



It was a Saturday afternoon. Mr. Charles Potter, one of my governors, he came to me just as I was getting ready to leave the office, and he says :—

“Briggs,” he says, “I want you to take this basket of fruit to Mrs. Dewsnap, 47, Bardolph Crescent, Maida Vale. She’s an aunt of ours, and it’s her birthday to-morrow, Sunday ; it’s a little compliment we’re paying her—I thought you might take it on the way home. You’d better have a cab, and here’s the fare.”

I got into a hansom with the basket—a very fine basket it was ; if my governors had not been in the trade I should have said it cost them a mint of money ; as it was I knew, and what I didn’t know I could guess. We hadn’t got so very far before my hansom cannoned into a cart which pulled out suddenly, and over we very nearly went. Quite over the basket went ; the fruit was spilt ; three of the finest peaches rolled on to the road. I nipped after them, just in time to prevent a brewer’s dray spreading them all over the street. When I’d picked them up I said to my driver :—

“Excuse my asking,” I said, “but is this the first time you’ve ever driven a cab ? Because if so you might just as well have dropped me a hint before I trusted myself inside your coffin on wheels.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, but he didn’t say anything, because he

was saying all that he could think of to the driver of the cart. Off we went again, still all alive ; but when I found that Mrs. Dewsnap’s fruit wasn’t improved by being bruised I pushed up the trap and had another go at my driver. We exchanged a few more remarks as we went along, so that by the time he pulled up and I got out we were not on what might be called the best of terms. I handed him the eighteenpence Mr. Charles had said was his fare. He looked at it as if it was something the likes of which he had never seen before.

“Here,” he said, “haven’t you given me too much ? My fare’s only one and five-pence three-farthings ; though, really, between ourselves, I merely drive a cab for pleasure. Here’s your change ; your master’ll want it.”

He was holding out what I could see was a farthing.

“You keep it,” I told him, “and pay it to someone to give you a few lessons in driving, and then a gentleman won’t have to insure his life before he gets into your dirty cab.”

The language he used to me as I went up the steps to the front door I should not like to see in print. A nice-looking young lady opened the door.

“Mrs. Dewsnap ?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, very sharp, “it’s not Mrs. Dewsnap.”

She would have shut the door if I hadn’t stopped her.

"Here," I said, "one moment; there's some mistake. Isn't this 47, Bardolph Crescent?"

"No," she answered, "it isn't; and very well you know it isn't. I don't want any of your impudence."

That time she did shut the door before I could stop her, leaving me standing on the steps. I felt a bit funny. A boy was passing with an empty basket over his shoulder. I called out to him:—

"Isn't this 47, Bardolph Crescent?"

"No," he answered, "not unless it's been and got itself moved since I was round here last."

"Then where is 47, Bardolph Crescent?"

He swung his basket over on to the other shoulder; then he whistled; then he said:—

"Bardolph Crescent, second on the right, third on the left, fourth on the right, round by the Nag's Head, and then you ask again."

Whether that boy was getting at me or not I couldn't say; he went off whistling, so I shouldn't be surprised. That cab of mine was strolling off down the road; the driver was looking back at me—I could see that he was grinning.

"Now, then," I shouted, "what's this? I paid you to put me down at 47, Bardolph Crescent; you come back and take me where I paid you for!"

He halloaed back:—

"If you buy the cab you can get inside; I wouldn't have you in it on any other terms. You step it, my sunny Sam!"

How he came to know my name is Sam is more than I can say; I expect he guessed it. He cracked his whip and off he went. If there had been a policeman about, I'd have shown him! I hadn't the money for another cab if there had been one to be seen, which there wasn't, nor an omnibus either. I can't say how far it was to Bardolph Crescent, but, carrying that basket, it seemed to me some miles. An ornamental basket, loaded up with fruit to the top of the handle—artistic fashion, as they call it—is not an easy thing to carry; long before I got there I felt more than once like throwing the whole lot down an area.

No. 47, Bardolph Crescent, turned out to be a smallish house, painted green, with flower-boxes in all the windows. The door was opened by about the very tallest woman ever I saw.

"Well, young man," she said, before I had a chance of opening my mouth, "is it the tea-cakes?"

