

The Missing Link eBook

The Missing Link by Edward Dyson

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CHAPTER I.

Dr. Crips's healing mixture.

His Christian name was Nicholas but his familiars called him Nickie the Kid. The title did not imply that Nicholas possessed the artless gaiety, the nimbleness, or any of the simple virtues of the young of the common goat. Kid was short for "kidder," a term that as gone out recently in favour of "smoodger," and which implies a quality of suave and ingratiating cunning backed by ulterior motives.

The familiars of Mr. Nicholas Crips were a limited circle, and all "beats," that is to say, gentlemen sitting on the rail dividing honest toil from open crime. They were not workers, neither were they thieves, excepting in very special circumstances, when the opportunity made honesty almost an impertinence. The sobriquet coming from such a source acquires peculiar significance. The god-fathers of Nickie the Kid were all experts, and obtained bed and board mainly by exercising the art of dissimulation. To stand out conspicuously as a specialist in such company one needed to possess very bright and peculiar qualities.

Mr. Nicholas Crips was blonde, bony man perhaps five feet nine in height, but looking taller because of the spareness of his limbs. This spareness was not cultivated, as Nickie the Kid was partial to creature comforts, but was of great assistance to him in a profession in which it was often necessary to profess chronic sickness and touching physical decrepitude. Mr Crips despised whiskers, but, as shaving was an extravagant indulgence, his slightly cadaverous countenance was often littered with a crisp, pale stubble, not unlike dry grass.

To-day Nickie wore a suit of black cloth. It had once been a very imposing suit, and had adorned a great person, but having fallen on evil days, was dusty and rusty, while the knees of Mr. Crips poked familiarly through a long slit in each leg of the stained trousers. The frock coat went badly with the damaged tan boots and the moth-eaten rag cap Nicholas was wearing.

Mr. Crips was making back-door call, and telling housewives what the doctors at the hospital had said about his peculiar ailment which, it appears, was an interesting heart weakness.

"Above all, I must be careful never to over-exert myself, madam—those are the doctor's orders," said Nickie, in his sad, calm way. "The smallest excitement, the slightest strain, and my life goes out like that." Nickie puffed an imaginary candle with dramatic significance.

This was the preliminary to a mild appeal for creature and medical comforts, and it had two objects—to open the soul to compassion, and bar all considerations of manual labour.

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Our hero's manner with women was a gentle manly deference; his begging showed no trace of servility, but he was always polite. He accepted failure with good grace, and did not resent scorn, abuse, or even violence from intended victims. He was rarely combative. Fighting was not his special gift; he met misfortune with patient passivity. Resistance he found a mistake. But for all this a certain sense of superiority was, never wanting in Nickie the Kid; the shabbiest clothes, a deplorable hat, fragmentary boots, shirtlessness, the most distressing situations all failed to wholly eliminate a touch of impudent dignity, a trace of rakish self-satisfaction which as a rule escaped the attention of his clients; but, here and there, a student of human nature found it delightfully whimsical. Sometimes it appeared that this spice of egotism sprang from a blackguardly sense of humour that found joy in the abounding weaknesses and simplicity of the people he imposed upon, but, on the other hand, it would be sufficient to show that Mr. Crips was inspired only with gross selfishness or to comprehend that the stability of society depends upon fair dealing and faithful labour.

Nevertheless there were occasions when Nickie the Kid deliberately undertook to earn his daily bread. For a week he served as waiter in a six penny restaurant. He had been a "super" in drama and a practical crocodile in pantomime and was long in the employ of a fashionable undertaker as second in command on the hearse. In this latter billet he had to keep his hair dyed a presentable black, but otherwise the duties were light, and Nickie might still have been useful mute, only that he had the misfortune to get drunk at the funeral of an eminent politician and behaved himself in a way obnoxious to the other mourners.

Some credit must be given to Crips for the above in view of the fact that he had long, since discovered how unnecessary work was to a man free of prejudices and unhampered with conscience. Every man should be master of his own conscience, and the exactions of conscience should be subordinate to the needs of the body. That was a large part of Nickie's philosophy, and he had acted up to it with marked success, but this morning housewives were incredulous and tough, and our hero was faring badly.

He entered the yard of Ebonwell, the chemist, and was about to knock, when his eye fell upon a well-worn Gladstone bag full of small bottles. In the course of long experience as a beat, Nickie had learned the value of prompt action. He gently snapped up the bag, and jauntily to the gate. Here he collided with a female entering in a hurry.

"Was yeh wantin' anythin', mister?" said the woman suspiciously.

"Good morning, madam," said Nickie, with unction. "Can I tune your piano this morning?" His manner was most courteous, he smiled kindly, but he did not invite attention to the bag.

"No yeh can't," snapped the woman, "an' a good reason why—coz we ain't got a pianner to toon."

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"A pity," said Nickie, suavely, "a pity, madam. No home should be without the refining influence of good music."

The woman passed in as Nickie passed out, and the latter looked back over the gate, and said, "Good morning, lady," with profound respect.

Nickie must have forgotten all about his weak heart; the dash he made out of that right-of-way, across the street, down a second right-of-way, and into a public garden, would not have discredited a trained pedestrian. An hour later Mr. Crips was seated in a secluded spot on the river bank, taking stock. He possessed one very second-hand black bag and four dozen four-ounce bottles. The Kid's intention in the first place had been to dispose of the loot at the nearest marine store, but Nickie was a man of ideas, and one had come to him there in his loneliness. He hid his bag of bottles, and wandered into the city. After several misses he succeeded in begging sixpence to buy cough drops for his influenza.

He paid threepence for the cough drops at a convenient hotel, and took them in bulk. With his change he purchased threepence worth of small corks. Back at the Yarra Nickie the Kid dissolved one of three gingerbreads he had taken from the bar lunch in a two pound jam tin of river water, and started to fill his bottles. He filled one dozen.

Having explained to a small knot of brother professionals that he needed change of air and scenery, Nickie the Kid started out of town that afternoon. We next discover him seated under a spreading gum in a pleasant sweep of sunny landscape at Tarra, with his trousers in his hands, carefully and systematically repairing and renovating the same. The frock coat had been "restored," the rag cap was abandoned in favour of a limp bell-topper, contributed by the family of a benevolent clergyman, and the tan boots were artistically blacked with stove polish. Nickie the Kid warbled at his work with the innocent gaiety of a bird.

It was not yet sundown, and Nicholas Crips was clothed, and stood with his black Gladstone in his right hand, prepared for the campaign. He had had a clean shave, and his face had a sort of calm dignity touched with benevolence. He turned round, examining himself, and the coat-tails floated gracefully in the breeze.

"Eminently satisfactory," said Mr. Crips. "And now for business." He cleared his throat, as if about to commence an oration, and set off at a smart pace towards the farm-house whose chimneys peeped over the hill.

A dog barked surlily as Nickie passed up the garden walk, but Nickie knew the character and quality of dogs, no beat better, and he recognised this one as harmless to man. A woman came to the door, wiping her fat, red arms on a canvas apron.

“A very good day to you, madam,” said Mr. Crips, lifting his belltopper with some grace, and bowing slightly. “I have taken the liberty of calling upon you to bring under your attention my celebrated medicine—Dr. Crips’s Healing Mixture, for coughs, colds, consumption indigestion, biliousness and all bronchial complaints.”

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He took a bottle from his bag and shook it invitingly, his voice was respectful and very persuasive, but by no means subservient. Nickie's voice was his most valuable possession; it had a note so winning, so appealing, that it was only with strong effort that ordinary people could resist it.

"No," said the woman, "we ain't got any o' them complaints."

"Headache, earache, toothache, lumbago, Bright's disease?" said Nickie, suggestively.

"No." The woman shook her head. "We ain't got nothin' in the 'ouse but rhoomertism in me ole man's back. He's bin laid up three weeks with it."

"Dr. Crips's Rheumatic Balm!" exclaimed Nickie, with decision, restoring the first bottle to the bag, and producing another of exactly the same mixture. "Cures rheumatism in two hours. Gives instant relief in cases of neuralgia and sciatica. A little to be rubbed on the affected parts night and morning."

The woman took the bottle, examined it closely, shook it up, and said, "It looks good."

"It's invaluable, madam," replied Nickie, with quiet conviction. "No family should be without it. Two shillings, if you please."

The woman took a bottle, and when leaving, Nickie the Kid turned and said, "I shall be back this way in a week, and shall do myself the honour of calling on you for a testimonial, if I may?"

At the next farm-house Nickie had a man to deal with. The man began by wanting to throw Dr. Crips over the fence, and ended by buying a bottle of his Infallible Hair Restorer, and paying him half-a-crown for professional advice in the case of a brown cow afflicted with mumps.

Nickie the Kid had put in the busiest day of his varied career, and here he rested from his labours. With six and six in his pocket he could afford luxuries. That night he slept in a bed at the Harrow Hotel, and next morning breakfasted on grilled bacon and boiled eggs. Before leaving, he sold the publican two bottles of the world-famous Healing Mixture as a pick-me-up.

On the second day the doctor set out to cover as much ground as possible. He was astute enough to recognise the wisdom of moving on before his customers had time to compare notes. Before noon, he sold six bottles of the Healing Mixture for influenza, two bottles of the Rheumatic Balm, and one bottle of the same as a certain cure for a peculiar disorder in pigs.

Nickie was going along the main road, heading north, branching off to the farm-houses by the way to sell his cure-all. He sold one guileless housewife a bottle, assuring her

that it would convert brass spoons into real silver. A little mercury in a rag helped this trifling deception. On the third day Nickie had to buy some gingernuts to make a fresh supply of the Healing Mixture, and bottles were running short. He saw fortune staring him in the face.

It was about eleven, and Mr. Crips was trudging contentedly along, the road, swinging his bag and singing his tender lay, at peace with the world, and buoyed with great hopes, when a trap drove up and a voice out of the accompanying dust said:—

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"That's 'im. That's the bloke!" A man jumped down and advanced to Nickie, and laid hands on him.

"You're that doctor bloke what's selling the Rheumatic Balm, ain't yeh?" he asked.

Nickie said nothing. Retribution had overtaken him. He knew that. His fair dreams fell from him, he sighed deeply, and philosophically, as was his wont, abandoned himself to the inevitable.

There were two young men in the trap. They hoisted Nickie to the seat behind, and drove on. No explanation was offered, and Mr Crips expected none. They would come, he imagined, along with the familiar penalties. One of the young men did remark, with cheerful enthusiasm: "You're in fer it all right, blokie," but Nickie the Kid only sighed.

Crips recognised the farm-house they drove to as that of the farmer with rheumatism in the back, his first customer. One young man ran in with the news, and presently reappeared in company with a large, elderly, energetic man, who was crying, excitedly: "Where is he? Bring him to me!"

This large man dashed at Nickie the Kid, and fell on him bodily. He was followed by the housewife who purchased the Rheumatic Balm, and she also fell upon Nickie, who put up a short prayer. But to the doctor's immense surprise he found presently that he was not being assaulted, but hugged, that it was not curses, but blessings the old couple were showering upon his head.

"Lor love yeh, I'll never forget yeh fer this," cried the farmer.

"Come inside an' have a bit to eat," exclaimed his wife.

The pair literally dragged Nickie into the house and dumped him down at a loaded table. He was waited upon by a rather nice-looking girl of twenty.

"This is him, Millie," said the farmer, with enthusiasm. "This is Dr. Crips what cured yer old dad. Gord bless you, sir."

The girl shook Nickie by the hand, and smiled on him sweetly, and said she could never forget the man that cured her dear pa, and all Nickie's happiness and his great content came back to him like refreshing waters. Dr. Crips stood up straight, he shook hands enthusiastically with farmer Dickson.

"So the Rheumatic Balm has set you up again?" he said, heartily.

"Hasn't it, by gum! Look at this." The farmer capered about the room. "Every bit o' pain's gone. I'll buy every drop of that balm you've got. That's why I had you brought back. But sit down, and eat, man—eat!"

They simply squandered hospitality on Nickie the Kid that night; they had neighbours in to see him; they had music, and Dr. Crips sang, and danced, and drank, and made love to Miss Dickson out under the elderberries. Out under the elderberries, for the edification of Millie Dickson, Nicholas Crips was a medical man of high attainments, but the victim of extraordinary vicissitudes. It was very touching, most romantic. Nickie lied with great splendour. He displayed no little aptitude in the character of Don Juan too. Miss Dickson thought him a perfect dear.

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Returning to the house for supper, Nickie and the ingenuous Millie loitered by the open kitchen window, and Nickie saw and heard things of no little interest to him professionally. Farmer Dickson and three neighbours were comparing bottles of Dr. Crip's Celebrated Healing Mixture.

"Anyhow," said one, "I'll swear his nibs sold me this ez a cure fer pip in chickens."

"And he told me this was a dead sure cure fer corns 'n' ingrowin' toe-nail," ejaculated another.

"I bought this bottle fer me diabetes," explained Coleman. "He said it ud root out diabetes in nine hours."

Farmer Dickson shook his bottle, and looked at it very dubiously. "It seems t' me it's all the same mixture," he said. "It looks like it, tastes like, 'n' it smells like. Now I come t' think iv it, I ain't too sure 'bout these blanky rheumatics o' mine." He reached down his back and rubbed himself anxiously.

"I thought my diabetes was a-movin', but they're all back at me agin," said Coleman.

"The chicken died what I gave the mixture to," explained Anderson.

Dickson scowled and felt himself, for as far as he could reach up and down his spine. "I'm pretty certain the rheumatics 're comin' back," he murmured. "Wow!" he gasped, as a bad twinge took him. "It is back!"

"Tell yeh what," Anderson remarked plaintively, "we've been done."

"He's a blanky fraud!"

"A robber!"

"Let's look him up, 'n' 'ave a word or two."

The farmers seized their sticks. They moved towards the door, but already Nickie had begged to be excused, and passed into the night. The stillness and mystery of the bush enveloped him.

Next day the neighbours compared notes and bottles, and found that the medicine for influenza, consumption, liver disease, indigestion and cold feet, the embrocation for rheumatism, sprains, corns, bruises and headaches, the cure for pigs, the wash for silvering spoons, and the hair-restorer were all the same mixture. Then a great popular demand for Dr. Crips set in at Tarra, but by this time Nickie the Kid was back in town, amazing his friends with his lavish hospitality in threepenny bars.

CHAPTER II.

A family matter.

Even Nickie's intimates of the wharves and the river banks knew nothing of his ancestors or relations. Nickie was naturally reticent about his own business; On the point of family connections he was dumb. It was assumed that he had had a father and mother at some stage of his career, but the evolution of Nickie the Kid from a schoolboy, with shining morning face, to a homeless rascal, living on his impudence, was never dwelt upon by our hero, which is a great pity, as the process of degeneration must have been highly interesting.

Certainly, Nickie did not regret his respectable past, if he were ever respectable, and it is equally certain that he had no craving for high things in the way of tall hats and two-storey houses. He appreciated the value of money, since it enabled him to gratify his tastes, but it must be admitted his tastes were scandalous in the main.

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However, at Banklands Nickie solicited work, laborious and painful work. Moreover, he went to the job of his own free will, when sober and in his right mind. This seemed to imply an awakening of conscience, a dawning sense of his utter uselessness to the body politic, and a desire to figure as a useful member of society. On the other hand, it may have been a symptom of brain-softening. But it happened to be neither; it was in fact a means to a wicked end. On the fading end of a superior suburb, where the streets of fine villas and mansions thinned off and dwindled, and were lost among the gum trees of the original wilderness, Nickie found his billet.

The suburb was coming ahead. The motor-car had made it easy and accessible to the rich. Splendid dwellings were going up all over the place, the road makers were exceedingly busy, and hammers of the stone-knappers rattled an incessant fusillade.

Nickie the Kid came to Banklands one pleasant summer day, watched the busy people with a desultory sort of interest, and moralised within himself.

"Do these people expect to live a thousand years?" mused Mr. Crips, "that they build such solid houses? Or do they regard them as monuments? Look at that palace, and I sleep well on a potato sack under four boards!"

Nickie was examining a fine, white house, ornate as a wedding cake, with plentiful cement, and balconies as frivolous as those of a Chinese pagoda. It stood within capacious grounds, and proclaimed aloud the fact that its proprietor was a rich man, ostentatious of his riches.

"I expect there's a matter of thirty rooms in that house," mused Nicholas Crips, "and after all, a man can get just as drunk in a threepenny bar."

Nickie put in a couple of days skirmishing at Banklands, and fared well, but as there was no hotel in the suburb Nicholas did not contemplate making a lengthy stay. Something he saw on the second afternoon induced him to change his mind, and threw him into a state of profound reflection lasting for nearly an hour; then he sauntered over to the man working on the pile of stones before the gates of the cemented mansion, and seating himself on the broken metal, entered into conversation with the two-inch mason wielding the hammer.

"Pretty hard work this," ventured Nicholas.

"Blanky hard," assented the stonebreaker.

"Did you ever try the softening influence of beer?" asked Nickie, drawing a bottle from his pocket.

"Well, I won't make yeh force it on me," said the stonebreaker.

They divided the liquor like brothers dear, and the stonebreaker developed a sudden affection for Nicholas Crips, who after twenty minutes casual conversation, introduced his plea.

“Must be splendid exercise for the liver, stoneknapping,” he said. “I’ve been troubled with liver complaint lately. Living too high. Could you give a man a job?”

“Well,” said the breaker, “I got a sorter contrac’ t’ break so many yards. If you’ll do it at bob a yard you can get gain’ on the other end iv th’ ’eap.”

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The price was far below current rates for cutting metal, but Nickie was not penurious and grasping. He threw off his tattered coat, and, draped in fragments of a shirt, in a pair of trousers, half of which fluttered in the breeze, and boots that looked like a collection of fragments, he set to work.

Certainly Nicholas Crips did not show any disposition to work himself to death. After an hour his employer told him he wasn't likely to earn enough to keep a rag-gatherer in toilet soap, but Nickie explained again that he was merely exercising his liver, and had no intention of making an independence as a breaker of road metal.

Nickie's heap was right opposite the great, fanciful iron gates of the cemented residence. He could see the well-kept garden and the showy house from where he worked, and he frequently ceased his half hearted rapping at the tough stone to watch children playing on the lawn. He was particularly interested in a tall, `severe-looking, fair-haired woman, who appeared on the balcony for a moment.

Mr. Crips had been at work for about three hours, during which time he had perspired a good deal and gathered much dust, for Nickie was habitually easy going, and his task, although pursued with no diligence, had "taken it out of him" to some extent. He was certainly a deplorable scarecrow. A fine, polished carriage, with rubber tyres, drawn by a splendid pair of chestnuts, was driven down the side drove by a liveried menial. It drew up near the centre gates, and Nickie leaned on his hammer and waited.

The tall, dignified lady, accompanied by a short, important man in immaculate black, came along the path, and approached the open door of the vehicle. Nickie advanced carelessly, and intercepted them. He bowed grotesquely.

"Good day, Billy," he said, familiarly. He lifted his hat pointedly to the lady. "'Ow's yerself Jinny?" he asked.

The lady and gentleman stared at him in utmost astonishment for a moment, then consternation seized them, and they made a dive for the vehicle. Nickie followed to the door.

"So long, if yer mus' be goin', Willyum," he said, pleasantly. "So long, Jinny. How's the old man's fish business?"

"Drive on!" gasped the gentleman. He had the scared expression of one who had seen a spectre.

The liveried menial whipped up, and the carriage was swept away. Nickie returned to his heap, and for fully two minutes Stub McGuire, his employer, gazed at him in speechless, open-mouthed amazement.

"Well, of all the blarsted cheeks!" gasped McGuire, when speech came to him.

“Don’t mention it,” said Nickie.

“Don’t mention it!” yelled Stub. “No, iv course not, but what price his nibs in the noble belltopper mentionin’ it t’ th’ Johns, an’ gettin’ you seven days fer disgustin’ behaviour?”

Nickie smiled inscrutably, and continued his work. When the carriage returned, he made an adroit movement, and courteously opened the door.

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“Low me, Jinny, my dear,” he said, offering his grimy hand.

The lady stepped down, and passed him disdainfully. The gentleman brushed him aside.

“Ope yeh ’ad er pleasant ride in yer cart, Billy?” said Nicholas.

He followed them to the gate, and called through the bars.

“Very sorry, Jinny, but I carn’t haccept yer pressin’ invitation ter dinner, havin’ er previous engagement.”

He returned to his work again, smiling sweetly. He seemed to enjoy Stub McGuire’s horror.

“Ere, ’ere,” said McGuire, “off this job you go if you don’t know better than to insult people that way. You’ll be gettin’ me inter mischief.”

“Not at all,” said Nickie, “not at all. Surely a man may offer ordinary civilities to his friends. Bless my soul, you wouldn’t have me cut old Billy in the streets, would you? If I didn’t speak to Jinny she’d think I was angry with her, and cry her eyes out. She has a tender heart, poor girl. She is a sensitive soul, and craves for social distinction. She looks to me to secure them a footing in exclusive circles, Mr. McGuire.”

“I don’t know what y’re talkin’ about,” Stub grumbled, “but that’s enough of it, see?”

Nickie took no notice of his employer’s admonitions, however, and when a clergyman drove up in a buggy an hour later, our hero intercepted him at the gate.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he said. “Would you mind tellin’ Willyum inside there how Nickie sends him his compliments, and ’opes Jinny’s quite well.”

“My good fellow, you must not be insolent,” ejaculated the minister.

“They won’t take it as hinsolence,” Nicholas explained. “They’ve er very touchin’ regard fer me. Tell them. I arsked after ’em, won’t yer?”

Even Stub McGuire noticed that Nickie, whose speech was usually excellent, adopted the vulgar tongue in addressing the man he called Billy, or any of his friends or relations.

Next day, Nickie inveigled three children, who were playing on the lawn, and entertained them at the gate with frivolous conversation for nearly ten minutes, when the state of affairs was discovered by their dignified mamma, who sent a maid flying to the rescue. Nickie took off his hat to the maid.

“Tell Willyum,” he said, “that bein’ ‘andy, I’ll drop in ter lunch t’ day, but Jinny’s not on no account t’ put up a big spread fer me. I’ll jist take what’s goin’.”

He finished these remarks at the top of his voice, the girl being half-way back to the house.

When the important man in immaculate black came out a little later, Nickie saluted him gravely, as between gentlemen, but without deference.

“Ow’s it, Billy?” he said. “You might drop in an’ see me this evenin’. I’m livin’ under th’ blackberry hedge back o’ your stables.”

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The stout man passed in silence, and with a great show of dignity. Nickie had a busy afternoon. Evidently it was the dignified lady's "day." Quite a crowd of people drove up to the gates during the afternoon, and Nickie entrusted each with an affectionate and familiar message to Jinny. All were horrified at the insolence of the disgusting man, and one young fellow kicked Mr. Crips, but our' hero did not seem to mind. He merely warned his assailant that he would issue a County Court writ for any damages done to his trousers.

On the following morning at about 11 o'clock Nickie entered the grounds, his rags fluttering in the breeze, marched to the door and rang the bell. To the Napoleonic man-servant who opened to him, he gravely presented a tomato can half-full of water, and said:

"Will yer please arsk Bill or Jinny if they'll be so good as to bile my billy at the drorin'-room fire. Tell 'em it's Nicholas Crips what makes the request. No, thanks, I won't come in, I'm afraid my motor car might bolt."

The Napoleonic man-servant threw Nickie off the verandah, and threw his billy after him, but this did not deter Nicholas from an attempt to enter into familiar conversation bearing on family matters, when he found the dignified lady in a summer house.

The lady glared at him in stony horror. "How dare you?" she ejaculated. "How dare you?"

"Why, what's wrong, Jinny, old girl." asked Crips innocently, assuming a lounging attitude in the doorway. "You find the togs I'm wearin' a trifle too negligee, so to speak. They're quite the thing in our set."

"Let me pass!" ejaculated the lady with crushing hauteur.

Nickie was not impressed. He smiled, and continued dreamily: "My word, things have moved with you, Jinny. You're gone up like er rocket in er reg'lar blaze iv glory, but I can still see yeh in the old shop days. You blazed then too, old girl. It wasn't with di'monds, 'twas fish scales, but you blazed. You could alwiz put on dog. You sold flathead, Jinny, but I give the devil his due—you did it like a duchess."

At this point the Napoleonic footman intervened again. He took Nickie by his rags and the nape of his neck, and running him tip-toe out of the garden, tumbled him headlong on the grass-grown roadside. Nickie rejoined Stub McGuire quite unconcerned.

"That's a new society game, my friend," he said. "The flunkey scored ten points."

A few hours later the proprietor of the cement mansion came to his gate, and beckoned Nicholas Crips off the heap. Nickie the Kid responded with alacrity, and Stub McGuire gazed in cow-like wonder while the two discussed matters in the gateway.

Nickie was calling him “Bill,” “Billy,” and “Willyum,” indiscriminately. Stub nearly fainted when he saw the gentleman draw a bank-note from his pocket, and hand it to Nicholas Crips. Nickie lifted his deplorable hat, and said:

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“So long, Bill. I’m sorry I can’t come an’ stay a month. Some other time, perhaps.”

The gentleman went in, and slammed the gate behind him. Nickie returned to the heap, and picked up his coat and donned it.

“I’m handing in my resignation, Mr. McGuire,” he said. “You are welcome to my earnings, as I intend to live on my means—temporary at least.” He held up the note.

“A tenner!” gasped McGuire.

“A tenner!” replied Nicholas, “presented by the kind gentleman on condition that I emigrate from this suburb and absent myself permanently. The worst thing about rich relations, Stub, is that they want whole suburbs to themselves; the best is that you can make them pay for the privilege of exclusiveness.”

CHAPTER III.

The mask ball.

