

The Mystery of the Expert.

By ROBERT BARR.



HE editor of that highly successful periodical, *Forest and Field*, in searching for a match, found more than he expected. He had wandered into his assistant's room, but that industrious individual, being no smoker, was matchless, so the editor took a piece of torn paper from the waste-basket to make a spill of it and thus bring fire to the bowl of his pipe, when his eye caught a woodland phrase on the sheet which arrested his attention as a protruding nail lays hold on a trailing garment. The pipe remained between his teeth lifeless as he read on to the end of the scrap, then he groped in the waste-basket and salvaged the torn manuscript bit by bit, assorting the remnants on the table of his assistant, who looked on uneasily. The silence was oppressive as the editor slowly cryptogramed his way through the scrawl.

"Where did this come from?" he asked at last.

"Oh, that," replied the assistant, visibly perturbed, fearing he had somehow made a mistake, which indeed was the case, "it's from some old duffer out in the country. He sends a long letter every week, but he doesn't know how to spell, and has the most elementary ideas about grammar."

"This simply reeks of the soil, my boy. We can supply grammar in the office, and

there are several dictionaries. Just paste these pieces together and bring them in to me."

"He has never given his name and address, but merely signs himself 'Pathfinder,'" rejoined the assistant, anxious to exculpate himself by quoting a rigid rule, not to be broken in a well-regulated newspaper office.

"That's all right. I want to see anything else this man sends in," and John Stobcross

went to his own room, forgetting his quest of the match. Unthinking people called Stobcross lucky, but he was merely a person who knew a good thing when he saw it, a most valuable quality in an editor.

From that time on the "Pathfinder" articles appeared nearly every week in the *Forest and Field*, their instantaneous success more than justifying the judgment of the editor. They

were quoted by many journals, letters of admiration were written to the office about them from various parts of the world, and finally a noted publisher asked permission to collect the series and issue it in book form.

John Stobcross was not the man to let such a volume slip through his fingers into the hands of any other publisher. The newspaper got out books on its own account, and the *Forest and Field* Library is too well known to need any praise at this late day. But the mysterious contributor re-



"THIS SIMPLY REEKS OF THE SOIL, MY BOY."

tained that anonymity which had so deeply offended the assistant in the first instance. This was most unusual, for the *Forest and Field* paid handsomely when a contribution pleased it, and there never before had been an instance where an author had considered himself unworthy of his hire. Stobcross was not going to admit to anyone that he knew nothing of his celebrated correspondent. There was ample money due to the "Pathfinder" if he would but call for it, though this does not usually keep an editor awake at nights; but, by-and-by, the question of book rights came up, and it was important to find the man behind the *nom-de-guerre*.

Of course, technically, the office could publish the book, for the articles had been copyrighted in the name of the sheet, and the author might find a difficulty in establishing any legal claim; still, the *Forest and Field* was an honest trader, and wished to have its dealings done in proper form.

It was impossible to advertise boldly for the unknown man; that would be tantamount to making public the secret of the dilemma. It would not do to print an announcement under the head of "Missing": "Stolen or strayed, a valuable contributor. Answers to the name of 'Pathfinder.' Any person returning same to the office of *Forest and Field* will be suitably rewarded."

Nevertheless, Stobcross did something very similar. He printed a note at the end of one of the articles which ran: "Will 'Pathfinder' kindly communicate with X.Y.Z., Box 73, office of *Forest and Field*, London, E.C.?" But "Pathfinder" unkindly did nothing of the sort, and so Stobcross published that celebrated volume, "And Pastures New," without the author's permission.

The book was warmly welcomed and

widely read. A leading review said it was as refreshing as a breeze from the moors; an intimate and astonishing revelation of wild life, and a welcome change from those innumerable pottering volumes on the garden.

Before three months were past a small fortune was at the disposal of "Pathfinder" at the office of publication, if he but called for it, but he did not call.

