

# THE STOLEN BLENKINSOP.

By ARTHUR MORRISON.

## I.



IF it had been necessary for Mr. Hector Bushell to make a fortune for himself there can be little doubt that he would have done it. Fortunately or unfortunately—just as you please—the necessity did not exist, for his father had done it for him before he was born. Consequently, Hector, who was a genial if somewhat boisterous young man, devoted his talents to the service of his friends, whose happiness he insisted on promoting, with their concurrence or without it, by the exercise of his knowledge of the world and whatever was in it, his business-like acumen, his exuberant animal spirits, and his overflowing, almost pestilential, energy. Quiet-mannered acquaintances who spied him afar dodged round corners and ran, rather than have their fortunes made by his vigorously-expressed advice, enforced by heavy slaps on the shoulder and sudden digs in the ribs, and sometimes punctuated with a hearty punch in the chest. For he was a large and strong, as well as a noisy, young man, accurately, if vulgarly, described by his acquaintances as perpetually “full of beans.”

He had given himself a reputation as an art critic, on the strength of a year or two's attendance at an art school in Paris; and, indeed, he maintained a studio of his own, expensively furnished, where he received his friends and had more than once begun a picture. But his energies in this matter were mainly directed to the good of painters among his acquaintances who were under the necessity of living by their work. He told them how their pictures should be painted, and how they could certainly be sold. Indeed, in this latter respect he did better than advise the painter—he advised the buyer, when he could seize one, and trundled him captive into the studio of his nearest friend with great fidelity and enthusiasm.

“The chance of your life, my dear sir!” he would say, snatching at the lapel of some wealthy friend's coat, and raising the other hand with an imminent threat of a slap on the shoulder. “The chance of your life! The coming man, I assure you! Something

like an investment. A picture they'll offer you thousands for some day, and I do believe I can get it for you for a couple of hundred! Come and see it before some dealer gets in!”

It was with some such speech as this that he interrupted Mr. Higby Fewston, the margarine magnate, full of the report of the robbery a day before of a Gainsborough portrait from a house in Charles Street, Berkeley Square. Mr. Fewston was not the sort of man to take a deal of interest in pictures for their own sake, but the newspapers estimated the money value of the missing picture at twenty thousand pounds, and he found that very touching. He had the same respect for that Gainsborough, which he had never seen, that he would have had for a cheque for the sum signed by the firm of Rothschild; rather more, in fact, for if the cheque were stolen it might be stopped and so rendered valueless; but there was no stopping the Gainsborough till you had caught the thief. So that Mr. Fewston found himself taking an unwonted interest in art; and when Hector Bushell, seizing the opportunity and pulling at his arm, drew him in the direction of Sydney Blenkinsop's studio, he offered less resistance than otherwise he might have done.

“Man named Blenkinsop,” declaimed the zealous Hector. “Capital chap, and paints like—like a double archangel. His studio's close by—come and look for yourself. Of course, nothing need be said about buying the picture, if you don't want to. But just come and see it—— I'll pretend we were passing and just dropped in. You'll have the sort of chance that people had in Gainsborough's own time. Why, I don't suppose *he* got more than a couple of hundred or so for the very picture the papers are so full of to-day!”

Mr. Fewston suffered himself to be dragged through many streets—the studio was not so near as Hector's enthusiasm made it seem—and finally into the presence of Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop, the painter. Blenkinsop was, by the side of Bushell, a comparatively quiet young man, not without apprehension of the possible consequences of his friend's devotion; for one never could tell what wild things Bushell might have been saying about one.

"Ah, Sydney, old boy!" cried that enthusiast. "How have you been all this time?" They had last met the day before, when Hector had hauled in some other possible patron. "How have you been? Just looked in as we were passing, you know—just looked in! This is my friend, Mr. Higby Fewston, much interested in art, and what he don't know about a picture—well, there! Working on anything just now, eh? I say"—this with a start of apprehension—"you haven't sold that picture yet, have you? The stunner, you know, the Keston?"