Nickie the Kid only observed his agreements and kept honourable promises so long as some material advantage flowed from his complaisance. Within a month he was again haunting the vicinity of the white mansion. One night he leaned against the fence and watched a procession of guests alighting from their vehicles. Splendid motors dashed up, and loads of gaily-dressed ladies and gentlemen quaintly caparisoned were discharged at the great iron gates, and went trooping up the path to the flaring white residence, blazing like a crystal palace in a fairy tale.

Nickie was not exactly envious, but looking through the iron railing at the gay array of lanterns in the vast garden, and the glowing mansion, and hearing the hubbub of cheerful voices and the laughter, he had a dawning sense that respectability, especially well-to-do respectability, had its compensations after all.

He walked to the gate for a better view, and discovered a strange object lying on the path. It was a false nose, a large, red, boosy nose, with, a length of elastic to hold it in its place. One of the guests had dropped it. Nickie put it on in a waggish humour, and stood moralising as three pretty Spanish dancers, in charge of a toreador, passed in.

Nickie loved gaiety, waster and rascalion as he was—sunshine, colour, flowers, beautiful women, life, music and laughter shook passions loose within him. Another little kink in his brain might have made a poet of him, just as the smallest turn of chance might have made a deadbeat of almost any poet of parts.

Mr. Crips actually sighed over that vision of fair women, and longed to be that happy toreador.

“Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we, too, into the dust descend:
Dust unto dust, and under dust to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and—sans End.”

The quotation had just escaped our hero lips when a young fellow garbed as Romeo, alighting from a hansom, dashed into him.

“By Jove, that was dooced awkward of me—yes, I beg your pardon, I’m sure. Should have looked where I was going—what?” said Romeo.

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"Not at all," answered Nickie politely. "My fault in blocking the path. My fault, entirely."

"By Jo-o-ve!" gasped Romeo; "that's a stunnin' make-up, old chap—what? Nevah saw a bettah, by gad."

"Make-up?" said Nicholas. Mr. Crips had for gotten his false nose.

"Ya-as," said Romeo. "Your character, you know. A fellah 'd think you'd just come from sleeping in a rubbish bin. Yes. Best Weary Willie I've seen. But aren't you coming in, dear boy? You're a cart for Dolly's prize for best-sustained character, eh?"

"Presently—presently," said Nicholas, smitten with a sudden idea. "Waiting for a friend, you know."

Romeo went up the garden path, and Nickie the Kid retired under the shadow of the hedge to allow his thoughts to revolve. Romeo's words had suggested possibilities. Mr. Crips rarely wasted time making up his mind. Three minutes later he was sauntering jauntily up the garden path on the heels of a laughing Red Indian set.

It was a fancy dress ball. All the guests were masked or otherwise disguised. Nickie had never encountered a softer thing. He determined to make a night of it at the expense of the host of "White-cliff." To avoid unpleasantness at the door, Nickie boldly climbed up the trellis of a vine, and entered the noisy crowded ballroom through an open window, rolling head over heels among the guests.

His appearance provoked a shout of laughter. This was the proper way for a tramp to enter such a house. It was accepted as a quaint effort of humour. Weary Willie was applauded, and his appearance, when he rose to his feet, occasioned fresh merriment.

The "make-up" of Mr. Crips was certainly very effective, but with the exception of the false nose it was nothing but his ordinary habit. He wore a pair of old grey trousers, lashed up with one brace, and belted with a strip of red material; between the fringed legs of this garment and his broken canvas shoes the tops of socks, one white, the other plaid, were plainly visible. The fact that they were only tops, and not whole socks, was not to be missed, as they had worked up, and an inch of bare ankle protruded. Nickie's coat was an old black Beaufort, from which two buttons' hung on grey threads, which was split half-way up the back, and from below the tails of which fluttered strips of torn lining. He wore no vest, and had on a woman's faded pink print blouse as a shirt. He had a linen collar that had long since lost all claims to whiteness and all pretence of dignity, and his hat was a small round boxer, with scarcely any rim. On one of the buttons of his Beaufort hung a strip of ordinary sugar bag, on which he had written with a stub of pencil the word "Program."

Mr. Nicholas Crips looked the part to the life. He had not shaved for a week, and his lank hair was reaching out in all directions from under his ridiculous hat, and from various strands dangled fragments of his last couch under the boat shed. Nickie had nothing of the painted, unconvincing theatrical accessories of the usual fancy dress tramp; he looked real, and his success was instantaneous and complete.

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I have endeavoured to show that Mr. Crips was not a diffident man; he did not distress himself with scruples; fear of failure in an enterprise of this kind never worried him. He walked across the grand ball-room, swaggering in his rags, lifted his hat to a Watteau shepherdess who was laughing at him from a settee in a recess, and said:

“Would yer darncce with er poor man, kind lydie?”

Again the crowd laughed. A tall Mary Queen of Scots peered at Nickie through her lorgnette, and said.

“How very whimsical!” The little shepherdess was a merry spirit, and bowed willingly. Nickie wrote “Milk Made” on his absurd programme, and the quaintly assorted pair joined in the waltz. How, where and when Nickie the Kid had learnt to dance Heaven knows, but he waltzed well, and after that he danced with Mary Stuart in a set.

He was particularly attracted by Mary Stuart. She was a fine woman and the rakish Nicholas had a discriminating eye where the sex was concerned. Mary had a bold eye too, and a breezy manner. She took great joy in the tramp.

A feature of Nickie’s very humorous and original impersonation of the Yarra-banker was his waggish begging. When he had danced, before leaving his partner, he assumed a most lugubrious manner, and said:

“Dear lydie, would you kindly assist a pore decayed gent, what’s got a bedridden wife an’ nine starvin’ children, all twins? Just a copper, lydie. The bailiffs is in, lydie, an’ if I don’t take ’orne nine-pence for the rent they’ll seize ther kerosene case, an’ ther flour-sack, and ther rest iv ther drorin-room furniture, kind lydie.”

A gay vivandiere led Nickie to a portly Henry VIII. “Sire,” she said, “this poor man claims king’s bounty for his three sets of triplets. I humbly commend him to your majesty.”

“Just a trifle to assist a poor man, kind gent,” whined Nickie the Kid. “Not a morsel iv turkey’s passed me lips for seven days. Just a few pence, sir, to buy champagne fer me widders and orphans. I don’t care about meself, kind sir.”

King Henry promptly dropped half-a-crown into Nickie’s hat. Two, or three laughing guests standing about contributed silver. There was an impression in the ballroom that the sum of the quaint tramp’s collection would go to a charity. None but Nickie himself knew the charitable object to which the money was to be devoted.

Nickie danced with all sorts and conditions of women. Romeo slapped him on the back.

“Splendid, deah boy!” he said. “We been thrown together, you know. Ran’ into you at the gate—what? By gad, you’re doin it well. But I say, who the devil are you?”

“I’m Willie’ the Waster, kind young gentleman, and I’m residin’ under No. 3 wharf, fifth plank from the corner. Would yer give er trifle towards me time-payment furniture, please, sir.”

Romeo contributed a shilling. “You’re a sport,” he said. “They’re all on to you. Dolly herself’s delighted. Yes, you’re right as rain for the prize, but you might put me on—what?”

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"I'm feather-legged Ned, with ther consumptive corf," said Nickie. "Would you please give me a shillin' t' pay fer me medicine?"

"No, dash me if I do!" said Romeo, and he went off laughing.

Nickie took champagne with Sir Peter Teazie, Rip Van Winkle, Slender, and Henry VIII., and under the influence of the good wine became more audacious. He passed the hat with a characteristic complaint wherever a few guests were assembled, and in view of the vast amusement he was giving was allowed any license in reason. The offerings of the charitable he deposited in the tail pocket of his coat, and presently the weight dragged at him with a grateful pressure, and the silver clanked as he walked. Fortune was not actually staring him in the face, but it was hanging on behind.

By one o'clock in the morning Nickie was carrying round a champagne bottle in his left hand, from which he refreshed himself, and he was no longer able to walk a chalk line as wide as a tram with an certainty, and had got into the way of clinging to the curtains and hangings; but this was all accepted as part of an excellent piece of caricature, and earned our hero some applause.

Just before supper a lady, dressed as Portia, came forward, and pinned a neat design of gold laurel leaves and emeralds on the breast of Mr. Nicholas Crips. It was the prize for the best sustained character, which the host had offered his guests in a frivolous mood. Nickie bowed in acknowledgment of applause, and then, with the bottle in one hand, and his hat in the other, he appealed to Portia.

"Could you spare a copper, kind lydie, to assist a poor orphan what's laid up with lumbago in the feet. I've bin bed-ridden fer ten years, lydie, and I lost both me legs in th' battle of Waterloo. On'y a penny for the battered 'ero good, kind lydie."

At supper Nickie declined to unmask. He would not remove his preposterous false nose. He also excited doubts and misgivings by the depth of his thirst and his almost miraculous capacity for food. After supper he was simply impossible.

Nicholas Crips in his sober moments was quiet and unpretentious in his rascalities, his temperament was naturally mild; but under the influence of strong drink he always developed tremendous belief in his own magnificence, strutted about and fondly fancied himself a king. He was wholly and completely drunk when he charged into the ballroom at two in the morning, brandishing a full bottle, and singing uproariously. He staggered into the middle of the dancers, whirling his magnum.

"Room" he cried. "Room, there, for King Solomon in all his glory" He whirled his bottle again, and the dancers broke before him. A Sir Toby Belch got the thick end of the bottle in his natural fatness, and collapsed with a groan. "Remove the body!" ordered

Nickie, magnificently. “D’ye hear me, there, minions? Remove these offensive remain from the royal presence.”

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The guests had retreated against the walls, and Nickie held the floor. Nobody believed this to be an artistic effort to sustain the character. Weary Willie was as drunk as a lord. He tittered a wild Indian whoop, and sang the chorus of “at the Old Bull and Bush,” beating time with a leg of turkey. Then he turned to the band.

“Play ‘God Shave King’.” he said. “If yeh don’ play ‘Go’ Shave King’ I’ll have ver heads off ‘fore mornin’.”

King Henry interposed, he put a restraining hand on Nickie, and spoke soothingly to him and Nickie the Kid promptly knocked the poor monarch on the head. Then rude hands seized Nickie: he was rushed from the house; he was rushed down the path, and hurled into the street.

When all the guests had left the white mansion at Banklands, and daylight was streaming in, a weary man-servant interviewed the master of “Whitecliff.”

“Please, sir,” he said; “the—eh—gentleman who was thrown out last night.”

“Well, what of him?” asked the host, disgustedly.

“He’s sleeping in the garden, sir.”

The host went out. He found Nickie the Kid sleeping in the Pansy bed, and Nickie was pulled to his feet.

“Nicholas!” he gasped.

“That’sh me, Willie,” answered Nicholas Crips.

“You blackguard, you intrude into my house and insult my guests, and you promised when I gave you that last L10 never to interfere with me again.”

“Now Willie, Little Willie,” said Nickie, “when did I ever keep my promises?”

“Leave my grounds or I’ll give you over to the police!”

“Chertainly,” said Nickie. “Chertainly, I’ll leave the grounds. There’s always room for me outside.”

He took the skirt off his coat, heavy with the contributions of the guests, in his hand, and strolled joyously through the gate.

“Ta-ta,” he said. “Good-bye, Billy, dear ole Billy, dear, old, fat-headed, bumptious Billy!”



Feeling like a king, Nickie the Kid passed down the road, and the morning sun glittered on the emblem on his breast. He was still sustaining the character.

CHAPTER IV.

A temporary reformation.

Nickie the Kid presented himself at the front door of a decorous villa in an intensely respectable suburb, with sad story. Mr. Crips did not address the lady as an unblushing mendicant, he spoke as a man of some refinement and keen sensibility, whose bitter complaint was literally dragged from him by adverse circumstances.

The lady was touched—her eye moistened.

“That is really very sad,” she said. “Come right in, my poor man. You must tell your story to my James. James will know how to help you.”

Nickie followed the lady without the smallest compunction. She knocked quietly at the door of a room and admitted Nicholas to a small apartment fitted up like a study. At a table near the window a grave young man was seated with writing materials before him.

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"Well, mater" he said, "whom have we here? Another of your proteges?"

"I want you to listen to this poor fellow, James," said the lady, "his story will touch you as it has touched me. My poor man, this is my son, the Rev. James Nippit."

Nickie bowed with a grace that did not belong to his tramp's garments and his insanitary and unshaven state.

"Thank God. I have met you, sir," he said, in the voice of a strong man whose sorrows have about broken his proud spirit, "if your heart is as gentle as that of this sweet lady."

The lady withdrew, and the Rev. James Nippit, who had been eyeing Mr. Crips keenly, motioned him to a chair.

"Be seated," he said, "and tell me your story."

"I am the only son of the Rev. Arthur Crips, of Bolton, Lancashire, England," said Nickie. "My father held a good living. He intended to make a doctor of me. He brought me up always with that intention, lavished much money on me, and from the time I was fourteen I understood I was to live the life of a gentleman. Before my education was completed my father died, and I found that he had been led into speculation and we were ruined. Not only ruined, but disgraced. The shock killed my mother. I came to Australia. Unwittingly, without a chance of saving myself, I sank and drifted till I found myself a mere tramp. For years I have been a tattered, unclean, despised outcast. Yesterday I heard you preach; I was outside under a window too despicable a creature to enter among you trim flock. Your sermon reminded me of what I was, showed me to myself, made the future horribly real to me. I was inspired to fight, to try and work myself out of the slough into which I have drifted, and I have come to you for help. I am here." Nickie the Kid opened his arms with a dramatic gesture—his face was very sad.

"Liar!" said the young clergyman looking Nickie straight in the eye. "Liar!" he repeated.

Nickie looked back into the eye of the clergyman. His face betrayed no amazement. For a moment it was grave, almost reproachful, and then it relaxed into a broad grin. The device had failed—there was no further occasion for subterfuge.

"Well," Mr. Crips admitted, "I don't pretend to be a George Washington. I may have been betrayed into errors of detail."

"It is as well you admit it," said the Rev. Nippit. "Because I did not preach yesterday."

"Very remiss of you," said Mr. Crips.

“And, furthermore, I remember you well. Two years ago I was on a charity committee that inquired into your case. You were then the son of a Queensland Judge, reduced to poverty by wild living, but anxious to return to respectable courses.”

Nickie grinned again, and took up his hat. “It is as you say.” he said, “a truly delicious morning for a stroll. I think I’ll go and watch the grass grow. Good-day, Mr. Nippit.”

The young clergyman arose and interposed between Nickie and the door. “You will stay where you are,” he said. “Sit down.”

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Nickie sat down. He placed his hat very carefully on the carpet, folded his arms, and crossed his legs. "You are very kind," he said. "May I ask if a compulsory lunch goes with this unwarrantable detention?"

"That remains to be seen," replied James. "I am going to offer you your choice of two courses. You will either submit yourself to my deliberate intention of making a good, clean, respectable, industrious member of society of you, or you will walk out of this place into gaol."

Nickie's mind was made up instantly, but he did not capitulate in too great a hurry; he talked of conditions, and asked for details of his expected regeneration. The Rev. Nippit explained his belief that all men had in them the elements of decency, order and religion. Those elements only needed proper opportunities for development. He purposed giving Nickie the opportunities. He needed a handy man about the house; Nickie was to have the job. He would be expected to bathe every day, to shave every day, and observe the decencies of the well-ordered home.

"And you are prepared to believe you can reform me?" said Nickie the Kid.

"I am not only prepared to believe it—I am determined to believe it," said the young clergyman, thumping the table.

Nickie smiled again. "I submit myself to the experiment" he said, "but promise nothing. I don't think you will succeed. Your intentions are good, but mine are not, and it takes two to make a bargain."

Nickie entered his new duties at once. After lunch he took a shovel into the garden and toyed with the earth a while, and then he went to sleep under a tree. The Rev. Nippit awakened him and talked with him in a firm but kindly spirit on the virtues of honest dealings with one's employer, and the necessity of industry to keep the world wagging, Nickie' graciously admitted that it was all very true. But when set to clean out the fowl-house he sat on a stone and held converse with an educated cockatoo next door.

That evening, clean-shaven, freshly-bathed, dressed in a cast-off suit of James Nippit's, whole if slightly rusty, and robbed of its clerical significance, Nickie the Kid attended a religions function with his reverend employer. Nickie was orderly, wakeful and fairly attentive. When the plate came round he put threepence in, but he took a shilling out. It was a useful trick, taught him by an expert in the art of rigging the thimble and the pea. Nickie, when he had fairly good clothes, often attended church merely to practise it. To-night the exploit was more an act of unseemly and impious levity than a crime.

The Rev. Nippit had a theory which he believed would succeed with nine malefactors out of ten if exerted under fair conditions it was based on kindness, forbearance and the inculcation of excellent precepts.

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It is distressing to have to report that Nickie took few pains to encourage his preceptor. He was lazy, he sometimes forgot to shave, he often forgot to bath, he was not always temperate; but the Rev. James bore it all with unconquerable patience. If Nickie was lazy, he talked with him like a brother of the twin virtues, industry and thrift; if he were unwashed, he explained to him that cleanliness was next to godliness: if he seemed to, have gazed too, long upon the wine when it was red, or the beer when it foamed in the bowl, the clergyman pointed out the advantage of strict sobriety, and earnestly besought Nicholas Crips to strive for higher things and the true light.

The Rev. James Nippit was not discouraged. He saw Nickie often clean, usually decently attired, generally fairly decent in his behaviour, and always respectful in his manner, and believed the seed of righteous was sprouting; but Nickie was living comfortably, he was being well fed and well bedded, and was careful not to over-exert himself in the pursuit of his duties; consequently, it was easy for him to maintain a certain show of decorum.

After Nickie the Kid had been under the tutelage of the Rev. James for about three weeks, the latter was puzzled to find that Mr. Crips was far from penniless. Now Nickie was paid nothing his services, but every week a small sum, representing his wages, was paid into the Savings Bank, and the deposit was to be transferred to him when he gave proof of complete and perfect regeneration. When asked to account for a bottle of whisky found in his room, and for a burst of inebriety that represented a good deal in spot cash, Nickie quibbled. The quibble was obvious even to an innocent soul like James. James was hurt, but he persisted.

Nickie was content to have the experiment continue, but he held out no great hopes. "You know," he said, "this is your scheme, not mine. You, as it were, forced me to submit. You said you'd reform me in spite of myself. Well, I am patient, and you are earnest, but we don't seem to make much progress."

For seven weeks the Rev. James Nippit continued experimenting and never once lost faith.

James Nippit's pet work was in connection with his reform movement, the Young Men's Mission, a design for upraising the youths of the larrikin and criminal classes. The Young Men's Mission had attracted some attention, people were found willing to contribute to the good work, and this fact gave rise to some imposition. Uncertified persons of bad character were found to be collecting for the fund and appropriating the money to their own use. This caused James much distress of mind.

One Sunday afternoon when driving from his Sunday School the Rev. Nippit was hailed by a trusted friend, who said:

“For the last ten minutes I have been listening to a man preaching on the sands down there. He represents himself as one of the leaders of the Young Men’s Mission Movement, and I am confident he is an impostor. If he is, it is your duty to expose him.”

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The Rev. James took up the task eagerly. Leaving the buggy in charge of a small boy, the two gentle men joined the crowd, and James soon recognised that the speaker was delivering something very like a sermon of his own, but seasoning it with a sort of quaint, insolent humour, that suited the tastes of his hearers admirably. The crowd laughed and applauded.

“Brothers and sisters,” said the speaker, “I have shown you that these young men must be divorced from the long-sleever, and rescued from the lures of the plump, peroxided barmaid, and the blandishments of Bung, the reprobate who runs the pub. I have shown you they must be turned from the joys of the ‘pushes,’ tobacco chewing, and stouthing in offensive Chinamen with bricks, and now I appeal to you for the means of doing things. Money is said to be the root of all evil, but it is also the means of much good. If we want to go to heaven, we must pay the tram fare. He who gives quickly gives twice, but it is better still to give twice and to give quickly.”

As he spoke he moved among the people, taking up a collection in his hat, and the people responded liberally. He returned to his little eminence, and the Rev. James Nippit forced his way through the crowd, and confronted him, flushed, furious, overflowing.

“So,” said James, “this is the reward of my kindness? This—”

Nickie was silent for a moment—for the preacher was Nicholas Crips, garbed in an old suit of his master’s—then he turned calmly and said:

“This gentleman, brothers and sisters, is the Reverend James Nippit, the founder of our noble much desire to say a few words. I desire to say mission. He desires to say a few words.”

“Yes, my good people,” cried James, “I do very that the Young Men’s Mission is one of the finest and most worthy institutions in this city to and to express the abhorrence I feel for those villains who make use of the credit the Mission has won for their own infamous purposes.” He went on to explain how the Mission was being robbed, and wound up dramatically with the words: “And this man, this man at my side, this man who has addressed you in the guise of a minister, is one of the most wicked and detestable of the impostors.”

But in consequence of his oratorical training, and his clergyman’s inability to come quickly to a point the denunciation lost its effect, for Nickie was not at the speaker’s side; he had gone. He had taken the Rev. James Nippit’s buggy, and driven off, and he carried the collection with him.

The buggy was safe in the carriage-house when the Rev. James returned home, but Nickie was seeking fields and pastors new.

CHAPTER V.

The incident in Biggs's buildings.

The tall, spare man in rusty, clerical raiment was going from room to room in one of the huge, city buildings where Business people, gregarious as sparrows, nest in hundreds.

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The tall, spare man was cleanly shaved, he wore a very white collar, his expression combined benignity with a certain ascetic calm. He carried two or three books in his left hand, pressed against his heart with a sort of caress, an affection very common with gentlemen of the cloth, for Nicholas Crips had a keen eye for character, and his various impersonations were fairly true to type, and of no mean dramatic quality.

Nickie the Kid knocked gently at an office door, a peremptory voice called "Come in," and he opened the door very softly, entered, closed the door very gently behind him, placed his crippled belltopper (rim uppermost) on the small counter that walled visitors off from the severe gentleman dictating to a blonde typewriter and said, with clerical unction.

"Good-day sir. Good-day my dear young lady."

"D-afternoon!" replied the severe gentleman severely.

"Sir. I am here on a mission of charity, if you don't mind. I am the Rev Andrew Rowbottom. I am collecting subscriptions for the widow and family of the late William John Elphinston, a worthy member of my congregation, and a most estimable bricklayers labourer, killed, as you may remember, in the execution of his duty on the 14th September last."

"Bless my soil, I can't be bothered with these matters in business hours," said the gentleman, and his severity was something terrible, but it did not appal the Rev. Andrew Rowbottom.

"I have here a subscription list," continued the intruder suavely. "You will find upon it the name of some of our most prominent business people."

"I'm busy." said the severe gentleman.

"Need I remind you, my very good sir, that the smallest contribution will be thankfully received?"

"Be so good as to close the door after you."

"Certainly, brother, all in good time. Shall we say half-a-crown? Half-a-crown is a nice sum. No? A shilling perhaps?"

"I suppose I shall have to pay for the privilege of being left in peace to the pursuit of my affairs. Here!!" The severe man slapped a shilling on the counter.

"Oh, thank you—thank you so much." said the Rev. Andrew Rowbottom effusively. "What name?"

“Confound the name!” snapped the severe gentle man. “Good-day.”

“Oh, to be sure, to be sure—good—day,” said the Rev. Andrew, and he smiled and bowed and slid I trough the half-open door.

Nicholas Crips called at many offices. In a few instances the occupants evaded a levy. They were people who had no particular business in hand, and could spare the time to hear all the Rev. Andrew Rowbottom persuasive arguments and stubbornly resist each plea, but the majority of the men were glad to buy the eloquent clergyman off with a small contribution. Sometimes office boys were impertinent, and an occasional business man was insolent and talked of throwing the suppliant out of the window, but Mr. Rowbottom was always suave and conciliatory. He seemed to sympathise with the angry individual whose privacy he was forced to break in pursuit of a sacred duty.

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Nickie the Kid reached the fourth floor. It was very quiet, and most of the offices were deserted. He found a pale young typewriter, a slave of the machine, in a room rather larger than an alderman's coffin, and obtained threepence in coppers for the widow and family of the late lamented William John Elphinston. He passed along a dim passage, and came to one of the larger apartments fronting the main street. It was evidently one of a suite. On the door was a brass plate bearing the name. "Henry Berryman."

The Rev. Andrew Rowbottom knocked on his door a meek, appealing summons. He received no reply. Confident that he had heard a movement in the room Andrew knocked again. Still no answer. The Rev Andrew Rowbottom turned the knob, opened the door a foot or so, and thrust his benignant countenance into the room.

The face when it first appeared to the occupant was lit with a smile, suffused with a tender benevolence, a moment later it was stark and white, drawn with horror, a horror that chilled the blood, and gripped at the heart with a hand of iron.

What the Rev. Andrew Rowbottom saw was a tall, handsome, fashionably-dressed woman of about thirty-six resting with her back to an office table, the position was crouching, her fingers clung to the table's edge; her eyes, large, dark, and instinct with mortal terror, were fixed upon the stranger in the doorway. At her feet was the body of a man, a stout man of perhaps forty. The body lay on its right side, the face turned to the floor, and from somewhere in the breast flowed a red stream that massed in a dark, clammy pool upon the slate coloured linoleum.

Nickie saw a faint, flutter of movement in the limbs of the man on the floor, and his eyes rose to the face of the woman again. Her dry tongue passed over her parched lips, she seemed to be making an effort to speak. On the table near her right hand was a knife.

Nicholas Crips slipped into the room, the door closed softly behind him. He had recognised the woman. She was his Mary Stuart of the Mask Ball. The man on the floor he remembered in the guise of Henry VIII.

For a terrible half-minute the two stared at each other over the dead man.

"You killed him!" whispered Nickie.

The woman tried to moisten her lips again, made an effort to speak, and her voice broke in her throat. She nodded dumbly.

