

Old Fags

By Stacy Aumonier

The boys called him “Old Fags,” and the reason was not hard to seek. He occupied a room in a block of tenements off Lisson Grove, bearing the somewhat grandiloquent title of Bolingbroke Buildings and, conspicuous among the many doubtful callings that occupied his time, was one in which he issued forth with a deplorable old canvas sack, which, after a day’s peregrination along the gutters, he would manage to partly fill with cigar and cigarette ends. The exact means by which he managed to convert this patiently gathered garbage into the wherewithal to support his disreputable body, nobody took the trouble to inquire; nor was there any further interest aroused by the disposal of the contents of the same sack when he returned with the gleanings of dustbins, distributed thoughtfully at intervals along certain thoroughfares by a maternal Borough Council. No one had ever penetrated to the inside of his room, but the general opinion in Bolingbroke Buildings was that he managed to live in a state of comfortable filth. And Mrs. Read, who lived in the room opposite Number 477 with her four children, was of opinion that “Old Fags ’ad ’oarded up a bit.” He certainly was never behind with the payment of the weekly three and sixpence that entitled him to the sole enjoyment of Number 475; and when the door was opened, among the curious blend of odours that issued forth, that of onions and other luxuries of this sort was undeniable. Nevertheless, he was not a popular figure in the Buildings; many, in fact, looked upon him as a social blot on the Bolingbroke escutcheon. The inhabitants were mostly labourers and their wives, charwomen and lady helps, dressmakers’ assistants, and mechanics. There was a vague, tentative effort among a great body of them to be a little respectable, and among some, even to be clean. No such uncomfortable considerations hampered the movements of “Old Fags.” He was frankly and ostentatiously a social derelict. He had no pride and no shame. He shuffled out in the morning, his blotchy face covered with dirt and black hair, his threadbare green clothes tattered and in rags, the toes all too visible through his forlorn-looking boots. He was rather a large man with a fat, flabby person, and a shiny face that was over-affable and bleary through a too constant attention to the gin bottle.

He had a habit of ceaseless talk. He talked and chuckled to himself all the time; he talked to every one he met in an undercurrent of jeering affability. Sometimes he would retire to his room with a gin bottle for days together and then—the walls at Bolingbroke Buildings are not very thick—he would be heard to talk and chuckle and snore alternately, until the percolating atmosphere of stewed onions heralded the fact that “Old Fags” was shortly on the war-path again.

He would meet Mrs. Read with her children on the stairs and would mutter: “Oh! here we are again! All these dear little children. Been ont for a walk, eh? Oh! these dear little children!” and he would pat one of them gaily on the head. And Mrs. Read would say: “Ere, you, keep your filthy ’ands off my kids, you dirty old swine, or I’ll catch you a swipe over the mouth!” And “Old Fags” would shuffle off muttering: “Oh, dear; oh, dear; these dear little children! Oh, dear; oh, dear.” And the boys would call after him and even throw orange peel and other things at him, but nothing seemed to disturb the serenity of “Old Fags.” Even when young Charlie Good threw a dead mouse, that hit him on the chin, he only said:

“Oh, these Boys! These BOYS!”

Quarrels, noise and bad odours were the prevailing characteristics of Bolingbroke Buildings, and "Old Fags," though contributing in some degree to the latter quality, rode serenely through the other two in spite of multiform aggression. The penetrating intensity of his onion stew had driven two lodgers already from Number 476, and was again a source of aggravation to the present holders, old Mrs. Birdie and her daughter, Minnie.

Minnie Birdie was what was known as a "tweeny" at a house in Hyde Park Square, but she lived at home. Her mistress—to whom she had never spoken, being engaged by the Housekeeper—was Mrs. Bastien-Meiland, a lady who owned a valuable collection of little dogs. These little dogs somehow gave Minnie an unfathomable sense of respectability. She loved to talk about them. She told Mrs. Read that her mistress paid "‘undreds and ‘undreds of pahnds for each of them." They were taken out every day by a groom on two leads of five,—ten highly groomed, bustling, yapping, snapping, vicious little luxuries. Some had won prizes at Dog Shows, and two men were engaged for the sole purpose of ministering to their creature comforts.

The consciousness of working in a house which furnished such an exhibition of festive cultivation brought into sharp relief the degrading social condition of her next-room neighbour. Minnie hated "Old Fags" with a bitter hatred. She even wrote to a firm of lawyers, who represented some remote landlord, and complained of the dirty habits of the old drunken wretch next door. But she never received any answer to her complaint. It was known that "Old Fags" had lived there for seven years and paid his rent regularly. Moreover, on one critical occasion, Mrs. Read, who had periods of rheumatic gout and could not work, had got into hopeless financial straits, having reached the very limit of her borrowing capacity, and being three weeks in arrears with her rent, "Old Fags" had come over and had insisted on lending her fifteen shillings! Mrs. Read eventually paid it back, and the knowledge of the transaction further accentuated her animosity toward him.

One day "Old Fags" was returning from his dubious round and was passing through Hyde Park Square with his canvas bag slung over his back, when he ran into the cortege of little dogs under the control of Meads, the groom.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" muttered "Old Fags" to himself. "What dear little dogs! H'm! What dear little dogs!"

