

# The Clock and the Pillar Box

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"Troy Town", "The Delectable Duchy", "Dead Man's Rock", etc., etc.  
Illustrated by FERGUS KYLE

**M**R. BANNISTER stood in the doorway of his five-roomed private residence in Quocunque Livery; which is in Little Britain in the City of London, and hard to find nowadays, notwithstanding that two lofty archways give access to it, north and south, out of the City's traffic.

These passage-ways, though wide enough to admit a coach and spare a few inches of kerbing, are long and very dark, leading in between blank walls of shop-buildings that give all their plate-glass and glitter to the street; being vaulted also to carry upper floors that continue the street frontage.

But if you press on through either of these tunnels, at the end of it you will get—even at shut of day—a sensation of light restored to you without artificial aid and in unexpected beauty. For you find yourself in an ample paved yard lined with low buildings which, designed by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire, still squarely and sturdily hold the surrounding skyscrapers at their distance and keep open a broad patch of sky.

The reason why Quocunque survives, defying all rises in ground values, is that a certain City Company, now and long since defunct, in the act of expiring conveyed the site and premises, for the advancement of piety and good learning, to a certain College in Cambridge which, absorbed in those twin pursuits, has treated its treasures with a generous neglect. Its bursar is kind to old tenants, lenient over arrears of rent, but obdurate against repairs.

The yard which Mr. Bannister, job-master, surveyed from his doorway one evening in last July, wore an appearance hardly less solidly respectable than it had worn a hundred years ago, when Lord Mayors' coaches had rumbled in and out beneath its archways. The main coach-house, his coach-house—faced him, with an Ionic portico and a clock on the roof above it. In the gloom of the portico one could hardly detect how shabby its doors were and how badly in need of a coat of paint. But Mr. Bannister knew—and, worse, his enemy Horrex, at the end of the yard knew—how shabby they were, and why, and what dilapidation of poverty they hid: a moth-eaten barouche, a brougham presentable enough for nightwork, and a hearse. Of late years his old clientele had come more and more to choose the hearse for their drives, or to speak accurately, to have it chosen for them, and Mr. Bannister's circumstances were such that while conducting yet one more old patron to interment he could drink present solace, as a drug, from the thought that funerals were, so to say, ready-money jobs or thereabouts.

Of the five horses he possessed two years ago (and fed with difficulty) the war had claimed the three best. Two were left for the hearse. The war had also claimed his son Dick, but had given him back.

This brings us again to the coach-house clock. It had stopped for no ascertainable reason, on the very day that news came of Dick's being severely wounded in Gallipoli. Listening, as you followed Mr. Bannister's gaze, you might also swear you heard the clock ticking yet, though the hands stood motionless, and as if glued together, at ten minutes past two. The ticking came from a room upstairs where Dick, aged twenty-one, blinded in both eyes by one of our own naval shells, and now discharged, was assiduously practising on a type-writer, in the hope to qualify himself to earn a living. Dick, who in 1914, was just coming to an age to save the business; Mrs. Bannister—bedridden and querulous in an adjoining room, maintained that the clock had never stopped on that day by accident, but as a presage and a seal set by Heaven upon the family's ill-luck.

Thus Mr. Bannister, with a bed-ridden wife, a blinded son in whom he had built his hopes, a business almost extinct, owing rent, with his lease closing in a few days, and nowhere to turn to for money, was in a bad pass. Yet he dared neither tell the worst to his wife, for fear of her useless nagging, nor to Dick, in pity. Yet he looked a solid man enough as he stood and sucked his pipe in the doorway; solid and durable and old-fashioned as Sir Christopher's facade opposite; each with stout front covering ruin and the worm within.

And Horrex knew. That was the worst. . . . that had been the worst during old wrathful indignant days which yet were proud. Horrex had been Mr. Bannister's foreman and had nearly snapped up a lease of the premises at the north end of the yard and opened a garage.

Horrex had said, "A man must look out for himself. Here were these premises which you never used. Times and again I warned you that a few years would see motors driving every horse off the streets; but you never would listen."

To which Bannister returned irascibly, "That doesn't excuse your chipping in under my very nose and playing me this dirty trick. God forgive me for trusting you all these years!"