"My God!"

"You-you-what are you going to do?" whispered the woman. "Why don't you call out?" There was a wild hope in her dilated eyes. "You don't! You don't!"

Nickie shook his head. “I don’t run for the police?” he said. “No, I am not on speaking terms with the police myself.”

“You won’t seize me, you won’t betray me—you, a clergyman!”

“No.” said Nicholas Crips.

The woman moved forward, she laid hands upon him, she looked into his face.

“He was a villain.” she said. “He deserved it, but I am a murderess, and you won’t—”
Her hands gripped him, a new light shone in her eyes.

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"Why were you creeping in here?" she said. "You are a thief, That's it—you are a thief. Well, listen, there are five thousand pounds' worth of diamonds in a little leather bag in his breast pocket!" She pointed down at the body. "Five thousand pounds' worth," she said.

"Five thousand!" he gasped. "Five thousand!"

The woman's hand was on the door knob. She opened the door and slipped out. The lock clicked as she closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER VI.

A departure into art.

Nicholas Crips seated-himself on a warm stone, on a convenient boulder spread the contents of yesterday's "Age." The "Age" contents on this occasion was the lunch of Mr. Nicholas Grips. Nickie had been given the meal half-an-hour earlier by a kind soul in one of the suburbs, to whom he had pitifully presented his urgent need of sustenance of an inviting kind. Very adroitly Nickie the Kid had dwelt upon his necessities, while impressing the lady's with the eccentricities of a peculiarly capricious appetite.

It was the day after the distressing incident in Biggs's Buildings. Mr. Crips was no longer dressed in his clerical garments; they were carefully stowed away in a niche in a riverside quarry where he had long kept his wardrobe. To-day Nickie was dressed in the rags of a simple mendicant.

The strongly melodramatic adventure the previous day did not seem to distress Mr. Crips; he ate heartily, but had only reached his second course, which was represented by the chicken, when his attention was attracted by a very lean, very pale, hollow-eyed, sad stranger who had seated himself on a sloping tree nearer the river, and was eyeing the banquet hungrily.

Nickie the Kid, was not selfish. When his own needs were fairly met he could be generous with anybody's property, even his own. He tapped the chicken's breastbone invitingly with his penknife, and addressed the stranger.

"May I offer you a little lunch, sir?" he said urbanely, with quite the air of a generous host.

The long, lean man shook his head in mute melancholy, but accepted the invitation as an offer of friendship, and approached nearer, seating himself on a rock facing Nickie's banquet.

"No, thanks, boss," he said.



"You'll forgive me," said Nickie, after wrenching a mouthful from the back of the pullet, "but you look famished."

"I am," answered the stranger.

"Well, help yourself. These garlic sausage sandwiches are superb. Try the beer."

Nickie pushed his jam tin forward.

The other shook his head very regretfully.

"I mustn't," he said. "Fact is, my livin' depends on me not eatin', an' I've got a wife an' kiddies to support."

Nickie paused with the bottle half-way to his mouth.

"Your living depends on your not eating?" he ejaculated. "What, do you earn anything by starving, then? By Jove, that's a quaint idea."

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"I earn all I get by starvin'. My name's Cann—Matty Cann, but I'm known professionally as Bony-part. Ain't yeh seen me advertisements up the main street? I'm drawn on a big poster outside Professor Thunder's Museum iv Marvels, I'm the livin' skelington."

"He isn't ruining himself with your upkeep," Nickie.

"No." replied the Living Skeleton. "I'm allowanced off an' I've got t' eat on'y what he gives me—that's in our contrac'. If I eat more an put on flesh out I go. There's a clause in ther contrac' what sez I'm li'ble t' be fired if goes above seven stone seven. The previous livin' skelington got the run at Barnip fer breakin' out. He was the only original. I'm just a sort iv understudy."

Nickie clicked his tongue sympathetically. "Well," he said, "you might pick a hone. That wouldn't be very fattening, and it might delude your stomach with the idea you were having something to eat."

Bonypart, the Living Skeleton, took the wish-bone with a few shreds of chicken on it.

"Thanks," he said, "it might be a comfort." He sucked the bone fondly.

"You said that Professor Thunder's only original living skeelton broke out at Barnip. What happened to him?"

"He went on the spree," said Matty Cann.

"Drink?" queried Nickie.

"No, food. He got at a bar spread in the Shire hall at Barnip, an' afore they missed him he ate enough fer ten Shire Councillors. He completely rooned that banquet. That was the third time he'd gone on th' spree, an' ther Perfesser 'ad warned him if it 'appened again he'd get the shoot."

Nickie the Kid grinned.

"It isn't a Profession that would suit me," he said. "I have an instinctive fondness for meals. I knew the travelling show' business was a hungry game but I never reckoned on starvation as a means of earning a livelihood."

"Oh. 't isn't all bad." said Ronypart eagerly. "There's th' Missin' Link, fer instance; he a glutton. Blime, th' food that Missin' Link gets makes me lose all patience, an' sometimes I'd like t' get right up from my chair, an' bite him. He's in the 'ospital just now, sufferin' from his over—feedin'. It's a judgment on him."

"A monkey in the hospital!"



“Well, he ain’t exactly a monkey. He was a man done up something like one o’ them hoorang-hoo-tangs. Yeh see, part o’ Perfesser Thunder’s show is called the Descent of Man. It contains ten different kinds of monkeys, from Spider, a little cove ‘bout th’ size iv a rat, up t’ Ammonia, what’s a big griller. Th’ Missin’ Link, he comes next; but as I was sayin’ he’s out iv it just now, bein’ ill, an’ Perfesser Thunder ud give ez much ez two quid er week fee a good, reliable Missin’ Link what wouldn’t over-eat hisself.” The Living Skeleton was allowing an inquiring eye to roam over Nickie the Kid.

“I was thinkin’ yon was just bout th’ build fer a Missin’ Link,” he said.

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"What, me?" cried Nickie.

The Skeleton nodded, and Nickie was silent for a moment, lost in thought. It was very necessary that Nickie should sink his identity for a time. Here was a magnificent opportunity. "Has the Missing Link much to do?" he asked.

"No," replied Matty Cann. "He's just gotter be careful not t' over-eat hisself, as I was savin'. Yeh see, people what come in t' th' show gives him buns, an' lollies an' things, an' if he's a glutton he's bound t' be knocked out."

"What else does he do?"

"Oh, prowls round in the cage."

"Anything else?"

"An' scratches hisself."

"Yes."

"An' growls."

"That seems easy."

"Well, it all depends. If yer gifted that way it's easy enough, but real scratchin' an' natural growlin' takes a bit o' doin'."

"How's this?" asked Nickie.

He scratched himself in approved monkey style, hopped briskly over the stone, then sat up, and growled a deep, guttural growl.

"That's it—that's it, t' th' life!" cried Bonypart in amazed admiration. "Why, you're er natural born artist, that's what you are. If I could growl an' scratch like that I'd be a Missin' Link t'-morrer. No more living skelingtons fer me."

"Look here," said Nicholas Crips seriously, "how long does the Missing Link have to remain in the cage?"

"The show opens et one in th' afternoon, close at five, opens again at seven, an' closes et arf-pas ten."

"And has the Missing Link to be growling' and scratching all the time?"

"No, not all the time. If there ain't any people in he kin lie in er corner on th' stor under his blanket an' sleep, an' sometimes he kin stay lyin' on the stor when there's on'y a

few people in, so long ez he growls a bit, an' stretches hisself. There's a lot in stretchin' hisself proper."

"Like this," said Nickie. He reached out one leg, clawed with his left hand, and yawned cavernously.

"Th' very identical," said Bonypart admiringly. "You was meant t' be a Missin' Link. Y'iv got all th' natural gifts, an' with th' proper hide drawn on over yeh, an' yer face made up a bit, nobody ud ever think you was anythink else but a true African Missin' Link, born an' bred."

"Are you quite sure the Missing Link has nothing else to do?" asked Nickie, cautiously.

"Positive, Missin' Links is scarce; they has pretty much their own way. Hold on—he's gotter 'aug a bit by one hand from a bar what goes through his cage, an' pretent to be sleepin'."

Nickie the Kid had a contemplative expression "Bless my soul," he said, "there are strange ways of earning a living, and I'm not sure that my way is the easiest after all."

He drained the bottle.

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Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels was established in a shop in Bourke Street, Melbourne. The shop window was curtained with large posters, one representing a tall man, very thin even for a skeleton, sitting at a table, tying knots in his limbs. The other pictured a strange, hairy monster, half human, half monkey, which was labelled "Darwin's Missing Link." On a kerosene case at the door stood Professor Thunder himself, appealing to the populace to pause and contemplate the "astonishin' marvellous pictorial representations," and assuring five small boys that these were "living, speaking likenesses" of the wonders within. "No deception, ladies and gents, no deception!" he cried.

Professor Thunder was his own "spruicher;" his eloquence was remarkable, his voice had the carrying power of a steam whistle, and the penetrating qualities of a circular saw. He was a quaint product of the show business, having been born in a museum and bred in an atmosphere of cheap theatricals.

"Step inside! Step inside! Step inside!" cried the Professor. "There you will behold our extraordinary educational collection of Nature's mysteries, known as 'The Descent of Man,' described by the nobility, the scientists, and the faculty as the most complete representation of man's descent from the apes ever presented to an intelligent audience. There you will behold Bonypart, the miraculous, the bone man who has mystified all the doctors and amazed millions. There you will behold Ephraim, the enlightened pig; Madame Marve, the unrivalled seer, and last, but not least, Mahdi, the Missing Link, pronounced by travellers, medical men, and Darwinian students to be the one and only authentic and reliable Missing Link discovered by mortal man. And the price is only sixpence. Step up! Step up!"

The people stepped up, and saw the living skeleton, a thin, long, melancholy man sitting on a chair, in limp tights, showing his bony knees; the educated pig, that did astonishing things at the bidding of Madame Marve; and the Descent of Man, represented by several monkeys of varying sizes, a gorilla, and the awe-inspiring Missing Link.

The cage of Mahdi, the Missing Link, was some what dark, and the terrible form of the mystery loomed in the dusk, heavy and formidable. He was as big as a man, somewhat lank, and covered with coarse hair the colour of cocoanut matting. This afternoon, when the early patrons entered, they found him hanging limply by one arm, like a great ungainly bat.

"The Missing Link always reposes in this manner in his native wilds," said Madame Marve, in the chaste tones she assumed when imparting valuable instruction "but he is otherwise very human in his tastes and habits."

"Has 'e a vote, ma'am?" asked a facetious labourer.

A stout lady prodded Mahdi with her umbrella, and he flopped on all fours on the floor of his cage, and sprang forward with a hoarse growl, reaching a great, hairy paw out of the cage.

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“Lor blime, missus, yer ortenter do that to another woman’s ’ushand,” said the facetious labourer.

The people pressed about Mahdi’s cage. They threw nuts at him, and offered him lollies and cakes, and the Missing Link went through many surprising contortions, and rolled about, and capered, and growled in a most realistic way, while Madame Marve gave a full and exciting account of his capture in the jungles of Central Africa by a party of hunters, of whom Professor Thunder was the leader and the conspicuous hero.

“Mahdi was then very young,” said Madame. “He has been reared with great tenderness, and is now probably the most valuable, and he is the rarest animal in the world. Professor Thunder has been offered thousands of pounds for Mahdi, but refuses to part with him, preferring to take the marvellous monkey-man through the world for the education and edification of his fellow-creatures.”

Mahdi swung on his bar again, flopped, and then ran up the back wall several times, after which he sat in a corner and scratched himself industriously, grinning at the people every now and then, or uttering a growl that gave the women delicious cold shivers.

The attention of the patrons was next drawn to the educated pig, and presently the show-room was empty again for a minute or two. Madame Marve addressed Mahdi the Missing Link.

“You must growl more, my boy,” she said. “The people like the growling, it terrifies them, and they talk to their friends about it. You really must keep on growling. I don’t care if you don’t scratch quite so much, but you must growl.”

The Missing Link pushed his drab muzzle through the bars.

“Keep on growling,” he protested. “Excuse me, madame, but I’m damned if I do unless you give me more beer. I’ve got a throat like a hot-box.”

Old friend of Mr. Nicholas Crips would have recognised those crisp tones instantly. Nickie the Kid had found his vocation.

CHAPTER VII.

An unfortunate meeting.

Nicholas Crips entered into formal agreement with Professor Thunder, sole organiser, director and owner of Thunder’s Celebrated Museum of Marvels, to impersonate Mahdi, the Missing Link, at a salary of thirty-seven and sixpence a week and keep, Nickie undertaking to observe the Sabbath, to behave becomingly and in no circumstances to disclose his identity to persons outside the show.

The clause entailing strict observance of the Sabbath was a wise one from the Professor's point of view, as a previous Missing Link had taken advantage of Sunday being an off-day to get unreasonably drunk, in which state he betrayed the confidence of his employer, and disclosed the most sacred secrets of the profession.

Nickie was assured that the job would be a permanency if he proved himself a zealous, efficient Missing Link, and as he understood that even when on show Mahdi was expected to do little more than curl up on the straw in his cage and growl, he gratefully accepted. The contract was signed.

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So far Nicholas had discovered the new skin he was compelled to don to be the only serious disadvantage attached to his office. It was tight-fitting, coated with monkey-like hair, and covered him entirely, the face being disguised under an attached mask with a flat nose and patches of hair. The skin laced down the spine, but the laces were artfully hidden under the fur.

At least Nickie was leading man of the small company. Ammonia (whose cage adjoined the more sumptuous one in which Nickie was exhibited, and whose open jealousy of Mahdi was a source of no little inconvenience to Nickie the Kid) was an item of considerable interest, but the Link was the culminating point of the monkey's progress the climax, so to speak, and he enjoyed great popularity and many nuts. Possibly the nuts were the true source of Ammonia's dislike.

Nickie the Kid had been three days figuring as the star of Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels, and was growing accustomed to his suit, and to the situation. The Professor himself was a born vagabond, and his wife, Madame Marve, the somewhat plump prophetess, who read fortunes, and was mistress of the educated pig, had the Gipsy instinct and took life easily. Nickie had a good deal in common with both, and they promised to be a happy family.

In his proudest moments Professor Thunder was not likely to overestimate the intrinsic value of the Missing Link as he stood, for tucked away under the singlet that lay between him and his hairy simian cuticle was a store of treasure with the product of which Nicholas Crips dreamed of living a life of ease and luxury when certain matters had blown over and it was wise for him to resume his proper place in the animal creation.

The murder in Briggs's Building had stirred up a tremendous sensation, but as yet no one had thought of associating either the Rev. Andrew Rowbottom or the tall, fashionably-dressed lady with the crime.

The show was not yet open for the evening, and Mahdi, the Missing Link, was permitted the privilege of free speech, denial of which was one of the most painful disadvantages of his public career.

"Well, how're yeh likin' th' grip, Nickie?" asked Matty Cann, otherwise Bonypart the living skeleton.

"It is not exacting," said the Missing Link, dreamily, "but it has its drawbacks to a man accustomed to finding favour with the ladies."

"Drawbacks," exclaimed Bonypart. "What price living skelingtons? You wouldn't believe it, but I'm considered rather a fine man in flesh. It almost breaks my poor wife's 'eart t'

see me in such redoooced circumstances. I tell yeh I never thought I'd come clown t' this."

Nickie peered at the living skeleton from his cage. "I believe being a missing link has its advantages." he said. "After all, a missing link does have time off, but a living skeleton has no relaxations."

"Dry up, Mahdi, an' get on your perch," cried Madame Thunder, "The Professor's openin' up."

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The door was opened, and the Marvels heard Professor Thunder declaiming on the astonishing quality of his exhibits.

“Roll up! Roll up! Roll up!” exclaimed the professor in his deep, steam-organ tones. “Roll up, and see Mahdi and Marve—Mabdi the Missing Link, the great man-monkey, captured in the gloom jungle of Darkest Africa, the Connectin’ link ‘tween man an’ the beasts; Marve, the Mystic, the prophetess, enchantess and Egyptian seer, who will read your future in your palm, exhibit her educated pig, and display the occult science of the Oriental wonder-workers!”

“Here they come,” said Madame, arranging her rich Egyptian costume, made by sewing a design of spangles on a curiously-patterned bed quilt.

The Missing Link hooked himself to the crossbar with one hand, drew up his hairy legs, and remained suspended in a limp attitude, as two women, with frightened children clinging to their skirts, entered the show.

Madame took charge of the audience, and lucidly explained the Darwinian theory, beginning with Spider, the tiny ape, and tracing the descent of man through Ammonia, the gorilla, to Mahdi the Missing Link, and Mahdi romped about the cage, growled and gibbered, poking his amazingly human face through the bars for fleeting moments.

When not engaged telling fortunes, performing a few primitive illusions, or putting Ephraim, the Educated Hog, through his manoeuvres, Madame was anything the occasion required. The Professor had great faith in her. She had once carried the show through successfully when the Living Skeleton, the Missing Link, Ammonia the Gorilla, and Ephraim were all incapacitated through an influenza epidemic.

They had a big evening, the holiday-makers flocked in so freely that Professor Thunder abandoned his position as “spruicher,” or public speaker, and took charge of the interior, acting as explainer and interpreter, leaving his little daughter Letitia to take the sixpences at the door.

The night was warm, and as the stream of patrons was incessant, Nickie the Kid found his duties most oppressive, and had serious thoughts of shedding his skin.

Professor Thunder greatly excited the interest of the crowd by announcing that a sum of one pound and a silver medal valued at one guinea would be given to any person courageous enough to follow Madame Marve’s example and enter the cage containing Mahdi, the Missing Link.

Nickie was resentful, as this meant a most energetic demonstration of savagery on his part, following a fawning and submissive manner, while madame, wearing a large sombrero and a man’s coat, moved about in the cage, cracking a whip.



The people gathered before the cage gazed upon madame with stupid awe, while the strange monster capered, or prostrated himself in great humility at her bidding. When she had withdrawn, and after the Professor had made his prodigal offer, it was Mahdi's duty to stimulate ungovernable ferocity, in order to deter any too-venturesome spirits. Nickie did his best. He bounded madly round the cage, he tore at the straw, tooth and nail, he roared terribly, and snatched furiously at the people near the bars. The crowd retreated in terror; all save one woman, a grim-looking female with the indurated face of an old-established lodginghouse-keeper.

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This woman came forward, and jabbed at Mahdi the Missing Link with her umbrella. "Gerrou, yeh brute!" she said. Mahdi backed into shades carefully provided at the back of the cage, and the old woman reached her umbrella through the bars, and made a hit at him. Mahdi seemed to cower.

"A prize of one pound and a silver medal to any person daring enough to enter the cage of Mahdi, the man-monkey!" repeated Professor Thunder, with great hardihood.

"Wha's that?" gasped the woman.

Professor Thunder repeated his intrepid words; aside he hissed "Bellow, damn you—bellow!"

Nickie bellowed; he jumped with desperate energy, he clawed up the straw, but he remained in the shadow.

"A pound!" cried the woman. "A pound jist fer goin' in with that ape? Done! I'm yer man."

The Professor was thunderstruck, so also was Mahdi the Missing Link. Never since Thunder invested in his famous fake of the man-monkey had man or woman been found courageous enough to beard the monster in his den for a pound. Never had any been expected to. Professor Thunder stood non-plussed.

Madame went to the back of the cage. "Howl!" she whispered. "Howl! Do you want to ruin us?"

Mahdi howled, he growled ferociously, he made an attempt to savage Ammonia. His paroxysms were fearful to look upon, but the woman did not seem to mind in the least.

"Open the door," she said.

"Madame, are you quite resolved to take this terrible risk?" said Thunder, gravely, feeling keenly the approaching loss of a hard-earned pound.

"Terrible pickles!" said the woman. "I've bin managin' men fer twenty years, an' I ain't goin' t be stopped be no monkey."

"Very well, madam, the consequences be upon your own head." (Aside to Nickie) "Roar, curse you, roar!"

The Missing Link crept to the back bars in an imploring attitude. "No, no; for the love of heaven! don't let her in!" he whispered to Madame Marve.

Professor Thunder burst into one of his frenzied street orations to drown the voice of the Missing Link, and threw open the cage door. The crowd huddled back, horrified. One girl screamed, but the heroine from the old-established lodging-house boldly entered the cage, swinging her gamp.

It was expected that the strange monster from the dim, damp jungles of Darkest Africa would spring upon her, but he did nothing of the kind; he rushed to the back of his cage, and cowered down, burying his face in the straw.

The heroine butted Mahdi the Missing Link with her gamp. He gave no sign. She kicked him. He bore it meekly, crouching lower. There was some tittering in the crowd.

"Get up, you nasty brute!" said the woman, and prodded the horrid monster.

Nickie didn't even growl. The woman kicked, she kicked with force. She booted the terrible brute round the cage. She seemed to glory in her triumph, and when Mahdi butted into a corner and refused to stir, she took him by one leg, and towed him twice round the cage, and the tittering the crowd swelled to yells of derisions and ribald laughter, while Professor Thunder pranced about and cursed furiously. To save his show from being ruined with ridicule, he rushed in, seized the woman, and bundled her from the cage.

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"I can't permit on to risk your life in this mad way," he blurted; "any moment he might round on you, and then they'd pinch me for manslaughter. Here is your pound, madam; go, and thank God you have been permitted to live through this fearful experience." He paid with the grand air of a hero of melodrama. His manner was so impressive it almost restored confidence, but Mahdi, the monster, remained crouched at the back of his cage, his face hidden in the straw, and nothing would induce him to come out till closing time.

When the last patron was gone, and the doors were closed, Professor Thunder approached Nickie.

"Well, my friend, you're a pretty cheap kind of baa-lamb for a Missin' Link, I must say," he said haughtily. "Why in the devil did you allow the woman to make such a holy show of you?"

"What was a man to do?" answered Nickie.

"A Missin' Link that knew his business would have scared her out of her rags. By Heavings, man, you are no artist—you will never be an artist."

"You couldn't scare that woman with a den of lions and an old-time German dragon, Professor."

"Bosh! Rot! My last Missin' Link would have had her in fits, sir."

"Allow me to know, please."

"What do you know about her in pertickler, fellow?"

"Well, it's ten years now since I ran away from her, Professor, but I ought to know something about her. She's my first error of judgment. She's my wife!"

CHAPTER VIII.

The link goes missing.

The Missing Link was recognised by patrons of Thunder's Museum of Marvels as no ordinary animal. The Professor's show being conducted in a small shop, and owing nothing of its popularity to expensive advertisements in the "Amusements" columns, received no recognition from the press, consequently fame on a large scale did not come to Professor Thunder. Nevertheless the Museum of Marvels enjoyed a reputation in humble circles, and here Mahdi was talked of, and accepted without a question, as an astonishing vindication of the Darwinian hypothesis about which the Professor discoursed so fluently in his three minutes' lecture before the cage. It had only taken

Nicholas Crips two weeks to assert himself, and already he had introduced many novelties into the recognised “business” for Missing Links.

Occasionally a too-inquisitive visitor with a taste for natural history became obtrusive and sought close investigation. It was part of Nickie’s duty to fill such visitors with a proper respect for Missing Links, but ninety-nine out of every hundred accepted Mahdi in good faith. It is an axiom in the show business that the people who can’t be deceived are so few that they are not worth considering.

It was a hot day, life in the cage was very oppressive. Nickie the Kid was painfully thirsty. Probably no Missing Link since the day when man began to emerge from the monkey had ever been so sorely afflicted with the craving for alcoholic stimulants.

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Mahdi had a fixed allowance his beer supply was rigorously prescribed by Professor Thunder, and precisely measured by Madame Marve. It was this precision that prevented Nickie being quite content with an artistic career.

He had had his first pint. The second pint was not due for two hours. Nicholas Crips was not satisfied he would survive the time. The place was stifling.

"Yar-r, get to blazes!" snorted the Darwinian hypothesis, and hurled his water tin at Ammonia.

Ephraim, the pig, grunted pitifully, and Matty Cann, the bone man, drowsed in his chair. Madame Marve was sleeping, too, and the ripple of a monotonous snore came from the Egyptian tent.

There were no patrons, the town was still, prone under the great heat. Professor Thunder entered, mopping his brow, and the Missing Link pressed against the bars.

"How is it for a drink?" he said. "You've got to be generous, Professor, or I resign. There you are, a drink, or my resignation—the loss of the most versatile Link in the profession."

The Professor entered the Egyptian tent, and presently returned with a pint pannikin which he passed through to Mr. Crips. Nickie seized it greedily, raised it to his lips, and then changed his mind, and hurled it at Thunder with a furious imprecation.

"Water!" snarled the Missing Link, "Water! You have the heart to insult a Christian thirst with water on a day like this, you blastiferous heathen! Let me out! I resign. Let me out of this monkey house."

Professor Thunder laughed and returned to his post at the door, and the baffled Link pushed his face through the bars and poured a torrent of frantic objurgations in the direction of the street door.

"Nickie, fer th' love iv 'Eaven let er man sleep," pleaded the Living Skeleton pitifully. "I was just a-dreamin' iv pickled pigs' feet an' fried taters—crisp, brown, fried taters. Oh, Lord!"

"Be quiet!" snarled the Missing Link, "and do a perish here from thirst while that cow of a man swills his fill and makes a fortune out of my mortal agony? No, hanged if I do."

The Missing Link howled again, and Madame Marve, that she might sleep peacefully, broke rules and regulations, and smuggled him another half pannikin of beer.

"Lucky dog!" sighed the bone man. "If I was t' tear the place up they wouldn't give me half yard iv grilled steak an' er pint iv chips."

After tea, Mahdi was very quiet on his straw. The Professor and Madame Marve were making their usual dinner of cold boiled leg of mutton, bread and beer, in the Egyptian tent. The other animals were sleeping.

