THE EPISODE OF THE LIVE WEEKLY

Fourth of a Series of Six Stories [First published in Pictorial Review, August 1916]

It was with a start that Roland Bleke realized that the girl at the other end of the bench was crying. For the last few minutes, as far as his preoccupation allowed him to notice them at all, he had been attributing the subdued sniffs to a summer cold, having just recovered from one himself.

He was embarrassed. He blamed the fate that had led him to this particular bench, but he wished to give himself up to quiet deliberation on the question of what on earth he was to do with two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, to which figure his fortune had now risen.

The sniffs continued. Roland's discomfort increased. Chivalry had always been his weakness. In the old days, on a hundred and forty pounds a year, he had had few opportunities of indulging himself in this direction; but now it seemed to him sometimes that the whole world was crying out for assistance.

Should he speak to her? He wanted to; but only a few days ago his eyes had been caught by the placard of a weekly paper bearing the title of 'Squibs,' on which in large letters was the legend "Men Who Speak

to Girls," and he had gathered that the accompanying article was a denunciation rather than a eulogy of these individuals. On the other hand, she was obviously in distress.

Another sniff decided him.

"I say, you know," he said.

The girl looked at him. She was small, and at the present moment had that air of the floweret surprized while shrinking, which adds a good thirty-three per cent. to a girl's attractions. Her nose, he noted, was delicately tip-tilted. A certain pallor added to her beauty. Roland's heart executed the opening steps of a buck-and-wing dance.

"Pardon me," he went on, "but you appear to be in trouble. Is there anything I can do for you?"

She looked at him again--a keen look which seemed to get into Roland's soul and walk about it with a searchlight. Then, as if satisfied by the inspection, she spoke.

"No, I don't think there is," she said. "Unless you happen to be the proprietor of a weekly paper with a Woman's Page, and need an editress for it."

"I don't understand."

"Well, that's all any one could do for me--give me back my work or give me something else of the same sort."

"Oh, have you lost your job?"

"I have. So would you mind going away, because I want to go on crying, and I do it better alone. You won't mind my turning you out, I hope, but I was here first, and there are heaps of other benches."

"No, but wait a minute. I want to hear about this. I might be able--what I mean is--think of something. Tell me all about it."

There is no doubt that the possession of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds tones down a diffident man's diffidence. Roland began to feel almost masterful.

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"There's something in that," said the girl reflectively. "After all, you might know somebody. Well, as you want to know, I have just been discharged from a paper called 'Squibs.' I used to edit the Woman's Page."

"By Jove, did you write that article on 'Men Who Speak----'?"

The hard manner in which she had wrapped herself as in a garment vanished instantly. Her eyes softened. She even blushed. Just a becoming pink, you know!

"You don't mean to say you read it? I didn't think that any one ever really read 'Squibs.'"

"Read it!" cried Roland, recklessly abandoning truth. "I should jolly well think so. I know it by heart. Do you mean to say that, after an article like that, they actually sacked you? Threw you out as a failure?"

"Oh, they didn't send me away for incompetence. It was simply because they couldn't afford to keep me on. Mr. Petheram was very nice about it."

"Who's Mr. Petheram?"

"Mr. Petheram's everything. He calls himself the editor, but he's really everything except office-boy, and I expect he'll be that next week. When I started with the paper, there was quite a large staff. But it got whittled down by degrees till there was only Mr. Petheram and myself. It was like the crew of the 'Nancy Bell.' They got eaten one by one, till I was the only one left. And now I've gone. Mr. Petheram is doing the

whole paper now."

"How is it that he can't get anything better to do?" Roland said.

"He has done lots of better things. He used to be at Carmelite House, but they thought he was too old."

Roland felt relieved. He conjured up a picture of a white-haired elder with a fatherly manner.

"Oh, he's old, is he?"

"Twenty-four."

There was a brief silence. Something in the girl's expression stung Roland. She wore a rapt look, as if she were dreaming of the absent Petheram, confound him. He would show her that Petheram was not the only man worth looking rapt about.

He rose.

"Would you mind giving me your address?" he said.

"Why?"

"In order," said Roland carefully, "that I may offer you your former employment on 'Squibs.' I am going to buy it."

After all, your man of dash and enterprise, your Napoleon, does have his moments. Without looking at her, he perceived that he had bowled her over completely. Something told him that she was staring at him, open-mouthed. Meanwhile, a voice within him was muttering anxiously, "I wonder how much this is going to cost."

"You're going to buy 'Squibs!'"

Her voice had fallen away to an awestruck whisper.

"I am."

She gulped.

"Well, I think you're wonderful."

So did Roland.

"Where will a letter find you?" he asked.

"My name is March. Bessie March. I'm living at twenty-seven Guildford Street."

"Twenty-seven. Thank you. Good morning. I will communicate with you in due course."

He raised his hat and walked away. He had only gone a few steps, when there was a patter of feet behind him. He turned.

"I--I just wanted to thank you," she said.

"Not at all," said Roland. "Not at all."

He went on his way, tingling with just triumph. Petheram? Who was Petheram? Who, in the name of goodness, was Petheram? He had put Petheram in his proper place, he rather fancied. Petheram, forsooth. Laughable.

A copy of the current number of 'Squibs,' purchased at a book-stall, informed him, after a minute search to find the editorial page, that the offices of the paper were in Fetter Lane. It was evidence of his exalted state of mind that he proceeded thither in a cab.

Fetter Lane is one of those streets in which rooms that have only just escaped being cupboards by a few feet achieve the dignity of offices. There might have been space to swing a cat in the editorial sanctum of 'Squibs,' but it would have been a near thing. As for the outer office, in which a vacant-faced lad of fifteen received Roland and instructed him to wait while he took his card in to Mr. Petheram, it was a mere

box. Roland was afraid to expand his chest for fear of bruising it.

