



"MORBUS NOBILIS"

OR THE
PLASTER BRIGADE

BY W. H. WILLIAMSON.

which will make him ill. And, of course, the affair must be kept secret by us all. Only we'll enjoy and profit by the experiment. For me to persuade a person that he has something the matter with him is not a difficult thing, but you will see that other people will also persuade themselves that——"

Bounts entered. He at once began to tell us "all the winners and special places," and he was raving about the latest star at the Empire, when Pillar got up and said, in a confidential, solicitous way: "What's the matter with your neck?"

Silence covered the group as with a garment. Bounts rent the covering. He was startled, and he looked the doctor straight in the face for a few seconds. Then, bending his head, he rubbed his hand along his neck, and after two or three ineffectual rubs he got up and tried to look at the back of it in the mirror. He almost choked himself in the attempt, and when he found he could see nothing, he turned to Pillar:—

"What's the matter with it? I don't feel anything."

"I was looking at that white spot," said Pillar, in a doctorly way, and he turned Bounts to the light. He stroked his neck and then pressed a pencil-case or something on it, and asked—in that low-toned, quiet, sympathetic manner: "Do you feel anything now?"

"Yes, *now* I do," replied Bounts. "But what is it?" and he once more rubbed his hand over his neck. "It's nothing bad, is it? Can't you do something for it, doctor?"

Pillar was silent for a moment and then he said, thoughtfully: "It's—it's a—it's not much. Yes, I'll let you have a little ointment for it." And he once more bent poor Bounts's head and rubbed the place he had pressed

"WHAT'S that, Pillar? Do you mean to say that people believe and say they are ill when they are not?"

"Yes. A great number of people said and thought they had the influenza, merely because they imagined it was fashionable."

"I suppose, as a matter of fact, doctor, you could persuade a man that he had some disease or other if he were quite well?"

"Certainly," replied Pillar.

"That won't wash," said Waggs.

"What won't?" asked Pillar.

"That persuasion or imagination theory."

"As a matter of fact," replied Pillar, "I haven't the slightest intention of submitting it to the laundry-maid, but I'll prove it if you like."

"So be it. Show us the Q.E.D. of the matter, and I'm satisfied."

"This is somewhat unprofessional," Pillar said, apologetically, "but I merely want to prove my theory. I won't persuade anybody that he has a disease the contemplation of

with the pencil-case; after which he added, "Umph" very sentimentally.

Said Waggs: "Pillar, how does leprosy first show itself?"

"By Jove! You don't think this is leprosy, do you?" asked Bounts, in terrified tones, looking at the doctor.

"Oh, no," said Pillar, smiling. "This isn't leprosy, otherwise Waggs wouldn't be here. It's a new bacillus, I fancy, that has not long been discovered, and which, hitherto, has confined its attention to persons—er, of—er, rather aristocratic birth. The medical name of the disease is *morbus nobilis*. You remember Prince R——, who visited this country last month? He was attacked by it, as were several members of our own Royal Family. Then the Duke of ——, too, has entertained it; but it has made very little headway."

Bounts had his hand on his neck. "But," he said, "is it dangerous? Will my neck swell? . . . And whom did you say it has attacked so far? Prince R—— and the Royal Family? By Jove! What does it look like?" And he made another attempt to strangle himself.

"Won't you call on the Duke of —— and the members of the Royal Family, Bounts? They'll, perhaps, give you a recipe for *morbus nobilis*."

"You are a lucky fellow, Bounts," said Nowles. "You drop in for all these good things."

"Is it contagious, doctor?" I asked, and I made as though I would fall on Bounts's neck. Bounts declined the embrace. He was still rubbing his neck, and he said:—

"It is strange, though, isn't it? Let's see, who has had it? Prince R——. What members of the Royal Family? Oh, some. The Duke of —— and myself. By Jove! Er—what must I do, doctor?"

"Well," replied Pillar, "there is very little to be seen at present. I should advise you not to catch cold. I think if you were to go home and to bed early, and visit me in the morning, when I will have another look at your neck, you will do all that is necessary." And Bounts went away murmuring "Prince R——."

I did not see Pillar again for two or three days, and when we did meet he immediately took my arm, and we went for a stroll. As we walked my companion discoursed thus:—

"Bounts came to me, and I put him a small black plaster, about half an inch square, on his neck. He seemed perfectly satisfied and correspondingly gratified, and he asked

me if I could see any more spots. I couldn't. I thought one was enough. Then he asked me once more to repeat the names of the illustrious persons who had been visited by relatives of the microbes he was entertaining. I did so, and he left in the best of spirits. But that's not all. The disease has spread, but the infection is going to be more serious than I anticipated, I am afraid. Bounts has been to all his best society friends and, so I suppose, told them the *raison d'être* of his black patch. He has, moreover, been assiduously engaged in finding spots similar to the one on his own neck, which he has never seen, on the necks of his friends. And having found some spots, he has sent the bearers of them to me.