The Link was not sleeping, he was amusing him self in a quaint way at the back of his cage. He had a small lasso made of cord, and was throwing it at an object near the wall at a distance of five feet.

Every time Nickie failed he swore in a patient heart-broken way, but he persisted, and eventually success crowned his efforts. An exclamation of great joy burst from his lips.

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"No silly business there, Mahdi," cried Madame warningly from her tent. "The public will be here in half a tick."

Mahdi dropped his string and curled in a knot, but presently he started cautiously hauling in his prize. A long hairy arm reached out and clutched it, and hastily hid the object in the straw. The treasure was a bottle three-parts full of brandy, Professor Thunder's extra special.

The Missing Link's performances during the next hour were curious and perfunctory: the animal was not himself. If Missing Links were habitually intemperate one would be inclined to say this Missing Link had taken something too much. During a quiet quarter of an hour Mahdi got the key of his cage from the Professor's ordinary vest, which had been left hanging within his reach, opened the door, and going quietly along the wall behind the cages, reached the back door, opened it, and stepped into the night.

Two minutes later a monstrous shape came out of the shadows of a right-of-way into the well-lighted City Street, a strange, misshapen animal, with a head half-human half-monkey, with a body like that of an ourang-outang and long, flapping feet. The brute was covered with short, tufted, reddish hair, and in its hand it carried a brandy bottle containing about half-a-cup of spirit.

The first to confront Nicholas Crips, the Missing Link, was a woman. She did not attempt to escape, but stood right in his way, staring at him with eye frantic with terror. Fear had struck her motionless but not dumb; she shrieked in Mahdi's face again and again. Her screams echoed along the street.

"Thash all ri', missus," said the Missing Link affably, "I don' know you, an' excuse me; I don' wanter hear you sing." He brushed her aside, and rolled drunkenly into a wine shop.

In the wine shop a large mirror served as a door screen. Nickie saw his grizzly shape reflected in this, and after surveying it in stupid surprise for a few moments, smashed the glass with his bottle, and rolled out again.

Amazed men assembled at the door, fell back in awe before the Missing Link, and Mahdi crossed the road, carrying the neck of the broken bottle, his quaint feet, like huge hands, flopping in the dust. Mahdi's make-up did Professor Thunder great credit—it was grotesquely inhuman. The shape of the costume demanded a stooping attitude and shambling gait. Only in a good light and at close quarters could the deception be seen.

People came running from all directions. A cab horse backed in terror before the monster, reared, plunged furiously and bolted into a peanut stall.

Nickie waddled on, blissfully unconscious of the sensation he was creating. He invaded a secondhand clothes shop.

“Shemima, mother of der brophet!” gasped Moses Aaronstein, throwing out his palms in a gesture terror, and Moses bolted through a side door.

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The Missing Link appropriated a spangled skirt and trailed it after him down the street. The shouting crowd followed at a respectful distance. In a small eating-house the Link encountered two men eating fried steak and onions. They beheld him with indescribable emotion, glared for a moment and fled. A girl coming in with a tureen of stew dropped the lot on the floor, threw her apron over her head, and fainted amongst the broken crockery and scattered viands.

For a moment the strange inebriate stood swaying over the prostrate girl, making a grave, drunken effort to grasp the situation, then the Italian proprietress came into the room humming a cheerful strain, and carrying a burden of fried sausages. She beheld the horror, uttered a piercing scream, and dashed up the narrow stairs. Nickie went up the stairs after her, anxious to explain. The horrified people pressing at the front door and the windows saw him pass out of sight. There was now a large, excited crowd in the street. All sorts of rumours were afloat. Already it was stated that the mighty gorilla had killed three men and eaten half a horse. Two policemen were busy beating back the crowd, and collecting evidence from excited onlookers who had seen nothing.

At this stage, Professor Thunder dashed through the assemblage. The Professor was in an agitated frame of mind.

"What is it?" he cried. "Has anyone seen a Missin' Link—a dark brown Missin' Link?"

Ten persons explained at once.

"He's in there now," cried a bewildered cabman, pointing to the eating-house. "He's ate er girl, an' he's out after the missus with a club."

"T went up them stairs," cried a trembling woman.

Yells from the crowd in the road brought the people surging into the middle of the street. Mahdi had opened a front window, and stepped out on to the roof of the verandah. He was dancing clumsily on the corrugated iron, and gesticulating, with his long, shaggy hands. Nickie was declaring with the warmth of absolute conviction that he was a king, but the yelling of the crowd rendered his speech inaudible.

"I'm a king!" cried the Missing Link. "Behold in me your rightful sovereign. Bow down t' ye ri'ful sovereign, ye base born!" He threw five fried sausages into the crowd.

The crowd continued yelling, and Nickie broke into a vain-glorious song, and capered like an idiot brandishing a Vienna loaf.

Professor Thunder beat on his forehead like the baffled villain in the play. "Ten thousand furies!" he howled, and dashed for the stairs.

While the Missing Link was still capering, Professor Thunder appeared at the window. He climbed through. The crowd loudly applauded his courage. He descended upon Mahdi, he seized him. The crowd cheered vociferously. Professor Thunder kicked the Missing Link. He dragged him back to the window, and kicked him through. The crowd nearly went frantic in its appreciation of such heroism.

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Presently the Professor appeared on the stairs, dragging the hairy monster after him. He dragged it by the leg. It bumped cruelly on the steps. The Professor pulled the Missing Link to his feet, took him by his rudimentary tail and the scuff of his neck, and ran him out of the shop. He ran the grizzly monster up the street as a publican ejects the unwelcome drunk. The crowd followed, cheering still.

It was an inspiring sight. The Missing Link running on tip-toes, his eyes projecting, seemingly in imminent danger of falling on his nose, the Professor furious, two wild policemen with drawn clubs following after, ready to do or die should the terrible brute break loose again.

The Professor ran Mahdi into the show, kicking him through the door. He kicked him into his cage, and ten seconds later was vociferating on his kerosene box again, strenuously inviting the crowd to roll up, roll up, roll up, and see the wonderful Missing Link, the only genuine man-monkey in captivity.

The rush that followed was unprecedented in the history of Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels. The people flocked in. Prices were put up to a shilling all round, but still the people flocked, and Letitia took nearly a bucketful of silver before public interest was exhausted.

Meanwhile, Madame Marve stirred up Nickie in his cage, and made him grin and howl and caper for the edification of the crowd, whose souls his street escapades had filled with awe.

Next day the papers contained an account of the excitement occasioned in the city by the escape of a huge monkey from Thunder's Museum of Marvels, and the Missing Link demanded an increase of salary and a double allowance of beer, and got both, in view of his increased importance as the greatest draw the show had ever known.

CHAPTER IX.

The missing link performs in the Provinces.

After taking to the show business, Nicholas Crips often complained of the vicissitudes of an artistic career and threatened on many occasions to resign his arduous role as the Missing Link, but despite his occasional eccentric departures from the manners and customs of Missing Links, Nickie had so far proved to be the most successful and profitable man-monkey ever associated with the Professor's show, and Thunder was determined not to lose him.

A bottle of beer, a good meal, and a season of repose, usually overcame Nickie's reluctance to continue his splendid impersonation. Besides, the easy Bohemian life

was taking hold of him, and the actor's morbid love of applause had already planted itself in his breast.

Matty Cann, the bone man, was the most respectable and melancholy freak in the museum, but his melancholy was not native to him, it sprang from the cravings of appetite doomed to dissatisfaction—he had his brighter moments.

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"I ken put up with always bein' like er specimei iv er Indian famine," he said, confiding in Mahdi the Missing Link, through the bars of the latter cage, "knowing the missus and the kids has plenty. You noticed 'ow fat Jane was when she brought the fam'ly t' see the show the other day? Well, I give you my word, the wife was thin enough t' take on this billet 'erself when the Perfesser engaged me."

Nickie's sentimental side was quite stirred by the affection existing between Bonypart and his small family, and the anguish of Jane and the kiddies at parting with Matty when the show was on the eve of starting on a provincial tour so wrought upon him that he shed two large tears down his Simian cheeks, and handed a shilling to Mat, the fat baby.

The show opened at Bunkers, a small Gippsland town. The Museum of Marvels was conveyed in a two-horse caravan, and was displayed in a small circus tent, Mahdi's cage, as usual, being thrown into shadow by an ingenious device of the Professor's.

Professor Thunder was more at his ease in the bush towns. There patrons are neither so inquisitive nor so exacting as in the metropolis. The Museum of Marvels was opened to the public of Bunkers in the afternoon, admission sixpence, children half-price, special concessions to schools and other educational institutions.

Nickie found his sphere of usefulness enlarged in the country, since he expected to assist in pitching the tent and striking it again, and had to do his share of the camp work, cooking, &c. The quick changes prevented outsiders from noticing that the absence of Nicholas Crips was always coincident—with the appearance of Mahdi, the Missing Link; but, still, nice judgment and caution had to be observed in effecting the transformation.

Business at Bunkers was only moderate—for the first afternoon and evening, but Professor Thunder had so worked his "splendid living realisation of the Darwinian theory, the descent of man," as to induce the proprietress of a local young ladies' school to bring her pupils on the second afternoon.

There were twenty-five young ladies in all, daughters of the superior families of Bunkers and the surrounding district. Miss Arnott, their teacher, was a tall, bony spinster, with austere glasses and sharp elbows that looked like weapons of defence.

The Professor had several manners adapted for various audiences, and possessed costumes to suit. He met Miss Arnott and her pupils in his splendid impersonation of the studious naturalist and reverent authority on the wonders of creation. A long black coat, a somewhat dingy belltopper, and a pair of smoked spectacles went with the part. So equipped, the boss conducted the seminary through his Museum of Marvels, educating and edifying the pupils, first with the astonishing mathematical calculations of

Ephraim, the educated pig, then with Madame Marve's amazing acts of mysticism and legerdemain.

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The Living Skeleton was described as a unique freak of nature—"Teaching us all how wise and wonderful are the workings of Providence," said the Professor, piously. "He is thin, ladies, but very—happy," he added.

This was Bonypart's cue to work off a long, wan smile, and he smiled accordingly. The effort so worked on the feelings of one of the younger pupils that she burst into tears, and offered the bone man her piece of cake.

Matty Cann looked eager, but the Professor smartly intervened.

"Excuse me, young lady," he said suavely, "but visitors are requested not to feed the Living Skeleton. Living Skeletons are very delicately organised, madame," he continued, addressing the teacher. "A dry biscuit has been known to throw them into violent dyspepsia and they have died of a rump steak."

Bonypart groaned audibly and recovering himself, made another effort to smile, but failed, and sighed hungrily, whereat the younger pupil broke into a dismal wail, and had to be taken out and soothed with lemonade.

The fine collection of natural curiosities, illustrating the descent of man, was reserved for the last, and Professor Thunder proudly arrayed his company before the cages containing the tiny apes, the middling-sized gibbons, the baboon, Ammonia, the gorilla, and Mahdi, the man-monkey, or Missing Link.

The young ladies were quite enthusiastic in their admiration. They fed the Missing Link with spongecake and nuts, which he took from their hands and ate with a certain genteel decorum. His manner of cracking the nuts was much appreciated. Nickie was a specialist at nut-cracking, having made a special study of the subject at the Zoo.

Some of the girls said he was a "regular dear," and threw him flowers, and frosty Miss Arnott relaxed her elbows a trifle, and admitted that this quaint creature was indeed entertaining and instructive—most instructive. She had never met a more instructive creature. And meanwhile Ammonia the gorilla shook the dividing bars, and reached fierce claws towards Mahdi, convulsed with jealousy, and inspired with a primitive yearning for nuts.

Professor Thunder spread himself in the delivery of his learned oration on the origin of the human race, beginning with Spider, and ranging up to the wondrous Missing Link. "Captured by my own hand in the jungles of Central Africa, ladies," said he, with fine dramatic elocution and the attitudes of a leading man.

"You will observe that the creature is kept in semi-darkness, that is because he is accustomed to the thick shades of his native forests. He is very docile, excepting when attacked or irritated"—(descriptive growls from the Missing Link)—"when he displays

extraordinary activity in pursuit of his foes”—(display of extraordinary activity by Madhi, swinging on the bar, racing round the cage, roaring, &c.). “He is very human in his appearance, as you will observe, and is much more upright

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in his carriage than the gorilla, while his mild and benevolent expression in repose”— (mild and benevolent expression artfully simulated by the Missing Link)—“gives his countenance a certain manly beauty and dignity. Looking at him thus, ladies, no one will deny that he stands for the missing link in the chain leading from the small ape up through the gorilla to the noblest work of God.” The Professor finished chin up, heels together, eyes lifted, and the left hand thrust in the vest, a la Napoleon—to signify the highest effort of a benign Providence.

Here Ammonia created a diversion by squealing angrily, spitting at the Missing Link, and clawing for him in a paroxysm of professional envy.

“I think, ladies,” continued Professor Thunder in his best manner, “that even those who discard the Darwinian hypothesis because of their objection to acknowledging relationship with the monkeys should have no reluctance to admit some distant connection with this noble and intelligent being, so like man in bearing and intellect, and yet so closely allied to the gorilla that we cannot deny—Blazes and fury!”

The Professor’s indecorous ejaculation was inspired by the mean, vicious, and unsportsmanlike conduct of Ammonia the gorilla, who had succeeded in gripping Mahdi by one leg, and was hanging on, squealing frightfully.

“Pull him off! Pull him off!” yelled the Missing Link, forgetting everything in the moment of pain and, peril.

Instantly the whole show was thrown into commotion. Miss Arnott screamed, her pupils screamed, the monkeys all rattled at their cages and jabbered excitedly; the Professor, the Living Skeleton, and Madame Marve added to the uproar.

Ammonia, having his hated rival in his power at last, was determined to glut his hate. He secured a grip with the other iron talon, dragged Nickie down, and pulling him close to the bars, and pushing his short nose between the rods, bit at him with gleaming teeth, and all the time he clawed furiously, his nails tearing through the hide of the Missing Link, and lacerating the man beneath pitilessly.

Nickie fought and yelled and swore, in good strong Australian. Miss Arnott’s pupils, huddled together, staring with round, horrified eyes, and as they stared a truly horrible thing happened. The skin was torn clean from the upper part of the Missing Link, and the bare, blood-stained head and shoulders of a man emerged.

That was too much for a well-conducted ladies seminary. With a final ear-piercing scream in chorus the school turned and fled; it broke pell-mell from the tent, headed by

Miss Arnott, who executed a remarkable sprint, taking her age, her dignity and her lack of training into consideration.

It was Madame Marve who rescued Nickie from the clutches of the gorilla, having subdued the brute with a discharge from a squirt charged with ammonia; but Professor Thunder was not thankful, he hadn't time, his magnificent mind was already busy on ways and means of repairing the mischief done to his Missing Link and to his reputation as an honourable showman.

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Of course, the revelation resulting from Ammonia's misconduct would go round the place like wildfire. There might be a raid of indignant residents, a prosecution for fraud, and there wasn't time to run.

The raid came in due time. Ten heads of families accompanied by Quinn, the local constable, bore down upon the Museum of Marvels within an hour. Professor Thunder met them at the entrance, with his studious manner and his solemn black hat. The raid was going to express itself forcibly; it did refer to "iniquitous frauds," "shameful imposition," "scoundrels," &c., but the Professor's big, penetrating voice, his heavy-as-lead manner, triumphed.

"Most unfortunate, gentlemen, a most lamentable disaster," he said. "My valuable Missing Link is more seriously injured than I imagined, and I may lose him, which would be a heavy blow, indeed, as the College of Naturalists of London, values the beast at four thousand and seventy pounds."

"It's a fraud—a blanky imposition!" cried a fierce little man.

"Gentlemen will you favour me by stepping into the museum, and judging for yourself," said Thunder gravely. "You will find the Missing Link in a low state, but Madame Marve has done all that surgical skill could do. The murderous attacks of the gorilla scalped the poor creature, and tore the skin from his body, but the wounds have been stitched up—there is still hope. This way, gentle men, and quietly, if you please."

The surprised and subdued deputation found Mahdi, the Missing Link, lying moaning on his straw, his wounds—artfully bloodstained—all stitched up. There were white bandages about his head and his injured arms.

"But the girls say it was a man gasped the fierce deputationist.

"A not unnatural mistake, my dear sir," said the Professor, "Strip the poor creature of its hairy hide and its resemblance to a human creature would deceive the most expert naturalist."

"Wonderful!" said the local publican.

"But all the same, me mahn," said Quinn, regretfully, "I have half a moind t' prosecute yeh fer croolty t' animals."

The trick worked, however, the situation was saved, and that night all Bunkers flocked to see the Missing Link that had been flayed in its life-and-death struggle with an infuriated gorilla.

CHAPTER X.

The stolen Babe.

In the larger townships and the small towns visit by the museum of Marvels on its provincial tour, Professor Thunder, gifted manager of this “colossal amusement enterprise,” as the streamers eloquently phrased it, preferred to secure a shop in the main street to pitching his tent in some out-of-the-way place, where his persuasive powers might be wasted on the desert air.

The Professor flattered himself there was not a more seductive “spruicher” in the business, and, mounted on a gin case at a shop front plentifully papered with screaming posters depicting the more popular attractions, he reckoned that he could always lure a given number of people into the show by the sheer force of his eloquence, and so make up the rent, provided there were men and women in the street willing to listen.

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Professor Thunder had found a vacant shop to suit him near the end of Main-street, Wangaroo. He would have preferred a central site at the same price, or even less, but none was available. However, business was so good on the first afternoon and evening that he resolved to extend his Wangaroo season into the following week. This involved a day of idleness, an unemployed Sunday, a boon that rarely came to the partakers in Professor Thunder's godless enterprises, the day of rest usually being given over to travel and arduous preparations for a Monday matinee.

Nicholas Crips was well content with the change of dates. He certainly took a good deal of natural pride in his marked success as the most artistic and realistic representative of the missing link, and toyed in the reputation he was rapidly making for himself in the show business; but for all that, it was a great relief to throw off the hide of the celebrated man-monkey, drop the exactions of art, and be himself for a whole day.

Nickie did not find, as many celebrated actors have done, that the work of sustaining a grand role day after day, night after night, week after week, and month after month, was too exacting; he bore the strain with consummate ease; moreover, the most conscientious artist wishes to be himself once now and again, if merely for a change.

The shop in Wangaroo occupied by the Museum of Marvels was rented from a Chinese greengrocer, who carried on a business next door. The place had originally been one shop, but Kit See, with the frugality of his race, had partitioned it roughly, and with Oriental astuteness let the half for nearly as much as he paid for the whole.

Kit See was a stout, cream Confucian with an oleaginous smile, and the gentle, propitiatory man of an inferior people, cunning enough to realise that if you cannot dominate it is wisest to be docile. He had a good stock, a good business, a half-caste wife, and a noiseless, placid, slit-eyed baby about the size of a Bologna sausage.

The Missing Link discovered this much through a crack in the partition, and amused himself with his eyes glued to the slit when there were no professional demands on his time and talents.

Most things that Mahdi did irritated Ammonia, whose jealousy and hatred were intensified by Nickie's habit, when in a playful humour, of teasing the gorilla by ostentatiously devouring delicacies Ammonia particularly affected in Ammonia's sight, almost within his reach.

Nickie's interest in that hole in the wall was a course of consuming anxiety to Ammonia. While Mahdi had his eye to the wall, the gorilla would cling to the bars of his cage, pushing his blunt nose through, and gibber and spit and protest in a high-pitched, querulous growl.

"Blime, yiv got the noble Ammonia goin' this trip, Nickie," said the Living Skeleton.

“Yes,” replied Nickie, still with his eye to the crack, “that beast will have to learn decency and good conduct, Matty, my man. I aspire to teach him moral restraint.”

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"He'll do you a bad turn one o' them days, mark me."

"I believe not," said the Missing Link. "I've got something here that will always reduce him to reason." Nickie touched his breast. "I say, Matthew, this Chow next door is a luxurious heathen. He's got all sorts of lovely preserved fruits in beautiful juices, and cakes, and ginger floating in its own gravy, and there is a bottle of Chinese brand under the counter. Now, Matthew, I think it is a sin to encourage the inferior races to indulge in intoxicants."

"Don't," cried the Living Skeleton, a ring of anguish in his tones. "Yeh know, it's agin the rules t' talk t' me of things t' eat. It makes me fat." Poor Matty Cann groaned aloud. "Is there anythin' substantial?" he asked pitifully.

"Not just now," said Nickie, "but last night I watched the Chow and his missus dining on roast duck. You notice there's a door in this partition just at the back of my cage. Curious, is it not? Well, I found an old rusty key in the crack under the wall, and it fits the lock of that door. Remarkable that, don't you think? Now, I shan't be surprised if some of those Chow delicacies find their way in here most unaccountably."

"What's it t' me if they do?" sighed Matty. "I wouldn't dare t' eat 'em. If I did the boss would find I was puttin' on flesh, an' I'd be doin' a bunk."

"But I suppose a drop of Chinese brandy wouldn't entirely spoil your figure, my boy."

The Chinese delicacies did find their way into the cage of the Missing Link, quite a fine assortment of them, also the bottle of Celestial spirits. Ammonia witnessed the process of transference that night, and nearly went mad in his cage, springing about wildly, clinging to the bars, squealing and certainly blaspheming in his peculiar monkey gibberish, and Nicholas Crips sat in his cage, impishly eager to goad his enemy to fury, and ate luscious figs and fine preserves, while the gorilla strained at the intervening bars and shrilled his anguish.

After this there were other casual visits to the shop of Kit See, and Ammonia's curiosity concerning the mysterious place from which the Missing Link drew such delectable supplies kept him at the back of his cage for hours together, peering at the wall, scratching it, and whining impotently.

Evidently Kit See was troubled in his mind, too, for he came into the show to examine the door in the wall, and finding the cage of the Missing Link right up against it, and the formidable monster sleeping in the straw, was satisfied that the petty larcenist found access to his goods in some other way.

On the Sunday, Nickie and the Living Skeleton walked abroad, seeing the sights of Wangaroo, including a waterfall; a hanging rock, and a cemetery, the latter the favourite

resort of the elite and fashion of Wangaroo on Sundays. Mat's skeleton proportions were disguised in a long overcoat, and Nickie wore a loud theatrical suit, and a conspicuous clean-shave. He thought he looked like Henry Irving. He didn't see why he shouldn't.

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The company ate a late dinner in a room behind the show that evening. Amiable Madame Marve had prepared an excellent meal, in which the regulation beer and boiled leg of mutton course was relieved of monotony with vegetables and dumplings. There was soup before and pudding after, and in a burst of gratitude the Missing Link proposed the health of the Egyptian Mystic which was being drunk with enthusiasm in Chinese brandy, when suddenly a great racket arose in the yard, shouts and screams were heard from the street, and Kit See burst in upon the dinner party, his Celestial face pale with terror, his usually benignant eyes round with apprehension.

"What' for? Wha' far?" screamed the Chinaman at Professor Thunder. "Come! Come! You come dam quick! Monkey he stealem my baby."

"Wha—at?" yelled the Professor.

"The monkey cally baby away alonga house-top si'." Kit pointed to the ceiling. He was dancing with anguish.

The Professor dashed for the caravan cage, and was back in a minute. "It's Ammonia," he cried, wild with excitement. "He's broke loose. He's got the Chinaman's baby on the roof."

Kit See ran into the street, the Professor turned to follow, but Nickie seized him.

"Hold hard," he said, "there's no hurry, no hurry in the world. Let us think this thing out."

"No hurry!" snorted the Professor, "and that infernal gorilla waltzing round up there with a live baby?" The Professor's tragic manner would have been the making of a cheap melodrama.

"Did you ever know Ammonia drop anything he'd once taken a good grip of? The youngster's safe for a while. It strike me we can make a hit out of this. How will it read in the Wangaroo 'Guardian': 'Child stolen by a gorilla. Rescue by Professor Thunder's famous Missing Link'?"

Professor Thunder stopped with a gasp. "Holy Joseph!" he said, "that's a noble thought, my boy. Can it be done?"

"You get out there and keep the crowd from overexerting itself. Leave the rest to me."

Professor Thunder dashed out by the front door. There was already a large and vociferous crowd in the road, staring up at the gorilla, gesticulating and yelling, and people were coming running from all directions. On the side of the road stood Kit See, weeping, and brandishing his arms helplessly in the face of this grand calamity. Aloft, on the top of one of the chimneys, about three feet above the roof, sat the gorilla. In one of his hind claws he held the baby's clothing, and the youngster dangled,

apparently disregarded by Ammonia, who, despite the terrors of the situation, cut a most ridiculous figure, for he was composedly sucking the milk from the baby's bottle, keeping his vindictive eyes on the crowd the while.

"For God's sake keep quiet," thundered the Professor to the excited crowd. "Do not irritate him, and all will be well." He dragged to the ground a heroic Cousin Jack miner who was climbing the verandah post. "Back, man, back," he cried, "or all is lost."

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The Professor strode up and down with all a heavy villain's impressiveness and orated. His eloquence was drowned by a great hullabaloo at the next corner, and with a rattle and a yell four firemen came tearing down the road with a hose-reel. Some excited individual had, rung the fire-bell. The firemen attached the hose to a plug, and came on, hydrant in hand. It required all the Professor's energies, supplemented by the frenzied protestations of Kit See, to prevent them turning a full stream of water on the gorilla.

The crowd was now a large one, gathered far out on the road, where a good view of the roof was obtainable, and when the excitement occasioned by the fire men had subsided, a fresh outburst was provoked by the appearance of another huge monkey, the great bulk of which came up slowly over the left ridge. The second monkey, which was much larger than the gorilla, sat upon the apex of the roof, jabbered at Ammonia, and the gorilla turned towards him, baring his teeth in a hideous grin of malice.

