

"On the contrary; I think we ought to be deeply grateful that his life has been spared. Just fancy, had he been cut off before he could finish the Great Work which he contemplates, what would the world have lost? On the whole I'm glad it was only a goat," replied Coddleby.

This speech appeared to comfort Mr. Crinkle in some slight measure, and he assumed a more cheerful aspect.

The stranger, during this conversation, might have been seen to smile occasionally, the emotion evidently not being caused by anything he was reading, though he still appeared to be intently perusing his paper.

"Well," said Yubbits, "all this has not decided us as to what we are to do for the remainder of the evening. Surely there must be something to amuse ourselves with in this city"



"Was it not pitiful.
In a whole city full
Fun there was none,"

parodied Crinkle, this being the first sign he had given that his mind was gradually ceasing to brood over his troubles.

"Bravo, Crinkle," cried Yubbits, "capital!" You'll make your mark yet, old fellow: but I say: we *must* do something."

"Well," what is it to be, we can't play whist without Bramley, and I hate dummy."

The stranger here rose, and advanced to that quarter of the apartment in which the trio were sitting, bowed and said,

"Gentlemen, I hope you will pardon me, a stranger, for addressing you, but chancing to hear this gentleman's last remark, and feeling, myself, somewhat at a loss to put in the time, I make bold to offer myself as a fourth in a game of whist or whatever you please. I am staying at this hotel, and this city is, as I have overheard one of you say, really exceedingly dull."

All this was said with perfect ease of manner, but those close set eyes glanced swiftly from one to the other, reminding one of those of a frightened hare, and the nose twitched unpleasantly and in a very rabbit-like manner.

"I'm sure, sir," replied Yubbits, "we shall only be too happy to welcome you to our party if by so doing we can hit upon some thing that will enable us to pass this even-



ing. It is now," looking at his watch, "only half-past nine, and fully two hours must elapse before we can 'turn in,' as we say on board ship."

"Ah!" exclaimed the other apparently gratified, "so you have been in the service?" Mr. Yubbits was highly pleased.

"May I ask what ship you last sailed in? I, too, am a son of the sea, though I have deserted Father Neptune now for some years," and he produced a card on which was engraved:

"PERCY B. VINER.

LATE LIEUTENANT, R.N."

and looked enquiringly at Mr. Yubbits.

"Oh! well ah"—replied that gentleman somewhat confused, "I, that is, you know, I never was in the regular service, but have knocked about, yachting, a good deal, you know."

The other bowed and continued—

"A very pleasant pastime, yachting, very; exceedingly pleasant; but you have the cut of a sailor, sir, if you will excuse me saying so,"—Mr. Yubbits looked intensely gratified, which Mr. Viner perceiving, he went on.

"And I am sure you would have been no discredit to any service: however, I trust I have not offended you by falling into an error which anyone might be excused for doing."

"I am flattered, sir," replied Yubbits, "I am a great admirer of the naval and military professions myself."

"And well you may be, and I deeply regret that I ever left the former," replied the other: "but my health would not stand the life," and again the rabbit nose twitched.

These compliments and pleasant interchanges having been passed, the subject of some present amusement was again brought up. Cards were tabooed by Yubbits as being slow, that gentleman said he felt more like having a "trot round" somewhere, whilst Crinkle and Coddleby declared that they did not much care what they did, but wished it was bed-time.

"I have it, gentlemen," said Mr. Viner, suddenly, and turning to Coddleby, "You play billiards, or pool, the very thing."

"I regret to say, sir, that I am entirely ignorant of either game, though my friend here, Mr. Yubbits, is, I believe, a proficient at them; at least I have heard him say so."

"Oh! nothing to speak of," said the gentleman referred to, "I have certainly knocked the balls about a little, but nothing to entitle me to claim any such thing as proficiency."

"Ah! true merit is ever modest," said Mr. Viner. "I am not much of a hand myself, but I don't mind, just *pour passer le temps*, having a game or two; what d'ye say, gentlemen?"

Messrs. Crinkle and Coddleby again asserted their ignorance of the scientific games mentioned, but their objections were over-ruled by Mr. Viner, who offered to teach them to the best of his poor ability; whilst Yubbits agreed to go and have a game, though he looked as if he would much rather have not done so, and the party, led by Mr. Viner, started for the billiard room, which, for a wonder, contained not more than a dozen people, only three of the five tables being engaged.

"What shall it be, gentlemen?" asked their new friend, "billiards or pool?"

All said it was a matter of perfect indifference to them what it was, and so Mr. Viner proposed pool as being easier for the two novices to learn, and the balls having been procured, and Mr. Viner having summoned an attendant from the adjoining bar by knocking on the floor with his cue, asked the three Pickwickians what refresh-