"Lady Kwickup brought her daughter. 'Doctor,' she said, 'Mr. Bounts was looking at my daughter's neck yesterday afternoon, and he said he thought she had the—er—the—what did he call it, Amy, darling?' 'I forget,' said Amy, darling, 'I think it was something like *morbo nobilis*. But I know he said Prince R—— had had the same thing.' 'That was it,' exclaimed her ladyship; '*moro pro nobis*. And Prince R—— and the dear Duke of —— had had it. It's quite an aristocratic little malady, doctor, is it not?' And she tittered. I had to look at Miss Kwickup's neck. It was as healthy as yours or mine; if there's anything the matter with yours, then healthier. But what could I do? I couldn't pretend to tell Miss Kwickup there was nothing the matter with her neck and that *morbus nobilis* was a fudge. Lady Kwickup and her daughter had made up their minds that *morbus nobilis* was in the family, and though I was to be allowed to try and exorcise it, I was not such an idiot as to say there was nothing the matter.

"And when the black plaster was ordered and I had said that Miss Kwickup need not in any way change her mode of living on account of *morbus nobilis*, Lady Kwickup was in ecstacy. 'It is so like dear Amy,' she said, 'to catch Prince R——'s disease, as Mr. Bounts and I have arranged to call it. It's so much better, is it not, doctor, than that common *La grippe*? Everybody had that. Awful, was it not?' I agreed that the number of people who had had the influenza was awful, and when Lady Kwickup had taken away her dear Amy, I sat in my chair and was hilarious and melancholy by turns."

"Bounts must be an ass," I remarked, by way of comment on the doctor's narrative.

"He is," said Pillar. "But what about Lady Kwickup and her daughter? There is



"I HAD TO LOOK AT MISS KWICKUP'S NECK."

absolutely nothing the matter with either Bounts or Miss Kwickup, only they will be parading themselves on the Row and elsewhere with black plaster on their necks. And they will tell everybody the reason of it. And all their acquaintances will know the names of the people who have had white necks."

We both laughed.

"But," added Pillar, "I'm afraid the disease is spreading too quickly and too far. Look here," and he drew from his pocket a copy of the *Daily Boudoir Gossip*, and showed me the following paragraph:—

"AN ARISTOCRATIC BACILLUS.

"It appears that a new bacillus of a discriminating and exclusive character has lately been discovered. At the present time little is known of its nature, but it is reported on high authority only to have attacked members of reigning houses, the Duke of —, the Hon. R. K. U. Bounts, and Miss Kwickup, daughter of Sir Jabez Kwickup, so that its ravages are confined to a limited circle. It attacks its victims generally in the back of the neck, when it is distinguishable by a small white spot. If attention be paid to it quickly we believe there is absolutely no

danger, and the only inconvenience caused is the wearing of a small piece of plaster, which is used to cover the spot. Those of our readers who were present at Mrs. Wurdly's ball on Friday evening last probably noticed that Miss Kwickup and Mr. Bounts were conspicuous amongst a crowd of *distingués*, who are always present at Mrs. Wurdly's *recherché* balls, by the small piece of black plaster which each carried on the back of the neck, and which covered this really aristocratic bacillus. We believe the honour of the discovery of *morbis nobilis*, which is the scientific name of the disease, is due to Mr. F. R. Pillar, M.D., B.Sc., of Cavendish Square."

"What do you think of that?" asked Pillar, when I handed him back the paper, and he smiled.

I laughed. "'Aristocratic bacillus. Discovered by Mr. F. R. Pillar!' Good heavens, Pillar, what are you going to do?"

"What can I do?"

"But the thing is sure to spread now."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. Everybody will want to have Prince R——'s disease, and all the ambitious mothers will look for spots on their eligible daughters' necks, and they will be sure to find them. . . . I didn't expect so much as this."

I did not see Pillar for a week or two afterwards, but I saw Bounts. It was about four or five days after I had had the conversation above reported with Pillar. Bounts buttonholed me in Picadilly, and took me down Regent Street. He was greatly excited, and our conversation was somewhat as follows:—

"You remember, Tutchy, that spot on my neck which Pillar found at the club the other day?" I nodded. "Well, it is really the same thing that attacked Prince R—— and those others whom Pillar mentioned."