"I don't call it trusting a man," retorted Horrex, "when you won't listen to him counselling for your good. . . . Suppose you drag the business down, as you will. Then one day you'll come and tell me—'Sorry, Horrex, you'll say, 'but I find I can't pay you wages any longer.' And sorry you'll be; but I shall be on the streets. . . . You had your chance. You went to the college and just proved that you couldn't take a renewal of lease unless they lowered the rent. Easy enough you could prove that, having let the north building go to Jack Straw's Castle for fifteen years. But the fact was, you hadn't the renewal-money handy. So I stepped in and proved that the premises could be made to pay. I didn't prove too much, either. I didn't go so far as to tell them monsters o' learning as the whole place was a gold-mine to an enterprising man."

"Oh!" sneered Bannister, "and I've no doubt you'd like to be that enterprising man: . . . After twenty years and your wages never once behind on a Saturday night,

intrinsically wrong with a pillar-box. In fact, to have a pillar-box handy by one's front door is a convenience. But here lay the grievance: Horrex had persuaded the G.P.O. to provide it, bringing proof of the large correspondence entailed by his growing business. Moreover Horrex had caused it to be erected near his old employer's door because, as he put it to himself quite simply and sincerely, 'The old boss is main tenant after all. This sort of recognizes it, and may soften his feelings a trifle.'

Of course, it did nothing of the sort. Mr. Bannister was in the frame of mind to conclude, and promptly, "Horrex has got 'em to stick this blasted object just here, so's it'll be out of the way of his manoeuvring cars. Likely as not too he's planned it to insult me—coming along as he does with a pile of letters for every post. . . . Happen also," added Mr. Bannister to himself, yet more suspiciously, "he reckons I find it convenient at times, coming home in the dark. He's capable of it."

For Mr. Bannister of late had taken to coming home in the dark, after deadening care at the Saddlemakers' Arms.

But what most affronted Mr. Bannister just now was the sight of young Jim Horrex, in spectacles, cleaning a Red Cross Ambulance car in front of the garage door, over which the legend P. H. HORREX AND SON hit the eye, in gilt two-foot lettering.

For while Dick Bannister, having enlisted in the second week of the War, was fighting in Egypt and afterwards at Gallipoli, young Jim Horrex had been excused, first on the ground that his father's thriving business could not spare him, and twice afterwards on the ground of defective eyesight. Defective eyesight, just Lord! And here was Dick returned, totally blind!

The typewriter upstairs went on ticking, now with hesitation, anon with a cheerful rush.

The door of Horrex's office opened, and Horrex himself came briskly across the yard with a thick bundle of letters in his hand. At sight of Mr. Bannister in the doorway, he seemed a trifle disconcerted, but came on bravely.

"Post hasn't been collected yet?" Horrex asked: for the two men had somehow kept on speaking terms. He poised the bundle in his hand.

"Won't be here for another five minutes," answered Mr. Bannister shortly.

"Nice time we keep here," observed Horrex, with a glance up at the arrested clock, while he slid his letters one by one into the pillar-box.

It was an unhappy remark. Bannister had been eyeing him suspiciously. "You'll be able to repair the darned clock when you've ousted me," he answered sourly. "That son of yours has a gift for looking into machinery, they tell me, though his eyes give out when it comes to sighting a rifle."

Horrex, apparently without hearing this, selected a long envelope and dropped it very deliberately into the box: selected another, in a smaller square envelope and transferred it to his breast-pocket; then thrust the rest, in a heap, through the slit. And then it appeared that he had heard, after all.

"As I make it out," he said slowly, "a boy that can drive wounded soldiers to hospital, as Jim does, is doing his bit just as much as one in the trenches."

"Think so?" sneered Bannister. "Well, 'tisn't for us old ones to have opinions on that. Let your son go out and try. Mebbe, when he comes back to you with his eyesight cured, I'll listen."