"Keep still!" yelled Professor Thunder. "Keep quiet, for the love of heaven! Mahdi, the Missing Link, will save the che—e—ild! Mahdi, the animal that approaches nearest to man, captured by me in the dark jungles of Darkest Africa. Observe."

The gorilla seemed animated with an implacable hatred for the larger monkey. The shades of night were falling, but the people in the street could divine this enmity from Ammonia's attitude and his gestures. His flat, ugly face was thrust towards the Missing Link. He grimaced horribly. With his eyes always on Mahdi, the gorilla slowly lowered the baby to the roof and let it go. The roof was shaped like an M, and the child rolled harmlessly into the gutter between the ridges. For a moment Ammonia faced the Missing Link, his venomous little eyes luminous as those of a cat, and then he ran along the ridge.

A cry broke from the crowd, but when Ammonia was within couple of feet of the Missing Link he stopped as if shot, let go his hold, and rolled down the roof, and lay in the gutter beside the child, limp and inanimate.

Mahdi clambered down the ridge, took up the baby, and, nursing it gently on one arm, came along the roof and down the sloping verandah, and lowered the son and heir of Kit See into Professor Thunder's arms amidst a storm of cheering such as had never been heard at Wangaroo.

Nickie had predicted rightly. The Wangaroo "Guardian" next morning contained a thrilling account of the rescue, and in a leading article the editor pointed out that the humanitarian action of the Missing Link was proof that it approached nearer to the standard of man than any other known animal.

The enthusiasm provoked by Mahdi's action brought a tremendous rush of business. In fact, the attention excited threatened to lead to an exposure of Professor Thunder's

daring imposition. Leading men wanted to interview Mahdi; a section of the people of Wangaroo were even talking of having the Missing Link adorned with the Humane Society's medal, and another section prepared an illuminated address. Eventually the great showman left the town in something of a hurry to escape notoriety that promised to be dangerous, but he had done a record six-days' business, and was content.

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"But how'd yeh beat the blanky gorilla?" asked the Living Skeleton on the morning after the rescue, as the Missing Link sat in his cage munching preserved fruits presented to him in abundance by the grateful Kit See.

"How do you think?" replied the intelligent animal. "With an ammonia squirt, of course. When he came at me I squirted a dose into him that nearly killed him. I'm never without that little weapon, and I think, Matthew really think that we shall teach the gorilla proper respect for the superior animals before we have done with him. His desire to supplant me in the scheme of evolution is contrary to science, my boy, and a defiance of natural law, and must not be countenanced for a moment."

CHAPTER XI.

The defeat of Dan Heeley.

At Big Timber Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels had run for several consecutive hours to satisfactory business, and was now well on its way to The Mills, where a great day was expected in view of some local festivity that meant a general holiday for the mill hands, and a bush carousal.

The caravan was drawn up for tea in the moonlit bush by Howlet's jinker track. A camp-fire blazed in the end of a butt under a wide-branching gum. The Professor lay at a distance—for the night was warm—smoking on the crisp grass. The Living Skeleton crouched near, embracing his lean knees, staring into the fire, thinking fondly of his absent wife and family, a furtive tear lurking in the hollow of his cheek, for Matty Cann's absurd sentimentality made him a failure as a vagabond. Nickie fussed about gallantly, assisting Madame Marve and little Miss Thunder, who were busy spreading papers for the evening meal.

Professor Thunder had in Madame Marve a perfect wife for a showman. In addition to her value as the Egyptian Mystic, a wonder-worker, and teller of for tunes, she was chief cook and housekeeper for the whole caravan, but she had a flirtatious disposition, and the attentions Nicholas Crips offered in his unprofessional moments were received in a spirit of frivolous appreciation that disturbed the boss showman's complacency at times.

"Less of it. Less of it, my boy!" was his deep throated exhortation on such occasions.

All the members of the company had to take a hand in the hard graft and menial tasks incidental to the upkeep, management and movement of the show, and neither professional etiquette nor artistic pride could rescue Nicholas Crips from the vulgar task of preparing comestibles for the monkeys. But Madame was certainly the most useful artist on Professor Thunder's salary list, a document preserved with much pride, to be exhibited in bars and such public places for purposes of advertisement, and which

represented the Egyptian Mystic as receiving L30 per week. On the salary list Bonypart, the Living Skeleton, was rated at L15 per week. He actually received twenty-shillings and his keep.

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“Professional usage, my boy—professional usage!” explained the celebrated entrepreneur when Matty Cann drew attention to the discrepancy. “It’s always done in the theatrical business. Bless you, you don’t think we pay our Sarah Bernhardts, and our Cinquevallis, and our Paderewskis and our Peggy Prydes those enormous salaries that get into the papers. No; no, we couldn’t do it, but we are content to let it be thought we do. It impresses our public, Bonypart—it impresses our public, my boy.”

Madame Marve produced bread, butter, pannikins, and the familiar necessities, brought forward the usual boiled leg of mutton on a lordly dish, large, fat and steaming like a laundry.

“Encore, encore!” cried the Professor.

“Hear, hear!” applauded Nickie, clapping vigorously. Matty Cann even ventured an expression of appreciation.

Madame Marve placed the mutton for the carver, and bowed low to the right and left, picked up an imaginary bouquet, and threw three kisses to hypothetical “gods.”

“Come, come, Bony,” she said, patting the Living Skeleton on the back, “buck up, man. If my old man couldn’t think of me for ten minutes without snivelling, I’d have a divorce.”

Matty Cann smiled wanly. He had no great cause to “buck up,” his share of the boiled leg would be very small indeed and entirely knuckle, the Professor holding that the knuckle end was not fat-producing.

“It’s Jane’s birthday this day week, an’ little Mat’ll be two year old the day after. I was wonderin’ if I could get a day off t’ visit me fam’ly?” said Matty.

“And fat up over-eating yourself,” said Thunder. “Not much, my boy!”

Matty groaned. “I give you me word I’d eat nothin’ but ship’s biscuit,” he pleaded.

“Poor old Bony,” said the Egyptian Mystic. “It’s a pity your missus ain’t a bit of a freak, so as we could have her along. Now, if she could eat fire we might find a place for her. Fire-eaters are very popular. I suppose she couldn’t learn to eat fire, Bony?”

The Living Skeleton shook his head gloomily over his poor meal. “I’m afraid she couldn’t,” he said. “Jane ain’t got any gifts.”

The meal was finished, and the utensils were washed and restored to the caravan cupboard, a zinc-lined packing case. Professor Thunder was down on his back on the crisp grass again, smoking. He was feeling good, and opened his heart.

“We’ll top off with a touch of old Jamaica, Nickie, my boy,” he said. “There’s a bottle in the box-seat. You might lead her out.”

Nickie needed no second invitation. He sprang up with unaccustomed alacrity, and passed out of the circle of light into the bush darkness. He found the bottle in the locker under the driving seat, and stepping down from the vehicle turned again towards the fire. The extraordinary change in the peaceful scene he had just left flashed upon him with the vividness of a tableau in melodrama The gifted members of Professor

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Thunder's world company were no longer lounging carelessly on the grass, they stood erect, grouped together, their faces, tense with fear and amazement, showing whitey-yellow in the firelight, their hands thrown above their heads. Facing them on the other side of the fire, with his profile to Nicholas Crips, was a short, stoutly-built man, in a coarse blue shirt and corduroy riding pants, with a white handkerchief tied loosely about his neck. A fine chestnut horse stood behind him. The rein was looped over his arm. In his right hand this man held a long, business-like Colt's revolver pointed at the group before him.

It was a fine picture, intensely dramatic, it amazed Nickie, and brought him up short with a gasp, but it did not appeal to him as an artist particularly. He stepped sharply into cover of a gum butt. His hand went instinctively to his breast where, in a small chamois bag next his skin, he carried a certain treasure the care of which was the one real concern of his present life.

"See here," said the gentleman with the long revolver, "the first of you, man, woman or child, that stirs a finger or utters a yelp gets lead poisonin'. Understand?" He looked round. "This is the whole band?" he said.

Professor Thunder nodded his head.

"Yes," said the intruder, "I was at your show at Big Timber, Professor, an' I took trouble t' size up the strength of the crowd. I guessed it would be an easy thing, and it is."

"Who are you?" asked the celebrated entrepreneur, much distressed to find himself in a theatrical situation that was painfully real.

"Don't ask questions of yer betters, Professor, an' you won't get hurt. Howsomever, yer bound t' hear at The Mills all about Dan Heeley, so I don't mind admittin' I'm little Danny."

"Heeley!" gasped Madame Marve, "the man that shot Hollander, the man that's been sticking up the banks?"

Heeley's brow darkened.

"Precisely, missus," he said; "the man the Gov' mint offers L250 quid for, cash on delivery." He turned again to Professor Thunder. "I noticed you was doin' pretty good at Big Timber, mate," he said, "and I thought I'd follow on and pick up a little loose change. Fact is, I want your cash box, Perfessor, and any little articles of value you don't happen to be needin' for the moment."

"I—I've got next to nothing," faltered Thunder. "Most of my takings went in expenses."

Mat Heeley's revolver hand became rigid, his grim mouth, tightened, his chin set itself in prognathous ugliness.

"You'll send your little girl for that cash box, Professor," he said coldly, "and you'll tell her to gather up any bits and pieces of jewellery and such like as would please me, and if the collection isn't a good one I'll maybe blow an arm off you, jist as a mark of my displeasure. As for the rest, if you ain't good I'll riddle the brain-pan of one of yeh jist to convince the others that I mean business."

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Professor Thunder was quite convinced; he had not the slightest doubt but that Daniel meant business. He gave Letitia his keys, and a few words of instruction, and the girl went to the caravan, and presently returned with the Professor's zinc cash box and a chamois-leather bag containing a few rings and chains belonging to himself and Madame.

Dan Heeley placed his revolver to his hand on the stump by his side, and took up the cash box, but the next instant he snatched at his revolver again, and turned it upon a large, ungainly figure, that loped out of the bush, and stood grinning and chattering where the firelight faded into gloom. It was Mahdi the Missing Link, in full dress.

"What's that?" demanded Heeley, fiercely.

The figure leaped about in a foolish way, and rolled on the grass in unskillful play. Heeley burst into laughter. "It's that blanky monkey," he said. "D'yeh mean t' say you leave four thousan' quids' worth o' monkey run round loose in the bush like this?"

Mr. Heeley grinned amiably, replaced the revolver on the stump, and turned his attention to the cash box once more. That cash box was decidedly heavy, but the Professor, whose heart had been in his boots at the prospect of a big loss, was now tremulous with hope, and watched the Missing Link anxiously. Mahdi scraped and picked at the grass with a diverting show of monkey antics, sniffed at the boiler in which the leg of mutton had been cooked, and backed away nearer Heeley, with a yowl of consternation as his nose encountered the scalding water. Dan Heeley was diverted, he laughed aloud, but he had a cautious eye on his victims the while, for all he held them cheaply.

Mahdi, the man-monkey, sniffed about the stump, and capered foolishly. He looked with ape-like curiosity at Heeley's horse, then made an impish jump at the animal, grinning and growling savagely. The horse threw up his head, snorted in terror, and pulled back, dragging Heeley with him, broke free, and bolted into the night. Cursing wildly, Heeley ran for his revolver. He ran with his nose on to the barrel of it.

One was there before him—the Missing Link. The revolver was held in Mahdi's shaggy paw, pointed straight at Heeley's head, and the animal gibbered in guttural fury, snarling and showing ugly white fangs. It was a sight to deter the boldest; it shocked Dan Heeley, the Bold Dan Heeley, who had never trembled at the sight of a living thing—when he had the drop on it—and he drew up sharply and recoiled a step.

Then he swore a big black oath, and his right hand went to his hip. It was an unwise action; the Missing Link anticipated the evil intention and fired. A second revolver fell from Mr. Heeley's right hand. Dan's shooting arm was broken.

The Missing Link advanced with movements and howls significant of horrible ferocity. Dan Heeley backed before it, white to the lips. At this point the Professor plucked up courage and advanced upon Heeley.

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Dan offered no resistance, his arm was broken, and he was completely paralysed by the insistence of the monster attacking him. Five minutes later Dan, Heeley, the Bold Birragua Boy, was securely tied to a tree, with about three fathoms of inch manila, and the Professor's cash box, with its proper contents increased by certain sums that were illegally Heeley's, was safely bestowed in its locker again.

"What was the price you said the Government had put on your head, Dan, my boy?" asked Professor Thunder. "Two hundred and fifty of the best? It's mine, Daniel."

Heeley made no reply; his frightened eyes were fixed on the man-monkey cowering in the shade, with the revolver tight in its right hand.

"The Missing Link will watch over you to-night, Dan," continued the Professor, jauntily. "He's as strong as ten men, so don't try tricks with him."

But the Professor did not get that L250. At day-break, to Heeley's great amazement, the huge monkey cut him free, and made no attempt to resist his flight. Nicholas Crips had very satisfactory reasons for not being mixed up in a long, legal ceremonial such as the handing of Heeley over to the police would have entailed. Nicholas remembered a certain strange adventure in Bigg's Buildings, and his desire was to give the police of Victoria as wide a berth as the most exclusive officer could possibly long for.

CHAPTER XII.

A curious mischance at Bullfrog.

Professor thunder freely admitted that Nickie the Kid was by far the best Missing Link he had ever met.

"There ain't your equal in the whole profession, my boy," he said, clapping the man-monkey heartily between the shoulder blades, "and if you go on improving your interpretation and developing the character, by the Lord Harry, I believe it'll be worth our while to do a world's tour one of these days."

In consideration of Mahdi's perfections the Professor had twice generously raised his salary by half a-crown a week.

"There isn't a Woolly Man o' the Woods or a Wild Man from Borneo now on the roads' drawing the salary you are, Crips," said the Professor. "Two pounds two and six a week is princely pay for a Missing Link. Let me tell you there are stars playing Romeo and Hamlet that aren't getting such good money, my boy."

Nickie certainly deserved his munificent salary, as he was the best draw in the museum, and was improving the attractiveness of the show weekly, with bright ideas and new

schemes for inciting the interest of the Professor's bucolic customers. It was Nickie suggested the idea of a ride through Bullfrog town ship in character.

"I'm afraid, my boy," said the Professor, "it's risky—very risky. You'll be giving the game away one of these days, and once it gets about that Professor Sullivan Thunder's marvellous and only-living Missing Link is a fake, the metropolitan press will be down on me like a ton of bricks, and I'll come to running a Punch and Judy show at baby parties in my old age."

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"My dear Professor, have a bit of enterprise," replied the Missing Link, "we are not drawing well! Bullfrog wants waking up. Run out the caravan, and take a turn through the township, with the cornet playing and me riding ahead on the black mare, and we are bound to make an impression. Get through at a good bat, and they won't have time to look twice at the man-monkey before it's all over. Just a dash through and back to the tent, and we can be under cover again before they're fairly out of their houses. I tell you, sir, it will make Bull frog wild with curiosity."

Madame Marve, the Egyptian Mystic, favoured the scheme, and Professor Thunder agreed. The caravan was prepared, and Madame Marve, wearing a much bespangled, but rather seedy, pantomime, fairy costume, stood by the box seat, playing a lively air on the cornet; Professor Thunder, with a flowing mane of hair and a Buffalo Bill rig-out, drove the horses. From the sides of the big vehicle hung highly-coloured posters, while above flared the name of the show in long, red letters.

The black mare Nickie rode was one of the three hired to drag the Museum into Bullfrog. She was a rather spirited little beast, and had shown great perturbation when Mr. Crips, in his full make-up as Mahdi, the Missing Link, approached to mount. Now she cantered ahead at a smart pace, still nervous about the monstrous thing upon her back. The caravan came rattling after, Professor Thunder keeping up a volley of whip cracks, and Madame tooting gaily.

It was early in the day, and the township had lain drowsing in its dust under the shimmer of a great yellow sun till this astonishing invasion struck it, and startled it from its accustomed lethargy. There was a rush to windows and doors, men fell over each other struggling from Harvey's bar, a sudden mutiny arose in the little wooden school, and children swarmed at the windows, and poured pell-mell from the doors. The people of Bullfrog caught only a fleeting glimpse of a huge monkey crouched man-wise on a gaily caparisoned pony, of Madame Marve in her fairy costume, and the gaudy caravan, as the small procession dashed past.

But Constable Cobb, who was drowsing against the shoemaker's doorpost, saw the amazing thing on the horse approaching as in a dream, and professional zeal uppermost in his mind, he dashed into the toad, and grabbed at the rein. The mare, already much distressed, lost her head entirely at this rude intervention of the law, and rearing high on her hind legs as she beat the air with her hoofs, plunged wildly, and then bolted, leaving Constable Cobb on the broad of his back, half stifled in the dust, with the imprint of a horseshoe on his elegant helmet.

The mare did the circuit of Bullfrog at a furious pace, with the Missing Link hanging about her neck, and slinging to her ribs with insistent heels. Never had Bullfrog experienced such a shaking up. People came running in all directions, eager to see this marvellous thing. The township was almost obscured in its own dust, and through the

clouds of her own creating came the little mare, scattering the horrified inhabitants, who caught only fleeting glimpses of the huge, hairy creature sprawling in the saddle.

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When Nickie at length regained his stirrups, and worked himself into an upright position, he found the mare racing along a rough road between walls of bush, heading towards Tollbar, whence she had come on the previous day.

Nickie the Kid was not expert as an equestrian. So far he had clung to the horse with desperate tenacity, and now that he had recovered his mental grip to some extent he could think of nothing to restrain the animal's wild career, but he did think of the awful possibilities of his position, one of which was an apparent certainty. The horse would carry him back to Tollbar, to its owner's stable, the township would be drawn together by the extraordinary spectacle of a horse bolting through the place mounted by a gigantic monkey, the fraud would be discovered, and then the inhabitants would deal in their own gentle, characteristic way with the man who had been party to Professor Thunder's shocking imposition. Two days earlier Tollbar had patronised the museum.

These cheerful thoughts occupied Nickie's mind while the mare was negotiating about five miles, and wearing much of the wool off Mahdi, and not a little cuticle off Mr. Crips; but he was saved the dread ordeal he anticipated by another disaster. The mare caught a hoof in a rut and came down heavily, and presently Nickie recovered consciousness, lying on his back, blinking at the blue sky, gratified to find that he was not dead.

The mare was out of sight, and the Missing Link was at large in the bush, with a damaged head, a sprained ankle, a cracked rib, and a pain in every limb. He arose and shook some, of the dust off himself, and then limped from the road and sat in the shade of a tree, with his back to the butt, to consider his lamentable situation and feel his injuries.

Nickie's position was certainly an unpleasant one. He could not walk back to Bullfrog, because he would be certain to meet people by the way, and the sight of a Missing Link prowling in the Australian hush might lead to disaster. In any case, the sprained ankle made a five-mile walk impossible. Nickie could not strip off his monkey make-up, because of the very scanty undergarments he possessed.

"What the deuce am I to do now?" groaned the victim, gently chafing his bruises.

He was answered by a shrill scream, an energetic and most piercing feminine yell of terror, and lifting his startled eyes he beheld a young girl, clad after the manner of a settler's daughter, standing a few yards away, staring at him with wild horrified eyes. The girl's fingers were clutching her hair, her face was white, her limbs convulsed, she seemed glued to the spot, incapable of movement, but power of screaming remained with her, and she exerted it to the utmost—she screamed, and screamed, and screamed again, the bush resounded with the echoes of her agonised cries.

For a moment Nickie stared back in blank surprise. It had not struck him that he was the occasion of this frantic demonstration, but presently he realised that a little

screaming was excusable in an excitable young lady coming suddenly upon a full-grown missing link drowsing under the gums in her native bush.

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Nickie arose, he advanced a step. His intentions were honourable he meant to offer a full explanation, with apologies, but the girl did not wait; at his first movement she swung round and fled through the trees, still screaming.

The Missing Link sat down again with a sigh. Anyhow there must be a residence near, he was not destined to perish in the bush; but the girl would rush home with a shocking tale of some hideous monster in the paddock, her male relations would come to hunt down that monster. Nickie had had experience of such hunters; he remembered that they carried guns, and that they were not disposed to delay shooting in order to argue with a monkey about the sacredness of life.

Mr. Crips had a ready mind, and his peculiar career had taught him the necessity of prompt action. With eager hands he pulled off his monkey skin, rolled it up, and stuffed it into a hollow log, with the head-piece and mask; and then with his singlet he rubbed the make-up off his face, rubbing off a fair amount of hide in his eagerness. After this he set to work tearing up the grass tufts, and creating evidence of a struggle. The blood from a cut in his head came in most useful; he made as big a show as possible with it. Nicholas Crips next lay down amid the ruin he had wrought.

Nickie had not long to wait. About twenty minutes later he saw an elderly man and a youth coming hurriedly through the trees, looking about them eagerly. Each carried a gun. He sat up and beckoned, and they hastened to him, not a little astonished to find a strange man clad only in torn singlet and drawers lying there in the depths of the bush.

"Hullo, mate," said the elder man, "what's amiss?"

Nickie groaned aloud. "Horrible!" he gasped. "Horrible! Horrible!"

The man raised him. "I say, you've been knocked about," he said. "Have you seen anythin'?"

Nickie nodded feebly. "Yes," he said, "a monkey, an orang-outang, or something, as big as a man. An awful brute."

"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped the man. "Then Nell was right. My daughter came home in a fit; she said a monkey bigger'n me had chased her."

"It's true," murmured Nickie. "It chased me. We had a terrible fight. It tore all my clothes off about a mile and a half back there near the creek. I escaped, and it chased me here, and we fought again. I thought my end had come, when it must have heard you, and it made off through the bush towards the mountain, going like the wind."

"By cripes!" ejaculated the youth in an awed voice.

"Did he hurt yeh much?" asked the man.



“My ankle’s sprained, and I’ve got a broken rib and a cut head,” answered Nickie; “but losing my clothes is the worst. What is a man to do without his clothes?”

“You get up to the house, Billy, and bring down my Sunday things,” said the settler. “We’ll fix you up all right, mister,” he added, addressing Nickie the Kid, and Nickie smiled warily, and uttered feeble thanks.

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They dressed Nickie and took him up to the house and fed him, and then drove him back to Bullfrog in their spring cart, delivering him into the hands of Madame Marve, who manifested great joy on receiving back the unparalleled Missing Link in fairly good condition.

Nickie had explained to the settler that he believed the orang-outang that attacked him had escaped from Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels and that he intended claiming damages.

Later in the day Nickie and the Professor drove out and recovered Mahdi's outfit from the hollow log, and that evening the Missing Link was again on view, and exciting much interest, although he sullenly refused to any further demonstration for the edification of the people of Bullfrog.

CHAPTER XIII.

The widow and the link.

The Museum of Marvels was "resting" at Devil's Head. The Professor was resting, personally and particularly, on a stretcher bed in a small, hot, fly-infested room in "The Devil's Head" Hotel, pending the mending of divers injuries sustained in a disaster that put the show temporarily out of action. Thunder did not travel with his own horses, finding it much cheaper to hire a team to pull his caravan from one pitch to another. The pair of bays engaged to tow the museum, and traps and wares from Field Hill to Corner Stone had been so upset by the eccentric conduct of a frenzied inebriate, who fled along the stone road in a woman's nightdress, being pursued by purely imaginary griffins, dodoes, unicorns and dragons, all in primary colours, that they wheeled and bolted with the whole caboodle, and running into a bridge railing upset Professor Thunder and Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels into Billy's Creek, greatly to the detriment of the show, and to the serious discomfort of the Professor who was pulled from under Ammonia, the gorilla, just when that amusing animal had almost succeeded in stifling him in the slurry for which Billy's Creek was famous.

While the Professor rested and underwent repairs, and whiled his time negotiating for damages with the owner of the horses and the frantic person in the woman's nightdress, Matty Cann, the Living Skeleton, and Nicholas Crips, the Missing Link, were allowed their liberty. The Living Skeleton went home to the bosom of his affectionate family, with stern instructions to carefully regulate his diet, and Nickie went on to Winyip, sworn to preserve professional secrets, and bound to hold himself in readiness for resumption of duties at a day's notice.

Nickie wore a good suit of store clothes, he bore on his rascally head quite a reputable hat, his linen was fairly meritorious, his boots were above reproach, he wore socks like

a man accustomed to luxuries, he was clean-shaven, he jingled money in his pocket. In his varied career Nickie had had ups and downs; true, his “ups” had been brief, but they were frequent enough to keep him almost in touch with respectability. At Winyip, a considerable township in its way, he passed quite easily for a dramatic artist taking rest and change to dissipate brain fag, the result of too studious application to his art.

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When the Professor was himself again he called his company together and descended upon Corner Stone. The caravan remained at Corner Stone for a night and a day, and then moved on to Winyip. Nickie the Kid, for some reason of his own, strongly opposed the trip to Winyip; possibly because he was reluctant to appear as a mere man-monkey with a demoralised head and a rudimentary tail in a township in which he had recently figured to great advantage as Crips Nicholas, the eminent Shakespearean actor.

Winyip proved to be an excellent show town and Mahdi, the Missing Link, came in for a good deal of attention, although his performance was more subdued than ordinarily, and he showed little of the actor's natural anxiety to monopolise the limelight, but a local moral reformer wrote to the "Winyip Advertiser and Porkkakeboorabool Standard" enlaring on the shocking action of a depraved showman in keeping this poor heathen, which was "almost a human creature," confined in a cage like a beast of the field. The disputation that followed was kept alive by Professor Thunder.

People flocked to see the wonderful man-monkey, and on the afternoon of the second day came a tall, stern woman of about forty. She was nearly six feet high, her nose was large, her chin small and sliding, and she wore glasses. Across her left arm she nursed a large, shabby umbrella, and her habitual expression was that of one who has discovered a smell of drains.