"So I understand."

"Yes, really, by Jove! But isn't it queer that it should come to me first, that is, after Prince R—— and that lot? Some would think it quite an honour, by Jove!"

"Umph. Doesn't it hurt at all?"

"That's the best of it; I hardly feel it. You see the plaster, don't you? I haven't taken it off since Pillar put it on. And don't you know, by Jove! that a lot of fellows have got it now?"—the spot, he meant. "A

lot of girls, too, are wearing plaster. Ha! ha! We are calling ourselves Prince R——'s plaster brigade. Ha! ha! Good name, isn't it? By Jove!"

"Capital. I suppose you are the captain, eh?"

"Ha! ha! By Jove, yes. I ought to be, eh? By-the-bye, haven't you got a white spot on your neck?"

He seized me by the collar and, regardless of the locality and time, he would have instituted himself disease-hunter on the spot, if I had not adopted measures to circumvent him.

"Thanks awfully," I said, slangily but firmly, as I parted him from my vesture. "I washed this morning, and I haven't the slightest doubt that I have many white spots on my neck, but I am afraid I cannot flatter myself that I have Prince R——'s disease, as you call it."

"That's a pity now, isn't it? By Jove! Because it's really aristocratic, don't you know. I was at Lady Fairchin's the other day, and what do you think I was doing? Ha! ha!" I said I didn't know. "Looking at Lady Fairchin's neck and the necks of all the girls with a magnifying glass to see if they had Prince R——'s spot. Good, by Jove! wasn't it?"

"Decidedly good. Did you find any?"

"Oh, yes! They all had it, don't you know. They went to see Pillar the next day, and now they've all got plasters."

"The malady is spreading," I said, as serenely as I could.

"It is, really. I was at Lady Arton's ball on Tuesday evening, and there were thirty-seven of us there with black plasters, don't you know. It was awfully jolly. We call them beauty spots. Ha! ha! And everybody wanted to dance with a member of Prince R——'s brigade. Its getting to be a sign of blood, by Jove! and those who

haven't Prince R——'s disease won't be allowed in good society soon, don't you know, Tutchy. So, ha! ha! you had better hurry up and get it, or you'll be left in the cold, ha! ha!"

I said I would do my best, but it was just possible I couldn't catch it.

"That's unfortunate, by Jove! We have decided to have printed on our cards: '*Morbus nobilis*,' and only those who have had this will be considered fit for good society, don't you know. Halloa! there's Lady Kathleen, Lady Arton's daughter. Do you see the plaster? By Jove! I must go and speak to a member of —er—Prince R——'s brigade. Ta ta, old man, ta ta."

I said "Ta ta."

And that's Bounts.

This is Nowles. Two days afterwards I saw Nowles. He might have had the jaundice, but fortunately he hadn't. He was looking on the ground and drawing geometrical figures. I stood in front of him for a moment before he noticed my presence. When, however, he did look up, he gave a huge sigh of relief, as though he were in some Lucknow and I were a Have-lock. I sat beside him and asked how he was. He said he was wretched, and the following conversation ensued:—

"What's the matter?"

"Can't solve the problem?" And I pointed to the figures he had made. "What book is it?"

"No book. It isn't that figure on the ground that's troubling me. It's a far more serious affair. You remember that night at the club when Pillar made a fool of Bounts?"

"When he found the spot? Yes."

"Exactly. That's what I mean. Now, it seems that Bounts has been telling such a garnished tale about that spot, that it is really considered, by many people, to be a sort of aristocratic trade mark. In fact, so rapidly has the idea spread, that those



"HE SEIZED ME BY THE COLLAR."

who have no plaster on their necks are being looked upon as plebs. To us, who know all about it, the affair is an immense joke, and the bigger the plaster the immenser the joke. But we have by no means heard the last of *morbis nobilis*."

"Yes, but, Nowles, you are surely not so advanced as to let a joke hit you so hard as this, and send you for amusement to problems?"