John Stobcross was seldom baffled, and the continuing mystery put him on his mettle. He examined carefully the envelopes that brought in the manuscripts. They had been posted from a group of small villages in the north of England—Sutton Marbury, Fernlea, King's Bootle, Purlbrook, Saggat's Bend, Peaceberry, Trimnal, and Plumpton Cross. All these places were in the same district, and King's Bootle was a railway station. *King's Bootle?* The name came home to Stobcross at once; his laugh rang

out, and he smote his fist on the table before him, called himself a fool never to have suspected. The one man in England with the knowledge of woodcraft and the love of all wild creatures to have written such a book, and yet a man who pretended to despise books and writers, lived near King's Bootle, and consequently near all the other little villages whose post-marks had decorated the several envelopes.

Bluff old Squire Acrescliffe, the owner of a domain—a man rich enough to care nothing for the monetary product of his pen, or more probably so ignorant of bookish ways that he had no suspicion there was any money in a volume about things so familiar to him—was well qualified to be the author

of "And Pastures New." Often had Stobcross been a visitor at Acrescliffe Manor, for the *Forest and Field* was the one paper that the squire swore by; all others were tommy-rot in his opinion, and King's Bootle was the station at which the squire's trap or



"THE OWNER OF A DOMAIN."

carriage met the editor when he went to stay a week at the Manor.

The letters had not been in the squire's handwriting, but the old man would naturally wish to conceal his descent into authorship, and the engaging of an uncultured amanuensis was an easy matter; one of his own game-keepers, very likely. Stobcross resolved to write to the squire a letter that would draw out his opinion of the articles; if he criticised them severely then it was all but certain he was their author, for this course would probably occur to him as a subtle method of throwing dust in the editor's eyes.

"MY DEAR ACRESCLIFFE (he dictated),— I am sending you by this post a book entitled 'And Pastures New,' which has been the success of the season. I know your contempt for city-bred writers, but I wish you would read this work and tell me what you think of it. How are you all, and have you caught the Demon Poacher yet?"

"Ever yours,

"JOHN STOBCROSS."

The reply came in due time, and it left the editor in very much the same quandary in which he had been before its arrival.

"MY DEAR JOHN,—No city-bred man wrote that book. I bought it when it first came out, and several other copies since. Gave 'em away to friends, so I thank you for this extra copy. I was going to write you about the letters when they were appearing in the *Forest*, but have been busy, and you know I am not handy with the pen. I would rather meet 'Pathfinder' than any other man in England. Can't you bring him down here with you? He'd be delighted with this place, I'm sure; indeed, it seems to me when I read his book that I know the very glades and dells and bits of stream he's writing about.

"The Demon Poacher, damnum, we haven't caught yet, but we're going to; you'll see. I've got a trap for him now that's costing me hundreds of pounds. I can't give you particulars yet, for if it doesn't come off I don't want to be laughed at again by the whole countryside. Curse that poacher, he'll see the inside of a gaol before long, or I'm no magistrate. We're going to spring the trap on the night of the 21st. If it works, it will make the greatest page you ever printed in the *Forest*. If it doesn't, I don't want anything said about it. Bring 'Pathfinder.' He is the man to write about it, although I think he favours poachers a little too much, but that's the only fault I find with him. Wire your

train.—Yours, as usual, GEORGE ACRESCLIFFE."

Thus it came about that John Stobcross was met at King's Bootle by the squire's carriage, but "Pathfinder" was not with him. Arriving at the Manor, the squire greeted him cordially, but was palpably disappointed that he came alone.

"Good gracious, squire, you are surely never installing the electric light in this old mansion?" cried the editor, seeing coils of wire about and workmen busy insulating and making connections.

"Why not? One must keep up with the times, you know, even in this out-of-the-way corner," and the squire winked.

After partaking of refreshment, Acrescliffe mysteriously led his visitor along a passage to a locked door, at which he rapped, and it was opened from the inside by a keen-faced man, who admitted them into an apartment that looked like an electrical stock-room, an amazing aggregation of telephones, bells, indicators, and other apparatus.

"Why, what's all this?" cried the astonished editor; "are you starting a factory?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it? Mr. Volter here can explain the matter better than I. Volter, this is the visitor I was expecting, or, at least, one of them. The other couldn't come. Would you kindly tell him what we are trying to do?"