The boy returned to say that Mr. Petheram would see him.

Mr. Petheram was a young man with a mop of hair, and an air of almost painful restraint. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and the table before him was heaped high with papers. Opposite him, evidently in the act of taking his leave was a comfortable-looking man of middle age with a red face and a short beard. He left as Roland entered and Roland was surprized to see Mr. Petheram spring to his feet, shake his fist at the closing door, and kick the wall with a vehemence which brought down several inches of discolored plaster.

"Take a seat," he said, when he had finished this performance. "What can I do for you?"

Roland had always imagined that editors in their private offices were less easily approached and, when approached, more brusk. The fact was that Mr. Petheram, whose optimism nothing could quench, had mistaken him
for a prospective advertiser.

"I want to buy the paper," said Roland. He was aware that this was an abrupt way of approaching the subject, but, after all, he did want to buy the paper, so why not say so?

Mr. Petheram fizzed in his chair. He glowed with excitement.

"Do you mean to tell me there's a single book-stall in London which has sold out? Great Scott, perhaps they've all sold out! How many did you try?"

"I mean buy the whole paper. Become proprietor, you know."

Roland felt that he was blushing, and hated himself for it. He ought to be carrying this thing through with an air. Mr. Petheram looked at him blankly.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Roland. He felt the interview was going all wrong. It lacked a stateliness which this kind of interview should have had.

"Honestly?" said Mr. Petheram. "You aren't pulling my leg?"

Roland nodded. Mr. Petheram appeared to struggle with his conscience, and finally to be worsted by it, for his next remarks were limpidly honest.

"Don't you be an ass," he said. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for. Did you see that blighter who went out just now? Do you

know who he is? That's the fellow we've got to pay five pounds a week to for life."

"Why?"

"We can't get rid of him. When the paper started, the proprietors--not the present ones--thought it would give the thing a boom if they had a football competition with a first prize of a fiver a week for life. Well, that's the man who won it. He's been handed down as a legacy from proprietor to proprietor, till now we've got him. Ages ago they tried to get him to compromise for a lump sum down, but he wouldn't. Said he would only spend it, and preferred to get it by the week. Well, by the time we've paid that vampire, there isn't much left out of our profits. That's why we are at the present moment a little understaffed."

A frown clouded Mr. Petheram's brow. Roland wondered if he was thinking of Bessie March.

"I know all about that," he said.

"And you still want to buy the thing?"

"Yes."

"But what on earth for? Mind you, I ought not to be crabbing my own paper like this, but you seem a good chap, and I don't want to see you

landed. Why are you doing it?"

"Oh, just for fun."

"Ah, now you're talking. If you can afford expensive amusements, go ahead."

He put his feet on the table, and lit a short pipe. His gloomy views on the subject of 'Squibs' gave way to a wave of optimism.

"You know," he said, "there's really a lot of life in the old rag yet. If it were properly run. What has hampered us has been lack of capital. We haven't been able to advertise. I'm bursting with ideas for booming the paper, only naturally you can't do it for nothing. As for editing, what I don't know about editing--but perhaps you had got somebody else in your mind?"

"No, no," said Roland, who would not have known an editor from an office-boy. The thought of interviewing prospective editors appalled him.

"Very well, then," resumed Mr. Petheram, reassured, kicking over a heap of papers to give more room for his feet. "Take it that I continue as editor. We can discuss terms later. Under the present regime I have been doing all the work in exchange for a happy home. I suppose you won't want to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar? In other words, you would

sooner have a happy, well-fed editor running about the place than a broken-down wreck who might swoon from starvation?"

"But one moment," said Roland. "Are you sure that the present proprietors will want to sell?"

"Want to sell," cried Mr. Petheram enthusiastically. "Why, if they know you want to buy, you've as much chance of getting away from them without the paper as--as--well, I can't think of anything that has such a poor chance of anything. If you aren't quick on your feet, they'll cry on your shoulder. Come along, and we'll round them up now."

He struggled into his coat, and gave his hair an impatient brush with a note-book.

"There's just one other thing," said Roland. "I have been a regular reader of 'Squibs' for some time, and I particularly admire the way in which the Woman's Page----"

"You mean you want to reengage the editress? Rather. You couldn't do better. I was going to suggest it myself. Now, come along quick before you change your mind or wake up."

Within a very few days of becoming sole proprietor of 'Squibs,' Roland began to feel much as a man might who, a novice at the art of steering cars, should find himself at the wheel of a runaway motor. Young Mr.

Petheram had spoken nothing less than the truth when he had said that he was full of ideas for booming the paper. The infusion of capital into the business acted on him like a powerful stimulant. He exuded ideas at every pore.

Roland's first notion had been to engage a staff of contributors. He was under the impression that contributors were the life-blood of a weekly journal. Mr. Petheram corrected this view. He consented to the purchase of a lurid serial story, but that was the last concession he made. Nobody could accuse Mr. Petheram of lack of energy. He was willing, even anxious, to write the whole paper himself, with the exception of the Woman's Page, now brightly conducted once more by Miss March. What he wanted Roland to concentrate himself upon was the supplying of capital for ingenious advertising schemes.

"How would it be," he asked one morning--he always began his remarks with, "How would it be?"--"if we paid a man to walk down Piccadilly in white skin-tights with the word 'Squibs' painted in red letters across his chest?"

Roland thought it would certainly not be.

"Good sound advertising stunt," urged Mr. Petheram. "You don't like it? All right. You're the boss. Well, how would it be to have a squad of men dressed as Zulus with white shields bearing the legend 'Squibs?' See what I mean? Have them sprinting along the Strand shouting, 'Wah! Wah!