"Oh, that?" responded Blenkinsop, who

scape, as you say, and no mistake! Something like a landscape that, eh? I knew you'd like it, of course, having an eye for such a thing. Ah, it's a topper!"

He fell back by the side of the man of margarine, and the two inspected the marvel in silence, the one with head aside and a smile of ecstasy, and the other with all the expression of a cow puzzled by a painted field with nothing to eat on it. Sydney Blenkinsop shuffled uneasily.

Presently Mr. Fewston thought of something to say. "Where was it taken?" he asked.

"Keston Common," murmured Sydney



"THE TWO INSPECTED THE MARVEL IN SILENCE."

had never sold a picture in his life. "No, I haven't. Not that one."

"Ah, plain enough Agnew hasn't been here lately. I'd like to have another look at it, old chap; probably sha'n't have another chance, unless it goes somewhere where I know the people. Ah, there now; look at that now!"

Mr. Fewston looked at it blankly. "It—it's a *landscape*," he said, presently, after consideration. The stolen Gainsborough had been a portrait, and Mr. Fewston liked things up to sample.

"Rather!" replied Hector. "It's a land-

faintly, and "Keston Common" repeated Hector loudly, making the title sound like a fresh merit. He also drew attention to the wonderful effects of light in the picture, the extraordinary painting of the sky, the subtle suggestion of atmosphere, and the marvellous "values." Mr. Fewston listened patiently to the end. There was another pause, longer and more awkward than the last; it seemed likely to endure till something burst in Sydney Blenkinsop. Then, at last, Mr. Higby Fewston spoke, weightily.

"Keston," he said, with solemn conviction,



"is a place I don't like. There's a bad train service."

Such a criticism as this even Hector Bushell could not readily answer. He attempted to evade the point, and returned again to his "values." But any reference to values unsupported by definite figures made little impression on the commercial mind of Mr. Fewston, and in a very few minutes more he drifted out, with Hector Bushell still in close attendance.

Hector, however, remained with the margarine Mæcenas only long enough to discharge another volley of admiration for the picture, and took his leave at the first convenient corner. As a consequence he was back in five minutes, to discover Sydney Blenkinsop vengefully kicking a lay figure.

"Don't bring another chap like that to this place," cried the painter, savagely, "or I'll pitch him out o' window!"

"My dear chap, don't be an ass! You've got no business instincts. A man like that's invaluable, if you can only kid him on. He'll buy any old thing, if he buys at all."

"If!"

"You're an ungrateful infidel. I tell you I'm going to sell that 'Keston Common' for you. What could you do with it by yourself?"

"Put a stick through it—burn it—anything! I'm sick of the whole business."

"Just what I expected. You could put a stick through it or burn it—and what's the good of that?"

"What's the harm? I can't sell it, and they won't hang it at the shows; I know that before I send it."

"You know everything that's no use to you and nothing that pays. You can burn a picture, but you can't sell it. Now, I'm going to sell that picture for you, if you'll let me. Will you?"

"You can do what you like with it."

"Done with you, my boy! I'll make you famous with it, and I'll get you money for it. I've an idea such as you couldn't invent in a lifetime. Shut up the shop now and we'll talk it over at the Café Royal. Come along. We'll have a little dinner out of the money I'm going to make for you. But you've to take orders from me, mind."

## II.

THE evening papers flamed with the tale of the lost Gainsborough, as the morning papers had done before them, and the morning papers of the next day kept up the flame with scarcely diminished violence. Sydney

Blenkinsop rose with nothing but a headache to distinguish him from the other unknown people about him, but by lunch-time he was as famous as Gainsborough himself. For another picture had been stolen. The evening papers came out stronger than ever, giants refreshed by a new sensation, with the blinding headline, ANOTHER PICTURE ROBBERY! Sub-headings sang of A DANGEROUS GANG AT WORK, and deplored a YOUNG PAINTER'S MISSING MASTERPIECE. Sydney Blenkinsop was the young painter, and the view of Keston Common was the missing masterpiece. In the eyes of thousands of worthy people Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop became an artist second only in importance to Gainsborough, if second to anybody; and Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop, himself appalled by the overwhelming success of Mr. Hector Bushell's scheme, would have fled the country, but for the superior will-power of that same Hector Bushell, who never left his side.