A minute later Minnie Birdie ran up the area steps and gave Meads a bright smile. "Good-night, Mr. Meads," she said.

Mr. Meads looked at her and said: "‘Ello! you off?"

"Yes!" she answered.

"Oh, well," he said, "good-night! Be good!" They both sniggered, and Minnie hurried down the street. Before she reached Lisson Grove "Old Fags" had caught her up.

"I say," he said, getting into her stride, "what dear little dogs those are! Oh, dear! what dear little dogs!"

Minnie turned, and when she saw him her face flushed, and she said: "Oh, you go to Hell!" with which unladylike expression she darted across the road and was lost to sight.

"Oh, these women!" said "Old Fags" to himself, "these WOMEN!"

It often happened, thereafter, that "Old Fags" business carried him in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park Square, and he ran into the little dogs. One day he even ventured to address Meads and to congratulate him on the beauty of his, canine protégées, an attention that elicited a very unsympathetic response; a response, in fact, that amounted to being told "to clear off."

The incident of "Old Fags" running into this society was entirely accidental. It was due, in part, to the fact that the way lay through there to a tract of land in Paddington that "Old Fags" seemed

to find peculiarly attractive. It was a strip of ground by the railway, that butted at one end onto a canal. It would make quite a good siding, but that it seemed somehow to have been overlooked by the Railway Company, and to have become a dumping ground for tins and old refuse from the houses in neighbourhood of Harrow Road. "Old Fags" would spend hours there alone with his canvas bag.

When the winter came on there was a great wave what the papers would call economic unrest. There were strikes in three great industries, a political upheaval, and a severe tightening of the Money Market. All of these misfortunes reacted on Bolingbroke Buildings. The dwellers became even more impecunious, and consequently more quarrelsome, more noisy and more malodorous. Rents were all in arrears; ejections were the order of the day, and borrowing became a tradition rather than an actuality. Want and hunger brooded over the dejected Buildings. But still "Old Fags" came and went, carrying his shameless gin and permeating the passages with his onion stews.

Old Mrs. Birdle became bedridden and the support of Room Number 476 fell on the shoulders of Minnie. The wages of a "tweeny" are not excessive, and the way in which she managed to support herself and her invalid mother must have excited the wonder of the other dwellers in the building, if they had not had more pressing affairs of their own to wonder about. Minnie was a short, sallow little thing with a rather full figure, and heavy grey eyes that somehow conveyed a sense of sleeping passion. She had a certain instinct for dress, a knack of putting some trinket in the right place, and of always being neat. Mrs. Bastien-Melland had one day asked who she was. On being informed, her curiosity did not prompt her to push the matter further, and she did not speak to her; but the incident gave Minnie a better standing in the domestic household at Hyde Park Square. It was probably this attention that caused Meads, the head dog groom, to cast an eye in her direction. It is certain that he did and, moreover, on a certain Thursday evening had taken her to a Cinema performance in the Edgware Road. Such attention naturally gave rise to discussion; and, alas, to jealousy; for there was an under house maid, and even a Lady's maid, who were not impervious to the attentions of the good-looking groom.

When Mrs. Bastien-Melland went to Egypt in January, she took only three of the small dogs with her, for she could not be bothered with the society of a groom, and three dogs were as many as her two maids could spare time for, after devoting their energies to Mrs. Bastien-Melland's toilette. Consequently, Meads was left behind, and was held directly responsible for seven, five Chows and two Pekinese, or, as he expressed it, over a thousand pounds' worth of dogs. It was a position of enormous responsibility. They had to be fed on the very best food, all carefully prepared and cooked, and in small quantities. They had to be taken for regular exercise, and washed in specially prepared condiments. Moreover, at the slightest symptom of indisposition he was to telephone to Sir Andrew Fossiter, the great veterinary specialist in Hanover Square. It is not to be wondered at that Meads became a person of considerable standing and envy, and that little Minnie Birdie was intensely flattered when he occasionally condescended to look in her direction. She had been in Mrs. Bastien-Melland's service now for seven months, and the attentions of the dog groom had not only been a matter of general observation, for some time past, but had become a subject of reckless mirth and innuendo among the other servants.

One night she was hurrying home. Her mother had been rather worse than usual of late, and she was carrying a few scraps that the cook had given her. It was a wretched night and she was not feeling well herself: a mood of tired dejection possessed her. She crossed a drab street off Lisson Grove and, as she reached the curb, her eye lighted on "Old Fags." He did not see her. He was walking along the gutter, patting the road occasionally with his stick. She had not spoken to

him since the occasion we have mentioned. For once he was not talking—his eyes were fixed in listless apathy on the road. As he passed, she caught the angle of his chin silhouetted against the window of a shop. For the rest of her walk the haunting vision of that chin beneath the drawn cheeks, and the brooding hopelessness of those sunken eyes, kept recurring to her. Perhaps, in some remote past, he had been as good to look upon as Meads, the groom! Perhaps some one had cared for him! She tried to push this thought from her, but some chord in her nature seemed to have been awakened and to vibrate with an unaccountable sympathy toward this undesirable fellow lodger.