Wah! Buy it! Buy it!' It would make people talk."

Roland emerged from these interviews with his skin crawling with modest apprehension. His was a retiring nature, and the thought of Zulus sprinting down the Strand shouting "Wah! Wah! Wah! Buy it! Buy it!" with reference to his personal property appalled him.

He was beginning now heartily to regret having bought the paper, as he generally regretted every definite step which he took. The glow of romance which had sustained him during the preliminary negotiations had faded entirely. A girl has to be possessed of unusual charm to continue to captivate B, when she makes it plain daily that her heart is the exclusive property of A; and Roland had long since ceased to cherish any delusion that Bessie March was ever likely to feel anything but a mild liking for him. Young Mr. Petheram had obviously staked out an indisputable claim. Her attitude toward him was that of an affectionate devotee toward a high priest. One morning, entering the office unexpectedly, Roland found her kissing the top of Mr. Petheram's head; and from that moment his interest in the fortunes of 'Squibs' sank to zero. It amazed him that he could ever have been idiot enough to have allowed himself to be entangled in this insane venture for the sake of an insignificant-looking bit of a girl with a snub-nose and a poor complexion.

What particularly galled him was the fact that he was throwing away good cash for nothing. It was true that his capital was more than equal to

the, on the whole, modest demands of the paper, but that did not alter the fact that he was wasting money. Mr. Petheram always talked buoyantly about turning the corner, but the corner always seemed just as far off.

The old idea of flight, to which he invariably had recourse in any crisis, came upon Roland with irresistible force. He packed a bag, and went to Paris. There, in the discomforts of life in a foreign country, he contrived for a month to forget his white elephant.

He returned by the evening train which deposits the traveler in London in time for dinner.

Strangely enough, nothing was farther from Roland's mind than his bright weekly paper, as he sat down to dine in a crowded grill-room near Piccadilly Circus. Four weeks of acute torment in a city where nobody seemed to understand the simplest English sentence had driven 'Squibs' completely from his mind for the time being.

The fact that such a paper existed was brought home to him with the coffee. A note was placed upon his table by the attentive waiter.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The lady, sare," said the waiter vaguely.

Roland looked round the room excitedly. The spirit of romance gripped

him. There were many ladies present, for this particular restaurant was a favorite with artistes who were permitted to "look in" at their theaters as late as eight-thirty. None of them looked particularly self-conscious, yet one of them had sent him this quite unsolicited tribute. He tore open the envelope.

The message, written in a flowing feminine hand, was brief, and Mrs. Grundy herself could have taken no exception to it.

"'Squibs,' one penny weekly, buy it," it ran. All the mellowing effects of a good dinner passed away from Roland. He was feverishly irritated. He paid his bill and left the place.

A visit to a neighboring music-hall occurred to him as a suitable sedative. Hardly had his nerves ceased to quiver sufficiently to allow him to begin to enjoy the performance, when, in the interval between two of the turns, a man rose in one of the side boxes.

"Is there a doctor in the house?"

There was a hush in the audience. All eyes were directed toward the box. A man in the stalls rose, blushing, and cleared his throat.

"My wife has fainted," continued the speaker. "She has just discovered that she has lost her copy of 'Squibs.'"

The audience received the statement with the bovine stolidity of an English audience in the presence of the unusual.

Not so Roland. Even as the purposeful-looking chuckers-out wended their leopard-like steps toward the box, he was rushing out into the street.

As he stood cooling his indignation in the pleasant breeze which had sprung up, he was aware of a dense crowd proceeding toward him. It was headed by an individual who shone out against the drab background like a good deed in a naughty world. Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time, and this was one of the strangest that Roland's bulging eyes had ever rested upon. He was a large, stout man, comfortably clad in a suit of white linen, relieved by a scarlet 'Squibs' across the bosom. His top-hat, at least four sizes larger than any top-hat worn out of a pantomime, flaunted the same word in letters of flame. His umbrella, which, tho the weather was fine, he carried open above his head, bore the device "One penny weekly".

The arrest of this person by a vigilant policeman and Roland's dive into a taxicab occurred simultaneously. Roland was blushing all over. His head was in a whirl. He took the evening paper handed in through the window of the cab quite mechanically, and it was only the strong exhortations of the vendor which eventually induced him to pay for it. This he did with a sovereign, and the cab drove off.

He was just thinking of going to bed several hours later, when it

occurred to him that he had not read his paper. He glanced at the first page. The middle column was devoted to a really capitally written account of the proceedings at Bow Street consequent upon the arrest of six men who, it was alleged, had caused a crowd to collect to the disturbance of the peace by parading the Strand in the undress of Zulu warriors, shouting in unison the words "Wah! Wah! Wah! Buy 'Squibs.'"

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Young Mr. Petheram greeted Roland with a joyous enthusiasm which the hound Argus, on the return of Ulysses, might have equalled but could scarcely have surpassed.

It seemed to be Mr. Petheram's considered opinion that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world. Roland's attempts to correct this belief fell on deaf ears.

"Have I seen the advertisements?" he cried, echoing his editor's first question. "I've seen nothing else."

"There!" said Mr. Petheram proudly.

"It can't go on."

"Yes, it can. Don't you worry. I know they're arrested as fast as we send them out, but, bless you, the supply's endless. Ever since the

Revue boom started and actors were expected to do six different parts in seven minutes, there are platoons of music-hall 'pros' hanging about the Strand, ready to take on any sort of job you offer them. I have a special staff flushing the Bodegas. These fellows love it. It's meat and drink to them to be right in the public eye like that. Makes them feel ten years younger. It's wonderful the talent knocking about. Those Zulus used to have a steady job as the Six Brothers Biff, Society Contortionists. The Revue craze killed them professionally. They cried like children when we took them on.