"Mrs. Dewsnap?" I asked.

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She stared at me all over; and I suppose she concluded that I wasn't the tea-cakes.

"Who from?" she said.

"Messrs. Potter, Potter, and Sons."

"Oh," she said, "from them!—If you are from them you'd better come inside." She led the way into a room where a lady was sitting in an arm-chair; very small she was, and all wrinkled, and though the hair on her head was all brown and curly, if ever I met a wig that was one. "From them," said the tall woman.

The little one looked me all over, like the other had done; then she asked, in a tone which was so loud and deep it took me aback:—

"What do you want inside my house?"

"I've brought this from Messrs. Potter, Potter, and Sons," I explained, "with their compliments."

"What did they send it for?"

"Mr. Charles told me that to-morrow was your birthday," I began; I was going to say something else, but she snapped me up in a manner there was no getting away from.

"He did, did he? Then it's like his insolence. How dare he talk about such matters to a perfect stranger? You tell Mr. Charles Potter from me that I've changed the date, and that my birthday's not for a good three months." Then she looked at the basket, which I'd stood upon a chair. "Fruit this time, is it? Last time it was nuts and oranges. It's generally something out of their stock for which they can find no sale." She took hold of one of the peaches which had rolled on to the road. "It's bruised! There's no mistake about this being old stock. How dare they send such stuff to me? Their sweepings!" Then all of a sudden she asked me, in what you might describe as a regular shout, "Have you been eating any of this fruit?"

She fairly made me jump. There was something about the way in which I told her that I had not which seemed to strike her. She looked at me till I felt uncomfortable; then she put up a pair of glasses and looked at me through them. She kept on looking as she said:—

"Not bad, Ashington. What do you think?"

The tall woman had kept on looking at me on her own account from the other side of the table.

"No intellect," she answered.

"You don't want intellect in a man."

"I suppose not."

"I've got all the intellect that's wanted in

my house. What is wanted in a man is something different. Is it your mother or your father who is fat?" she asked me, in that way she had of speaking as if she was firing a gun at you.

It struck me as being a funny question, but I made no bones about telling her.

"I shouldn't say that either of them was out of the way," I said.

"Aren't they? Then let me tell you that you'd better be careful about what you eat and drink, or you'll get a double chin. Come here." I went as near to her as I dared. "Closer!" she said. "Closer!" She made me go as close to her as I could. Then she put up her hand and felt my chin, prodding me in the cheek as a butcher might a pig. I went hot all over; I never had been handled like that before. "Nice and soft," she said.

"Like him," remarked the tall woman, in a voice which I should term snappy.

"What's the harm if he is? The softer a man is, the easier he is to manage. How old are you?"

"Twenty next birthday," I told her. I tried to get farther away, but she wouldn't let me.

"Keep still; stop where you are. That's young."

"He's only a child," said the tall woman.

"It doesn't follow that he's any the worse for that, Ashington. What's your name?"

"Sam Briggs."

"Briggs? It sounds plebeian. I don't know that I should care to be Mrs. Briggs, but the name might be changed."

"It would cost money," said the tall woman.

"What if it did? I've spent money more foolishly; it's mine to spend. How old would you think I am, Mr. Briggs?"

That was a facer. I might have made a fairly good shot at it, but I felt that she wouldn't like it if I did; so I hedged.

"I'm no hand at guessing a lady's age."

"Then I'll tell you. I'm thirty-three. Last year I was thirty-seven, and next I shall probably be thirty-two. I've made up my mind that I'll never again be more than thirty-five. Are you married?"

"No," I said, "I am not; and, what's more, I'm not thinking of getting married either."

I meant that to be by way of a hint; because, really, there did seem



"SHE FAIRLY MADE ME JUMP."

to be no knowing where she would be getting to. But it was no good dropping a hint to her; it was like water on a duck's back.

"Then you'll start thinking. What, for instance, do you think of marrying me?"

That was a nice question to be asked. It was what I call a paralyzer. I didn't know what to say; all I could do was to stutter—she kept looking at me all the while as if I was something which she thought of buying.

"I—I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, but I—I—if you'll excuse me I—I don't think I'd care to—thank you."