She hurried home, and in the night was ill. She could not go to Mrs. Melland's for three days and she wanted the money badly. When she got about again she was subject to fainting fits and sickness. On one such occasion, as she was going upstairs at the Buildings, she felt faint and leant against the wall just as "Old Fags" was going up.

He stopped and said: "Hullo, now what are we doing? Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" And she said: "It's all right, old 'un." These were the kindest words she had ever spoken to "Old Fags."

During the next month there were strange symptoms about Minnie Birdie that caused considerable comment, and there were occasions when old Mrs. Birdie pulled herself together, and became the active partner and waited on Minnie. On one such occasion, "Old Fags" came home late and, after drawing a cork, varied his usual programme of talking and snoring by singing in a maudlin key, and old Mrs. Birdie came banging at his door and shrieked out: "Stop your row, you old — My daughter is ill. Can't you hear?"

And "Old Fags" came to his door and blinked at her and said: "Ill, is she? Oh, dear! oh, dear! Would she like some stew, eh?"

And old Mrs. Birdie said: "No, she don't want any of your muck," and bundled back. But they did not hear any more of "Old Fags" that night, or any other night when Minnie came home queer.

Early in March Minnie got the sack from Hyde Park Square. Mrs. Melland was still away—having decided to winter in Rome—but the Housekeeper assumed the responsibility of this action, and in writing to Mrs. Melland, justified the course she had taken by saying that "she could not expect the other maids to work in the same house with an unmarried girl in that condition." Mrs. Melland, whose letter in reply was full of the serious illness of poor little Annisette, one of the Chows, that had suffered in Egypt on account of a maid giving it too much rice, with its boned chicken; and how much better it had been in Rome under the treatment of Dr. Lascati,—made no special reference to the question of Minnie Birdie, only saying that "she was *so* sorry if Mrs. Bellingham was having trouble with these tiresome servants."

The spring came, and the summer, and the two inhabitants of Room 476 eked out their miserable existence. One day Minnie would pull herself together and get a day's charring and occasionally Mrs. Birdie would struggle along to a laundry in Maida Vale, where a benevolent proprietress would pay her one shilling and threepence to do a day's ironing; for the old lady was rather neat with her hands. And once, when things were very desperate, the brother of a nephew from Walthamstow turned up. He was a small cabinet-maker by trade, and he agreed to allow them three shillings a week, "till things righted themselves a bit." But nothing was seen of Meads, the groom. One night Minnie was rather worse and the idea occurred to her that she would like to send a message to him. It was right that he should know. He had made no attempt to see her since she had left Mrs. Melland's service. She lay awake thinking of him and wondering how she could send a message, when she suddenly thought of "Old Fags." He had been quiet of late; whether the demand for cigarette ends was abating and he could not afford the luxuries

that their disposal seemed to supply, or whether he was keeping quiet for any ulterior reason, she was not able to determine. In the morning she sent her mother across to ask him if he would "oblige by calling at Hyde Park Square and asking Mr. Meads if he would oblige by calling at 476 Bolingbroke Buildings, to see Miss Birdie."

There is no record of how "Old Fags" delivered this message, but it is known that that same afternoon Mr. Meads did call. He left about three-thirty in a great state of perturbation, and in a very bad temper. He passed "Old Fags" on the stairs, and the only comment he made was: "I never have any luck! God help me!" And he did not return, although he had apparently promised to do so.

In a few weeks' time the position of the occupants of Room 476 became desperate. It was, in fact, a desperate time all round. Work was scarce and money scarcer. Waves of ill-temper and depression swept Bolingbroke Buildings. Mrs. Read had gone—Heaven knows where. Even "Old Fags" seemed at the end of his tether. True, he still managed to secure his inevitable bottle, but the stews became scarcer and less potent. All Mrs. Birdie's time and energy were taken up in nursing Minnie, and the two somehow existed on the money—now increased to four shillings a week—which the sympathetic cabinet-maker from Walthamstow allowed them. The question of rent was shelved. Four shillings a week for two people means ceaseless, gnawing hunger. The widow and her daughter lost pride and hope, and further messages to Mr. Meads failed to elicit any response. The widow became so desperate that she even asked "Old Fags" one night if he could spare a little stew for her daughter who was starving. The pungent odour of the hot food was too much for her.

"Old Fags" came to the door: "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" he said, "what trouble there is! Let's see what we can do!" He messed about for some time and then took it across to them. It was a strange concoction. Meat that it would have been difficult to know what to ask for at a butcher's, and many bones, but the onions seemed to pull it together. To any one starving it was good. After that it became a sort of established thing: whenever "Old Fags" *had* a stew, he sent some over to the widow and daughter. But apparently things were not going too well in the cigarette-end trade, for the stews became more and more intermittent, and sometimes were desperately "honey."

And then one night a climax was reached. "Old Fags" was awakened in the night by fearful screams. There was a district nurse in the next room, and also a student from a great hospital. No one knows how it all affected "Old Fags." He went out at a very unusual hour in the early morning, and seemed more garrulous and meandering in his speech. He stopped the widow in the passage and mumbled incomprehensible solicitude.