"By the way, could you put through an expenses cheque before you go? The fines mount up a bit. But don't you worry about that either. We're coining money. I'll show you the returns in a minute. I told you we should turn the corner. Turned it! Blame me, we've whizzed round it on two wheels. Have you had time to see the paper since you got back? No? Then you haven't seen our new Scandal Page--'We Just Want to Know, You Know.' It's a corker, and it's sent the circulation up like a rocket. Everybody reads 'Squibs' now. I was hoping you would come back soon. I wanted to ask you about taking new offices. We're a bit above this sort of thing now."

Roland, meanwhile, was reading with horrified eyes the alleged corking Scandal Page. It seemed to him without exception the most frightful production he had ever seen. It appalled him.

"This is awful," he moaned. "We shall have a hundred libel actions."

"Oh, no, that's all right. It's all fake stuff, tho the public doesn't know it. If you stuck to real scandals you wouldn't get a par. a week. A more moral set of blameless wasters than the blighters who constitute modern society you never struck. But it reads all right, doesn't it? Of course, every now and then one does hear something genuine, and then it goes in. For instance, have you ever heard of Percy Pook, the bookie? I have got a real ripe thing in about Percy this week, the absolute limpid truth. It will make him sit up a bit. There, just under your thumb."

Roland removed his thumb, and, having read the paragraph in question, started as if he had removed it from a snake.

"But this is bound to mean a libel action!" he cried.

"Not a bit of it," said Mr. Petheram comfortably. "You don't know Percy. I won't bore you with his life-history, but take it from me he doesn't rush into a court of law from sheer love of it. You're safe enough."

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But it appeared that Mr. Pook, tho coy in the matter of cleansing his scutcheon before a judge and jury, was not wholly without weapons of defense and offense. Arriving at the office next day, Roland found a scene of desolation, in the middle of which, like Marius among the ruins of Carthage, sat Jimmy, the vacant-faced office boy. Jimmy was

reading an illustrated comic paper, and appeared undisturbed by his surroundings.

"He's gorn," he observed, looking up as Roland entered.

"What do you mean?" Roland snapped at him. "Who's gone and where did he go? And besides that, when you speak to your superiors you will rise and stop chewing that infernal gum. It gets on my nerves."

Jimmy neither rose nor relinquished his gum. He took his time and answered.

"Mr. Petheram. A couple of fellers come in and went through, and there was a uproar inside there, and presently out they come running, and I went in, and there was Mr. Petheram on the floor knocked silly and the furniture all broke, and now 'e's gorn to 'orspital. Those fellers 'ad been putting 'im froo it proper," concluded Jimmy with moody relish.

Roland sat down weakly. Jimmy, his tale told, resumed the study of his illustrated paper. Silence reigned in the offices of 'Squibs.'

It was broken by the arrival of Miss March. Her exclamation of astonishment at the sight of the wrecked room led to a repetition of Jimmy's story.

She vanished on hearing the name of the hospital to which the stricken

editor had been removed, and returned an hour later with flashing eyes and a set jaw.

"Aubrey," she said--it was news to Roland that Mr. Petheram's name was Aubrey--"is very much knocked about, but he is conscious and sitting up and taking nourishment."

"That's good."

"In a spoon only."

"Ah!" said Roland.

"The doctor says he will not be out for a week. Aubrey is certain it was that horrible book-maker's men who did it, but of course he can prove nothing. But his last words to me were, 'Slip it into Percy again this week.' He has given me one or two things to mention. I don't understand them, but Aubrey says they will make him wild."

Roland's flesh crept. The idea of making Mr. Pook any wilder than he appeared to be at present horrified him. Panic gave him strength, and he addressed Miss March, who was looking more like a modern Joan of Arc than anything else on earth, firmly.

"Miss March," he said, "I realize that this is a crisis, and that we must all do all that we can for the paper, and I am ready to do anything

in reason--but I will not slip it into Percy. You have seen the effects of slipping it into Percy. What he or his minions will do if we repeat the process I do not care to think."

"You are afraid?"

"Yes," said Roland simply.

Miss March turned on her heel. It was plain that she regarded him as a worm. Roland did not like being thought a worm, but it was infinitely better than being regarded as an interesting case by the house-surgeon of a hospital. He belonged to the school of thought which holds that it is better that people should say of you, "There he goes!" than that they should say, "How peaceful he looks".

Stress of work prevented further conversation. It was a revelation to Roland, the vigor and energy with which Miss March threw herself into the breach. As a matter of fact, so tremendous had been the labors of the departed Mr. Petheram, that her work was more apparent than real. Thanks to Mr. Petheram, there was a sufficient supply of material in hand to enable 'Squibs' to run a fortnight on its own momentum. Roland, however, did not know this, and with a view to doing what little he could to help, he informed Miss March that he would write the Scandal Page. It must be added that the offer was due quite as much to prudence as to chivalry. Roland simply did not dare to trust her with the Scandal Page. In her present mood it was not safe. To slip it into Percy would,

he felt, be with her the work of a moment.

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Literary composition had never been Roland's forte. He sat and stared at the white paper and chewed the pencil which should have been marring its whiteness with stinging paragraphs. No sort of idea came to him.

His brow grew damp. What sort of people--except book-makers--did things you could write scandal about? As far as he could ascertain, nobody.

He picked up the morning paper. The name Windlebird [*] caught his eye. A kind of pleasant melancholy came over him as he read the paragraph. How long ago it seemed since he had met that genial financier. The paragraph was not particularly interesting. It gave a brief account of some large deal which Mr. Windlebird was negotiating. Roland did not understand a word of it, but it gave him an idea.