For journalists haunted the studio and "wrote up" the whole business afresh for every edition of all the daily newspapers in England. Sydney would have bolted the door and fled from the rear, but Hector ordered in caviare sandwiches and oyster patties and a case of champagne, and was the life and soul of the party. When Sydney seemed at a loss for a judicious answer—which occurred pretty often—Hector was instantly equal to the occasion. The main story was simple enough, and was cunningly left to rest entirely on the word of the police. The constable on the beat had perceived, in the grey of the morning, that a window of the studio had been opened, and a pane broken in the process. Nobody seemed to be in the place, so the policeman kept watch by the window till assistance arrived, when it was found that obviously a thief had entered the place, but had left. It was not found possible to communicate with Mr. Blenkinsop till the morning was well advanced and somebody was found who knew the address of his lodgings; and then he was met as he was leaving home for the studio, in company with his friend, Mr. Bushell. Things in the studio had been much disarranged, and the picture, a view of Keston Common, had been cut from its frame and taken.

So much for the simple facts as observed by the police; but the frills, embroideries, tassels, tinsels, and other garnishings which lent variety and interest to the narrative came in an inexhaustible and glorious torrent from Hector Bushell. He took each



"HECTOR WAS INSTANTLY EQUAL TO THE OCCASION."

separate journalist aside and gave him the special privilege of some wholly new and exclusive information as to the surprising genius of Sydney Blenkinsop, and the amazing prices his pictures were worth and would certainly fetch, some day. Doubtless the thief was a knowing file, and was laying up for the future—"saving his stake," as it were. Any possible slump in Gainsboroughs—of course, nobody expected it, but such a thing might happen—would be compensated by the certain rise in Blenkinsops. And with this astute suggestion Hector shut one eye, tapped the side of his nose, and surprised the favoured reporter with one of his celebrated digs in the ribs.

The newspapers on their part neglected nothing. Gainsborough and Blenkinsop had a column apiece, side by side, in most of them, and in the rest they had more, or were fraternally mingled together. "Is no masterpiece safe?" asked the Press. And answering its own question with no more than a paragraph's delay, the Press gave its opinion that no masterpiece was. To have put in question the new-born eminence of Blenkinsop would have been to spoil the boom in the most unbusinesslike way. Of course, a Turner or a Raeburn or another Gainsborough would have been preferable, but as it was the Press had to do its best with the material to hand, and so it did, to the glory of Blenkinsop. The notion of a thief or a gang of thieves going about after valuable pictures was too good to waste, and every

newspaper expressed the sage conjecture that where one picture was, there would the other be found. One scribbling cynic managed to squeeze in a hint that this might suggest the valuable clue of lunacy in the culprit; though nobody noticed that in the general flood of Blenkinsoppery.

But in the intervals of interviewing, when the friends had a few minutes of private conversation, there was a notable lack of gratitude in Sydney's acknowledgments.

"This is a fine ghastly mess you've landed me in!" he protested, at the first opportunity. "How do you expect me to look all these people in the face?"

"How? Oh, the usual way—only the usual way, you know! The more usual the better. I don't find any difficulty!"

"You? No—you're enjoying it; you've the cheek for anything. I'm the sufferer. I've had to stand here and yarn to a police-inspector about the beastly business!"

"Yarn! The simple, plain, clear truth! You dined with me last night at the Café Royal, leaving the studio just as usual. And in the morning you come here also as usual, and find the police in charge. Straightforward enough. Of course, he didn't ask you anything about *me*. It seems to me you've got the soft job. I'm doing all the work, and as to enjoying it, of course I am! Why aren't you?"

"Enjoying it! Good heavens, man, I never expected such a row as this; I was a fool to listen to you."



