

Remarkable Accidents.

By JAMES SCOTT.



NOTWITHSTANDING the ever-present possibility of meeting with some severe accident, the probability is remote when considering the number of mishaps as compared to the number of persons exposed to them, yet it is hardly too much to say that we live amidst a perpetual plague of accidents, to which all individuals are equally exposed.

My purpose now is to deal with a few of the accidents which have been characterized by some peculiarity or coincidence. Such happenings are of very frequent occurrence, and have sometimes been so strange in their effect as to induce the belief that, were the fictionist to purloin the fact, and palm it off as the work of his imagination, the reading public would accept it in a spirit of disgust, and demand something more probable. Fact has ever been, and doubtless will continue to prove itself to be, more strange than fiction. What, for instance, could be more astounding than the accident depicted on page 350 in Vol. III. of "The Picture Magazine," which explains that a boiler full of hot water, being conveyed in a cart in France, exploded, and after flying completely over a block of houses, fell into a distant street? That publication also contains pictures of other strange accidents, and I here refer to them merely to emphasize the fact that remarkable accidents are by no means rare, comparatively speaking.

In Hoxton, recently, a boiler explosion occurred whilst the workmen were engaged at dinner, and an ill-fated man was blown some distance away from the spot where he had been quietly reading his daily paper, into an empty tank; wherein afterwards, to all appearance, he remained in the same posture, apparently reading his paper, but really, as the dreadful stare in his eyes revealed, dead!

Occasionally some peculiar form of accident has a less severe termination, as is evidenced by the case of a man, running over a level crossing on one of our railway lines, whose foot

was inadvertently imprisoned between one of the metals and the ground, just as an approaching train was upon him. With enviable presence of mind, upon becoming aware that it was impossible to withdraw his foot from its awful position, he ripped his boot open with a pocket-knife, and thus escaped a terrible death.

The illustrations which I have drawn here to assist my forthcoming remarks deal with a very few of the recorded curious mischances which have happened. In only few of the cases that I quote was the effect a fatal one.

In the north of London, a short time ago, the passengers of a tram-car received a shock when, with a terrific smashing of glass, the head of an unfortunate horse appeared within the vehicle. A careless carter, who was driving his van along one of the narrow by-streets of City Road, was forcing the horse onward so quickly that it was impossible for him to pull up in time to avoid a collision with a passing tram-car. The poor animal would have suffered acutely enough by the mere breaking of the glass, but when it is remembered that the car was



FIG. 1.—A HORSE IN THE WRONG PLACE.



FIG. 2.—THE CASE OF THE OLD STALL-KEEPER.

travelling, it will be understood that the gashing of the animal's neck was an additional severity. The fright caused to the passengers was an insignificant matter as compared to the injury undergone by the horse, which, I believe, it was deemed advisable to slaughter, on account of the impossibility of rendering surgical aid (Fig. 1).

My second illustration depicts the result of a curious accident which occurred in a suburb of London. An old female stall-keeper, who sat at the head of her barrow-load of wares, was ignorant of the conflagration roaring beneath her humble vehicle, until awakened in a fright by the commotion of some passers-by, but for whose timely assistance her loss might have been a serious one. In order to imitate as far as possible the comforts enjoyed by the more favoured people who were indoors, she had in front of her

a can containing a small fire. The night being windy, several pieces of paper were soaring promiscuously in all directions, and, suddenly, one piece passed through the flame of the fire and was blown beneath the barrow, where it quickly ignited a sack of coke, which the thoughtful yet drowsy dame had provided for herself. Little damage was done, however; but the accident proves that nowhere can we be free from the playful treachery of that useful element called fire (Fig. 2).

A case in which fire was greatly assisted by its natural enemy, water, is illustrated in Fig. 3. Garrets at no time constitute serviceable bedrooms, and are eminently unfitted for human occupancy when the roofs are in bad condition, and rain is admitted. The gentleman who preferred to suspend a basin near the ceiling of his room, in order to catch the drops of water which penetrated his abode, no doubt considered that he was acting in a way whereby he would be relieved of the jarring effect produced by water dripping into a receptacle placed upon the floor; but he also, subsequently, repented of his



FIG. 3.—THE BASIN AND THE NIGHT-LIGHT.

ingenuity. Being careless, or not particularly industrious, he must have failed to empty the basin at a proper time, for as a result of its increasing weight, combined with the decaying of the supporting strings, caused by the dampness, one of those strings snapped, and the contents of the basin were precipitated into a plate standing upon an adjacent chest of drawers. Now, it curiously happened that the plate contained a night-light, which illuminant, as all readers must certainly know, is, as a rule, partly immersed in some water which has been poured into the plate or saucer. The consequence was, contrary to what one would have supposed, that the water which was discharged from the suspended basin caused that in the plate to overflow and carry on its surface the night-light, which rapidly overturned on to some inflammable material, igniting it as shown.

A disastrous termination was averted by the waking of the man, who had slept; the return to consciousness being occasioned, no doubt, by the noise and the excessive flare.