[*] He is a character in the Second Episode, a fraudulent financier.

Mr. Windlebird's financial standing, he knew, was above suspicion. Mr. Windlebird had made that clear to him during his visit. There could be no possibility of offending Mr. Windlebird by a paragraph or two about the manners and customs of financiers. Phrases which his kindly host had used during his visit came back to him, and with them inspiration.

Within five minutes he had compiled the following

WE JUST WANT TO KNOW, YOU KNOW

WHO is the eminent financier at present engaged upon one of his biggest deals?

WHETHER the public would not be well-advised to look a little closer into it before investing their money?

IF it is not a fact that this gentleman has bought a first-class ticket to the Argentine in case of accidents?

WHETHER he may not have to use it at any moment?

After that it was easy. Ideas came with a rush. By the end of an hour he had completed a Scandal Page of which Mr. Petheram himself might have been proud, without a suggestion of slipping it into Percy. He felt that he could go to Mr. Pook, and say, "Percy, on your honor as a British book-maker, have I slipped it into you in any way whatsoever?" And Mr. Pook would be compelled to reply, "You have not."

Miss March read the proofs of the page, and sniffed. But Miss March's blood was up, and she would have sniffed at anything not directly hostile to Mr. Pook.

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A week later Roland sat in the office of 'Squibs,' reading a letter. It had been sent from No. 18-A Bream's Buildings, E.C., but, from Roland's point of view, it might have come direct from heaven; for its contents, signed by Harrison, Harrison, Harrison & Harrison, Solicitors, were to the effect that a client of theirs had instructed them to approach him with a view to purchasing the paper. He would not find their client disposed to haggle over terms, so, hoped Messrs. Harrison, Harrison, Harrison & Harrison, in the event of Roland being willing to sell, they could speedily bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion.

Any conclusion which had left him free of 'Squibs' without actual pecuniary loss would have been satisfactory to Roland. He had conceived a loathing for his property which not even its steadily increasing sales could mitigate. He was around at Messrs. Harrison's office as soon as a swift taxi could take him there. The lawyers were for spinning the thing out with guarded remarks and cautious preambles, but Roland's methods of doing business were always rapid.

"This chap," he said, "this fellow who wants to buy 'Squibs,' what'll he give?"

"That," began one of the Harrisons ponderously, "would, of course, largely depend----"

"I'll take five thousand. Lock, stock, and barrel, including the present staff, an even five thousand. How's that?"

"Five thousand is a large----"

"Take it or leave it."

"My dear sir, you hold a pistol to our heads. However, I think that our client might consent to the sum you mention."

"Good. Well, directly I get his check, the thing's his. By the way, who is your client?"

Mr. Harrison coughed.

"His name," he said, "will be familiar to you. He is the eminent financier, Mr. Geoffrey Windlebird."

THE DIVERTING EPISODE OF THE EXILED MONARCH

Fifth of a Series of Six Stories [First published in Pictorial Review, September 1916]

The caoutchouc was drawing all London. Slightly more indecent than the Salome dance, a shade less reticent than ragtime, it had driven the tango out of existence. Nor, indeed, did anybody actually caoutchouc, for the national dance of Paranoya contained three hundred and fifteen recognized steps; but everybody tried to. A new revue, "Hullo, Caoutchouc," had been produced with success. And the pioneer of the dance, the peerless Maraquita, a native Paranoyan, still performed it nightly at the music-hall where she had first broken loose.

The caoutchouc fascinated Roland Bleke. Maraquita fascinated him more. Of all the women to whom he had lost his heart at first sight, Maraquita had made the firmest impression upon him. She was what is sometimes called a fine woman.

She had large, flashing eyes, the physique of a Rugby International forward, and the agility of a cat on hot bricks.

There is a period of about fifty steps somewhere in the middle of the three hundred and fifteen where the patient, abandoning the comparative decorum of the earlier movements, whizzes about till she looks like a

salmon-colored whirlwind.

That was the bit that hit Roland.

Night after night he sat in his stage-box, goggling at Maraquita and applauding wildly.

One night an attendant came to his box.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you Mr. Roland Bleke? The Senorita Maraquita wishes to speak to you."

He held open the door of the box. The possibility of refusal did not appear to occur to him. Behind the scenes at that theater, it was generally recognized that when the Peerless One wanted a thing, she got it--quick.

They were alone.

With no protective footlights between himself and her, Roland came to the conclusion that he had made a mistake. It was not that she was any less beautiful at the very close quarters imposed by the limits of the dressing-room; but he felt that in falling in love with her he had undertaken a contract a little too large for one of his quiet, diffident nature. It crossed his mind that the sort of woman he really liked was the rather small, drooping type. Dynamite would not have made Maraquita

droop.

For perhaps a minute and a half Maraquita fixed her compelling eyes on his without uttering a word. Then she broke a painful silence with this leading question:

"You love me, hein?"

Roland nodded feebly.

"When men make love to me, I send them away--so."

She waved her hand toward the door, and Roland began to feel almost cheerful again. He was to be dismissed with a caution, after all. The woman had a fine, forgiving nature.

"But not you."

"Not me?"

"No, not you. You are the man I have been waiting for. I read about you in the paper, Senor Bleke. I see your picture in the 'Daily Mirror!' I say to myself, 'What a man!'"

"Those picture-paper photographs always make one look rather weird," mumbled Roland.

"I see you night after night in your box. Poof! I love you."

"Thanks awfully," bleated Roland.

"You would do anything for my sake, hein? I knew you were that kind of man directly I see you. No," she added, as Roland writhed uneasily in his chair, "do not embrace me. Later, yes, but now, no. Not till the Great Day."