"I didn't ask what you cared; I asked what you thought. It's in this way, Mr. Briggs. I've buried three husbands; and as I'm fond of married life, that's hard on me—especially as I hadn't a word to say against one of them. Some women manage to make one last them out; but I've been unfortunate. Providence moves in a mysterious way. And as I'm a woman who isn't happy

without a husband—to me a house feels as if it were empty without one—I'm thinking of taking a fourth. It has just occurred to me, why shouldn't it be you? I'm a woman of business, and I don't believe in long courtships. I married my last three days after I met him, and it was quite successful; only his health failed. I don't make a definite proposal. I only ask you to give the matter your consideration, and I'll give it mine. Come to-morrow to dine with me at half-past one, and we'll talk it over."

Dine with her! I would have given a trifle to have been able to say "No" right out, and so I tried to make her understand; but it wasn't to be done.

"I—I'm very sorry, but I—I'm afraid I'm engaged to-morrow."

"Don't tell me you're engaged!" she thundered back. "You'll come and dine with me to-morrow at one-thirty if you don't want to lose your situation. I hold Potter, Potter, and Sons in the hollow of my hand; and so, if necessary, I'll show them, and you too. Now you can go. Mind you; one-thirty, sharp. I don't like to be kept waiting for my food. And as, since we've gone so far, I may as well admit that it is my birthday, you might bring something to commemorate the day."

In the street I felt as I did once when I had had a penny electric shock—as if something had happened, but I didn't quite know what. It was three or four minutes, and I had gone quite a way, before I got back my senses enough to think about going home. Took a bit of doing that thinking did. Seemed to me that whatever I did I was in trouble. Whether Mrs. Dewsnap was or was not off her dot I couldn't make up my mind; but, looking at it all round, this way and that, considering that she was the governor's aunt—aunt to all my governors, from what I could make out—it appeared to me that, if I kept my head, no serious harm worth speaking of could come to me if I did go and pick a bit with her. So I went, very much against the grain, mind you; but I went. Though if I'd known what was to come of it I'd have gone a hundred miles to keep away; and that's where it was.

The tall woman opened the door—same as yesterday.

"You're late!"

That was all she said, and not very cheerfully either; there was something about the manner in which she said it which made me feel uncomfortable right from the very start. She led me into a room in which Mrs.

Dewsnap was sitting bolt upright in an arm-chair. Instead of saying "Good day," and "How do you do?" and that sort of thing, what she did say was:—

"Twenty-two minutes to two; I told you to be here by half-past one."

"Excuse me," I began, "but by my watch——"

But she wouldn't let me go on; not she.

"I want to know nothing about your watch. I keep the time, and there it is." She pointed to a clock which was on the mantelpiece. The way she had of shouting at you was most upsetting; I didn't know what to make of her. "Well," she asked, while I was wondering if I was expected to sit or to keep on standing, "is that all you have to say to me?"

"I'm sure I'm very sorry; but I had no idea that I was late."

"Have you forgotten what day this is?"

"Sunday."

"Sunday?" She turned to the tall woman. "He has forgotten—it's incredible."

"I told you he'd no intellect."

"It's not a question of intellect, but of something much more serious. It's a question of heart."

Then it came on me, all in a flash, what she was after, and out I burst.

"How forgetful I am, to be sure!" I said. "Do you know, I'd clean forgotten it was your birthday, ma'am. With your permission I'll wish you many happy returns of the day, if I may take that liberty."

She never smiled; she never anything—she just sat there like a log of wood.

"It's rather late to take that liberty, Mr. Briggs. And have you forgotten to bring me some little token in commemoration?"

I had, altogether; it was no use making any bones about it. So soon as the hint was dropped it had slipped my memory. All I could do was to try to explain.

"The truth is," I said, "that I get my salary on Wednesdays, and being a bit short this week I hoped——"

She cut in before I had a chance to finish, which was just as well, because I really did not know what I hoped.

"No excuses, Mr. Briggs. Excuses are always contemptible. I never accept them; I have made that clear to all my husbands."

She put up her glasses and looked at me through them. She had been looking at me hard all the time, but it seemed that she could look harder through her glasses; because, all at once, she gave what, for her, was quite a start.

"Mr. Briggs!—good gracious!—what have you got on?"