"It isn't that. I can still enjoy a chestnut or a new joke, but this is leading me into a deuce of a mess. I was at Mrs. Wurdly's ball the other evening. I could scarcely get a girl to dance with me; they all wanted partners with plaster on their necks. I called on Lady Kwickup the other day. She was not at home. She was, but I know why she wasn't. Excuse the bull." I began to understand the problem. Nowles continued: "The worst has to come. I am engaged, as you know, to Miss Praray. Now, Eva is a dear creature and sensible. Her father made a pile of money in the States and came to England to spend it; but he isn't—well, he wasn't born an aristocrat. My family is a fairly old one, as you know, although I shall be nothing but a squire; still, Mr. and Mrs. Praray consented to my engagement to Eva, as she is their only child, and—er—well—er—it's a love match, although Mrs. Praray would, I think, have been better pleased if Eva had fallen in love with a duke. Now, Mrs. Praray and Lady Kwickup have been seeing a great deal of each other lately, and I don't think that has been of any advantage to me, for my lady thinks I once flirted with her daughter, Amy, and didn't come to terms when I ought; and Mrs. Praray has been somewhat fascinated by this blessed *morbis nobilis*—all through Lady Kwickup. She has searched Eva's neck, morning, noon, and night, awake and asleep, but Eva hasn't got Prince R——'s spot. That hurts her—the



"TWO DAYS AFTERWARDS I SAW NOWLES."

old lady, I mean—but she thinks she can scarcely expect Eva to have it, as her blood is not of the bluest."

"An unhealthy colour," I said. "But why can't Miss Praray find a spot if one is wanted?"

"Another confession, Tutchy. I broke our confidence, and told Eva all about our lark with Bounts. Of course, she laughed heartily over it and said he was a 'silly.' Girls always call these darned fools 'sillies,' you know. I made her promise not to tell anybody, and now how can she get *morbis nobilis*? Mrs. Praray has found no end of white spots on Eva's neck, so she

says, 'Eva has it right enough, but she won't wear plaster,' although I fancy that Mrs. Praray, in the corridors of her soul, blames Eva's parentage. But here is where the trouble comes. Lady Kwickup has been suggesting that my blood can't be so pure after all, for I haven't got a sign of Prince R——'s spot. And poor Mrs. Praray has begun to distrust me. She looks upon me with suspicion, and every day has increased the intensity of the situation. The papers are full of this *morbis nobilis*. Nobody is invited to balls except Prince R——'s disease is in the family, all others are ostracized. And this has almost determined Mrs. Praray to break off Eva's engagement to me. I called yesterday, and they were out. They weren't. This morning I had a letter from Eva: I'll read part of it."

He took a letter from his breast pocket, and after humming a little he read: ". . . The truth of the matter is, Lady Kwickup, the horrid woman, has tried to persuade ma that you are a nobody, for you haven't got a wretched spot on your neck. Ma, of course, does not like to tell you this, but she said to me the other day that she thought our engagement was a mistake, and that it would be better for both of us not to consider

ourselves tied for a little while. Don't think I take any notice of this, darling, for I don't, but Lady Kwickup—how I hate her!—was here yesterday, and she stayed a horribly long time. And after she had gone, what do you think ma said? She said that unless you had *morbus nobilis* in three days our engagement would be broken off. Arthur, what will you do? Ma has found no fewer than six spots on my neck this afternoon, and after dinner she burnt poor father's hair with a match, through looking at his neck. What must I do? It isn't much to put a piece of plaster on one's neck, but when one knows the absurd reason for it, as I do, it is revolting. And yet we do so many things because other people do them, that I think it is hardly worth while being different now. Tell me what to do, love. I don't want to make ma cross, but I shall feel like a female Cain with that plaster brand of hypocrisy on my neck. And yet I expect I shall have to wear one, for ma has accepted an invitation for me to Lady Kwickup's ball, and nobody but members of the plaster brigade is to go, except *morbus nobilis* is in the family.

"You are to be given three days to find a spot on your neck. Isn't it horrible? I don't want you to play the sham, Arthur, but I don't think I can fight any more, and do you think you can have this silly *morbus nobilis* for my sake? . . ."

The rest was not for my ears.

"This letter has been sent unknown to Mrs. Praray, and I must reply at once. But what can I do?" And Nowles got up and walked a yard or two away from the seat.

"Why did Pillar start this game? . . . I'm hanged if I can play the fool—and know it."

"You're practically that if you don't."

"There's only one way out of the difficulty that I can see," Nowles said.

"And that way lies?"

"Through Pillar. It was he who started the affair, and he can end it. Everybody with *morbus nobilis* goes to him, and he is simply coining money. You have to wait two or three

hours if you go to see him. That's all very well for him, but what about us poor beggars? What about me?"

"He can cure you."

"Cure me? He must stop the nonsense, that's what he must do. He must be honest with his patients, and tell them there's nothing the matter."

"Nowles, you are letting this affair hit you too hard. Do you know what you have just said?"

"Hang it! old fellow, but it won't matter—just for once. He can lie to them again afterwards."