What the Great Day might be Roland could not even faintly conjecture. He could only hope that it would also be a remote one.

"And now," said the Senorita, throwing a cloak about her shoulders, "you come away with me to my house. My friends are there awaiting us. They will be glad and proud to meet you."

* * * * *

After his first inspection of the house and the friends, Roland came to the conclusion that he preferred Maraquita's room to her company. The former was large and airy, the latter, with one exception, small and hairy.

The exception Maraquita addressed as Bombito. He was a conspicuous figure. He was one of those out-size, hasty-looking men. One suspected

him of carrying lethal weapons.

Maraquita presented Roland to the company. The native speech of Paranoya sounded like shorthand, with a blend of Spanish. An expert could evidently squeeze a good deal of it into a minute. Its effect on the company was good. They were manifestly soothed. Even Bombito.

Introductions in detail then took place. This time, for Roland's benefit, Maraquita spoke in English, and he learned that most of those present were marquises. Before him, so he gathered from Maraquita, stood the very flower of Paranoya's aristocracy, driven from their native land by the Infamy of 1905. Roland was too polite to inquire what on earth the Infamy of 1905 might be, but its mention had a marked effect on the company. Some scowled, others uttered deep-throated oaths. Bombito did both. Before supper, to which they presently sat down, was over, however, Roland knew a good deal about Paranoya and its history. The conversation conducted by Maraquita--to a ceaseless bouche pleine accompaniment from her friends--bore exclusively upon the subject.

Paranoya had, it appeared, existed fairly peacefully for centuries under the rule of the Alejandro dynasty. Then, in the reign of Alejandro the Thirteenth, disaffection had begun to spread, culminating in the Infamy of 1905, which, Roland had at last discovered, was nothing less than the abolition of the monarchy and the installation of a republic.

Since 1905 the one thing for which they had lived, besides the

caoutchouc, was to see the monarchy restored and their beloved Alejandro the Thirteenth back on his throne. Their efforts toward this end had been untiring, and were at last showing signs of bearing fruit. Paranoya, Maraquita assured Roland, was honeycombed with intrigue. The army was disaffected, the people anxious for a return to the old order of things.

A more propitious moment for striking the decisive blow was never likely to arrive. The question was purely one of funds.

At the mention of the word "funds," Roland, who had become thoroughly bored with the lecture on Paranoyan history, sat up and took notice. He had an instinctive feeling that he was about to be called upon for a subscription to the cause of the distressful country's freedom. Especially by Bombito.

He was right. A moment later Maraquita began to make a speech.

She spoke in Paranoyan, and Roland could not follow her, but he gathered that it somehow had reference to himself.

As, at the end of it, the entire company rose to their feet and extended their glasses toward him with a mighty shout, he assumed that Maraquita had been proposing his health.

"They say 'To the liberator of Paranoya!'" kindly translated the

Peerless One. "You must excuse," said Maraquita tolerantly, as a bevy of patriots surrounded Roland and kissed him on the cheek. "They are so grateful to the savior of our country. I myself would kiss you, were it not that I have sworn that no man's lips shall touch mine till the royal standard floats once more above the palace of Paranoya. But that will be soon, very soon," she went on. "With you on our side we can not fail."

What did the woman mean? Roland asked himself wildly. Did she labor under the distressing delusion that he proposed to shed his blood on behalf of a deposed monarch to whom he had never been introduced?

Maraquita's next remarks made the matter clear.

"I have told them," she said, "that you love me, that you are willing to risk everything for my sake. I have promised them that you, the rich Senor Bleke, will supply the funds for the revolution. Once more, comrades. To the Savior of Paranoya!"

Roland tried his hardest to catch the infection of this patriotic enthusiasm, but somehow he could not do it. Base, sordid, mercenary speculations would intrude themselves. About how much was a good, well-furnished revolution likely to cost? As delicately as he could, he put the question to Maraquita.

She said, "Poof! The cost? La, la!" Which was all very well, but hardly satisfactory as a business chat. However, that was all Roland could get

out of her.

* * * * *

The next few days passed for Roland in a sort of dream. It was the kind of dream which it is not easy to distinguish from a nightmare.

Maraquita's reticence at the supper-party on the subject of details connected with the financial side of revolutions entirely disappeared. She now talked nothing but figures, and from the confused mass which she presented to him Roland was able to gather that, in financing the restoration of royalty in Paranoya, he would indeed be risking everything for her sake.

In the matter of revolutions Maraquita was no niggard. She knew how the thing should be done--well, or not at all. There would be so much for rifles, machine-guns, and what not: and there would be so much for the expense of smuggling them into the country. Then there would be so much to be laid out in corrupting the republican army. Roland brightened a little when they came to this item. As the standing army of Paranoya amounted to twenty thousand men, and as it seemed possible to corrupt it thoroughly at a cost of about thirty shillings a head, the obvious course, to Roland's way of thinking was to concentrate on this side of the question and avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

It appeared, however, that Maraquita did not want to avoid bloodshed,

that she rather liked bloodshed, that the leaders of the revolution would be disappointed if there were no bloodshed. Especially Bombito. Unless, she pointed out, there was a certain amount of carnage, looting, and so on, the revolution would not achieve a popular success. True, the beloved Alejandro might be restored; but he would sit upon a throne that was insecure, unless the coronation festivities took a bloodthirsty turn. By all means, said Maraquita, corrupt the army, but not at the risk of making the affair tame and unpopular. Paranoya was an emotional country, and liked its revolutions with a bit of zip to them.

It was about ten days after he had definitely cast in his lot with the revolutionary party that Roland was made aware that these things were a little more complex than he had imagined. He had reconciled himself to the financial outlay. It had been difficult, but he had done it. That his person as well as his purse would be placed in peril he had not foreseen.