"My best suit," I told her; which I had. Though I had been in two minds about putting it on, seeing the impression I had made on her in my weekday one. Therefore the way that she behaved surprised me to that degree that it was beyond me altogether.

"Your best suit!" she cried. "Is it possible? That conglomeration! Why, there are seven distinct colours in plain sight.



"YOUR BEST SUIT!" SHE CRIED. "IS IT POSSIBLE?"

Ashington, is there anything of my Henry's which Mr. Briggs can wear?"

"The blue serge," said the tall woman.

"Then for gracious' sake let him wear that. I cannot sit down to dinner with such clothes; it is not possible. Take the man upstairs at once."

And she took me, before I clearly knew what she was doing. They had such a sudden way of setting about things in that house that really you hardly seemed to know where you were not from one moment to another.

"Come along," said the tall woman; and she laid her hand upon my shoulder—such a hand and such an arm! Before I gathered what she was after I was through the door and half-way up the stairs as well.

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked, when I did have a chance of speaking. "I don't care to be pulled about like this," I

told her. "Not when I come out to dinner," I said.

She paid no more attention to me than if I was a monkey. She hauled me into a bedroom—a very nice room it was, and beautifully furnished. She took some clothes out of a drawer, and she threw them on the bed. Then she says:—

"Now," she says, "come out of those horrible things and put yourself inside some decent garments."

"Excuse me," I ventured to remark, "but if these clothes of mine are not good enough to sit down with a lady to table in, then I must be allowed to observe that all I can say is——"

She chipped in before I could finish.

"Don't talk," she said. "Come out of that frightful coat." She took hold of me somehow; she whipped me round like as if I was a top; and there was I out of my coat, and she with it in her hands. "Now for that nightmare of a waistcoat; the creature who made it ought to be sent to penal servitude." If you'll believe me, she had unbuttoned it from top to bottom and torn it off me in less time

than it would have taken me to sneeze. "The rest of the things you can manage yourself," she said. "And mind you're quick about it. I shall be back inside five minutes, and, dressed or undressed, downstairs you'll have to come."

Out of the room she flounced with my coat and waistcoat, leaving me scarcely knowing which end of myself I was standing on. The outrageousness of it was what beat me—left there with a blue serge suit of somebody else's. However, since there was only one thing to be done, why, I did it. I took off the rest of my things, as tasty a pair—pale pink stripes on a light blue ground—as anyone could wish to see, and got into that blue serge—at least, as far into it as I could get. Whether it had been made for a man or a walrus was more than I could tell, but it was no manner of fit for me; I was like a pea in a pint pot. Just as I was wondering whether I should ever find myself again inside those things back the tall woman came.

"Aren't you ready?" she asked.

"No," I told her, "and I never shall be.



"NOW FOR THAT NIGHTMARE OF A WAISTCOAT."

Am I supposed to sit down to dinner with a lady in a suit of clothes like this? Why, if she looks my way she'll wonder where I am."

"Those clothes," she said, "were made for a man, not a microbe. Let me button your waistcoat." And she did, like as if I was a child. "We'll manage somehow; the thing is to make sure that they'll stop on you."

She did manage, with about twenty pins, pinning me up behind and in front and at the side and all over.

"It'll be a bit of all right," I said, "if I happen to sit down on some of those pins."

"If you do," she said, "you'll know it. Now, down you go."

And down I went, with more help from her than I wanted. Mrs. Dewsnap looked at me through her glasses.

"At least at present you are possible; though the garments are a trifle large."

A trifle? There was room inside them for a feather bed as well as me—pillows, bolster, blankets, and all.

"Mr. Dewsnap was a proper-sized man," said the tall woman.

"He certainly was on the large side; which is perhaps the more reason why I should try a small one next. Variety is not necessarily to be despised. Mr. Briggs, give me your arm and take me in to dinner. We are already extremely late."

I gave her my arm. We sat down at a round table—me, Mrs. Dewsnap, and the tall woman. There was a servant in the room, another six-footer, who I dare say was forty-five, though she looked more. Soup was handed round. I was just starting on a spoonful when Mrs. Dewsnap all but made me drop it by the way she shouted at me.