"You see, sir," began the electrician, "we have surrounded the plantation which the poacher most frequents with three zones of concealed wire: an outer, a middle, and an inner zone. If any person crosses one belt or the other, or all three, the indicator here will not only tell us that he has so crossed, but also it will let me know within twenty yards of *where* he has crossed. The moment he is in the centre area I telephone simultaneously to different points where the constabulary are hidden, and they at once surround this central space, and there are enough men concealed to make a circle each unit of which will be in touch with the two units on either side of him. The circle will gradually close in, and I don't see how the poacher can escape. If he does, the three zones, which we will try to keep the men clear of, will tell which way he is escaping. This I can let the chief know instantly by field telephone, and so I think we have a chance of nabbing him."

"But suppose some animal crosses your wires?"

"There is that danger, of course; still, it

would take a heavy animal to send in an alarm. A fox might do it, but we have to take the risk of that."

The squire had no other visitors, and he sat with his guest in the electrical room until midnight, the only other occupant being Volter, who kept intent watch on the silent indicators. Acrescliffe spoke rarely, in an awed whisper, as if they were waiting for a ghost, or thought loud talk would disturb the electricity.

At eleven minutes after midnight there was a slight click, and the arm on the first dial swung lightly a quarter way round, and quivered at the figure 15.

"He's crossed No. 1," said the electrician, quietly, taking out a watch; "he has crossed near the north stile." In the silence that ensued the ticking of the watch could be heard. Host and guest were on their feet, breathless.

"He's going very slow, or taking a diagonal direction," continued Volter, at last, but as he spoke the hand of No. 2 dial dropped to 17.

"Not so diagonal, after all, but slow. Crawling on his hands and knees, I suspect." Volter rang up a telephone. "Are you there?"

"He has crossed 15, No. 1; 17, No. 2. Be ready." This message was repeated through the different telephones. Click went No. 3 resting at 36.

"Ah, he's gone south of the brook now. It's time to go if you want to be in at the death. Are you there? Crossed No. 3 at 36. Go." And so through all the telephones.

The squire and editor were speedily outside, the former leading the way. The night was very dark, but with brilliant starlight overhead. The owner of the ground knew every foot of the way, and soon came to the speechless circle, closing in, closing in, watching their own shuffling feet that no human being might escape. The field telephone gave the word that so far no one had crossed out again. Thus they felt sure of him, but the ever-contracting circumference came fruitlessly in on itself, making way through a kind of covert, without sound, but without result.

The diameter of the living circle had

shrunk to something like roft. when suddenly a partridge whirled up and away, which so startled the tense men that some of them cried out in alarm. A frightened little animal scuttled between their feet, and another, and another. But one was not so fortunate. The boot of a constable came down on it, and there was a faint, appealing squeal. Then came the climax of an exciting night. The slight, soil-coloured mound in the centre lifted its nose out of the mould and cried:—

"Take your foot off that weasel, you lout!" and the man was so dumfounded that he did as ordered, the released animal shooting to safety.

"Got him, begad!" roared the squire, pushing in.

The now standing mound shook the leaves from his back; he was holding to his breast some small animal that nestled under his chin.



"CRAWLING ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES, I SUSPECT."

"Make way there," shouted the poacher; and for the second time he was almost obeyed.

"Close in on him, men," commanded the chief; "look out for a knife; pinion him."

The poacher rubbed the little animal for a brief moment against his cheek, then flung it over the heads of the circle.

"Good-bye, Pink Eye; look out for yourself; I'm nabbed."

He made no resistance—a glance around showed him the futility of it—and was deftly handcuffed.

And now the procession set out for the house, where all the men knew ample refreshment awaited them.

"You'd never have got me, squire, if it hadn't been for that weasel. I hope it wasn't hurt. You've been as close as this to me before."

"I'll close you, you scoundrel. You'll do time."

"I suppose so. Well, I hope there'll be a friendly rat in my cell."

Once in the ample ancient wainscoted hall, with a great fire blazing, the jovial old squire was beside himself with glee. The prisoner stood in striking contrast to him, very dejected, ill-clad in rags that were the colour of the soil and that seemed part of the ground from which he had sprung.