This big woman was very curious. She peered into every hole and corner, she examined Bonypart, the Living Skeleton, very closely through her glasses, looking critically at his features, and was equally curious with the monkeys. She even inspected Professor Thunder with such minuteness, and with such an air of one who has at last detected a shameful imposition, that at length the celebrated showman exclaimed with some grandeur: "Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm not an exhibit."

"Oh," gasped the female, "I beg your pardon. My name is Martha Spink; I live at 'The Nook.' Do you happen to know a—eh—theatrical person named Nicholas—Crips Nicholas?"

Professor Thunder had learned caution. "I fancy I have heard the name," he said.

"You haven't such a person in your employ?" said the lady.

"No," said the Professor, thoughtfully, as if mentally running over the names of numerous celebrities on his long pay-roll. "No, I am sure there is no artist of that name in my company."

"I'll find him," said Mrs. Spink, decisively, firing up, and making dangerous gestures with her umbrella. "Mark me, I'll find him, and when I do—" The sweep of her bulky gamp nearly knocked Bonypart off his platform.

“Carefully, ma’am, carefully,” said the Professor, “you came near breaking a valuable exhibit then. Living Skeletons have to be handled gingerly, madam. I am sure the ruffian deserves all you can give him. May I inquire what villain’s work he is guilty of?”

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"He's been proposin' marriage, that's what he's been doin'," cried Mrs. Spink. "I'm a widder lady, and he's been proposin' marriage to Me."

"Dangerous, dangerous—very dangerous," said the Professor.

The Living Skeleton looked apprehensively towards the cage of the Missing Link, and Mahdi growled fiercely and retreated into the shadows.

"He stayed at my house two weeks," continued the widow, "paid nothing for board and residence, but made me an honourable proposal of marriage, and then ran off. But I'll find him."

The Professor was called away to give his scholarly address on the Darwinian hypothesis for the edification of his patrons, and the fierce female hung on the outskirts of the audience, and examined the exhibits suspiciously. When Thunder came to that scale of creation represented by the Missing Link, Nickie exhibited great ferocity, growling and gnashing his teeth in a most terrifying manner, but keeping sedulously to the shadows at the back of the cage. Madame Marve stirred him up with the long stick kept for the purpose, and the Professor dwelt with feeling on the worst features of the animal's character. Mrs. Spink peered with especial eagerness.

Mrs. Martha Spink paid twice for admission before sundown, and at night she came again. She betrayed extraordinary curiosity concerning the characteristics and peculiarities of missing links, and her concern had a powerful effect upon Mahdi. His diffidence was so marked that the Professor was constrained to excuse it in his descriptive address. "The poor animal is afflicted with toothache to-day," he said. "Like the best of us he has his morbid moments."

"S'pose she'll be lookin' yeh up agen t'day, Nickie," whispered the Living Skeleton through Mahdi's bars next morning.

The Missing Link snorted. "I wish the Professor would bet out of this hole," he said. "If that terrific creature discovers the truth, I am lost."

Nickie had not left the cage all night, preferring to sleep in his skin rather than risk a sudden descent on the part of the enemy.

"What'd yeh do it fer?" said the Skeleton; "a great lath-an'-plaster she-emu like that, too."

"Not having anything else to do, Matthew," moaned the Missing Link. "I always was tender with women."

"Well, yiv gotter look out, ol' man. If she nails yer, yer a gone link, that's er cert."

“For two pins I’d retire from the profession,” said Nickie. “It exposes a man to too much temptation.”

The lorn widow did not appear that morning. The afternoon passed, and Mrs. Spink had not been heard from. There was a good crowd in at half-past eight, and Professor Thunder was giving his instructive and entertaining description of the life and habits of the Missing Link in the dark jungles of Central Africa. The Link had recovered confidence somewhat. He ventured to show himself at the front of the cage, he capered and gibbered, and at that point where Thunder dwelt upon the courage and fierceness of the man-monkey in fighting for his young, Nickie jumped forward, clawing through the bars, and uttering blood-curling growls.

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At that moment his eye fell upon a face that thrust itself forward out of the press; his gaze encountered the eager scrutiny of a grim, green eye, behind glass. It was the eye of Widow Spink.

"It's him," cried the widow. She rushed for ward; she battered at the Missing Link with her umbrella, and the terrified animal retreated to his straw. "You villain!" screamed Mrs. Spink, "you double-dyed, lyin' villain, I've got you!" She was reaching as far as possible through the bars, prodding at the man-monkey, and the audience were gazing in stupid surprise.

"Madam, madam, my dear madam!" expostulated the Professor, "you must not irritate the animals."

He pulled her back from the cage.

"Don't tell me," cried the justly-indignant widow. "I know him I'd know him out of a thousand, robber of the widow and the orphan that he is."

The Professor spoke to her soothingly.

"There, there, madam, do not excite yourself, you'll be all right in the morning."

"Meanin' I'm drunk!" shrieked the widow, raising her gingham threateningly. "I know what I'm talking about. He promised me marriage."

She made another lunge at the Missing Link.

"Yes, he did; he said we'd be married in a fortnight, the villain, and I'll have the law on him."

"Most distressing hallucination," said the Professor, pressing Mrs. Spink through the crowd. "Will nobody take charge of the poor lady?"

He pushed her towards the door, the crowd following, delighted with the unexpected diversion, confident that Mrs. Spink was drunk or mad. The widow retired, fighting, the people pressing her.

"I'll have the law on him," screamed Mrs. Spink. "I'll have a thousand pounds damages for breach of promise. I'll teach him, deceivin' a lone widder, the villain!"

Outside she enlarged upon her wrongs, telling the crowd of the infamous conduct of these actors, who go about the country imposing upon innocence and virtue. She went off, still flourishing her sturdy gamp, and reiterating her determination to have the law on the infamous Missing Link.

“That widow means business, Crips, my boy,” said the Professor after the show; “somethin’s got to be done. She swears she’ll see a lawyer, and she will. Now look here, I can’t have my Missing Link dragged into a law suit. If you get sued for breach of promise, you’re no good to me, the game’s up so far as missing links are concerned, and my show’s reputation gone. Is this to be the end of a long and honoured public career? What’s to be done?”

Madame Marve, Letitia, Matty Cann, Nickie, and even the educated pig sat in council to consider ways and means of averting the pending catastrophe, and Nickie bore the fierce rebukes showered upon him with proper humbleness. Never was seen a more depressed and humiliated missing link.

The next day was Sunday and in the morning, dressed becomingly in his part as the naturalist and teacher, Professor Thunder called upon the Widow Spink at “The Nook,” and held a long consultation with her. As a result of the Professor’s arguments, the lady was persuaded to visit the Museum of Marvels and have a private audience with the Missing Link.

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The widow said she was going to town to see a lawyer on Monday morning, but agreed to Professor Thunder's proposal, and called on the Missing Link in his cage.

"I think, madam, you will admit that you are mistaken," said the Professor, at the door of the cage, "and will see that you have cast a serious aspersion on the character of an innocent animal and the genuineness of a reputable museum." He stirred up the huge, hairy body lying in the straw in the Missing Link's cage. "If you come inside the creature may attack you, but you are welcome to do so."

Mrs. Spink, after looking closer at the hideous head the Professor lifted out of the straw, and brought close to her own at the back bars, decided not to enter the cage. She had a painful impression that perhaps she was mistaken after all.

"I admit, madam, that we build the animal up to some extent to make him look large. That is a mere showman's trick, and innocent enough in itself, but I am determined to convince you that this is a genuine man-monkey, as your story has done me much mischief in my profession. Pray look closely at the beast."

Mrs. Spink did look closely. There was not the slightest doubt that the animal she beheld, although somewhat faked, was one of the monkey tribe. She confessed her error, she became contrite and tearful, and promised an apology if the Professor would not persist in his threatened action for defamation of character.

"I was told the wretch was seen with your company," said the tearful Mrs. Spink.

When the widow was well out of range, Nickie crept from the tent of the Egyptian Mystic, and breathed a great sigh of relief.

"I shall probably never make love to a widow again," he said, sadly; "they are so ungrateful."

He was dressed in his ordinary clothes, and the creature in the Missing Link's cage sprang towards him spitting and clawing spitefully. It was Ammonia, the Gorilla, in the Missing Link's skin, padded and faked to twice his size to deceive a poor, weak woman.

"I believe after all we ought to frighten something in the way of compensation out of the gorgon," said Nickie, vengefully. Our reprobate hero was a man who knew no remorse of conscience.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mardi has A night off.

Professor thunder was hurt in his professional pride by the signal failure of his Museum of Marvels in Rabbit township. In the first place, the great impresario had been guilty of a grievous blunder in selecting Rabbit for a two-night's pitch, but things had been going so remarkably well of late, due mainly to the eccentric adventures of the Missing Link, that the boss was getting proud, and was beginning to feel that his astounding galaxy of unparalleled attractions would draw well in the dead centre of the Old Man Plain. Rabbit township was making his error plain to him.

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Usually when the caravan bounded into a township, with the little bells on the horses jingling gaily, and Madame Marve, dressed in a somewhat brief and too youthful costume, enthroned on the box seat, playing a rattling tune on the cornet, the people turned out in crowds to welcome it, and the children swarmed, eager for a peep at the hidden mysteries.

It was different at Rabbit township.

The caravan dashed into Rabbit with the customary velocity and the regulation rattle, but Rabbit did not trouble itself.

“Blarst my eyes!” growled the Professor, when the camp was made; “even the dogs didn’t bark! What sort of a boneyard is this we’ve struck?”

As a matter of fact, Rabbit was a moribund township. The rabbits had eaten up the surrounding country, and now they were beginning to eat up the township. So voracious was bunny that when a man went missing it was gloomily concluded that the rabbits had eaten him, and the township took no action, subsiding in despair. Most of the people had left. Those who remained did so because they couldn’t afford to shift, or because they were too lazy to go.

Professor Thunder had been doing good business, and his expenses were light. He could afford to play tricks, but he played a foolish prank in trying to amuse Rabbit township. Rabbit was incapable of being amused.

There remained an open hotel at Rabbit, and the Professor called on its proprietor to gather useful information concerning the inhabitants, their tastes and habits. He found Schmitz, the portly proprietor, sprawling on his own bar counter, embracing a bottle of squareface with a loving hug. The two arms of Schmitz caressed the bottle, his cheek was pressed amorously to the cork. The eye of Schmitz was small and round, and seemed to be filled with pink cobweb, his hair was in a state of tumult, and was full of chips, suggesting that he had recently slept on the wood heap. Schmitz had a fierce, red moustache, that looked as if it had been trimmed on a block with an adze.

The publican blinked stupidly at the world-famous showman for a moment, trying to pick him out from a number of unnatural curiosities careering before him, and then he said, decisively: “Ged oud of mein ’ous’.”

“My dear fellow,” said the Professor, urbanely, “I suppose you will serve me with some little refreshment?”

“Refreshmend?” muttered the landlord. “Refreshmend?” His intellect struggled to grasp the situation. Suddenly it became luminous. “Nein!” he yelled. “I vill nod you mid refreshmend serve! Nein! I keep him all for meinseluf. Ged oud!”

“But, Mr. Schmitz,” expostulated the Professor.

“Ged oud of mein ‘ous’. I know vot you want, ain’t id? You want to buy mein liquer. Veil, I don’d sell some liquer to nopody. Der ain’t sufficiency for mieinseluf. Ged oud! Tam you, ged oud kvick!” Schmitz caught up a bottle in quick rage, and dashed it at Professor Thunder.

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The Professor pursued his investigations no further. The tent was pitched, the museum was arranged for an afternoon performance, and the unrivalled showman, to whose enterprise Rabbit owed this chance of improving its mind and enlivening its leisure, took his stand outside, and endeavoured to awaken the township to a sense of its opportunities. For three-quarters of an hour he poured forth a stream of eloquence at the top of his pitch. After the first quarter of an hour he was appreciated by a tired dog, which drifted up, and barked at him in a desultory way. Later, he was becoming discouraged when a tattered youth, wearing a hat that nearly engulfed him, came and stared at him open-mouthed, stupidly, silently, for twenty minutes. This youth was the township idiot. Nobody else troubled to come out and see what all the noise was about.

"We're got to shake up the township, Nickie," Thunder said.

"Well, go out and shake it, Professor—I'm tired."

"No, Nickie, you've got to do the shaking. See here, the place is dead. I don't believe it ever heard of Professor Thunder and his world-famous Missing Link; I don't think it has discovered that anything unusual has happened along. You must escape from your cage to-night, and scare the life half out of some of these miserable mummies, then I'll come along and recapture you. That should excite some curiosity, and perhaps bring in money to-morrow'."

Nickie yawned lazily. "Oh, all right," he said, getting back to his straw; "but mind there are no guns. I've an objection to being hunted with guns—it's too wearing."

That night a large, hairy animal of a species hither to unknown at Rabbit, made its way along the deserted main street of the township. The animal walked upright, like a huge monkey, its long hands swung below its knees. Mahdi had not gone a hundred yards when a large, stout man lurched out of the shadow of a tree and fell upon him.

The large, stout man smelt strongly of consumed drink. He clasped the Missing Link to his breast for a moment, then swayed back, holding on with one hand. In the other hand he flourished a bottle.

"Goot day, mein bruder; how are you?" he gurgled. Nickie growled his most terrible growl, and the stranger made some little show of surprise. "Vot is it der madder?" he said. "Blitzen, dot's a peaudiful winter overcload vot you year mit der summer. Come'n haff er drink." He held the bottle towards Nickie the Kid. It was a bottle of square gin. All kinds of bottles were fascinating to Nickie.

Mahdi faltered. Nickie was very partial to square gin, and although the Missing Link had a proper sense of duty, the inner man was weak.

"Helup vourseluf, Sharlie," said Schmitz.

Nickie helped himself. He helped himself liberally. Schmitz fell on Mahdi's neck, and embraced him freely. "Mein goot friend," he gurgled, "I like you. You shplended fellow. Dot's so, sure. Come mit me, my 'ous' to, und ye make a night mid it." He embraced Nickie again.

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"All der same," he said, in a puzzled tone, "I don't know me vy you vear dot hairy overcoad dose hot nides. Haff er drink."

The Missing Link, standing grimly outlined in the darkness, raised the bottle in his two prehensile paws, and drank health to Schmitz.

"Goot man," said Schmitz, embracing him again. "Now con mit me to my 'ous' to, und we make the night." He grappled with Nickie, and the two seesawed towards Schmitz's hotel. The place was in complete darkness; the bar door was wide open.

Schmitz dragged Nickie through the bar, with much bumping and more breaking of glass, into a back compartment, and there he fumbled for matches, forgot his mission, and sang a German song very drearily, stopping suddenly to say:

"Vere haf you gone mit yourseluf, mein goot friend? Vot is der madder mit der lightness."

He fumbled again. Nickie was in no hurry, he had the gin bottle.

Schmitz found the matches, and lit a candle on the shelf. He turned drunkenly towards Nickie, and beheld what must have been a strange and mysterious sight to a commonplace Dutchman in his own home. Sitting on a chair facing him, with the gin bottle raised to his lips, was a mighty monkey—a great, red, hairy ape, as large as a man.

The publican scratched his head wonderingly.

"Mein gracious!" he said.

"Dot iss a sdrange ting dot haff happened mit you, Sharlie," he said, in a wondering, small voice.

"Sharlie!" he called. "Sharlie!" The Missing Link gave no reply.

"Pless mein soul!" gasped the Dutchman.

Suddenly a gleam of intelligence shot through the publican's boosy gloom. He pointed a finger straight at Nickie, lurched towards him, crossed the room in a stagger, and drove his inquiring digit against the mysterious visitor. The mysterious visitor was solid.

Schmitz was beaten.

"Sharlie," he said, "is it true dot you vos, or is it true dot you aind't?"

Nickie offered him the bottle in a friendly way, and Schmitz took it and drank. The draught seemed to abolish all problems.

“Now ye make dot night, Sharlie,” said Schmitz. He staggered into the bar, and returned with an armful of bottles—all full of liquor. With the adroitness of an expert he knocked the head off a bottle of schnapps. “Dot is for you, Sharlie,” he explained. The Missing Link assumed possession.

Schmitz knocked the head off another.

“Dot one for me iss,” he said.

Then the night began. The Dutchman drank and sang and danced, and a hundred times assured the Missing Link of his undying friendship. True, he had occasional spasms of reawakened amazement, when he would gaze at the man-monkey in stupid wonder, saying: “I don’t understand me, Sharlie,” but Nickie’s extremely human manner of disposing of gin seemed to reassure him, and he would burst into song again.

In due course Nickie grew jovial, and lost all sense of his make-up and his professional reputation, and he sang, too, and caper exuberantly about Schmitz’s kitchen, while Schmitz, reclining in a corner on the floor, shook his fat sides with gargantuan roars of laughter. The sight of this gigantic ape dancing a Highland Fling stirred the drunken Dutchman to wildest merriment; he howled with delight.

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“Goot, goot! Some more Sharlie!” he yelled. “Dance, dance. Mein Gott, dot’s der greadest sight I effer haff see me.”

This was the strange and awful spectacle Mrs. Schmitz tumbled upon, returning from a week’s stay at Rattletrap. Her screams brought the red-headed stable boy to the rescue.

Two minutes later, while Mrs. Schmitz was assuring one section of Rabbit township that her poor, miserable husband had sold his soul to hell, and was at that moment dancing fiendish dances with the devil himself in her kitchen, a red-headed youth, almost beside himself with horror, was stirring up the other section with the tale of Dutchy Schmitz howling mad in the hotel, while a great, hairy, hideous jim-jam capered on the floor before him.

Rabbit was stirred at last. Professor Thunder was made unpleasantly aware of the fact when he discovered a crowd of patriots surrounding Schmitz’s, preparing to burn out the devils that possessed it, having peeped timidly at the windows; and assured themselves of the unearthly nature of Schmitz’s guest.

The Missing Link, with Schmitz on his arm, came rolling from the back door, roaring and brandishing a bottle. The crowd broke and fled before them, and a minute later the bosom friends were rocking down the road together, singing insanely.

How to recapture Nickie was the showman’s real trouble now. He knew that persuasion would be useless with Nickie in his present state, and resolved to try force. He grappled with Nickie in the street, and Nickie, now feeling like a king in his own right, and valiantly asserting his majesty, resented this impudent interference, and fought with fine, royal spirit. For a moment or two Dutchy failed to realise the situation, and then, roaring like a bull, and swinging a bottle of stone gin, he went at the Professor.

The bottle took Thunder in the back of the head. It ought to have killed him, but it didn’t—it merely stretched him on the road unconscious. When he recovered he was on a couch in the hotel, with his head wrapped in a tablecloth, and day was breaking. No body knew what had become of Dutchy and the Missing Link, and the Professor returned to the tent, with a soul seething bitterness. He found Nickie in his cage, sleeping soundly, and alongside him on the straw lay the bulky form of Schmitz, the publican, in whose hand was still clutched a bottle of stone gin. The Missing Link had returned hospitality for hospitality, and side by side like brothers dear the carousers slept.

CHAPTER XV.

Hobbs versus Mahdi.

It was shortly after noon, and the day was warm and still. No one was stirring in Waddy. Professor Thunder had given up the idea that his eloquence could conquer the general lassitude, and was snoring in the tent of the Egyptian Mystic. Madame Marve was shopping in the township, and Matty Cann, the Living Skeleton, had come down from his throne and was curled up on a horse-rug. Ammonia, the orang-outang, sprawled on the floor of his cage, and the other monkeys were chattering angrily.

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Nickie sat with his back to the wall of his compartment, sweltering in the hot garb of the Missing Link, drowsing and day-dreaming of beer. He thought he was sitting in a sylvian glade, with an attendant nymph, where a cascade splashed over crystal rocks, and the cascade was beer—all beer.

“Ello there!” said a thick voice. Someone was shaking the bars of the cage. “Get up and do some thin’, blarst yer eyes! What have I paid yeh for?” continued the voice.

Tish had taken sixpence at the door, and admitted a patron without giving due warning to the exhibits. It was a rule that the public was not to be admitted to the Museum of Marvels without proper notice being given to the company. The precaution was necessary to obviate the chance of the Egyptian Mystic being discovered in the act of preparing onions for the stew, or engaged upon some other menial task, to the destruction of her dignity and mystery as a distinguished foreigner with supernatural powers. Or the people might have come upon the Missing Link in heated debate with the Living Skeleton, or in the hearty enjoyment of a long beer, or possibly reading a sentimental novel.

Nickie bared the long tusks of his mask in a malignant grin, but did not stir. He couldn’t be expected to waste his arts and graces on a common drunk.

The man rattled the bars of the cage again. “‘Ello! ‘Ello!” he cried, “shake yourself up! Le’s see what yer made of. Get goin’. Give us a specimen of yer arts.”

The Missing Link yawned hideously, stretching his long hairy limbs, and blinked his little eyes at the visitor.

“Tha’s not so bad,” growled the man. “You’re a bit of an artist, anyhow, but I reckon you ain’t nothin’ t’ some of the Missin’ Links I’ve come across in my time. I’ve been in the business myself, so you can’t monkey me, my man.”

Nickie sat up, growled in his best style, and scratched with the dull laziness of a tired ape.

“‘Ere, ‘ere,” cried the man, “‘ere, ‘ere, Bravo! Not too rotten That’s first rate monkey business, take it from Ivo Hobbs. Let me interdoose myself. Mr. Mahdi. Ivo Hobbs, late o’ Kitts and Killjammer’s Whole World Show.”

Nickie walked along the back wall of his cage two or three times with simian ungainliness, turning with a peculiar spring that Mr. Crips had learned from the Orang.

“Good enough!” said. Ivo Hobbs. “Good enough. There’s no ticks on you, you’re a stoodent, I can see. How’s the game mate?”

It was necessary to convince this beery intruder of his grievous error in taking Professor Thunder' celebrated Missing Link, Mahdi, from the tangled jungles of Darkest Africa, for a cheap fake. Nickie sprang to the perch with great agility, caught it with one hand, slowly drew up a leg, hooked a hind claw to the bar and hung so, blinking unconcernedly.

"What oh!" said the audience, with enthusiasm.

"That's a bit of all right. You're a husker. But there ain't no reason for this reticence with a brother professional. I was the bearded woman with Kitts and Kiljammer's show for over two years, I was Shake, mate." The visitor thrust a hand through the bars.

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Nickie dropped from his swing, landing lightly on four paws, ambled daintily across the cage, ran up the bars, and seated himself on a limb propped in a corner.

The audience applauded generously.

“Bli’ me,” he cried, “you’re a fool t’ waste them talents on a side show like this. You orter hitch on at one o’ the great circuses.”

Nickie slid down the rope and resumed his leisurely scratching, prospected his ribs for a few seconds, and then made a sudden dash at Ammona, the orang, grappled with him through the bars, snatched away a little fur, and maintained a fierce scratching and snapping squabble for half a minute or so.

This was one of Nickie’s most effective bits of business. Whenever he heard an audience casting doubts on his authenticity as a genuine member of the monkey family, he work up a spluttering dispute with Ammonia and the battle was so realistic that it dispelled all doubts.

“Well I’m jiggered.” murmured Mr. Ivo Hobbs. “I could have sworn he was a fake.” He pressed more closely to the bars, and peered at Nickie with a critical, if somewhat beery eye, and the Missing Link posed languidly in a monkey attitude. Suddenly Ivo jabbed at him with a stick. The stick was pointed, and it took Nickie in the ear.

“Hell!” cried the Missing Link, bounding across his cage.

Ivo burst into a roar of laughter. “That’s all right, old bloke,” he said. “You’re a bonzer, but we all have our weak moments.”

Nickie was furious. This assault, combined with the heat and burden of the day, had dispelled his natural apathy. There was always a loose bar in the front of his cage, placed there for effect, so that the Missing Link might work up an occasional sensation by an apparent attempt to break away. Nickie dashed at this bar. It broke before him, and he came through, falling bodily on Ivo Hobbs, and bearing him to the ground. Ivo uttered a yell of apprehension. His beery doubts seemed to fly before this animal attack, and when he realised that he was being bitten and clawed mercilessly, he howled for help at the top of his voice.

Professor Thunder rushed from his slumber, and discovered his Missing Link and a total stranger rolling and tumbling on the ground. By this time Nickie had inflicted no little grievous bodily harm upon the unhappy Ivo, and he allowed Thunder and the Living Skeleton to drag him off, and thrust him back into the cage.

Ivo arose in great wrath.

“This is unprovoked assault and battery,” he cried, shaking his fist at the Missing Link.
“I’ll have the law on you.”

“But, my dear sir,” protested the Professor, “you must have provoked the poor animal.”

“Animal be blowed. You can’t jolly me. Think I don’t know a fake when I see one, I’ll have him run in in half a tick.”

Professor Thunder endeavoured to argue with Ivo, and hinted at compensation, but the injured man fled from the tent in a state of blind anger.

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"Let him go." said the Missing Link, vindictively. "He won't come back, He's had all the damages he wants."

But he did come back. Ivo returned in a quarter of an hour and he brought a policeman with him, and on their heels came quite a crowd, Professor Thunder, with business-like precision, charged a shilling a head to all seeking' admission.

"There he is!" cried Hobbs, "There he is!" He pointed to the Missing Link growling viciously and baring alarming fangs at the back of his cage. "I give him in charge for grievous assault and attempted murder."

"Come, what's all this, me friend?" asked Constable Dunne, addressing the Professor.

Hobbs had evidently had a few more beers to restore his faculties. He was now courageous enough, but vague in his mind and unsteady on his legs.

"The man irritated my Missing Link, and the animal attacked him, as he deserved," said the celebrated showman.

"Animal be blowed!" yelled Hobbs. "He's 'a man, and I give him in charge."

"Nonsense!" laughed the Professor; "The fellow's drunk!"

Constable Dunne peered at the Missing Link through the cage, and that intelligent animal never looked more malignant.