"Mr. Briggs! Please don't hold your spoon like that! Taylor, show Mr. Briggs how to hold his spoon."

And if that six-footer of a servant didn't grab me by the wrist, twist the spoon out of my fingers, and then put it back again in a way that suited her.

"Hold it like that," she said, "and not at the end, as if it was an umbrella."

"And don't take your soup from the end, but from the side of the spoon," said Mrs. Dewsnap.

"And don't pour it down your throat as if you were pouring it down a funnel," said the tall woman.

"And pray, Mr. Briggs, don't make that distressing noise when you swallow."

It was very nice for me, but, strictly in confidence, my appetite for soup all went when they started at me like that. But yet, when I tried to explain that soup was not one of my favourite dishes, they wouldn't let me leave it; not they.

"You can pay no worse compliment to your hostess," said Mrs. Dewsnap, "than not to consume what she has placed before you. Please take your soup, Mr. Briggs; not too fast, for that is not elegant, nor too slowly, for that may keep others waiting. And please remember that there are ladies looking at you."

I was not likely to forget; they took care

of that. That soup very nearly choked me, and that's the simple fact. It was the same with the fish.

"Pray don't use a steel knife"—there she was interfering before I was able to get so much as a taste. "Nor a fork and your bread. Fish-knives are provided. Taylor, show Mr. Briggs which is his fish-knife."

That there six-foot servant was at me again; snatched away my fork and my bread, and shoved between my fingers—as if I was a child—what I had thought was meant more for ornaments than anything else. However, I did the best with them I could. But it didn't suit her—oh, dear, no.

"You haven't a very graceful way of eating fish," she said. Who would have had, treated as I was? It was all I could do to eat it at all. "For Heaven's sake don't drop the sauce down your waistcoat!"

Her shouting at me like that gave me such a start that I dropped it more than ever; as a matter of fact, I dropped all that I had on my fork. She made me all of a twitter. She did go on.

"Your table manners are unspeakable," she halloaed—halloaing with her was the same as speaking with anybody else. "If you can't eat your food without spilling it all over you put your serviette up in front of you. Taylor, show Mr. Briggs how to put his serviette up."

If you will believe me, that impudent six-footer took hold of my serviette, which I had kept properly folded over my knee, opened it out, and tucked it inside my shirt-collar, all round my neck, like they do bibs in front of babies. The marvel is I did

not up and hit her; very near throttled me, she did, and she was twice my size, even if she was a woman. But I was so flurried by the way they all behaved to me that I felt as if I could do nothing—nor yet say anything either. It went on like that all through the dinner; if I had thrown the plates and dishes at them, it would have served them right. I simply could not have believed that a man could have been so sat upon by three females; so squashed, if I may say so. I might have been a rag doll, the way they used me. Though, mind you, the dinner itself was first-rate—slap-up. I could have done it proper justice if I had only been left alone. Even as it was, by the time that we got to the dessert, and there were a couple of the governors' peaches on my plate, and a glass of port-wine in front of me, I felt that I hadn't done myself so very bad. Just as I was taking a sip at my port—I didn't dare to do more than sip at it, for fear that that six-footer should be told to take it from me—there came a knocking and ringing at the front door. Mrs. Dewsnap looked at the tall woman—not the servant, I mean, but the one who had hauled me up the stairs.

"It's them," she said.

"So I suppose," said the other.

Mrs. Dewsnap turned to the six-footer—the servant, I mean, this time.

"Show them in here," she said.

In about half a minute, to my utter astonishment, who should come marching into the room, one after the other, but five of my governors—Mr. John, Mr. William, Mr. Charles, and Mr. Charles's two sons, Mr. Ferdinand and Mr. Adolphus.

Mr. John, he went straight up to Mrs. Dewsnap, all smiles.

"My dear aunt," he said, in the tone which he kept for the best customers, "once more, on this auspicious occasion, we have the felicity of offering you our



"SHE TOOK HOLD OF MY SERVIETTE, AND TUCKED IT ALL ROUND MY NECK."

united congratulations. And we do so with the greater pleasure since each year seems to make you younger."

"Does it?" she replied, short and sharp. "If that's your opinion, it's not mine."

The others had not been looking at her; they had been looking at me; and the more they looked the more they seemed to want to look.