"Now, there!" Hector Bushell spread his arms in injured protest. "There's ingratitude! I've positively made you the most celebrated painter alive, all in the course of a few hours, and you—you pretend you don't like it! Oh, come off it! Why, there are thousands of respectable people in this country to-day, who couldn't name six painters who ever lived, that know all about you—and Gainsborough. I fetched the Press round—did it all!"

"And how's it all going to end? And where *is* the picture? Why won't you tell me that?"

"Well, I was afraid somebody might catch on to a sort of idea that you knew where it was, and I wanted you to be able to say you didn't, that's all. Nobody has had any such unworthy suspicions, and so there's no harm in inviting you to admire the dodge. When I got home last night with the canvas rolled up under my arm I just took it to bed with me till the morning. When I woke I thought it over, and I remembered a big roll of old stair-carpet up in a garret where nobody went—a useless old roll that my dear old mother has dragged about with us for years—ever since we lived in Russell Square, in fact. It's never been touched since it came, and never will be. So I nipped out and up into the garret with the picture, unrolled a few yards of the carpet, slipped the canvas in very carefully, painted side out, rolled up the carpet again, tied it, and shoved it back among the other old lumber. And there it can stay, safe as the Bank, till we want it again!"

"Till we want it again! And when will that be?"

"When we've sold it. You leave it to me, my bonny boy. Remember that other Gainsborough that was stolen—the 'Duchess.' Would that have fetched such a price if it hadn't been stolen and boomed up? Not on your life. I'm out to sell that picture for you, and I'm going to do it—to say nothing of immortal glory, which I'm positively shovelling on you where you stand. Hark! There's another reporter. Keep up that savage, worried look—it's just the thing for the plundered genius!"

But this visitor was no reporter. It was, indeed, Mr. Higby Fewston, much more alert and affable than yesterday, and eager for news of the picture.

"Is there any chance of getting it?" he asked, with some eagerness. "Have the police got on the track of the thief yet?"

"No, they haven't—yet," replied Hector

Bushell, calmly. "But I should think there was a very good chance of getting the picture, ultimately."

"I suppose you'll offer a reward?"

"Well, we'll have to think it over. It's a bit early as yet."

"Tell me now," Mr. Fewston pursued, with increasing animation, "can the picture be properly repaired? Isn't it cut out of the frame?"

"Yes, but that's nothing. It's easily re-lined and put back."

"That's satisfactory. And now as to the flowers—I think I remember yellow flowers right in the front of the picture. They *are* cowslips, I hope?"

"Oh, yes—cowslips, of course," replied Hector, with easy confidence, since cowslips seemed to be required. While Sydney Blenkinsop, who had spotted in a few touches of yellow in the foreground because it seemed to be wanted, and with a vague idea of possible furze-blossoms, or buttercups, gasped and wondered.

"And I suppose more cowslips could be put in, if required, by a competent man?"

"I don't think any more are required," put in Sydney Blenkinsop, decidedly.

"No—very likely not—just an inquiry. I *did* think at the time there seemed to be rather a lot of cowslips for Keston Common, but I do a good deal in the 'Cowslip' brand of—the—the article I deal in, and there might be a possibility of reproducing the work as an advertisement. One has to consider all these things, of course; and on the whole I'd like to buy that picture, if you get it back. What about price?"

"Five hundred," said Hector promptly, before Sydney could open his mouth.

"Um, rather high, isn't it?" commented Fewston, equably. "I was thinking of, say, three hundred."

"Well, yes," Hector responded, just as affably. "Yesterday that might have done, but just now it's to-day." And he regarded the margarine magnate with a long, deliberate, placid wink.

"Ah, well, I understand, of course," replied Fewston, who appeared to far better advantage to-day, discussing business, than yesterday, misunderstanding art. "Of course, I quite recognise that all this publicity—naturally Mr. Blenkinsop wants all the benefit possible from it—quite legitimate, of course. But there, the picture isn't recovered yet. Meantime, I may consider I have the refusal of it contingently, I suppose? You see, Mr. Bushell—you are evidently a man of



"HAVE THE POLICE GOT ON THE TRACK OF THE THIEF YET?"

business—this may be useful to me. A great deal of space is being devoted to Mr. Blenkinsop and his picture in the papers, and I—well, it would be worth my while to be in it, as conspicuously as possible. Do you perceive?"