Minnie was very ill for three days, but she recovered, faced by the insoluble proposition of feeding three mouths, instead of two, and two of them requiring enormous quantities of milk. This terrible crisis brought out many good qualities in various people. The cabinet-maker sent ten shillings extra, and others came forward as though driven by some race instinct. "Old Fags" disappeared for ten days after that. It was owing to an unfortunate incident in Hyde Park, when he insisted on sleeping on a flower bed with a gin bottle under his left arm, and on account of the unreasonable attitude that he took up toward a policeman in the matter. When he returned things were assuming their normal course. Mrs. Birdie's greeting was: "Ullo, old 'un, we've missed your stoos."

"Old Fags" had undoubtedly secured a more stable position in the eyes of the Birdies, and one day he was even allowed to see the baby. He talked to it from the door.

“Oh, dear! oh, dear!” he said. “What a beautiful little baby! What a dear little baby! Oh, dear! oh, dear!” The baby shrieked with unrestrained terror at sight of him, but that night some more stew was sent in.

Then the autumn came on. People, whose romantic instincts had been touched at the arrival of the child, gradually lost interest and fell away. The cabinetmaker from Walthamstow wrote a long letter, saying that after next week the payment of the four shillings would have to stop, he hoped he had been of some help in their trouble, but that things were going on all right now; of course he had to think of his own family first, and so on.

The lawyers of the remote landlord, who was assiduously killing stags in Scotland, regretted that their client could not see his way to allow any further delay in the matter of the payment of rent due. The position of the Birdie family became once more desperate. Old Mrs. Birdle had become frailer, and though Minnie could now get about, she found work difficult to obtain, owing to people’s demand for a character from the last place. Their thoughts once more reverted to Meads, and Minnie lay in wait for him one morning as he was taking the dogs out. There was a very trying scene ending in a very vulgar quarrel, and Minnie came home and cried all the rest of the day and through half the night.

“Old Fags” stews became scarcer and less palatable. He, too, seemed in dire straits.

We now come to an incident that, we are ashamed to say, owes its inception to the effect of alcohol. It was a wretched morning in late October, bleak and foggy. The blue-grey corridors of Bolingbroke Buildings seemed to exude damp. The strident voices of the unkempt children, quarrelling in the courtyard below, permeated the whole Buildings. The strange odour, that was its characteristic, lay upon it like the foul breath of some evil god. All its inhabitants seemed hungry, wretched and vile. Their lives of constant protest seemed, for the moment, lulled to a sullen indifference, whilst they huddled behind their gloomy doors and listened to the raucous railings of their offspring.

The widow Birdie and her daughter sat silently in their room. The child was asleep. It had had its milk, and it would have to have its milk, whatever happened. The crumbs from the bread the women had had at breakfast lay ungathered on the bare table. They were both hungry and very desperate. There was a knock at the door. Minnie went to it, and there stood “Old Fags.” He leered at them meekly and under his arm carried a gin bottle, three parts full.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” he said. “What a dreadful day! What a dreadful day! Will you have a little drop of gin to comfort you? Now! What do you say?”

Minnie looked at her mother—in other days the door would have been slammed in his face, but “Old Fags” had certainly been kind in the matter of stews. They asked him to sit down. Then old Mrs. Birdie did accept just a tiny drop of gin, and they both persuaded Minnie to have a little. Now neither of the women had had food of any worth for days, and the gin went straight to their heads. It was already in “Old Fags’ ” head, firmly established. The three immediately became garrulous. They all talked volubly and intimately. The women railed “Old Fags” about his dirt, but allowed that he had “a good ’eart.” They talked longingly and lovingly about “his stoos” and “Old Fags” said: “Well, my dears, you shall have the finest stoo you’ve ever had in your lives tonight.”

He repeated this nine times, only each time the whole sentence sounded like one word.

Then the conversation drifted to the child, and the hard lot of parents, and by a natural sequence to Meads, its father. Meads was discussed with considerable bitterness, and the constant reiteration of the threat by the women that they meant to ’ave the Lor on ’im all right, mingled with the jeering sophistries of “Old Fags” on the genalman’s behaviour, and the

impossibility of expecting a dog groom to be a sportsman, lasted a considerable time. "Old Fags" talked expansively about leaving it to him, and somehow as he stood there with his large, puffy figure, looming up in the dimly lighted room, and waving his long arms, he appeared to the women a figure of portentous significance. In the eyes of the women he typified powers they had not dreamt of. Under the veneer of his hidebound depravity Minnie seemed to detect some slow moving force trying to assert itself.

He meandered on in a vague monologue, using terms and expressions they did not know the meaning of. He gave the impression of some fettered animal, launching a fierce indictment against the fact of its life. At last he took up the gin bottle and moved to the door and then leered round the room.

"You shall have the finest stoo you've ever had in your life tonight, my dears."

He repeated this seven times again and then went heavily out.