"Who on earth," remarked Mr. William, eyeing me most unpleasant, "is this person?"

"Why," came out Mr. Charles, with a sort of a burst, "it's Briggs."

"Mr. Briggs," said Mrs. Dewsnap, very straight and very loud, "has honoured me with his company at dinner on the occasion of my birthday."

By now Mr. John was also casting his eyes in my direction—all the smiles went off his face when he saw me.

"Honoured you?" he said, speaking in the tone which he kept for the customers whose accounts were a little behind. "My dear aunt!—Sam Briggs!"

"The word I used was 'honoured,'" said Mrs. Dewsnap, loud as ever.

They stared at her; then they stared at each other; then they stared again at me. Mr. Charles, he turned to Mrs. Dewsnap.

"My dear aunt," he said, "I fancy that there must be some misapprehension somewhere. This—lad, Briggs, is our office-boy."

I was not their office-boy, nothing of the kind; I was one of their junior clerks, that's what I was, but just then I didn't feel like telling them so. In fact, I didn't seem to feel like telling anybody anything. The way in which they kept eyeing each other and then me was proof that there was more trouble ahead. I wished with all my heart that I had never come to dinner; it was dead certain that I never wanted to. A remark which Mrs. Dewsnap dropped did not make it any better for me, not by any manner of means.

"Nephew Charles"—speaking, as always, as if she was a fog-horn in the middle of a storm—"do not dare to make any unpleasant allusions to my honoured guest Mr. Briggs. It is extremely possible that he will be my fourth."

"Fourth what?" asked Mr. Charles.

"Husband," she replied, as if she wouldn't mind if the ceiling did shake.

"Aunt!" they cried, all of them together. Once more they all of them looked at her, then once more they all of them looked at me.

"As you are aware," she went on, in the

same reach-right-across-the-Crystal-Palace tone of voice—she would have been a cure for the deaf if ever there was one!—"I own a large interest in the firm of Potter, Potter, and Sons, and it has occurred to me that it would be desirable that my fourth husband should be an active member of the firm, to represent that interest."

The looks which came upon their faces!

"I've no doubt, my dear aunt," said Mr. William, "that this is a little jest of yours; but, at the same time——"

She cut him short.

"I never jest," she said. I should think she never did. "As you know, when I have once made up my mind, nothing can induce me to change it. Still, if there are any observations which you wish to make, and which it is fitting that I should hear, let them be made in an adjacent chamber. Ashington, let us go."

She and the tall woman went; Mr. John, Mr. William, and Mr. Charles went with them; Mr. Ferdinand and Mr. Adolphus stayed behind—I wished they hadn't. Mr. Ferdinand was my age, as I happened to know; Mr. Adolphus was a year younger; but either of them would have made two of me, all bone and muscle—and both of them Rugby forwards. I had seen them play many a time—they didn't care who they killed to win the game. They both of them began at me almost as soon as the door was closed, as I'd expected.

"You're a nice young blackguard, Briggs!" said Mr. Ferdinand.

"A dirty little rascal!" said Mr. Adolphus.

"Excuse me," I managed to get in, "but those remarks are not called for as addressed to me, because I shall be able to explain to you that I'm not here owing to any wish of my own——"

But they wouldn't let me go on—not they.

"And it won't be owing to any wish of ours that you'll stay," said Mr. Ferdinand, in the very middle of my sentence.

"So out you go!" said Mr. Adolphus.

And out I went—they outed me.

"Look here," I shouted, "these clothes aren't mine; that tall woman knows where my clothes are."

"Never mind about your clothes," said Mr. Ferdinand; "any clothes will do for you."

"Here's your hat," said Mr. Adolphus, taking it off a peg and clapping it on my head harder than he need have done. "Think yourself lucky to get it."

"How am I going to get home?" I asked,



just as they were opening the front door. "All my money's in my trouser pockets; these aren't my trousers that I'm wearing—they're upstairs."

"Hang your trousers!" said Mr. Ferdinand. "Here's half a crown for a cab fare; now hook it!"

And I hooked it, owing to the way in which they sent me running down the steps. A hansom happened to be passing.