"I think I see. To-morrow morning's papers, for instance: 'We are at liberty to state that Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop's now famous picture was destined for the galleries of one of the best known of our merchant princes; in fact, that in the event of its hoped-for recovery it is to be purchased by Mr. Higby Fewston, and will make a conspicuous feature of that gentleman's collection.' I think that can go in—no doubt even a little more."

"Excellent! Will you do that? And it is understood that if you get the picture—you say there's a very good chance—I have first refusal?"

"At five hundred pounds."

"Three hundred, I think."

"Wouldn't do, really, as things go. Consider what the Gainsborough would cost you if you could get that, now that it has been stolen!"

"Well, well, we'll leave it at *four* hundred, unless you get a higher offer; it's rather absurd discussing this, with the picture lost. But I do want to be sure that I get proper publicity in the papers. You'll see to that, won't you? You see, this is just the time I want it. I am putting up for the County Council, and—this *strictly* between ourselves—there is just the possibility that I may be turning my business into a limited company. So all these things help, and I and my family are keeping ourselves forward as much as possible just now. Mrs. Fewston, for instance, is making an appeal for the Stock-jobbers' Almshouses, and running a sale. And this picture—well, if it's recovered we sha'n't quarrel

about the price so long as you get me well into the papers in the meantime. You see, I'm perfectly frank—we'll do our best for each other, mutually."

And so it was settled between Mr. Fewston and the untiring Bushell, while Sydney Blenkinsop hovered uneasily in the background, a superfluous third party in the disposal of his own picture; which also seemed to be superfluous, so far as its merits were concerned—or even its present possession.

### III.

MR. HIGBY FEWSTON was well satisfied with the next morning's newspapers. Hector Bushell saw to it that every office was supplied with information of the merits and doings of that patron of fine art, and during the day the evening papers interviewed Mr. Fewston himself, to the combined glory of Fewston and Blenkinsop. Mr. Fewston



expressed strong views as to the inefficiency of the police, and made occasion to allude to his views on the London County Council. Speaking as an art critic, Mr. Fewston considered Mr. Blenkinsop certainly the greatest painter of the present time; and the stolen masterpiece was a great loss to him, personally, the intending purchaser. There could be no doubt in Mr. Fewston's mind that the same clever gang had captured the two great pictures—evidently educated criminals of great artistic judgment. And then came certain notable and mysterious hints as to astonishing things that Mr. Fewston might say as to the whereabouts of the plunder, if it were judicious—which at this moment of course it was not. The "boom" went so well that Sydney Blenkinsop himself began to look upon his sudden notoriety with a more complacent eye. In another day or two the affair had run best part of the ordinary course of a newspaper "boom," the Bishop of London had given his opinion on it, and while the Gainsborough column shrank considerably, the Blenkinsop column became a mere paragraph at its foot. It would seem to be the proper moment for the recovery of the picture.

And now it grew apparent that this was the great difficulty. What had been done was easy enough; it had almost done itself—with the constant help of Hector. But to restore the picture—naturally, unsuspectingly, and without putting anybody in jail—this was a job that grew more difficult the more it was considered. Hector Bushell grew unwontedly thoughtful, and Sydney Blenkinsop began to get ungrateful again. He had been dragged up a blind alley, he said, and now he wanted to know the way out. Hector smoked a great many strong cigars without being able to tell him.

