightened, and angry beyond expression, he undressed and concealed himself beneath the sheets and blankets of his bed.

“Of course I'm going mad—that's what it all means,” he exclaimed. “I'm no longer of any account in the world. I could never go into my Club, for instance, like this!”—and he surveyed the small outline that made a little lump beneath the surface of the bed-clothes—“or read the lessons having to stand upon a chair to reach the lectern.” And tears of bleeding vanity and futile wrath mingled upon his pillow. . . . The humiliation was agonising.

In the middle of which the door opened and in came the hotel valet, bearing before him upon a silver salver what at first appeared to be small, striped sandwiches, darkish in hue, but upon closer inspection were seen to be several wee suits of clothes, neatly pressed and folded for

wearing. Glancing round the room and perceiving no one, the man proceeded to put them away in the chest of drawers, soliloquising from time to time as he did so.

So the old buffer did go out after all!" he reflected, as he smoothed the tiny trousers in the drawer. "E's nothing but a gas-bag, anyway! Close with the coin, too—always was that!" He whistled, spat in the grate, hunted about for a cigarette, and again found relief in speech. "My little dawg's worth two of 'im all the time, and lots to spare. Tim's *real* . . .!" And other things, too, he said in similar vein. He was utterly oblivious of Sir Timothy's presence— serenely unconscious that the thin, fading line beneath the sheets was the very individual he was talking about. "Even hides his cigarettes, does he? He's right, though. Take away what he's got and there wouldn't be enough left over to stand upright at a poultry show!" And he guffawed merrily to himself. But what brought the final horror into that vanishing Personality on the bed was the singular fact that the valet made no remark about the absurd and horrible size of those tiny clothes. *This, then, was how others—even a hotel valet—saw him!*

All night long, it seemed, he lay in atrocious pain, the darkness mercifully hiding him, though never from himself, and only towards daylight did he pass off into a condition of unconsciousness. He must have slept very late indeed, too, for he woke to find sunlight in the room, and the housemaid—that tall, dignified girl who had tried to be kind—dusting and sweeping energetically. He screamed to her, but his voice was too feeble to make itself heard above the sweeping. The high-pitched squeak was scarcely audible even to himself. Presently she approached the bed and flung the sheets back. "That's funny," she observed, "could've sworn I saw something move!" She gave a hurried look, then went on sweeping. But in the process she had tossed his person, now no larger than a starved mouse, out on to the carpet. He cried aloud in his anguish, but the squeak was too faint to be audible. "Ugh!" exclaimed the girl, jumping to one side, "there's that 'orrid mouse again! Dead, too, I do declare!" And then, without being aware of the fact, she swept him up with the dust and bits of paper into her pan.

Whereupon Sir Timothy awoke with a bad start, and perceived that his train was running somewhat uneasily into King's Cross, and that he had slept nearly the whole way.