"Halloa, cabman!" cried Mr. Adolphus; "take this young brute away from here as fast—and as far—as you possibly can!"

A nice way to be introduced to a cabin which you were going to ride!

"Pardon me," I called out to them, as I was getting in, "but if you'll allow me, I shall be able to explain——"

But I never had a chance. The cab started before I expected, and I was thrown all of a heap on to the seat—it was

only by a wonderful chance I was not hurled on to the road. Before I had properly pulled myself together the driver put his nose through the trap-door.

"Had a nice little kick-up?" he said. "Isn't it a bit early for that kind of thing? or is it that you're leaving off very late?"

As familiar as if he had known me for years! I was not going to be spoken to like that by a common cab-driver, and so I let him see.

"Never mind what I've had," I told him. "You mind your own affairs, and then perhaps no harm will come to you."

"Whose togs have you got on?" he asked.

"That's my affair," I said. "You look after your own togs, and leave other people's alone."

"I should think that that's what you'd better have done yourself, from what I can see." He was still peeping at me through the open trap—the impudence of him! "I only hope that they won't fall off you while you're inside my cab; they look to me as if they very easily might."

The fact was that, principally because of the style in which Mr. Ferdinand and Mr. Adolphus had handled me, most of the pins which the tall woman

had put in had come out, and some of them were sticking into me at that moment; the consequence being that I did not feel safe in those clothes myself. I know this: I shouldn't have liked to have had to walk far in them. A nice game I had with that driver! He kept calling attention to me as we went along, bawling out to 'bus-drivers, and people like that.

A regular show that cabman made of me—on a Sunday afternoon!

But I went back at him—I bet I gave him one

or two stingers! When we got to Walham Green we had a row about the fare; when I proved that it was under five miles he said that he always charged double for carrying a Guy Fawkes. Then I talked to him! Luckily none of my people were at home, so that I was able to get in without their noticing what a sight I was; if anyone had said so much as a syllable to me there would have been ructions. Boiling with rage I was—simply boiling.

The next morning, being Monday, I did not altogether fancy going up to the office. But as I had to go, I had—so up I went, with the late Mr. Dewsnap's blue serge suit under my arm in a brown-paper parcel. Mr. Charles came out to me directly I got there;



"HERE'S YOUR HAT," SAID MR. ADOLPHUS."

he might have been hanging about waiting for me to turn up.

"Come in here," he said.

He took me in to Mr. John's private room, and there they all of them were, looking as if they would like to eat me, and as soon as I got my nose inside the door, off they started.

"May I ask," I said, "what it is I am supposed to have done?" Because, between ourselves, it seemed to me to be about time that I should get my back up.

"None of your insolence to me!" bellowed Mr. John, jumping up in a way that made me jump back. "You know very well what you've done. You've crawled, like a wriggling snake, into the house of a lady who's a relation of mine."

"Believe me, sir," I said, "I have not. All I did was to take round that basket of fruit——"

"Don't tell me what you've done! I'll tell you what we are going to do. We have been considering three alternatives. Shall we call in a policeman and give you into his custody?"

"What for?" I asked.

"You know very well what for," he said. I did not—and he didn't either. "Or," he went on, "shall we kick you out into the street without a character? In which case we'll take care that you don't obtain another situation in the City of London. Or—will you give us, in black and white, your undertaking not to molest Mrs. Dewsnap again; that is, will you promise, on your word of honour, never, under any circumstances, to see her, speak to her, or communicate with her?"

In rushed Mr. Adolphus.

"Here she is," he cried; "she's coming along the passage."

There was a pretty how-d'ye-do!

"What shall we do with him?" asked Mr. John, looking as if he would like to tear his hair—what there was of it.

"We can't drop him out of the window," said Mr. William; "it's too high."

"We can't shove him up the chimney," said Mr. Charles; "it's too narrow."

"There's the cupboard," said Mr. Ferdinand.

And there was; a nasty, dirty cupboard in a corner of the room, which hadn't been cleared out, I should think, for a hundred years, with shelves; and under the bottom there was just room for a middle-sized man to crouch. I know; because they crammed me in under it, and not only shut the door, but locked it.

"Look here!" I said, as the cobwebs came tumbling down on top of me. "This won't do!"