There was silence for the space of a minute while we thought that over. Nowles broke the silence, and he did so with a face that was radiant with an idea. When a man has an idea of his very own, he feels as though he had found a hidden treasure. Said Nowles:—

"I have it. We must get another doctor to say this *morbus nobilis* is a kind of foot-and-mouth disease—anything, so long as it's beastly and bad enough. A species of leprosy will do. But it must be something that people won't want to have or want others to think they have. Nobody will look for spots if they might turn out to be leprosy."



"SHE BURNT POOR FATHER'S HAIR WITH A MATCH."

"A splendid idea, Nowles," I said; "splendid. Of course, the faculty will squabble over it, but as the dispute will never end, and as nobody will dare to have it till a definite verdict is given upon its nature, it will simply be forgotten and you will be forgiven by Mrs. Praray."

"Going back to the City?" was all Nowles's response.

"Yes."

"Come along."

The problem was solved. The same night Nowles wrote to his *fiancée* to tell her not to have *morbus nobilis* till she heard from him again. If she had any difficulty with her mother on the subject, she was to promise to wear a plaster on the night of the ball, if Mrs. Praray desired it.

The next news I got of *morbus nobilis* was from the *Daily Oracle*. It came out with a paragraph headed "Bachelors and Bacillus." It read thus: "A short time ago one of our contemporaries, with its usual gush, announced that a new bacillus had appeared, and that its ravages were confined to aristocratic circles. The nature of that bacillus has been a secret, and one well-known physician has been called upon to treat those afflicted with *morbus nobilis*, as the disease was called. We have no wish to make capital out of this 'aristocratic bacillus,' only we may say that it was discovered in a London club, and it has now, we believe, gone to far Cathay. Little more will be heard of it, and the next time our contemporary discovers 'a new bacillus' we shall be glad to receive a specimen."

Underneath was the following:—

"A DEPARTURE.—We understand that Mr. F. R. Pillar, M.D., B.Sc., of Cavendish Square, leaves to-morrow in the P. and O. *Cairo* for Japan, for the sake of his health. Dr. Pillar will be recognised as the name of the gentleman who has successfully coped with the new epidemic, *morbus nobilis*, that has lately been raging in aristocratic circles. The doctor's return is not definitely fixed upon."

I rushed off to Nowles.

"Yes," said Nowles, "I saw Pillar. He said he was as sick of the business as I, but he was practically helpless. He said that people came to him and insisted that they had *morbus nobilis*, and all he had to do was to treat them for it. General Indiana's daughter went to him the other day. She's fairly brown, you know, but her mother confessed that Miss Indiana had washed her neck a dozen times a day for the last week, and she

was sure she had Prince R——'s spot. And Miss Bluesang—that pale-faced girl—went to him. Her neck was the colour of a speckled hen; she hadn't washed for a week. But I told Pillar something must be done, and suggested that he should proclaim *morbus nobilis* as some foul disease. He said I was foolish to hint at such a thing, as he could not possibly change his opinion of a case. But at last he said he would leave the country for the sake of his health."

"It's rather a hard sentence," I said.

"Yes; but we could suggest no other. And if the blessed thing is not stopped soon, we shall have all the pet dogs and cats with *morbus nobilis*, and the bourgeois will also wear plaster on their necks, and then we shall indeed be a stiff-necked generation."

"But how did the *Oracle* get hold of its news?"

"It's Waggs's organ."

"Well, I'm——"

"Yes, yes, so you are. But *morbus nobilis* will die very quickly now."

And it did. The next day the following appeared in the *Oracle* in a leading article on "Morbus Nobilis": ". . . We do not blame Dr. Pillar. He did what, under the circumstances, was a proper thing to do. To have told those who came to him to be treated for this so-called Prince R——'s disease that there was really nothing the matter with them, would perhaps have unnecessarily excited them, and maladies, far more serious and harmful than the wearing of a black plaster, might have been the result. It is imperative that a medical man deceive his patients occasionally, and Dr. Pillar possessed far too much ability not to judge when such deception would be justifiable."

In the clubs, at all the balls, the gossip was of nothing but *morbus nobilis*. The *Oracle* had certainly lit a fire of no inconsiderable size. When next I saw Nowles he was in high spirits.

"You look well," I said; "what's the matter?"

"I'm not going to Lady Kwickup's ball; neither is Eva. It is too late to invite anybody now, and as only members of the plaster brigade were invited, only such favoured individuals will go. Won't it be a nice ball?"

I said I hoped it would.

"Mrs. Praray," continued Nowles, "almost wept when she saw me the other morning. She asked me to forgive her, and her opinion of my common-sense is a most exalted one."