In a certain part of the outskirts of Birmingham is a long lane, flanked by a wall surrounding a churchyard, which is reported in the neighbourhood to be visited by the visible spirits of the departed. As may be expected, this thoroughfare is shunned as much as possible after nightfall by the ladies, both young and old, of the neighbourhood. Occasionally, however, necessity demanded the passage of some belated females who had been visiting the adjacent town; and on the particular night to which I am referring, two women, who were walking very quietly down the lane and conversing in very subdued tones, and, perhaps, also trembling in anticipation of meeting the chief ghost, who strolled abroad at that particular hour, received as sudden and effective a fright as the most bitterly-inclined person could desire to befall a dreaded enemy. With scarcely a sound, a huge leg and foot dumped on to the head of one of the pair of women, and trod firmly upon her, causing her and her companion to shriek and flee in terror. It is safe to say that the "ghost" experienced as great a surprise as did the victims of his unpremeditated alarm, for it was subsequently revealed

that the "ghost" was merely the grave-digger leaving a dismal job upon which circumstances had necessitated his presence at a late hour, and that, either because the gate was barred against him or he chose to leave by a near cut, he was climbing over the wall with the object of returning homewards. He is shown to the reader in Fig. 4, in much bolder form and more detail than he appeared to the frightened females.

Beyond some bruises, and a severe nervous shock, the chief victim of this peculiar accident sustained no injury.

The truly remarkable mishap which is the subject of my fifth illustration is one of which several versions are extant, and I cannot accept any responsibility as regards its exact



FIG. 4.—A SUBSTANTIAL GHOST.

truth in connection with narrating here the most popular form of the story. But the manner of the accident is in itself so interesting as to merit a permanent place here. The story runs that a man was found lying dead upon a couch, his life having been destroyed by a bullet discharged from a gun lying near. The circumstances of the matter positively proved that the case could not have been one of suicide, and, therefore, the only alternative which could be reasonably suggested was that he had been murdered. An acquaintance was charged with the crime, but absolute proof of guilt was not forthcoming. One of the parties engaged in the case was so far



FIG. 5.—THE SUN AND THE GUN.

interested in the peculiar facts of the death, as to seek a different solution to the affair to that accepted by popular belief. The result of his observation and deduction was very curious. The rays of the sun had streamed in at the window of the apartment in which the man had encountered his end; and had been concentrated direct upon the explosive chamber of the gun, by which means sufficient heat had been engendered to warm the cap and powder, and cause a discharge. The gun having been quite inadvertently placed in such a way as to point to the unfortunate man, he received the bullet while he lay placidly sleeping, no doubt meeting with instant death.

Schoolboys are fond of torturing themselves by concentrating the sun's rays on to the backs of their hands, through the medium of a small lens, which produces a small, brilliant spot of light, sufficiently strong to severely burn the skin after a few moments' duration. One can therefore believe that in such a case as that described, a lens of increased strength would cause so remarkable an accident. We have seen it stated in other versions of this story, which, however, is in its

main facts undoubtedly true, that the lens was formed either by a spherical water-bottle, or by a "bull's-eye" in the window, that being the name given to the large, dropsical swellings seen in some old windows of which the panes are made of bottle-glass.

Fig. 6 points forcibly to the necessity of paying proper consideration to the state of flooring in our workshops, where the same extent of attention that is usually allotted to the home by those who control it is discarded. Flooring becomes rotten far quicker in rooms devoted to labour, on account of the continued exposure of uncovered and ill-kept boards, and in many cases becomes absolutely dangerous to the limbs of those who tramp upon it. Witness the effect illustrated. An enterprising knife-grinder availed himself of the existence of machinery in a house



FIG. 6.—AN UNFORTUNATE LEG.

situated in his neighbourhood, and had a belt connected with the gearing in an upper room, wherewith to drive his limited set of wheels in the apartment below. There was no space (as is customary in dwelling-houses) between the ceiling of the room he occupied and the floor above: in fact, one set of boards actually served the purpose of both. The decayed condition of the flooring was responsible for the accident under reference, and one night the grinder was astonished to hear a crash above him, and immediately afterwards observe the leg of a workman protrude into his shop. In its descent the leg had been stripped of its trouser covering, which was retained at the edge of the hole made by the foot. Its owner, as soon as he felt the touch of the fast-travelling belt, naturally kicked the leg about in order to effect a withdrawal; but before that desirable end could be accomplished, he was mortified at feeling it seized by the belt, which, as a result of the excited movements of the foot, entwined the ankle, and was drawn so tightly as to threaten to pull the member from its socket. Happily, the knife-grinder retained sufficient presence of mind to quickly detach the belt from his wheels, and to release the foot before anything more serious than a rather severe sprain had ensued.