That afternoon a very amazing fact was observed by several inhabitants of Bohingbroke Buildings. "Old Fags" washed his face! He went out about three o'clock without his sack. His face had certainly been cleaned up and his clothes seemed in some mysterious fashion to hold together. He went across Lisbon Grove and made for Hyde Park Square. He hung about for nearly an hour at the corner, and then he saw a man come up the area steps of a house on the south side and walk rapidly away. "Old Fags" followed him. He took a turning sharp to the left through a Mews, and entered a narrow street at the end. There he entered a deserted-looking pub, kept by an ex-butler and his wife. He passed right through to a room at the back and called for some beer. Before it was brought, "Old Fags" was seated at the next table ordering gin.

"Dear, oh, dear! what a wretched day!" said "Old Fags."

The groom grunted assent. But "Old Fags" was not to be put off by mere indifference. He broke ground on one or two subjects that interested the groom, one subject in particular being Dog. He seemed to have a profound knowledge of Dog, and before Mr. Meads quite realised what was happening he was trying gin in his beer at "Old Fags'" expense.

The groom was feeling particularly morose that afternoon. His luck seemed out. Bookmakers had appropriated several half-crowns that he sorely begrudged, and he had other expenses. The beer-gin mixture comforted him, and the rambling eloquence of the old fool, who seemed disposed to be content paying for drinks and talking, fitted in with his mood. They drank and talked for a full hour, and at length got to a subject that all men get to sooner or later if they drink and talk long enough—the subject of Woman.

Mr. Meads became confiding and philosophic. He talked of women in general and what triumphs and adventures he had had among them in particular. But what a trial and tribulation they had been to him in spite of all! "Old Fags" winked knowingly and was splendidly comprehensive and tolerant of Meads' peccadillos.

"It's all a game," said Meads. "You've got to manage 'em. There ain't much I don't know, old bird!" Then suddenly "Old Fags" leaned forward in the dark room and said: "No, Mr. Meads, but you ought to play the game, you know. Oh, dear, yes!"

"What do you mean, *Mister Meads*?" said that gentleman sharply.

"Minnie Birdie, eh, you haven't mentioned Minnie Birdie yet!" said "Old Fags."

"What the Devil are you talking about?" said Meads drunkenly.

"She's starving," said "Old Fags," "starving, wretched, alone with her old mother and your child. Oh, dear! yes, it's terrible!"

Meads' eyes flashed with a sullen frenzy, but fear was gnawing at his heart, and he felt more disposed to placate this mysterious old man than to quarrel with him.

"I tell you I have no luck," he said after a pause.

"Old Fags" looked at him gloomily and ordered some more gin. When it was brought he said: "You ought to play the game, you know, Mr. Meads. After all—luck? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Would you rather be the woman? Five shillings a week, you know, would—"

"No, I'm damned if I do!" cried Meads fiercely. "It's all right for all these women—Gawd! How do I know if it's true? Look here, old bird, do you know I'm already done in for two five bobs a week, eh! One up in Norfolk and the other at Enfield. Ten shillings a week of my — money goes to these blasted women. No fear, no more, I'm through with it!"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" said "Old Fags," and he moved a little further into the shadow of the room and watched the groom out of the depths of his sunken eyes.

But Meads' courage was now fortified by the fumes of a large quantity of fiery alcohol, and he spoke witheringly of women in general and seemed disposed to quarrel if "Old Fags" disputed his right to place them in the position that Meads considered their right and natural position. But "Old Fags" gave no evidence of taking up the challenge—on the contrary he seemed to suddenly shift his ground. He grinned and leered and nodded at Meads' string of coarse sophistry, and suddenly he touched him on the arm and looked round the room and said very confidentially:

"Oh, dear! yes, Mr. Meads. Don't take too much to heart what I said," and then he sniffed and whispered: "I could put you on to a very nice thing, Mr. Meads. I could introduce you to a lady I know would take a fancy to you, and you to her. Oh, dear, yes!"

Meads pricked up his ears like a fox-terrier and his small eyes glittered.

"Oh!" he said. "Are you one of those, eh, old bird? Who is she?"

"Old Fags" took out a piece of paper and fumbled with a pencil. He then wrote down a name and address somewhere at Shepherds Bush.

"What's a good time to call?" said Meads.

"Between six and seven," answered "Old Fags."

"Oh, Hell!" said Meads. "I can't do it. I've got to get back and take the dogs out at half-past five, old bird. From half-past five to half-past six. The missus is back, she'll kick up a hell of a row."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" said "Old Fags." "What a pity! The young lady is going away, too!" He thought for a moment and then an idea seemed to strike him. "Look here, would you like me to meet you and take the dogs round the Park till you return?"

"What!" said Meads, "trust you with a thousand pounds' worth of dogs! Not much."

"No, no, of course not, I hadn't thought of that!" said "Old Fags" humbly.

Meads looked at him, and it is very difficult to tell what it was about the old man that gave him a sudden feeling of complete trust. The ingenuity of his speech, the ingratiating confidence that a mixture of beer-gin gives, tempered by the knowledge that famous pedigree Pekinese would be almost impossible to dispose of, perhaps it was a combination of these motives. In any case a riotous impulse drove him to fall in with "Old Fags'" suggestion, and he made the appointment for half-past five.