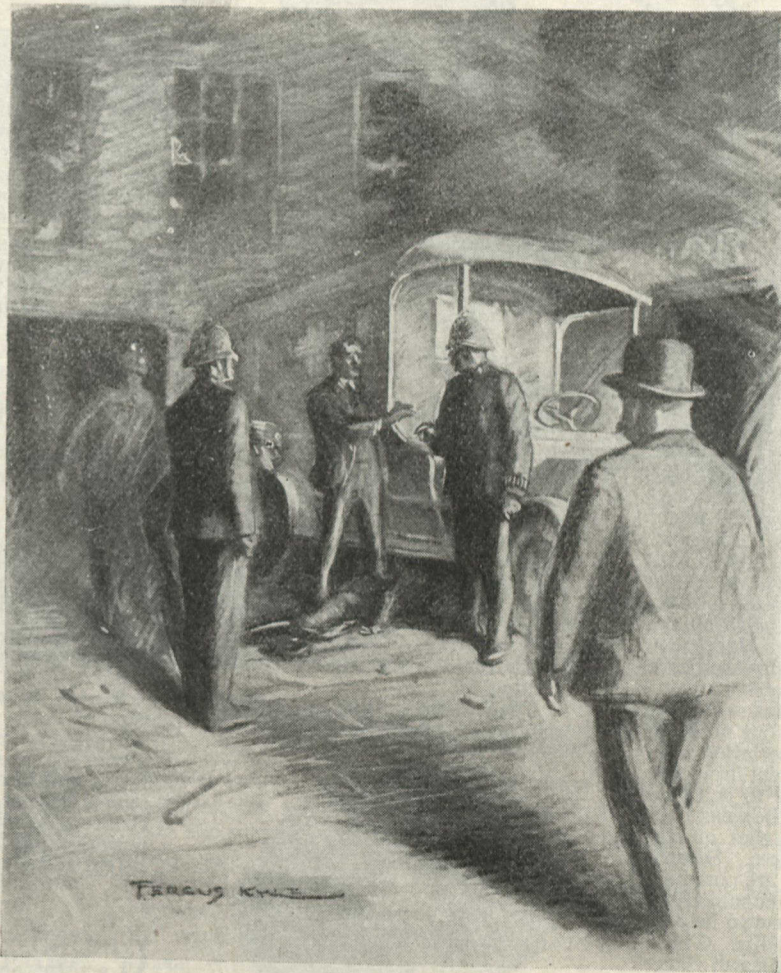
Horrex did not retort on this but turned and went somewhat heavily back to the garage door, before which he paused for a word with Jim.

Bannister with the tail of his eye, saw them there in converse beside the ambulance car; saw them step apart, in an irrational sort of way and stand staring up at the Heavens. His own straight gaze was fixed on a tiny patch of moss or grass—in the uncertain light he could not tell which—sprouting at the angle of two paving-steps, some five yards away. He had not observed it before. He had a mind to step out and kick it up. . . .

Hesitating, with a foot half over his doorstep, he heard a sudden rousing sound overhead, as of an express train taking a railway bridge.

Something fell out of the sky, hurtling. It struck the mid-pavement of the yard with a crash, and—as it were on the rebound, shot skyward again in a spout of flame and with an awful shattering detonation. . . . As Mr. Bannister fell back half-blinded, with ears almost bursting, the wind of the concussion fairly lifted and flung him down the house passage to the very foot of the stairs. . . . The world seemed to be full of the sound of raining glass.

Dick's voice brought him to, calling down the stairs, (CONTINUED ON PAGE 41)



"Ambulance!" shouted Horrex—"Ain't this an Ambulance staring ye in the face?"

though I've pinched myself, that's gratitude, I reckon, in this world," and Mr. Bannister spat.

"See, here, Master," said Horrex patiently. "I've a son as well as you have: and all being well, Jim's going to have a better start in life than his father. . . . That's firm. . . . But to be clear of this talk of ungratefulness, I'll offer you this. For the name of the old business take me in as partner and let me run this garage affair in my own way. In two years I'll prove to you which side of the concern is paying best on its capital."

Bannister kept his sneer. "Beginning to talk of your capital already!" Horrex kept his temper. "I wish it were yours, Sir. You know it can't be mine, first-along, out of the forty shillings you've paid me. But, with the lease secure, as it is now—and everything pointing to garages all over the place at five times the rent—if you'd only listen, Master!"

"I reckon you don't understand, Horrex," said Mr. Bannister coldly "that there's such a thing as natural aversions. I can't abide the stink of motors—nor of skunks."

**F**IVE years had passed since that quarrel. The outward aspect of Quocunque Yard, solemn and solid, had altered scarcely at all in the interim. There was a wide garage entrance in the northern corner, and a scarlet-painted pillar-box six paces to the right of Mr. Bannister's door. These were the only structural innovations and they affronted him; the garage for reasons already given; the pillar-box—well there is nothing