The fact was borne in upon him at the end of the second week by the arrival of the deputation.

It blew in from the street just as he was enjoying his after-dinner cigar.

It consisted of three men, one long and suave, the other two short, stout, and silent. They all had the sallow complexion and undue hairiness which he had come by this time to associate with the native of

Paranoya.

For a moment he mistook them for a drove of exiled noblemen whom he had not had the pleasure of meeting at the supper-party; and he waited resignedly for them to make night hideous with the royal anthem. He poised himself on his toes, the more readily to spring aside if they should try to kiss him on the cheek.

"Mr. Bleke?" said the long man.

His companions drifted toward the cigar-box which stood open on the table, and looked at it wistfully.

"Long live the monarchy," said Roland wearily. He had gathered in the course of his dealings with the exiled ones that this remark generally went well.

On the present occasion it elicited no outburst of cheering. On the contrary, the long man frowned, and his two companions helped themselves to a handful of cigars apiece with a marked moodiness.

"Death to the monarchy," corrected the long man coldly. "And," he added with a wealth of meaning in his voice, "to all who meddle in the affairs of our beloved country and seek to do it harm."

"I don't know what you mean," said Roland.

"Yes, Senor Bleke, you do know what I mean. I mean that you will be well advised to abandon the schemes which you are hatching with the malcontents who would do my beloved land an injury."

The conversation was growing awkward. Roland had got so into the habit of taking it for granted that every Paranoyan he met must of necessity be a devotee of the beloved Alejandro that it came as a shock to him to realize that there were those who objected to his restoration to the throne. Till now he had looked on the enemy as something in the abstract. It had not struck him that the people for whose correction he was buying all these rifles and machine-guns were individuals with a lively distaste for having their blood shed.

"Senor Bleke," resumed the speaker, frowning at one of his companions whose hand was hovering above the bottle of liqueur brandy, "you are a man of sense. You know what is safe and what is not safe. Believe me, this scheme of yours is not safe. You have been led away, but there is still time to withdraw. Do so, and all is well. Do not so, and your blood be upon your own head."

"My blood!" gasped Roland.

The speaker bowed.

"That is all," he said. "We merely came to give the warning. Ah, Senor

Bleke, do not be rash. You think that here, in this great London of yours, you are safe. You look at the policeman upon the corner of the road, and you say to yourself 'I am safe.' Believe me, not at all so is it, but much the opposite. We have ways by which it is of no account the policeman on the corner of the road. That is all, Senor Bleke. We wish you a good night."

The deputation withdrew.

Maraquita, informed of the incident, snapped her fingers, and said "Poof!" It sometimes struck Roland that she would be more real help in a difficult situation if she could get out of the habit of saying "Poof!"

"It is nothing," she said.

"No?" said Roland.

"We easily out-trick them, isn't it? You make a will leaving your money to the Cause, and then where are they, hein?"

It was one way of looking at it, but it brought little balm to Roland. He said so. Maraquita scanned his face keenly.

"You are not weakening, Roland?" she said. "You would not betray us now?"

"Well, of course, I don't know about betraying, you know, but still----. What I mean is----"

Maraquita's eyes seemed to shoot forth two flames.

"Take care," she cried. "With me it is nothing, for I know that your heart is with Paranoya. But, if the others once had cause to suspect that your resolve was failing--ah! If Bombito----"

Roland took her point. He had forgotten Bombito for the moment.

"For goodness' sake," he said hastily, "don't go saying anything to Bombito to give him the idea that I'm trying to back out. Of course you can rely on me, and all that. That's all right."

Maraquita's gaze softened. She raised her glass--they were lunching at the time--and put it to her lips.

"To the Savior of Paranoya!" she said.

"Beware!" whispered a voice in Roland's ear.

He turned with a start. A waiter was standing behind him, a small, dark, hairy man. He was looking into the middle distance with the abstracted air which waiters cultivate.

Roland stared at him, but he did not move.

That evening, returning to his flat, Roland was paralyzed by the sight of the word "Beware" scrawled across the mirror in his bedroom. It had apparently been done with a diamond. He rang the bell.

"Sir?" said the competent valet. ("Competent valets are in attendance at each of these flats."--Advt.)

"Has any one been here since I left?"

"Yes, sir. A foreign-looking gentleman called. He said he knew you, sir. I showed him into your room."

The same night, well on in the small hours, the telephone rang. Roland dragged himself out of bed.

"Hullo?"

"Is that Senor Bleke?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Beware!"

Things were becoming intolerable. Roland had a certain amount of

nerve, but not enough to enable him to bear up against this sinister persecution. Yet what could he do? Suppose he did beware to the extent of withdrawing his support from the royalist movement, what then? Bombito. If ever there was a toad under the harrow, he was that toad. And all because a perfectly respectful admiration for the caoutchouc had led him to occupy a stage-box several nights in succession at the theater where the peerless Maraquita tied herself into knots.

* * * * *

There was an air of unusual excitement in Maraquita's manner at their next meeting.

"We have been in communication with Him," she whispered. "He will receive you. He will give an audience to the Savior of Paranoya."

"Eh? Who will?"

"Our beloved Alejandro. He wishes to see his faithful servant. We are to go to him at once."

"Where?"

"At his own house. He will receive you in person."

Such was the quality of the emotions through which he had been passing

of late, that Roland felt but a faint interest at the prospect of meeting face to face a genuine--if exiled--monarch. The thought did flit through his mind that they would sit up a bit in old Fineberg's office if they could hear of it, but it brought him little consolation.