Evening had fallen early, and a fine rain was driving in fitful gusts when the two met at the corner of Hyde Park. There were the ten little dogs on their lead, and Meads with a cap pulled close over his eyes.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" cried "Old Fags" as he approached. "What dear little dogs! What dear little dogs!"

Mends handed the lead over to "Old Fags" and asked more precise instructions of the way to get to the address.

"What are you wearing that canvas sack inside your coat for, old bird, eh?" asked Mends when these instructions had been given.

"Oh, my dear sir," said "Old Fags," "if you had the asthma like I get it! and no underclothes on these damp days! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" He wheezed drearily.

Meads gave him one or two more exhortations about the extreme care and tact he was to observe.

"Be very careful with that little Chow on the left lead. 'E's got his coat on, see? 'E's 'ad a chill and you must keep 'im on the move. Gently, see?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! poor little chap! What's his name?" said "Old Fags."

"Pelleas," answered Mr. Mends.

"Oh, poor little Pelleas! Poor little Pelleas! Come along, you won't be too long, Mr. Meads, will you?"

"You bet I won't," said the groom, and nodding he crossed the road rapidly and mounting a Shepherd's Bush motor 'bus, he set out on his journey to an address that didn't exist.

"Old Fags" ambled slowly round the Park snuffling and talking to the dogs. He gauged the time when Meads would be somewhere about Queens Road, then he ambled slowly back to the point from which he had started. With extreme care he piloted the small army across the High Road and led them in the direction of Padding-ton. He drifted with leisurely confidence through a maze of small streets. Several people stopped and looked at the dogs and the boys barked and mimicked them, but nobody took the trouble to look at "Old Fags." At length he came to a district where their presence seemed more conspicuous. Rows of squalid houses and advertisement hoardings. He slightly increased his pace, and a very stout policeman standing outside a funeral furnisher's glanced at him with a vague suspicion. In strict accordance, however, with an ingrained officialism, that hates to act "without instructions," he let the cortege pass.

"Old Fags" wandered through a wretched street that seemed entirely peopled by children. Several of them came up and followed the dogs.

"Dear little dogs, aren't they? Oh my, yes, dear little dogs!" he said to the children.

At last he reached a broad, gloomy thoroughfare with low, irregular buildings on one side, and an interminable length of hoardings on the other, that screened a strip of land by the railway land that harboured a wilderness of tins and garbage. "Old Fags" led the dogs along by the hoarding. It was very dark. Three children who had been following, tired of the pastime and drifted away. He went along once more. There was a gap in a hoarding on which was notified that "Pogram's Landauettes could be hired for the evening at an inclusive fee of two guineas. Telephone 47901 Mayfair." The meagre light from a street lamp thirty yards away revealed a colossal coloured picture of a very beautiful young man and woman stepping out of a car and entering a gorgeous restaurant, having evidently just enjoyed the advantage of this peerless luxury.

"Old Fags" went on another forty yards and then returned. There was no one in sight.

"Oh, dear little dogs!" he said. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! what dear little dogs! Just through here, my pretty pets. Gentle, Pelleas! gently, very gently! There, there, there! Oh, what dear little dogs!"

He stumbled forward through the quagmire of desolation, picking his way as though familiar with every inch of ground, to the further corner where it was even darker, and where the noise of shunting freight trains drowned every other murmur of the night.

It was eight o'clock when "Old Fags" reached his room in Bolingbroke Buildings, carrying his heavily laden sack across his shoulders. The child in Room 476 had been peevish and fretful all the afternoon, and the two women were lying down, exhausted. They heard "Old Fags" come in. He seemed very busy, banging about with bottles and tins and alternately coughing and wheezing. But soon the potent aroma of onions reached their nostrils and they knew he was preparing to keep his word.

At nine o'clock he staggered across with a steaming saucepan of hot stew. In contrast to the morning's conversation, which though devoid of self-consciousness had taken on at times an air of moribund analysis, making little stabs at fundamental things, the evening passed off on a note of almost joyous levity. The stew was extremely good to the starving women, and "Old Fags" developed a vein of fantastic pleasantry. He talked unceasingly, sometimes on things they understood, sometimes on matters of which they were entirely ignorant; and sometimes he appeared to them obtuse, maudlin and incoherent. Nevertheless, he brought to their room a certain light-hearted raillery that had never visited it before. No mention was made of Mends.

The only blemish to the serenity of this bizarre supper party was that "Old Fags" developed intervals of violent coughing, intervals when he had to walk around the room and beat his chest. These fits had the unfortunate result of waking the baby.

When this undesirable result had occurred for the fourth time, "Old Fags" said: "Oh, dear! oh, dear! this won't do. Oh, no, this won't do. I must go back to my hotel!" A remark that caused paroxysms of mirth to old Mrs. Birdie. Nevertheless, "Old Fags" retired, and it was then just on eleven o'clock.

The women went to bed, and all through the night Minnie heard the old man coughing.