"A man" said the officer, dubiously; "sure, he ain't lookin' it."

"Arrest him!" said Ivo Hobbs.

"Devil a wan o' me," answered Dunne. "You'd better proceed by summons, me man. 'Tain't me juty to arrist monkeys, an 'twould not be becomin' t' the' dignity iv an officer iv th' law, anyway, t' be seen draggin' a baste iv thim proportions through the street."

Mr. Hobbs protested indignantly, and beerily, but the constable explained that according to a strict reading of the Act, dogs were not liable to arrest, "and in the oye iv th' law," he said, "monkeys is dogs." Eventually, Ivo Hobbs went away in Constable Dunne's company to take out a summons. The policeman endeavoured to persuade him to summon Professor Thunder, as the Missing Link's next of kin, but Hobbs stood drunkenly to his belief that the monkey was a man, and so the summons was made out against Mahdi, and was solemnly delivered, citing the Missing Link to appear at the Waddy Police Court on the following morning at 10 o'clock.

"Here's a pickle," growled the proprietor of the world-famous Museum of Marvels.

The Missing Link scratched his head over the document. “I’m nothing of a lawyer,” he said, “but I’ve had a good deal of experience of police courts, and never knew a monkey to be proceeded against for assault—in fact, nothing lower in the animal kingdom than a Chinaman is amenable to the law.”

As a result of a long conference, Professor Thunder went out that evening and cultivated the acquaintance of John Lidlow, J.P. John Lidlow, Esq., J.P., was the local butcher, and Professor Thunder found him a very companionable man with an amiable weakness for raw whiskey. Affectionately they made a night of it, and in the morning they had a mutual pick-me-up. The pick-me-up was concocted of knock-me-down rum and colonial beer, and ran into several editions.

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John Lidlow, Esq., J.P., was uncommonly sleepy and preternaturally solemn in court when the case of Hobbs versus Mahdi was called on for hearing. Ivo Hobbs explained his grievance clearly, and when the defendant was called upon, Professor Thunder stepped forward and explained:

"The defendant, Your Worship, is my justly-celebrated man-monkey, Mahdi, the Missing Link."

"Is he a man or a monkey?" asked the court, drowsily, opening one eye.

"He's a bit of both, but mainly monkey, Your Worship."

"It's a lie, he's a man," cried Hobbs.

"Silence in the Court!" said His Worship, with portentous hauteur, "or I'll give you ten days for contempt. The defendant must be brought before us."

"But, Your Worship," exclaimed the Professor, "it would not be safe, I assure you, The animal is wild. He was irritated by this man, it would not be safe to take him from his cage. He might attack the court."

"Eh, what's that?" ejaculated the magistrate. "Attack the court? We don't allow that kind of thing here. I'd give the beggar twelve months."

Constable Dunne whispered to the court, and Professor Thunder enlarged upon the shocking temper of the Missing Link when roused.

"Very well," said the Magistrate, "if he cannot be brought to this court, the court will go to him. Justice must be done. This court stands adjourned to Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels."

Very gravely John Lidlow, J.P., led the court to Professor Thunder's tents, and sedately he established himself behind a table before the cage of the Missing Link, and again the case was called on.

"The Missing Link pleads guilty, Your Worship," said Constable Dunne. Professor Thunder whispered to him. "Through his next iv kin, Yer Worship," continued Dunne.

"With extenuating circumstances. Your Worship," said the Professor. "This man attacked my Missing Link with a stick."

The Missing Link at this moment bounded against the front of the cage with a blood-curdling growl, making seemingly frantic efforts to get at Ivo Hobbs. One of the bars broke before his terrific onslaught, and through the apperture Mahdi snatched and snapped at his adversary of yesterday, growling horribly the while.

With a 'ell of terror Hobbs fled into a cement barrel.

The Missing Link flopped from his cage, and advanced upon the J.P.

The sight so upset the court in the person of John Lidlow that it sat for a moment, staring in blank horror across the table set for its convenience, then slowly tilted over in its chair, and fell heavily on the back of its neck, picked itself up, and made a bolt for the open. At the tent door the court turned for a moment, and cried breathlessly:

“Fined five shillings or two days,” and then it dashed out and away.

Professor Thunder paid the fine with the greatest goodwill, considering the advertisement an ample recompense. Besides this presentation at court was a useful testimony in support of the his claims of the Missing Link, and the Waddy Bugle’s grave account of the trial under “Police Court News” was added to the archives of the Museum.

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CHAPTER XVI.

The kidnappers.

Loo was a small triangular township, subsisting on agriculture, road traffic, and the patronage of thirsty shearers and station hands from runs within a half-day's ride of Sawyer's "Emu Hotel," which was the incisive point of the triangle.

Thunder's tent was pitched on a small clearing facing the "Emu Hotel." and Professor Thunder, clad somewhat after the manner of the bushranger in lurid Australian melodrama, in high boots, cord trousers, a red shirt, and an immense cabbage-tree hat, stood on a borrowed rum keg at the door of his show, and earnestly besought Sawyer's customers to visit his unrivalled show and complete their education.

"Roll up, gents, roll up, roll up, roll up!" cried the Professor, in a voice keyed to stir the whole town ship. "Bring your families to learn how man sprang from the ape, and when the ape's got claws like my gorilla's he shows his good sense in springing. Walk in, walk in, walk in, all together, one after the other, and witness the most miraculous performance of Madame Marve, the Egyptian Mystic, converse with the educated pig, and behold for the first time the amazing Missing Link, the wonder of the universe, the only true authentic Missing Link now in captivity, certified correct in every particular by the great Darwin himself, and approved by all the crowned heads of Europe."

It was Saturday noon, and the township of Loo was rapidly filling with convivial shearers. The sheds were cutting out at Dim Distance, Devil's Bend, and the Emu, and the men were full of money, and eager for beer and diversion.

When a score or so had collected inside, the Professor came down from his keg, and assumed the office of lecturer, explaining the quaint physical peculiarities of Matty Cann, and the intellectual eminence of the educated pig, and then passing to his trump card—the Missing Link.

"Here we have, gentlemen," he exclaimed, "a living exemplification of the truth of the teachings of the great Darwin. Behold the descent of man in all its stages, from the smallest ape that capers on the rocky declivities of the Himalaya Mountains, to the noble Missing Link himself, having the splendid proportions of the human man, and almost his god like intellect."

One party of four young shearers from Devil's Bend exhibited great interest in Mahdi.

"D'yeh mean t' say that animal's worth four thousan' quid?" asked one of these.

“Four thousand seven hundred pounds, fifteen shillings, is the exact sum what was offered me by the Anthropological Society of Berlin,” said the Professor, “but I wouldn’t part with him for ten thousand.”

The shearers marvelled together, and watched Mahdi’s movements with deep attention, and Nickie, acting up to instructions, glowered in the shade. When a visitor wanted to look into details, the Missing Link displayed quite human astuteness in retreating into cover in the gloom.

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"Suppose he's like us in most iv his ways?" continued Bill. "Does he smoke, 'r chew, 'r drink?"

"Its considered by the faculty and all the scientific gents that proof of his being a near relation to the human race is found in the fact that he has a weakness for intoxicating liquors," said the Professor, sadly. "We've tried to reform him, but he refuses to become teetotal, showing how much a man he is."

Bill and Ben and Mike and Fred applauded these sentiments. Then they returned to the Emu bar and had another drink.

"Four thousan' bloomin' quid fer a blanky monkey!" said Bill, and he looked dreamily at his companions. "Four thousand quid!" he added. "It's a sin."

"Now, supposin' that monkey was to get away! There'd be four thousan' o' th' best tearin' round in th' bush fer anyone t' drop on."

"He couldn't," said Mike, "outer that iron cage."

"He could," said Bill, "if he was helped." Ben, Mike and Fred woke up. They looked hard at Bill. Bill had a grave, still face. He winked his left eye suddenly.

"If he did escape there'd be a reward. I reckon," said Ben.

"Precisely," said Bill; "there'd be a reward. Now, if that Missin' Link could escape—if helped—and if there was a reward offered fer his capture, what's t' prevent us earnin' it?"

The shearers looked at each other gravely. Then they all winked.

"The spoutin' bloke sez he likes his fill iv tangle," said Bill, "well he'll get it t-night. I'm goin t' stand a spree fer me poor relation."

That night at about ten o'clock, when Professor Thunder was concentrating the attention of his patrons on the fascinating boniness of Matty Cann, Nickie, who was taking his ease on the straw, became aware of a slight disturbance at his elbow, between the back of his cage and the tent wall. Blinking his eyes he discovered the shape of a man in the darkness. The man held a pannikin in one hand, and was offering it through the bars.

"Here, old boy. Here old fellow," murmured the intruder, in a tone one adopts in propitiating strange dogs.

He shook the pannikin, and the Missing Link detected the familiar flavour of rum, good red-rum, bush rum. Nickie sniffed again, and backed away, growling a low, guttural growl. The Missing Link had a great tenderness for rum, the smell of it excited profound

longings, but he wanted time to deliberate. What was the game? “These fellows have heard Thunder describing Mahdi’s fondness for liquor,” thought Nickie. “They want to make him drunk, and see him play up. It’s a lark. Shall I encourage them? I can do it safely to a moderate extent. It’s like flying in the face of Providence missing drinks that are thrown at you. I’ll encourage them to the extent of one drink, anyhow. Here’s luck.”

The Missing Link seized that pannikin of rum, the Missing Link took a good, long pull, and in less than half a minute was curled up on the straw, dead to the world, a thoroughly hocused man-monkey.

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When Professor Thunder came to shake up his justly celebrated Link, he found the cage empty, and a bar wrenched from its place in the back wall. He drew his own conclusions—conclusions most unfavourable to Mahdi—and used his own language. He closed his show, and went raging about Loo township in quest of his stray freak.

Nickie the Kid awakened from a death-like sleep in the early hours of a warm summer Sunday. Dawn steeped the bush in crimson, the smoke of a dying camp-fire curled high in the air and its top most spiral caught the red glow of the young sun. About that camp-fire, twisted on their rugs and blankets on the grass in the quaint attitudes of out-door drunks, lay four shearers, Bill, Mike, Ben, and Fred. Near them were scattered various bottles, all empty.

Nickie rubbed his eyes with his hairy paw, and stared at the recumbent figures. His head seen as capacious as an iron tank, and every inch of it held a special and independent ache. The Missing Link was trying to think.

Understanding came in a flash. He had been stolen from the show. These rascals had given him hocused rum, and had got him away, probably tied to one of the horses. His aching limbs hinted at that, and he could see the horses grazing among the trees.

Nickie reviewed the situation. He was tethered to a tree, his bonds were stout, and his captors had not made sufficient allowance for the almost human intelligence of Professor Thunder's star performer. All about were scattered the utensils of a late supper, and with the aid of a stick the Link contrived to draw a knife within reach. With this he promptly cut the rope.

When free Nickie went quietly and deliberately to work to overhaul an open swag. He took a coat, pair of trousers, a pair of boots, and a hat, and with these under his arm retired to the bush to make his toilet.

An hour later three shearers, Bill, Fred, and Ben, riding at a gallop along the high road to Loo, came upon a man with a bundle walking cheerfully in the same direction. The horsemen pulled up.

"Hi, mate, have you seen anythin' of a strange sort of animal on this road?" cried Bill.

"Have I?" answered the man. "My word, I have! A great, big, red, hairy bunyip 'r somethin' charged out o' th' bush 'bout a mile back, bowled me over an' went howlin' down th' road in a cloud o' dust."

"Which way?" gasped Bill.

The pedestrian pointed in the direction of Loo. "That's th' way he went," he said. "Cripes, I'd a' thought I seen a fantod on'y I bin teetotal fer a year."

The shearers whipped up, and rode on at a gallop, and the man grinned after them with exquisite joy. "Well, life's worth living after all." said Nickie the Kid.

Before Sunday night it was known at Loo that the Missing Link, which had been stolen or had escaped, was once more safely bestowed in Professor Thunder's Museum, and when the show opened on Monday there was something like a run on it. With the curious crowd came Bill, Ben, and Fred, Mike having been left to keep camp. At the sight of the shearers before his cage, the Missing Link simulated a paroxysm of ungovernable rage. He bit, glared, roared, and reaching his mighty claws towards Bill, made murderous sweeps in the air, as if desirous of disembowelling that hapless young man.

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"That's curious," said Professor Thunder, regarding the shearer sternly. "My Link don't often go on like that, and when he does he has good reason. See here, young gentlemen, what did you have to do with the purloining of my man-monkey Saturday night?"

Bill protested fiercely. "Never put a hand on yer blanky monkey. Wouldn't touch him with er forty-foot pole."

"Well, he as good as says you did."

Bill grinned. "You can't send a bloke up on th' say so of a Missin' Link," he said. "You can't put a monkey in the witness box t' swear a man's character away."

"I don't know," said the Professor. "That's a delicate point of law, but we may as well have a word with the constable about it."

The shearers didn't stay to take part in the consultation with the constable—Professor Thunder had not expected them to. "They lit out in a great hurry," he explained to the Missing Link at lunch time. "With a bit of engineering I might have shaken a few pounds out of them in the way of compensation. I was too hasty. Now, we'll have to leave their punishment in the hands of heaven, and there is no money in that."

"Heaven has punished them already, Professor," said the Missing Link, with a wide, simian smile.

"How that?"

Nickie's smile deepened. "There was eleven pounds in the pocket of the trousers I borrowed to come home in," he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

A narrow escape.

Thunder's Museum of Marvels was showing at Wildbee, and doing only moderately, much to the Professor's disgust.

Nickie the Kid was hurt, too, at the scant attendance.

He had been acknowledged by experts to be the best Link ever exhibited in Australia, and Links included all sorts of hairy freaks, wild men of the woods, and shaggy eccentrics from Borneo; but Nicholas Crips could not rest satisfied as a mere interpreter of monkey character.

Nickie reached out and developed, and his newest device was a dinner in the cage, an actual dinner, in which Madame Marve, bewitchingly dressed in a costume that was a cross between the uniform of a hospital nurse and the garb of a French peasant girl, acted as waitress, and the Missing Link figured as the diner. Actual edibles were used, and a “practicable” bottle of beer.

This turn gave the Living Skeleton great concern. “I wish yer wouldn’t do it, Nickie,” said Matty, from his pedestal next the cage of the Missing Link. “Et’s awful tryin’ to a pore bloke what ain’t ‘ad nothin’ fer dinner but a dry biscuit t’ ‘ave ’t sit ’ere, patient as an owl, while you’re hoggin’ into ther grub, an’ pourin’ fresh beer into yersell regardless iv expense.”

“Get out,” replied the Missing Link. “Call yourself an artist. Every pro. has to suffer for his art. You have to suffer for yours, going short in your eating so as to keep in proper condition. You wouldn’t have a fellow artist sacrifice his chance of becoming celebrated just because it isn’t quite pleasant to you to be a spectator at the banquet?”

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"Art he blowed!" said the Living Skeleton. "Give we a yard o' tripe an' a scoopful iv mashed potatoos."

"You aren't cut out for a public career. Matty you ought to abandon Living Skeletons and get a good eating part."

"Wish t' 'eaven I could, but there's ther missus an' ther kids t' think of."

"Well, you can turn your head away when the banquet scene's on."

"What if I do; can't I smell it?"

There was no escape—poor Matty Cann had to be sacrificed to the requirements of art.

Professor Thunder spread himself to make the new act a success; he procured a clean tablecloth, and napkin, a crush hat and black opera coat (both second-hand) were purchased for the Missing Link. A table, a chair, crockery, edibles, a bottle of beer, a walking stick, and an eyeglass were the rest of the properties.

When the Professor had explained to his patrons his gallant capture of the only living Missing Link in the jungles of Darkest Africa, and had put Mahdi through his paces, to the great amazement of the bucolic audience, he said:

"And now, ladies and gents. I have the pleasure of introducing to your notice an entire change of programme, exhibiting Mahdi, the Missing Link, in his wonderful act, called 'Civilisation.' You have, seen, ladies and gents, this here astonishing animal showing the natural qualities of the brute creation; you will now be privileged to see that side of his nature which approaches more nearly to humanity. This act, I may tell you, ladies and gents, though a miracle of training, would not have been possible if wasn't that the Missing Link has a good deal of human nature in his composition."

After this the opera cloak was handed in to the Missing Link, and he put it on with awkward, monkey movements; he donned the crush hat, put the eyeglass in his eye, and with the walking' stick promenaded the cage with some uncouth affectations of humanity. Meanwhile, Madame Marve had carried the small table into the cage. She spread a cloth, put on a few articles, and offered Mahdi a chair.

The Missing Link sat down, took off his hat, and closed it. Then he examined the bill of fare, and pointed to an item. While Madame was fulfilling the order Mahdi lounged in his chair, playing with the serviette, which he took from the ring, and spread on his lap.

After this Nickie went through the process of ordering and eating a dinner, the aim being to do the thing not too humanly, but as a trained animal might do it, throwing in a good deal of coarse humour, at which the audience roared.

The turn was a success, the spectators applauded vociferously.

“Ladies and gents. I thank you,” said the Professor, bowing. “You have witnessed a triumph of teaching and training over brute animal nature, and I hope that when you go out you’ll speak well of a show that has been in some measure the victim of a hireling press here in Wildbee.”

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"A marvellous performance, indeed," said a thin, shabby, sandy man, coming forward with a notebook. "Almost miraculous."

"True for you, sir," said the Professor eyeing the man suspiciously.

"Perhaps you can tell me. Professor Thunder, what branch of the Simian family this—this creature of yours belongs?"

"Well," said the Professor, "he is said to be most closely connected with the gorillas."

"Nonsense, man! Gorilla, rubbish! Look at that pelvis, sir, look at those arms. That's no more a gorilla than I am."

"May I ask to whom I have the honour of speaking?" asked the Professor, in his coldly polite manner—his most superior professional attitude.

"My name is Andrew McKnight, if that's any good to you. If that is a gorilla, sir, where are his vertebral processes, tell me that? And how comes it that his legs are almost as long as those of man?"

The Missing Link, who had doffed his airs of civilisation, and was now crouched in the straw, began snarling at this. It seemed almost as if Mr. McKnight's criticism were making the poor beast angry.

"You must remember, sir, that this animal is not of any known species," said Professor Thunder, who had a large collection of stock phrases for such discussions. "He is in a manner a creature apart."

"I should say so. Would you permit me to take cerebral measurements of your so-called Missing Link? I am interested in this matter, having opposed the Darwinian hypothesis for many years."

Here Mahdi's snarling became diabolical, and he leaped about in a terrifying way.

"Certainly," said the Professor, "Certainly, Mahdi is always at the service of science. But I warn you he is apt to be treacherous with strangers. He almost tore the arm off Professor Fitzpoof, of Dresden, and he nearly disembowelled a doctor in Dublin in 1895."

"Oh," said the gentleman with the notebook, doubtfully, "in that case I had better not, perhaps."

Mr. McKnight did not go away for some time. He lingered, watching Mahdi with great curiosity. He came back in the evening, too, and hung about the museum for hours.

The Professor observed him with growing resentment. He suspected the intentions of the sandy man, and he was not wrong.

Next day, shortly after the show opened, McKnight came again, with the same notebook and the same suspicious air. He brought five men with him, all solid men in Wildbee, one of them the local constable. This party assembled near the cage of the Missing Link, and listened carefully while the Professor reeled off the familiar story of the taking of Mahdi. They witnessed the stirring and entertaining dinner, and when the Professor had finished, and Mahdi had resumed his conch in the straw, McKnight stepped forward.

“And do you expect us to believe all that rubbish, Professor?” he said.

“I do,” said Professor Thunder, with dignity, “but I don’t care if you don’t.”

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“Well, we don’t, sir, and what’s more, we know you to be an impostor—a rank impostor—and as editor of the Wildbee ‘Guardian,’ it is my duty to expose you and your shameless fraud upon the public of this town and district.”

At this the Missing Link came out of his straw, growling, and springing to the perch hung by one hand, with his legs drawn up in a very monkey-like attitude.

“What the deuce do you mean?” thundered the Professor, manfully.

“I mean this,” said McKnight, addressing the crowd “you have been victimised. That creature is no monkey. It is a human being of some kind.”

Nickie the Kid felt his heart sink, but he made a big bid for popularity. He capered about the cage and thrusting his face through the bars jabbered excitedly.

“You’re talking rubbish, man,” cried the Professor.

“Am I?” retorted McKnight. “Then perhaps you will have the audacity to tell us you have a monkey that can talk? Last night I crept under your tent at the back there when there were no people in the show, and I heard your absurd Missing Link talking, and what’s more, he was teaching a magpie to talk.”

The Missing Link here made a fierce jump at Ammonia, who happened to be clinging to the dividing bars, caught him, and clawed viciously. Ammonia clawed back, and they fought a yowling battle that went a long way towards modifying the impression created by McKnight’s remarks.

The Professor was consternated for a moment, but the diversion Nickie had created gave him a chance to collect his wits and presently he began to laugh. He laughed uproariously. He clapped the Living Skeleton gaily on the back. “Laugh, you idiot!” he hissed, under his breath. The Living Skeleton laughed, and Madame Marve joined in the seeming merriment. She did not know why, but it seemed advisable.

“Well sir,” snorted McKnight, “you’ve finished that idiotic cackle, perhaps you will explain how a monkey comes to be acquainted with the English language.”

“Certainly,” said the Professor, cordially, “I might prefer to kick you off the premises, but I will explain. Mahdi!” he called imperiously. “Forward, Sir.”

The Missing Link turned from his argument with Ammonia, and lurched to the bars.

“I have not been able to teach my Missing Link to talk, though I’ve tried hard. He can do almost anything else, but not that. However, I dare say we can get him to address this intelligent audience. Mahdi, you see this nice gentleman here.” Professor Thunder pointed to McKnight, “What do you think of him?”

“I think he is an ass!” said the Missing Link, with emphasis.

At this there was a yell of delight from the crowd, and even McKnight and his party were astonished.

“There,” cried McKnight, “what did I tell you? What does that prove?”

“You hear, Mahdi?” said the Professor; “the gentleman wants to know what that proves?”

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"It proves I know an ass when I see one, answered the Missing Link.

"You daylight robber! You unblushing fraud!" yelled McKnight.

"Stay," cried the Professor, with dignity. "Is it possible, sir, you have never heard of the art of ventriloquism? I am a ventriloquist. The voice you heard was my voice thrown into the mouth of the Missing Link. In this way we are teaching a magpie to speak to the man-monkey as a new feature of my marvellous entertainment. As to your libellous accusations, sir, you will probably hear further on that point from my solicitor, and now good-day."

"Be me sowl, this bates cock-fightin', McKnight," said the constable. "Th' monkey's right, Mack. Sure, it's an ass yiv made iv yersilf this day."

When McKnight and his party had gone, and the museum was empty of patrons, the Professor mopped his brow, and drew a great breath.

"It's lucky we were prepared for that emergency," he said.

"I dunno," said the man-monkey; "why shouldn't a Missing Link talk, anyhow?"

"Look here, Nickie, you're wantin' to be too talented," said the Professor. "Your overweening ambition will ruin everything. Why, bless my soul, you be wanting to shave clean and have a vote presently."

CHAPTER XVIII.

An adventure at 'tween Bridges.

"Bony, my friend, I am weary of this," said the Missing Link.

The Living Skeleton, who had been drowsing on his chair, beat the flies off and groaned.

"So'm I." he replied, "but what's a cove t' do?"

"Sneak my key out of the Professor's tent, and let's go and have a drop of something."

"It ain't t' be thought of, Nickie," said Matty Cann, "where'd my livin' be? The Professor ud give me the run, an' there's the missus an' the kids."

"No fear, he can't pick up Living Skeletons at every Street corner. Living Skeletons are rarer than you think. Why, a man of your physique could get a Living Skeleton billet almost anywhere. What you want is a little more impudence and self-respect Matty. An

artist like you ought to be able to make his own terms, and not be tied up like a calculating dog or a two-headed calf.”

“D’yeh think so?” said Matty, eagerly.

“Of course I do. Now, you just pinch the key of my cage. We’ll trot out and have a drink. No one will be a penny the wiser.”

It was early in the afternoon of a midsummer day. Professor Thunder’s Museum of Marvels was on show at ‘Tween Bridges. The show was open for any casual sixpence but business in agricultural centres is dead at this hour, and the Professor and his wife slept in the tent of the Egyptian Mystic, and Miss Letitia, who was doorkeeper at the outer tent, overcome by the heat and burden of the day dreamed of that splendid time when she was to be acclaimed queen of the bare-back riders of all nations and generations.

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Nickie thirst had been nagging at him for two hours past. He always contended that the Missing Link's skin was provocative of a great drought. He pleaded with Matty, the bone man, appealing artfully to his professional pride, for Bonypart loved to feel in exalted moments that his position as the living skeleton was not insignificant after all.

"We can slip on overcoats, trot over to the Bridge Inn, have a drink, and return before the Professor wakes," whispered Nickie.

"I couldn't trust meself near th' counter-lunch. Nickie. I couldn't," Mat replied.

But in the end the Missing Link had his way. Bonypart pulled on trousers and coat over his tawdry tights, Nickie turned back the ingenious head-piece and mask of Mahdi, the man-monkey, so that it hung between his shoulders, donned an overcoat and a pair of the Professor's knee boots, and the two slipped under the tent, and made for Peter's Bridge Inn, on the outskirts of a dusty township.

An hour later the Missing Link and the Living Skeleton were sitting under the pile bridge a mile above the township, with a bottle of whisky between them. Bonypart was eating bread and cheese with an avidity which demonstrated the abandonment of all professional instincts. Nicholas Crips was drinking whisky slightly diluted with creek water. His drinking cup was a rusty sardine tin.