The cab drew up at a gloomy-looking house in a fashionable square. Roland rang the door-bell. There seemed a certain element of the prosaic in the action. He wondered what he should say to the butler.

There was, however, no need for words. The door opened, and they were ushered in without parley. A butler and two footmen showed them into a luxuriously furnished anteroom. Roland entered with two thoughts running in his mind. The first was that the beloved Alejandro had got an uncommonly snug crib; the second that this was exactly like going to see the dentist.

Presently the squad of retainers returned, the butler leading.

"His Majesty will receive Mr. Bleke."

Roland followed him with tottering knees.

His Majesty, King Alejandro the Thirteenth, on the retired list, was a genial-looking man of middle age, comfortably stout about the middle and a little bald as to the forehead. He might have been a prosperous stock-broker. Roland felt more at his ease at the very sight of him.

"Sit down, Mr. Bleke," said His Majesty, as the door closed. "I have been wanting to see you for some time."

Roland had nothing to say. He was regaining his composure, but he had a long way to go yet before he could feel thoroughly at home.

King Alejandro produced a cigaret-case, and offered it to Roland, who shook his head speechlessly. The King lit a cigaret and smoked thoughtfully for a while.

"You know, Mr. Bleke," he said at last, "this must stop. It really must. I mean your devoted efforts on my behalf."

Roland gaped at him.

"You are a very young man. I had expected to see some one much older. Your youth gives me the impression that you have gone into this affair from a spirit of adventure. I can assure you that you have nothing to gain commercially by interfering with my late kingdom. I hope, before we part, that I can persuade you to abandon your idea of financing this movement to restore me to the throne.

"I don't understand--er--your majesty."

"I will explain. Please treat what I shall say as strictly confidential.

You must know, Mr. Bleke, that these attempts to re-establish me as a reigning monarch in Paranoya are, frankly, the curse of an otherwise very pleasant existence. You look surprized? My dear sir, do you know Paranoya? Have you ever been there? Have you the remotest idea what sort of life a King of Paranoya leads? I have tried it, and I can assure you that a coal-heaver is happy by comparison. In the first place, the climate of the country is abominable. I always had a cold in the head. Secondly, there is a small but energetic section of the populace whose sole recreation it seems to be to use their monarch as a target for bombs. They are not very good bombs, it is true, but one in, say, ten explodes, and even an occasional bomb is unpleasant if you are the target.

"Finally, I am much too fond of your delightful country to wish to leave it. I was educated in England--I am a Magdalene College man--and I have the greatest horror of ever being compelled to leave it. My present life suits me exactly. That is all I wished to say, Mr. Bleke. For both our sakes, for the sake of my comfort and your purse, abandon this scheme of yours."

* * * * *

Roland walked home thoughtfully. Maraquita had left the royal residence long before he had finished the whisky-and-soda which the genial monarch had pressed upon him. As he walked, the futility of his situation came home to him more and more. Whatever he did, he was bound to displease

somebody; and these Paranoyans were so confoundedly impulsive when they were vexed.

For two days he avoided Maraquita. On the third, with something of the instinct which draws the murderer to the spot where he has buried the body, he called at her house.

She was not present, but otherwise there was a full gathering. There were the marquises; there were the counts; there was Bombito.

He looked unhappily round the crowd.

Somebody gave him a glass of champagne. He raised it.

"To the revolution," he said mechanically.

There was a silence--it seemed to Roland an awkward silence. As if he had said something improper, the marquises and counts began to drift from the room, till only Bombito was left. Roland regarded him with some apprehension. He was looking larger and more unusual than ever.

But to-night, apparently, Bombito was in genial mood. He came forward and slapped Roland on the shoulder. And then the remarkable fact came to light that Bombito spoke English, or a sort of English.

"My old chap," he said. "I would have a speech with you."

He slapped Roland again on the shoulder.

"The others they say, 'Break it with Senor Bleke gently.' Maraquita say 'Break it with Senor Bleke gently.' So I break it with you gently."

He dealt Roland a third stupendous punch. Whatever was to be broken gently, it was plain to Roland that it was not himself. And suddenly there came to him a sort of intuition that told him that Bombito was nervous.

"After all you have done for us, Senor Bleke, we shall seem to you ungrateful bounders, but what is it? Yes? No? I shouldn't wonder, perhaps. The whole fact is that there has been political crisis in Paranoya. Upset. Apple-cart. Yes? You follow? No? The Ministry have been--what do you say?--put through it. Expelled. Broken up. No more ministry. New ministry wanted. To conciliate royalist party, that is the cry. So deputation of leading persons, mighty good chaps, prominent merchants and that sort of bounder, call upon us. They offer me to be President. See? No? Yes? That's right. I am ambitious blighter, Senor Bleke. What about it, no? I accept. I am new President of Paranoya. So no need for your kind assistance. Royalist revolution up the spout. No more royalist revolution."

The wave of relief which swept over Roland ebbed sufficiently after an interval to enable him to think of some one but himself. He was not fond

of Maraquita, but he had a tender heart, and this, he felt, would kill the poor girl.

"But Maraquita----?"

"That's all right, splendid old chap. No need to worry about Maraquita, stout old boy. Where the husband goes, so does the wife go. As you say, whither thou goes will I follow. No?"

"But I don't understand. Maraquita is not your wife?"

"Why, certainly, good old heart. What else?"

"Have you been married to her all the time?"

"Why, certainly, good, dear boy."

The room swam before Roland's eyes. There was no room in his mind for meditations on the perfidy of woman. He groped forward and found Bombito's hand.

"By Jove," he said thickly, as he wrung it again and again, "I knew you were a good sort the first time I saw you. Have a drink or something. Have a cigar or something. Have something, anyway, and sit down and tell me all about it."