They parted moodily one night toward the end of the week, and the next day Sydney was alone in his studio all the morning. He was growing fidgety and irritable, notwithstanding his new-found eminence, and he wondered what kept Hector away. Was he going to shirk now that the real pinch was coming? Work was impossible, so the partaker in Gainsborough's glory loafed and smoked and kicked his furniture, and smoked and loafed again. His lunch was brought him from the corner public-house, and he ate what he could of it. Then he took to looking out of door, as is the useless impulse of everybody anxiously awaiting a visitor. He had done it twice, and was nearing the lobby again when the cry of a running newsboy

struck his ear. He pulled the door open hurriedly, for he seemed to hear something like the name Gainsborough in the shout. There came the boy, shouting at each studio door as he passed and waving his papers. Sydney extended his coin and snatched the paper as the boy ran past. It was fact; he *had* heard the name of Gainsborough, for the thousandth time that week. The picture had been discovered in the thief's lodgings, but the thief had bolted and was still at large. There was not much of it under the staring headline, but so much was quite clear. The picture was found, but the thief had got away.

Wasn't there a chance in this? Surely there ought to be. Why didn't Hector Bushell come? Surely, if they were prompt enough, some little dodge might be built on this combination of circumstances by which his picture might be brought to light again—also without the thief. They knew, now, where the thief *had* been, and that he was gone. This was good news. Hector could certainly make something of that. Where was he?

He was at the door, in the lobby, in the studio, even as the thought passed. Flushed and rumpled, wild of eye, with dust on his coat and a dint in his hat, Hector Bushell dropped into the nearest seat with an inarticulate "G'lor!"

"What's up?" cried Sydney. "The Gainsborough—do you know? They've got it!"

"Blow the Gainsborough—where's the Blenkinsop? Sydney, it's a bust-up!"

"What is?"

"The whole festive caboodle! The entire bag of tricks! My mother's been and sent the roll of stair-carpet to the jumble sale!"

"The *what*?"

"Jumble sale—Mrs. Fewston's jumble sale; Stockjobbers' Almshouse Fund!"

"Great heavens!"—Sydney leapt for his hat—"where is it? When is it? What——"

"No go!" interrupted Hector, with a feeble wave of the hand. "No go! It's to-day—I've been there. Blazed off there the moment I knew it. They'd sold the carpet to an old woman just before I arrived. Streaked out after her and caught her two streets off; she was shoving it home in a perambulator. I grabbed it with both hands and offered to buy it. I was a bit wild and sudden, I expect, and the old girl didn't understand; started screaming, and laid into me with an umbrella. I wasn't going to wait for a crowd, so I out with the stair-carpet and bowled it open all along the

pavement. There was no picture in it—nothing! I kicked it the whole length out, all along the street, and then pelted round the next corner while the old party was tangled up with the other end. Sydney, my boy, it's

pretty plain. He could never afford to stultify himself publicly after the advertisement he had so anxiously gained. And the interviews in the newspapers! And the County Council election! And the limited



"I GRABBED IT WITH BOTH HANDS."

my belief Fewston's got that picture now! The carpet was sent to the house!"

"What in the world shall we do? We're in a fine sort of mess!"

For a time Hector Bushell had no answer. It was quite clear that Fewston must be in possession of the picture, for the carpet had been in his house since the evening of the day before yesterday. More, now that he came to rescue his memory from the confusion wrought by his recent adventure, it struck him that at the jumble sale Mrs. Fewston had treated him to a cool stare of severe disdain which— At the moment it had passed almost unnoticed, such was his excitement, but now he remembered it well enough. Also, it suggested many things. Why had nothing been heard from Fewston? He had had a full day and a half to flare up in, if to flare up he had wished, but he was lying low. Why? The answer seemed

company! It was plain that Mr. Fewston's interests were not wholly divorced from their own, after all.

"What *shall* we do?" reiterated Sydney, wildly. "We're in a most hideous mess!"

"Mess?" repeated Hector, straightening his hat and gradually assuming his customary placidity. "Mess? Oh, I don't know, after all. I was a bit startled at first, but we haven't accused anybody, you know. *We're* perfectly innocent. If you like to authorize me to get in at your studio window to fetch a picture, why shouldn't you? And if the police like to jump to conclusions—well, they ought to know better. Lend me a clothes-brush."

"But what about Fewston?"

"That's why I want the clothes-brush. He's in it pretty deep after those published interviews, eh? We'll go round and collect that money."