Two hours later the Living Skeleton and Mahdi, the man-monkey, snored side by side in the shade of the bridge, the creek rippled at their feet, the sun blazed on the bushland on the left and right, and the whisky bottle stood between them.

Meanwhile, Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels was decorated with a placard, reading:

"Closed on account of illness in the family."

Professor Thunder himself was racing about the township and through the surrounding scrub, seeking his missing exhibits, fearing the worst, and promising himself the satisfaction of a terrible vengeance when he laid hands on the recreant pair. He knew that Nickie had gone off in his skin as the Missing Link, and realised the danger of a possible exposure. To communicate his loss to the people of 'Tween Bridge would practically mean giving the game away. At the inn he had been given a description of the two strangers who had refreshed themselves with three long beers, and then bought a bottle of whisky and certain edibles, and taken the road to One Tree Hill. Thunder recognised the description, and his language shocked Peters, the publican, who had once been a sinner and the champion bullock driver of the Western District.

"Bread and cheese!" groaned the Professor, as he thrashed about in the scrub. "That Living Skeleton 'll be as fat as a pig."

At about ten o'clock that night Dan Reynolds, riding from One Tree Hill to 'Tween Bridges, and thinking of Annie, the Cockie's daughter, whom he had left at the slip-rails, was amazed at a terrible apparition that arose before him on the moon-lit road. It was a strange, shaggy creature, half monkey half-man, covered from the top of his head to the knees in thick, crisp, tufted hair.

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Dan's horse snorted and, came back on his haunches, remaining so for an appreciable space of time, sitting up, glaring at the curious monster with dilated eyes and inflated nostrils, and Dan clung to the nag's neck and glared too, even more astonished than his horse.

Never had Dan Reynolds beheld such an animal, never had he heard of its like, the horror of it out did all the fabled bunyips and Tantanoola tigers he had ever dreamed of. It was loathsome in its ugliness, capering there in the dust, brandishing a whisky bottle in the air, and uttering quaint, half-human yells and strangest feature of all, Reynolds noticed that it wore high, piratical hoots, coming well above the knee.

Dan uttered a yell of mortal fear, Dan's horse gave a snort of terror, and bounding forward bolted at top speed down the track, rattled over the bridge, and dashed into Peter's yard, tearing down a gate and upsetting a water-butt in his rash flight, and Dan clung to his neck all the way, to be brushed off when the terrified steed climbed into the stable over half the door.

The racket brought rush of men from Peter's bar. They gathered Dan Reynolds out of the garbage, and carried him into the kitchen. After a long beer Dan was able to describe the bunyip he had seen in the moonlight on the One Tree Road.

Costello said it was a true jim-jam; he knew the breed well. He asked to be put on to the brand of whisky Reynolds had been drinking.

"Jim-jam, be jiggered!" cried Reynolds. "By ripes, I ought t' kno a jim-jam when I see one, I've met plenty. Tell yeh, I'm ez sober ez a turtle, an' I seen bin with me own naked eyes, not three yards off, jumpin' round on th' road, howlin' somthin' awful an' shakin' a bottle in the air."

Peters thought it might be a bunyip. He had heard of a bunyip in Pig Creek.

Then Watkins had an inspiration "By gum," he cried, "I know what!" He turned eagerly to Reynolds. "'Bout my height was it?" he said, "with reddish hair all ever him, an' long arms reachin' to his feet almost?"

Reynolds nodded, "Yes, yes," he said, "it's Perfessor Thunder's Missin' Link from the show up back o' the school. I was in there—I seen him. He's a terrible-lookin' big monkey, next to a man. The show's closed, an' the Perfessor's' bin huntin' all over th' place after some-thin'. That's what—it's his Missini' Link fer a quid."

Reynolds gave further explanations, there was more excited talk, and then Watkins suggested an expedition to capture the monster.

“You can bet the showman ‘ll be glad to pay a bit t’ have him back. He mus’ be scared about losin’ him, else he wouldn’t have kep’ it dark. It’ll be a lark, an’ it means drinks round at least.”

So it came about that a party, armed with guns and club and carrying strong ropes, started out from the Bridge Inn, under the guidance of Dan Reynolds, to capture the Missing Link, supposed to be at large in the vicinity of McCarthy’s paddock.

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Nickie the Kid had awakened from his slumber under the bridge, had partaken further of the whisky, then divesting himself of his overcoat and replacing the mask and head-gear of Mahdi the man-monkey, had gone forth into the bush to proclaim his kingship to the trees, and awaken the echoes of the hills with Bacchic song. He was enjoying a song and dance near the spot where Reynolds came upon him, when the hunters discovered him. The sight filled them with proper awe and great discretion.

Mahdi looked a truly formidable brute, capering there in the shadow of the gums, and his cries, stifled and made animal-like by the mask, added to the qualms of the Party.

Nickie saw the hunters on the chock-and-log fence ready to retire precipitately should he advance with homicidal intentions, and a vague idea that he was performing professionally before an attentive audience took possession of his bleary mind. He capered fantastically, and made a foolish attempt to climb a tree. Then he jumped up and down like a monkey on a stick, throwing out his long arms, and growling ominously.

"By cripes, he's er dangerous beggar," said Scott. "He'd tear yer limb from limb. Better cripple him. I think."

Scott raised his gun and fired. Fortunately, Scott was nervous, and missed, but the miss was a narrow thing, and Nickie heard the ping of the bullet and the plunk as it buried it in the bark of the tree behind him.

Suddenly a spasm of comprehension came to Nickie, despite the whisky, and he made a leap the gum-butt, and hastily entrenched himself. He was being fired at, and it was neither pleasant nor healthy to be fired at, that much he realised. He peered, monkey-like, from behind the tree, and made an effort to grasp the situation. Scott was taking aim again.

"No no," said Watkins, "we mustn't kill him unless it's necessary. He's very valuable. The Professor says he's worth a matter o' four thousand pounds. Let's scatter an' surround him, come up on him from all points, an' knock him out with the sticks. Scott and Peters holdin' their guns ready t' pot him if he gets hold of anyone."

This plan was adopted after some argument, and the party of hunters scattered, and commenced to close in towards Mahdi, the man-monkey, going very warily. Nickie had forgotten everything by this, however, and sitting with his back to the tree was drowsing, and faintly asserting that he was a king, the most mighty and dazzling' of all monarchs known to man, when the valiant hunters fell upon him.

The rush came suddenly, and in a twinkling half-a-dozen clubs were battering at Mahdi's unhappy head and thumping on his unfortunate ribs. Every man wanted to get a lick at the monster, and every man got it. Luckily, Nickie's skull was thick, and the Mahdi

head-dress offered it some protection, otherwise there would have been an instantaneous and fatal termination to the artistic career of Nicholas Crips.

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As it was, Nickie's senses were battered out of him, and within a few minutes, he was so bound round with rope that he looked like a huge Cocoon. Two saplings were cut, and suspended between these, and borne on the shoulders of eight men, the Missing Link was carried back through the township of 'Tween Bridges. The hunters shouted jubilantly, fired their guns, and yelled triumphant songs as they went, and the whole of the inhabitants turned out and made a triumphal march of it, pressing forward to see the monstrous ape dangling between the saplings.

So Mahdi, the Missing Link, was brought home to the Museum of Marvels. When Nickie was dumped on the floor of the tent, Madame Marve screamed believing he was dead.

"We shot him first," Watkins explained, "an' then we got at him with our sticks."

"Great heavens!" gasped the Professor, thought of manslaughter flashing upon him. "You might have murdered him."

"He might 'ave murdered us," replied the veracious Watkins, "Why, his struggles was somethin' awful, an' he roared like a lion an' bit an' tore. It took ten of us t' down him, an' then he bit through Orton's leg, all' knocked Billy Tett sick and 'epless. I reckon it's worth a flyer, mister."

"But if he's killed—if he's killed!" cried the tremulous Professor.

Thunder and Madame Marve carried Nickie into the Mystic's tent; they cut away the ropes that were choking him, and discovered that although gory and bruised, he still lived and breathed, and then the Professor, always quick to seize an opportunity, stood the hunters a whole barrel of beer, and till well on to daylight 'Tween Bridges was agitated by drink and reiterations of the sensational story of the capture of the man-eating Missing Link.

At sunrise, Bonypart returned to the show, contrite and trembling for his billet, and by this time Nickie the Kid, his bruises painted with iodine, and his battered head liberally patched with court plaster, was sleeping off the effects of his overdose of whisky.

The truants had to be on duty early that day, for the story of the escape of the man-monkey and, his capture by the heroes of 'Tween Bridges brought people from all over the district to inspect the marvel, but Madhi remained on his straw in the dark recesses of his cage, stiff, sore and filled with bitterness, while Professor Thunder explained to his awed patrons the animal's amazingly human viciousness, his love for drink, and his utterly depraved nature.

"D'yeh think I'm fallin' into fat. Nickie?" whispered the Living Skeleton, from his pedestal that evening. "I ate an awful lot o' cheese."

The Missing Link shook his head and groaned. “Next time I get tight I won’t do it in character,” he said, “my realisation of the part is too convincing.”

CHAPTER XIX.

The Link's last appearance.

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It is not forgotten that Mr. Nicholas Crips was a man of amatory instincts; he had a very warm if not particularly sincere regard for the sex, and in his brighter moments, when a relapse from his natural dilatoriness induced him to have a clean-shave, a perfunctory combing, and a general trimming-up, ladies of a certain class approaching the middle-ages found him not wholly forbidding.

Nickie's close application to an artistic career as the leading feature of Professor Thunder's Museum of Marvels had lifted him out of what had become an habitual impecuniosity, and in his brief unprofessional moments he wore a whole suit and boots that did not openly advertise his sockless condition.

In addition, Nickie was leading a fairly fat and easy life; he had put on condition; he was quite at his best; and a flirtatious matron might have found him a fairly presentable person. Madame Marve, the Egyptian Mystic, was a good wife to Professor Thunder, and a good mother to Letitia, according to the lights of show people at the conventions of the game, but she was still young enough to appreciate genuine admiration, and had sufficient of the vanity of the profession to roll a lively, dark eye for effect now and again.

Naturally, the lively, dark eye rolled in Nickie's direction once in a way, and Nickie responded with the beams of a tender, grey orb. He had a way of languishing a little when only Madame Marve was near, and he breathed sighs of simple eloquence.

Mr. Nicholas Crips had the primitive instincts of the pure individualist; fine notions of honour and delicate concepts of propriety had no influence on his modes of conduct.

It may be inferred in these circumstances that Mr. Crips had no compunction, about coveting his neighbour's wife.

Madame Marve had a light heart and a plump waist, She did not take Nickie's advances very seriously, but she found a certain piquancy in the situation, and was not above a reciprocal sigh or a responsive hand pressure.

This unlooked-for development in the internal economy of the Museum of Marvels might have provided Professor Thunder's patrons some amazing novelties had they been permitted peeps behind the scenes. For instance, there were occasions when the public was deaf to Professor Thunder's appeals, and resolutely passed by on the other side. On such occasions the Egyptian Mystic might have been discovered in the small, back tent, with white, well-shaped arms bare to the shoulder, busily engaged fabricating an Irish stew for the evening meal. The Museum was very partial to Irish stew, even the Living Skeleton liked the smell of it. Ten to one the Missing Link would be found hovering about Madame at such a time, garbed in his simian costume, but with the mask-like make-up turned back, exposing Nickie's florid countenance and rakish grin. Possibly at such moments Nickie would presume to squeeze Madame's waist. He

might even venture to steal a kiss. If so, Madame's protest might be forcible, but it would not be vindictive.

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Madame was not disposed to quarrel with Nickie; he was a profitable adjunct; the Museum had never possessed so versatile a missing link, and, as for a little philandering—pooh, it was all in a lifetime.

The tents were pitched at Catcat. The situation was similar to that described above, but Professor Thunder had the bad taste to intrude when Nickie was in the act of forcibly extracting a kiss in revenge. Madame Marve having playfully covered him with flour.

Professor Thunder was a jealous man, and an inflammatory one. He uttered a roar that would not have discredited the Missing Link in its native jungle in the wilds of Darkest Africa.

“You infernal blackguard!” he yelled.

“Now, Jim,” cried Madame Marve in sudden alarm, standing between the men with her paste pin.

“Out of my way, woman!” cried the Professor, tossing her aside.

Professor Thunder fell upon Nicholas Crips, and smote him hip and thigh. He was not content to smite—he kicked. He kicked hard—and often. His fury increased with the measures he took to wreak it.

“Jim! Jim!” pleaded Madame Marve, “you’ll ruin the skin.”

The Missing Link’s skin was an expensive item, but the Professor forgot his cupidity in vindicating himself as an outraged husband. He continued to kick, and then, taking Nickie by the scruff and the back, he rushed him from the tent, and pitched him headlong into the garish day.

There were a few youths and half a score of children loitering about. Fortunately, the mask-like structure covering Nickie’s nose, cheeks and chin, had fallen into place, and what the loiterers saw was infuriated man kicking a gigantic monkey, and assailing him with vehement profanity. The sight was sufficiently amazing. The children fled, screaming, to carry the astonishing news through the township. The youths stood off and yelled.

The Missing Link rolled to some distance, and backed against a tree.

“Don’t show your nose inside my show again, you dirty crawler!” said the great entrepreneur. “If you do, by the Lord Harry, I’ll break every bone in your body.”

People were coming from all directions, and a small crowd had already gathered from the adjacent houses. The inhabitants of Catcat drew as near as they dared, and gazed in open-mouthed amazement from Thunder to the Missing Link.

"I'll teach you to come creepin' and sneakin' into a man's home, tryin' t' ruin his happiness," the Professor roared, and he made another dash at Nickie.

The Missing Link slipped round the tree, and Madame Marve caught her husband, by the arm and dragged him hack.

"What's he done, mister?" asked a bystander.

"What's he done?" bellowed Thunder, the actor instinct in him coming out strongly.

"What's he done, sir? This infamous scoundrel has tried to wreck my home, sir, to blight my peace of mind."

"What, th' bloomin' Missing Link?"

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"Yes, sir, the perfidious Missing Link; the ungrateful Missing Link that I warmed in this bosom, and that has turned and stung the hand that fed him. But now I know all, the villain is unmasked, and if the slimy trail of the serpent enters the abode of peace again, by Heaven! I'll beat the life out of him."

A crowd had now collected, and when Madame Marve dragged her husband into the tent all attention was turned upon Nickie, who cowered against the tree, his mind busy on a way out of the peculiarly unpleasant situation. Thunder was still storming inside, and presently he reappeared, and hurled an armful of shirts, boots, trousers and other human habiliments into the air. These were the belongings of Nicholas Crips.

The people of Catcat maintained a respectful distance, not knowing for certain what so formidable an animal might do next.

"Better mind out," said one youth; "he bites! He bit the bloke inside. Didn't yeh 'ear him say?"

On the whole the attitude towards the Missing Link was hostile. It was felt that here was a dangerous brute at large. Several armed themselves with stones and sticks. Inside Professor Thunder was still raving to drown Madame's rational arguments. Twice he burst into the open with fresh invectives for Nickie, and some trifling piece of dress or property to hurl at him; but Madame Marve and the Living Skeleton hung on his coat-tails and dragged him back.

Nickie had a thought of lifting his mask and letting his humanity be known to the crowd, but there were many present who had paid to see the show, and these might take it into their heads to resent the imposition. Besides, Professor Thunder might relent. On the whole, it seemed better to await developments. Crouched against the tree, the Missing Link glowered at the people. If they came too near, he bared his fangs and growled ominously, and the venturesome ones backed away precipitately.

Somebody threw a clod of earth, and it smote Mahdi on the side of the head. The Missing Link sprang towards the crowd with a fearful cry. His antics were most alarming. The people ran, but they edged back again, and another clod thrown. Then came a stone. A second stone hit Nickie on the shin, and with a yell of pain he took cover behind the butt.

There was a burst of laughter from the crowd, and a rush for stones. Missiles fell about Nickie in a shower. Suddenly the situation had assumed a dangerous complexion. The crowd opened in a circle to get at the monster; stones rattled about his head.

With a horse cry, with eyes rolling and teeth bared in a shocking grimace, the Missing Link dashed at the spot where the circle was weakest, broke through, and went bounding up the township's single street.

Believing now that the great monkey was afraid, the crowd trooped after him, yelling as they ran, snatching up stones and other missiles from the road. Terror lent wings to the Missing Link. He raced up the dusty road in the white heat of a blinding summer day, and the stones flew about him as he ran.

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Those of the inhabitants of Catcat who had had no hint of the partial disruption of Thunder's unparalleled show ran to their doors, and beheld the hunt with speechless wonder. They saw a huge, monkey-like creature speeding up the street, pursued and pelted by a clamorous throng.

Nickie's physical condition was not good, he was ill-trained for a footrace, his wind was bad; he felt that he must presently succumb, and then Constable Daniel Mack loomed before him as a possible saviour.

Constable Mack had stepped from Hogan's store, drawn forth by the yells of the pack. He looked and beheld a terrific creature rushing towards him, erect like a man, but covered with thick, short, reddish hair, and displaying a face of demoniacal ugliness. Constable Mack had his good points; one of them an appreciation of the fact that discretion is the better part of valour. He turned to run for his valuable life, but too late; the monster was upon him, it grappled with him, it hung on, and the pair rolled in the dust together.

The zealous and intelligent officer thought his last day had come, but awoke presently to the knowledge that no harm was being done, and a voice was crying crying in his ear:

"For God's sake, run me in! Arrest me! They'll kill me!"

Constable Mack sat up in the dust, and stared stupidly at the Missing Link.

"Blarst me if it ain't Perfessor Thunder's man-monkey!" he said.

"Yes, yes," gasped Nickie. "Run me in. Be quick about it."

The crowd was forming about them, only refraining from using missiles out of respect for the law.

"Be th' holy, th' baste can spheak!" murmured the policemen.

"They'll kill me. Put me in the cell," pleaded the Missing Link.

"Troth an' I will," answered Mack; "but niver a one iv me knows iv ut's lagel arristin' monkeys."

Nickie was run in. Next morning he appeared to answer a charge of insulting behaviour, inciting a breach of the peace, and assaulting the police. Thanks to Matty Cann, a change of raiment was made in the cell, and Nickie Crips appeared in court in his proper person, and was fined two pounds.

Nicholas Crips paid his fine, collected his belongings from the Museum of Marvels, and went forth into the great world again, a man amongst men. His career as an artist was ended.

CHAPTER XX.

The return.

Nicholas Crips came back to Melbourne, the image of a reputable and orderly citizen. He had accepted office as a billiard-marker in a township hotel while his whiskers grew; and now, full-bearded, dressed in a new suit of sedate, grey tweed, wearing an excellent hat and whole boots, he re-entered the city. His pockets were fairly-well lined, much of the proceeds of his professional engagement under Professor Thunder having been stored by Nickie as a provision for a long journey he was contemplating. Nickie the Kid had mapped out for himself a well-considered and wholly excellent scheme of life as a man of comparative affluence, but that life must be lived under alien skies.

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In the small chamois bag lurking next his heart was the talisman that was to make an existence of comfort and good living possible to the vagabond and outcast. The diamond is the true philosopher's stone.

Nicholas put in a few days sauntering about Melbourne, swinging a neatly-rolled silk umbrella, smoking very excellent cigars. He passed several frowsy acquaintances of other days, and on two he bestowed small alms. He felt great satisfaction in the fact that none of his former companions recognised Nickie the Kid in the well-groomed, well-dressed, sleek, whiskered citizen.

On the third afternoon Mr. Crips entered a jeweller's shop, and placing a small stone on the pad before the man behind the counter, said:

"Would you be so good as to tell me the value of that diamond, sir? I picked it up on the floor of a first-class railway carriage the other day, and having no means of testing it, I thought I might, eh, venture to ask an expert."

The jeweller took up the stone, examined it, subjected it to a simple test, and handed it back to Mr. Crips:

"A good carbon, but practically valueless," he said.

Had Nicholas Crips received a blow full in the face he would not have betrayed greater consternation. His cheeks turned grey, he gripped the counter, all his assumed ease fell from him, he dropped every precaution, forgot the grim necessity for care and cunning.

"It is not a diamond?" he gasped.

The jeweller shook his head. "It an awful disappointment," he said, "but you may be sure you'll hear of it pretty quickly if you ever have the luck to pick up a true diamond of that size."

Nicholas hadn't the spirit to thank the man. He turned into the street. The buildings swam in a garish light, he felt his head rocking, and his feet seemed scarcely to touch the paving stones rising and dipping under him like a choppy sea. He drifted into a bar, and drank brandy, and went forth again with renewed strength and revived hopes.

The jeweller was mistaken or ignorant, the diamonds must be genuine. Nickie selected another stone, and told the same tale at a pawnbroker's shop in another part of the city. The benignant Hebrew passed judgment after a glance.

"Paste, my boy," he said, "not vorth ninepenth."

Grown rash in his anguish and anxiety, Nicholas Crips visited other shops. The experts all told the same tale. The chamois bag held nothing but carbon counterfeits! The

prospect of a life of ease and elegance faded away. It had been a vision, an illusion. Nickie's philosophy was not proof against this stroke. He felt broken, beaten. In the seclusion of his small room in a respectable suburban boarding-house, Nicholas wept and brooded. And now that the possibility of the splendid reward was gone, Nickie dwelt upon the fearful risk he had run more than he had done in all the long months since he knelt by the murdered man in Bigg's Buildings. He realised that in offering these sham stones for inspection he had probably done a mad thing. The act might bring the noose about his neck, if he were arrested, who would believe the absurd story he had to tell.

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Nickie had been careful to betray no particular interest in the great murder case in the presence of his friends in the Museum of Marvels. He knew that the fictitious Rev. Andrew Rowbottom had been inquired for by the police as a man who might provide a clue, but the search for him had not been warmly followed up, it being assumed that he was some trumpery imposter. In any case, his importance was forgotten in a splendid dramatic idea entertained by the detectives, inculcating a clever and notorious criminal. The notorious criminal proved an alibi, and after being a nine days' wonder the great diamond robbery and murder case was supplanted in the public mind by an even more sensational crime. Nickie in his terror of being associated with the murder had been careful, up to now, to betray no interest. He had evaded conversation about it, and only occasional papers had come into his hands at the show. Now he was eager to know all the evidence, anxious to account for the presence of the paste stones in the pocket of a reputable diamond dealer.

Mr. Crips determined to seek out "Mary Stuart." All hope of a comfortable future was not lost. "Mary Stuart" must provide for her scape-goat. It should be her pleasing duty to clothe and feed that hapless animal for the remainder of its days.

In pursuit of his inquiries Nicholas turned up at Whitecliff on the following Sunday afternoon. To the immense astonishment of the master and mistress of that stuccoed mansion, Nickie was neat and clean, spick and span: he wore pince-nez glasses and spoke like a gentleman.

Nickie greeted his brother William with chastened melancholy, his manner towards his sister-in-law was courteous and kindly. He talked of reformation and a new life, of the honourable and onerous position he now occupied in a reputable Sydney business, and of his approaching marriage with an excellent, middle-aged, maiden lady of means. Deftly he worked round to a tall, aristocratic woman who had appeared a Mary Queen of Scots at the memorable fancy-dress ball at Whitecliff.

Brother William groaned, sister Jean sat up very straight, and sniffed ominously. "The creature!" she said.

"That woman was no friend of ours, Nicholas," said brother William, hastily.

"I met her in your house," said Nicholas, "and from a brief conversation I had I was deeply interested. It has occurred to me lately that if she still holds the same views she would be of vast assistance to my firm in a transaction we are meditating."

"Have nothing to do with her," cried William. "The creature was an adventuress; she worked her way into our confidence with trickery and fraud, presenting herself in society here as a lady of title. It was afterwards proved that she had come to the country as the companion of an infamous scamp who at that very time was serving a sentence of seven years for attempted burglary and firing on the police. The woman disappeared

shortly after the occasion you mention. She left the country, I imagine. At any rate, the police were pursuing her for some time for passing valueless cheques. Please do not mention her name in this house; it awakens painful recollections, Nicholas."

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Mrs. William sniffed more significantly than before. "Williams cashed one of those cheques," she said bitterly, with a venomous glance at her lord that told volumes.

Nicholas recognised in that moment that the prospect of an easy, well-clothed, well-fed, middle age at the expense of Mary Queen of Scots was out of the question. He consoled himself to some small extent by borrowing ten pounds from brother William after dinner.

Mr. Crips employed himself on the following day reading up the murder case in back numbers of the Age in the newspaper annex of the Public Library. He had to read a great deal of superfluous matter, and of many idle schemes and excursions on the part of the police before he came upon an illuminating little item in the shape of a casual hit of testimony from a friend of the dead man. The friend explained that the diamond dealer always carried in a small leather bag in his breast pocket a fine assortment of paste brilliants, with the deliberate intention of deceiving thieves who might attack him at any time. His idea was that the thieves would seize this case and make off without prosecuting a further search. But the murderer, whoever he was, was not content with the false stones; he had secured L5,000 worth of pure diamonds!

The story of the paste jewels was not repeated, and nobody seemed to have found any significance in it. At this late hour Nicholas Crips discovered so much meaning in it that he went out into the wide Domain to be alone among the trees to think it over. His thoughts came back always to the crucial point.

"I got the paste brilliants," he muttered. "She got the real diamonds. She had them about her when I entered. She knew of the carbons, and she stalled me off with them. Lord, what a mug I was!"

Even in his great bitterness of spirit Nicholas could not help admiring the woman who had so completely sold him, and raising his hand in a mock salute, he said aloud:

"Mary Queen of Scots You're a *Daisy*!!"

From Prince's Bridge that night Mr. Crips emptied a small bag of glittering mock diamonds into the river, and, two days later, he looked over the rail of an out going steamer, watching Australia receding in the distance, and, to his fertile imagination, the outline on the horizon took the shape of a gallows with a pendant noose.

THE END