Mends jumped off the 'bus at Shepherds Bush and hurried in the direction that "Old Fags" had instructed him. He asked three people for the Pomeranian Road before an errand boy told him that he believed it was somewhere off Giles Avenue; but at Giles Avenue no one seemed to know it. He retraced his steps in a very bad temper and inquired again. Five other people had never heard of it. So he went to a post office, and a young lady in charge informed him that there was no such road in the neighbourhood. He tried other roads whose names vaguely resembled it, then he came to the conclusion that "that blamed old fool had made some silly mistake."

He took a 'bus back with a curious gnawing fear at the pit of his stomach, a fear that he kept thrusting hack, he dare not allow himself to contemplate it. It was nearly seven-thirty when he got back to Hyde Park, and his eye quickly scanned the length of railing near which "Old Fags" was to be. Immediately that he saw no sign of him or the little dogs, a horrible feeling of physical sickness assailed him. The whole truth flashed through in his mind. He saw the fabric of his life crumble to dust. He was conscious of visions of past acts and misdeeds tumbling over each other in a furious kaleidoscope. The groom was terribly frightened. Mrs. Bastien-Melland would be in at eight o'clock to dinner, and the first thing she would ask for would be the little dogs. They were never supposed to go out after dark, but he had been busy that afternoon and arranged to take them out later. How was he to account for himself and their loss? He visualised himself in a dock, and all sorts of other horrid things coming up—a forged character, an affair in Norfolk, and another at Enfield, and a little trouble with a bookmaker seven years ago. For he felt convinced that the little dogs had gone forever, and "Old Fags" with them.

He cursed blindly in his soul at his foul luck and the wretched inclination that had lured him to drink "beer-gin" with the old thief. Forms of terrific vengeance passed through his mind, if he should meet the old devil again. In the meantime what should he do? He had never even thought

of making "Old Fags" give him any sort of address. He dared not go back to Hyde Park Square without the dogs. He ran breathlessly up and down, peering in every direction. Eight o'clock came and there was still no sign. Suddenly he remembered Minnie Birdie. He remembered that the old ruffian had mentioned, and seemed to know, Minnie Birdie. It was a connection that he had hoped to have wiped out of his life, but the case was desperate. Curiously enough, during his desultory courtship of Minnie, he had never been to her home; the only occasion when he *had* visited it, was after the birth of the child. He had done so under the influence of three pints of beer, and he hadn't the faintest recollection now of the number or the block. He hurried there, however, in feverish trepidation.

Now Bolingbroke Buildings harbour some eight hundred people; and it is a remarkable fact that, although the Birdies had lived there about a year, of the eleven people that Mends asked, not one happened to know the name. People develop a profound sense of self-concentration in Bolingbroke Buildings.

Mends wandered up all the stairs and through the slate-tile passages. Twice he passed their door without knowing it—on the first occasion, only five minutes after "Old Fags" had carried a saucepan of steaming stew from Number 475 to Number 476. At ten o'clock he gave it up. He had four shillings on him, and he adjourned to a small "pub" hard by, and ordered a tankard of ale, and as an afterthought three pennyworth of gin which he mixed in it. Probably he thought that this mixture, which was so directly responsible for the train of tragic circumstance that encompassed him, might continue to act in some manner toward a more desirable conclusion.

It did, indeed, drive him to action of a sort, for he sat there drinking and smoking Navy Cut cigarettes, and by degrees he evolved a most engaging, but impossible, story, of being lured to the river by three men and chloroformed; and when he came to, finding that the dogs and the men had gone. He drank a further quantity of beer-gin, and rehearsed his role in detail, and at length brought himself to the point of facing Mrs. Melland. . . .

It was the most terrifying ordeal of his life. The servants frightened him for a start. They almost shrieked when they saw him and drew back. Mrs. Bastien-Melland had left word that he was to go to a small breakfast-room in the basement directly he came in, and she would come and see him. There was a small dinner party on that evening and an agitated game of bridge. Mends had not stood on the hearth-rug of the breakfast-room two minutes before he heard the foreboding swish of skirts, the door burst open, and Mrs. Bastien-Melland stood before him, a thing of penetrating perfumes, high-lights and trepidation.

She just said, "Well!" and fixed her hard, bright eyes on him.

Mends launched forth into his impossible story, but he dared not look at her. He tried to gather together the pieces of the tale he had so carefully rehearsed in the pub, but he felt like some helpless bark at the mercy of a hostile battle fleet; the searchlight of Mrs. Melland's cruel eyes was concentrated on him; while a flotilla of small diamonds on her heaving bosom winked and glittered with a dangerous insolence.

He was stumbling over a phrase about the effects of chloroform when he became aware that Mrs. Melland was not listening to the matter of his story, she was only concerned with the manner. Her lips were set and her straining eyes insisted on catching his. He looked full at her and caught his breath and stopped.

Mrs. Melland still staring at him was moving slowly to the door. A moment of panic seized him. He mumbled something, and also moved toward the door. Mrs. Melland was first to grip the handle. Mends made a wild dive and seized her wrist. But Mrs. Bastien-Melland came of a hard-

riding Yorkshire family. She did not lose her head. She struck him across the mouth with her flat hand, and as he reeled back she opened the door and called to the servants.