An accident which was more amusing than painful happened when a mischievous boy—a very common product—climbed over into one of the many “squares” dotted about London, and who, after having satisfied his curiosity, endeavoured to beat a retreat by squeezing through the iron railings. He managed to get his intelligent head through (Fig. 7), but was quite unable to create sufficient elasticity in the metal bars whereby to enable the remainder of his precious

person to effect a passage. Deeming, too late, that discretion was indeed the better part of valour, he sought to withdraw his upper anatomy, but in this he also failed. His ears had smoothly passed the bars in the first instance, but quite refused to repeat the performance, so the poor boy became alarmed, and struggled frantically, doubtless so irritating the ears and the adjacent flesh as to cause inflammation of the parts. At any rate, all his efforts bore futile results, and rescuers had to come to his aid. The railings must

have been very inflexible, for, notwithstanding the willing exertions of strong arms induced by sympathy, they failed to release their prisoner. In the end it was found absolutely necessary to dig one of the offending bars from its bed, and thus provide plenty of space for making the release.

Fig. 8 represents a mishap which was caused by a quantity of snow falling from a roof, and being chiefly deposited upon the tray of a muffin and crumpet seller, who chanced to be walking past the shop at the time. The sudden weight upon the tray caused it to upset, and, naturally, at that precise moment

the man paused momentarily; and, simultaneously, a collision occurred between him and a gentleman coming behind him, whose progress it was impossible to stop in time to prevent the curious accident. The rising end of the crumpet tray encountered the front portion of the gentleman's umbrella, which was immediately snapped from his hands; whereupon the force which had effected the severance was still sufficiently strong to thrust the umbrella handle into contact with the crumpet-seller's head, bruising it to a considerable extent. The gentleman's share of the matter consisted of a severe scratching about the head and neck,



FIG. 7.—THE PENALTY OF MISCHIEF.



FIG. 8.—WHAT A FALL OF SNOW DID.

provided by the ribs of his rebellious "gamp." During our late unusually severe winter a huge icicle fell from the roof of a house, and with amazing effect pierced the hat of a passer-by and penetrated the man's skull, causing death.

Of a similar character was the case of a woman who, whilst proceeding along a street carrying an open umbrella, was fatally injured by one of the ribs of her umbrella penetrating one of her eyes, after having been broken by the fall of a mass of snow from the roof of a house whereby she was passing.

Accident number nine was less serious than might have been expected under the circumstances. A slater was engaged upon the repairs necessary to the roof of a cottage, and had placed his small pail of material on the top of a chimney-pot, to which convenient position he had been tempted to allot it on account of the absence of any smoke proceeding therefrom, he naturally deducing that the absence of smoke revealed the fact that the fire-grate below was not in use, and that, therefore, he would not incommode anyone by

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choking the chimney. But he acted really unwisely, for the ever-useful sweep was expected, and, of course, in view of his visit no fire had been lighted in that particular grate. Quite without warning, the black one's broom protruded from the dark cavity of the chimney and dislodged the blockading pail, which fell on to the man's arm, cutting it rather severely, and careered down the sloping roof, from which it eventually tumbled into the yard of the premises. The sweep, doubtless, wondered what on earth obstructed the proper passage of his familiar broom; but he was not long in being acquainted of the fact (Fig. 9).

Had the bucket fallen a few inches to one side the man would have been stunned, and thus being unable to control himself, would have lost his

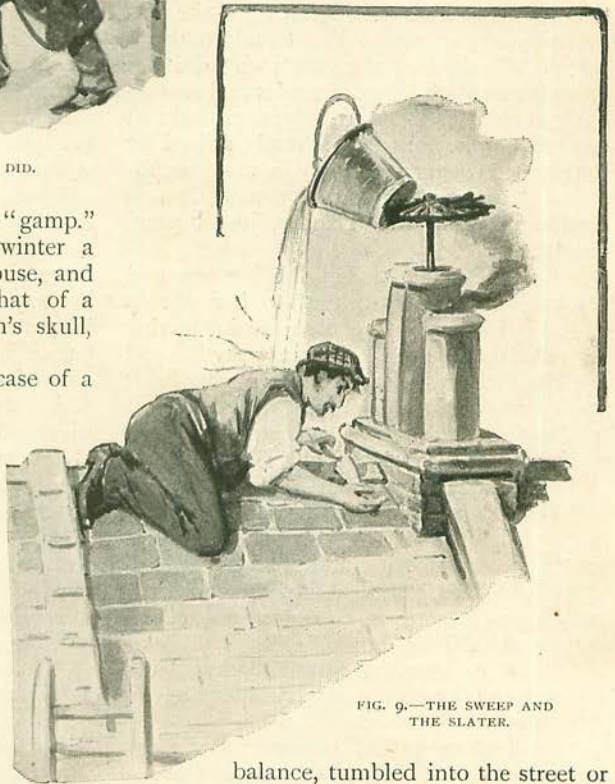


FIG. 9.—THE SWEEP AND THE SLATER.

balance, tumbled into the street or yard, and probably have been killed.

It is to be hoped that the narration of these few peculiar accidents has not created any feeling of timidity; for surely it would be far better to go through life not fearing chance occurrences, but with sufficient precaution to avoid them.