I heard Mrs. Dewsnap come into the room, and I was still, because



"THEY CRAMMED ME IN."

I wasn't very much more anxious that she should see me than they were.

"Where is Mr. Briggs?" she asked, in that shake-the-foundations-of-the-house voice of hers.

"You are an early visitor," said Mr. John.

"I presume that I know that as well as you do. I have come to take him away with me at once."

"Take him away with you? My dear aunt!"

"Don't repeat my words; you heard what I said. And don't 'dear aunt' me; I know you, John Potter. I ask you a second time, where is Mr. Briggs?"

"Mr. Briggs?" said the old serpent. "I really can hardly tell you. Do you know, William?"

"He's not here just at present," said Mr. William.

"In any case," said Mr. Charles, "you would scarcely be likely to find him in here. At this hour he is probably engaged in his usual duty of sweeping the floors."

Usual duty of sweeping the floors!—me!

"None of your lies," said Mrs. Dewsnap, in that plain-speaking way she had. "They told me outside that Mr. Briggs was in this room."

Then the fun began. I could hear everything from where I was, as plain as if I had been in the room—I shouldn't have been much more comfortable if I had been. You can take it from me that they none of them spoke in whispers. The things they said to each other!—and the things she said to them!—and especially the things they said to her and about her! If half of them were true she must have been a warm one—the idea of me being her husband made my blood run cold. At last, when they were all getting hoarse, except her—I shouldn't think she ever did get hoarse—she closed the discussion.

"I shall be back in an hour," she said. "I'm going to see my solicitor, on business which you may guess; and if, on my return, I don't find Mr. Briggs awaiting me, the consequences will be serious for all of you."

Out she stamped—and didn't she bang the door! They all started talking together again—this time under their breaths, so that I couldn't hear a word they said.

"Halloa!" I shouted, hammering against the cupboard door. "Let me out!"

They let me out. Mr. Charles tackled me.

"Sam Briggs," he said, "we're going to look at this matter from the point of view of men of the world. We're not going to lay all the blame for what has occurred upon your shoulders. So far, indeed, from blaming you, we're going to give you a mark of our confidence; we're going to entrust you with a confidential mission; we're going to send you, as our confidential agent, on a ship of ours which is starting immediately to Palermo, for a cargo of lemons."

"Thank you," I said; "I'm much obliged," I said; "but I don't know that I quite care to go to—what's the name of the place?"

"We're not asking what you care to do—we're sending you."

"But—I'm no sailor."

"That'll be all right when once you're out at sea."

"When did you say this ship was starting?"

"At once; you'll just have time to catch her."

"I'm in no hurry," I said.

"No; but we are."

"But—one moment. What will my mother say when she finds that I don't come home to supper?"

He paid no attention to me; he turned to Mr. John.

"Is that letter ready?" he asked. Mr. John gave him a letter which he had just been writing. Mr. Charles looked it through, put it in an envelope, and handed it to Mr. Adolphus. "Adolphus," he said, "give that to Captain Ruddock. Now off you go with Briggs; there isn't a moment to lose."

"Thank you," I said; "but I really don't think," I said, "that I'm what you might call keen," I said, "about going," I said.

Mr. Adolphus took me by the shoulders and he shook me—shook me, he did—till I thought he'd have shaken my bones right out of me. Then he observed:—

"Briggs, you're coming with me, and you're going to do exactly as you're told, and if you whimper, or if you object by so much as a word, I'll—break—every—bone—in your body."

He treated me to another shaking.

"I'll go," I gasped, when I could. "Only spare my life."

"I won't if you don't behave," he said. "But if you do behave, on board the *Eleanora*—that's the name of the ship on which you're going for your little jaunt—you'll have the best time you ever had in all your days."

I had my doubts about that myself, but it didn't seem to be much use to say so.

Presently me and Mr. Adolphus were bowling along in a hansom cab, travelling faster than I ever saw a hansom cab move before, and there was I starting on a voyage to—what was the name of the place?—for lemons. As a confidential agent! Oh, dear, yes; a deal of confidence they were putting in me. What my poor mother would say when she found I wasn't coming home to supper I couldn't think—she has said things more than once to me before; she can say them! And it all came from taking a basket of fruit to a lady!