Suddenly Meads remembered that the room had a French window onto the garden. He pushed her clumsily against the door and sprang across the room. He clutched wildly at the bolts while Mrs. Melland's voice was ringing out:

“Catch that man! Hold him! Catch thief!”

But before the other servants had had time to arrive he managed to get through the door and to pull it after him. His hand was bleeding with cuts from broken glass, but he leapt the wall and got into the shadow of some shrubs three gardens away.

He heard whistles blowing and the dominant voice of Mrs. Melland, directing a hue-and-cry. He rested some moments, then panic seized him and he laboured over another wall and found the passage of a semidetached house. A servant opened a door and looked out and screamed. He struck her wildly and unreasonably on the shoulder, and rushed up some steps and got into a front garden. There was no one there, and he darted into the street and across the road.

In a few minutes he was lost in a labyrinth of back streets and laughing hysterically to himself.

He had two shillings and eightpence on him. He spent fourpence of this on whiskey, and then another fourpence just before the pubs closed. He struggled vainly to formulate some definite plan of campaign. The only point that seemed terribly clear to him was that he must get away. He knew Mrs. Melland only too well. She would spare no trouble in hunting him down. She would exact the uttermost farthing. It meant gaol and ruin. The obvious impediment to getting away was that he had no money and no friends. He had not sufficient strength of character to face a tramp-life. He had lived too long in the society of the pampered Pekinese. He loved comfort.

Out of the simmering tumult of his soul grew a very definite passion—the passion of hate. He developed a vast, bitter, scorching hatred for the person who had caused this ghastly climax to his unfortunate career—“Old Fags.” He went over the whole incidents of the day again, rapidly recalling every phase of “Old Fags” conversation and manner. What a blind fool he was not to have seen through the filthy old swine's game! But what had he done with the dogs? Sold the lot for a pound, perhaps! The idea made Meads shiver. He slouched through the streets harbouring his pariah-like lust.

We will not attempt to record the psychologic changes that harassed the soul of Mr. Meads during the next two days and nights; the ugly passions that stirred him and beat their wings against the night; the tentative intuitions urging toward some vague new start; the various compromises he made with himself, his weakness and inconsistency that found him bereft of any quality other than the sombre shadow of some ill-conceived revenge. We will only note that on the evening of the day we mention, he turned up at Bolingbroke Buildings. His face was haggard and drawn, his eyes bloodshot and his clothes tattered and muddy. His appearance and demeanour were, unfortunately, not so alien to the general character of Bolingbroke Buildings as to attract any particular attention, and he slunk like a wolf through the dreary passages, and watched the people come and go.

It was at about a quarter to ten, when he was going, along a passage in Block “F,” that he suddenly saw Minnie Birdie come out of one door and go into another. His small eyes glittered and he went on tiptoe. He waited till Minnie was quite silent in her room and then he went stealthily to Room 475. He tried the handle and it gave. He opened the door and peered in. There was a cheap tin lamp guttering on a box, that dimly revealed a room of repulsive wretchedness. The furniture seemed to mostly consist of bottles and rags. But in one corner on a mattress he

beheld the grinning face of his enemy—"Old Fags." Meads shut the door silently and stood with his back to it.

"Oh," he said, "so here we are at last, old bird, eh!"

This move was apparently a supremely successful dramatic coup; for "Old Fags" lay still, paralysed with fear, no doubt.

"So this is our little 'ome, eh?" Meads continued, "where we bring little dogs and sell 'em. What have you got to say, you old—"

The groom's face blazed into a sudden accumulated fury. He thrust his chin forward and let forth a volley of frightful and blasting oaths. But "Old Fags" didn't answer, his shiny face seemed to be intensely amused with this outburst.

"We got to settle our little account, old bird, see?" and the suppressed fury of Meads' voice denoted some physical climax. "Why the Hell don't you answer?" he suddenly shrieked; and springing forward he lashed "Old Fags" across the cheek.

A terrible horror came over him. The cheek he had struck was as cold as marble and the head fell a little impotently to one side.

Trembling as though struck with an ague the groom picked up the guttering lamp and held it close to the face of "Old Fags." It was set in an impenetrable repose, the significance of which even the groom could not misunderstand. The features were calm and childlike, lit by a half-smile of splendid tolerance, that seemed to have over-ridden the temporary buffets of a queer world.

Meads had no idea how long he stood there gazing horror-struck at the face of his enemy. He only knew that he was presently conscious that Minnie Birdie was standing by his side; and as he looked at her, her gaze was fixed on "Old Fags," and a tear was trickling down either cheek.

"E's dead," she said. "'Old Fags' is dead. 'E died this morning of noomonyer."

She said this quite simply, as though it was a statement that explained the wonder of her presence. She did not look at Meads, or seem aware of him.

He watched the flickering light from the lamp illumining the underside of her chin and nostrils and her quivering brows.

"E's dead," she said again, and the statement seemed to come as an edict of dismissal, as though love and hatred and revenge had no place in these fundamental things.

Meads looked from her to the tousled head, leaning slightly to one side on the mattress, and he felt himself in the presence of forces he could not comprehend. He put the lamp back quietly on the box and tiptoed from the room.