"The laugh is with me this time," roared the squire. "By Jove, Stobcross, what a pity 'Pathfinder' didn't come. He'd be the fellow to have written about this night's work. I'd sooner meet 'Pathfinder' than any man in England, as I've said often enough."

"'Pathfinder!' What 'Pathfinder'?" asked the prisoner, looking up.

"I'm not talking to you, you scum."

"You don't mean 'Pathfinder' that writes for the *Forest and Field*?"

"Yes; what do you know about him?"

said the squire, astounded that such a creature had acquaintance even with such a periodical or writer.

"Nothing, but I am 'Pathfinder.' I wrote them things."

"You brazen liar! See how you trap yourself, for there, before you, stands the

editor of the *Forest*. You never thought to find him here to confront you. Tell him who 'Pathfinder' is, John."

"So help me, squire, you've both got me in a corner. I can't contradict him. I don't know who 'Pathfinder' is."

"Be you the editor?" asked the prisoner.

"That's what they call me."

"Well, my hands is in a snare, so if you feel under my belt you'll get the next letter. That there partridge was to get the stamp, but your stamp has flew away. You

shouldn't be so hard on poachers, squire. If I owned the land an' you lived in my cot, you'd be a poacher yourself."

"Me a poacher? You rat, how dare you say such a thing?"

"You know you couldn't keep out of the woods, squire; you love 'em too much and all that's in 'em; and there's no man can learn you anything about 'em either, squire. You knows a lot about them creatures an' their haunts."

"Why—why—why—you villain, do you think you're going to come over me with your— Well, I *do* know something about them, that's true, but I—"

The editor had been turning the letter over and over in his hand; had opened it



"THE POACHER RUBBED THE LITTLE ANIMAL AGAINST HIS CHEEK."

and examined the contents; now he interrupted the speaker.

"I say, squire, will you oblige me by ordering the handcuffs off this man?"

"Now, I'm not going to let him go. It is all nonsense about him being 'Pathfinder.'"

"I suspect as much. I think this letter has been given him to post. I'll find that out in a moment, if his manacles are off, and you can let us have pen and ink."

The released man was taken into the library and set down at table, with pen, ink, and paper before him.

"Write 'partridge,'" said the editor.

The prisoner laboriously wrote "p-a-t-r-i-g," and handed up the result of his effort. Stobcross glanced at it.

"This is the man, squire. You can't send such a genius to gaol, poaching or no poaching. Have you ever seen your book?"

"What book?"

"Do you see the *Forest and Field*?"

"Not reg'lar. Can't afford to pay sixpence, except now and then."

"Never saw a note at the foot of one of the articles asking you to send your address to the office?"

"No. Wouldn't 'av' done it if I had. I'm not easy trapped, am I, squire?"

"Here's the book," said the squire; "what do you think of it?"

The poacher turned over the sumptuous leaves as if afraid to touch them; then his attention became fixed upon some

of the engravings, and his grimy brow wrinkled.

"Say, squire, look how this fool man has pictured that there fox! Who ever saw a fox like that? You know how he crouches when he does what I writ about."

"Of course. Perfectly absurd picture," cried the squire with the enthusiasm of the expert.

"An' see this 'ere pheasant. Oh, gawd! Why, he's never seen the burd alive. That's stuffed, that is."

"Certainly it is. I never *aid* think much of the pictures."

"Done by the best animal artist in London," said the editor, with severity, displeased by such free comment on most expensive art.

"Them London men dunno much about beasties and burds, do they, squire?"

"That's what I've said all my life," roared the squire, slapping his prisoner on the back.

"Well, 'Pathfinder,' we have some thousand pounds waiting for you to claim in our office, and more to come," interjected Stobcross.

"What for?"

"For writing those articles."

"Do you *pay* a man for writing?"

"Always."

"For *writing*?"

"Certainly."

A seraphic smile slowly overspread the poacher's face, and he drooped one eyelid in the direction of the squire, his voice coming with a humorous chuckle:--

"Squire, what blooming fools them London chaps is, ain't they?"



"THE PRISONER LABORIOUSLY WROTE 'P-A-T-R-I-G.'"