

"Try again," said the other man gasping.

He did try. He tried for half an hour: he tried with patience and nearly succeeded: then with impatience, and never came near success: while he captured one letter the others slipped round: if he thought he had all, there was one wrong. At last he stood up and wiped his brow in despair.

"Jack," he said, "I should like to curse the thing, but it's no use."

"No use," the other echoed, "I've been thinking the same thing for the last half-hour. For such an occasion as this—"

"Look here, Jack. I believe there's a crowbar or a pick in the stable. Let go find it, and prize the thing open."

They went out together, and opened the stable door. The ponies occupied two of the boxes. They searched them first. No crowbar there. They then searched the other two, kicking about the litter, and feeling in the corners. But no crowbar. Meantime, the ponies, finding the door open and no opposition to their going out, did walk out together, and trotted off down the avenue.

"Jack! The ponies are gone."

They ran out together, calling to the sagacious creatures, who only turned their trot into a run, and, in half a minute, were out in the road and galloping away in the darkness.

"Good Lord! The devil's abroad to-night, I believe."

"They're gone," said Jack. They'll go off into the forest, and they'll be picked up by a maroon, and mine was a new saddle. There go fifty pounds, old man. Because, as for our getting ponies or saddles again—"

"I can't swear, I can't say anything. I am so thirsty."

They crept back to the house, hopeless and crushed. The night was darker than ever; darker and closer, and hotter and stiller. And not a drop of anything to drink—not even cold water. They found themselves once more side by side in front of the safety bin.

"I can feel a bottle," said Jack, with a broken voice. "It's full of whisky, and the soda bottles are under it."

"I've got a corkscrew in my pocket," said the other. "Who would ever dream of having a corkscrew and no bottle to put it in?"

"The bottle is deliciously cool to touch," said Jack. "It's the only thing that is cool. Can't we cut down the infernal house in order to get it?"

"Look here; tie a handkerchief round your hand, so as to get a good purchase. So. Now, then, foot to foot, hand by hand. Ready? Pull!"

They pulled. They had the strength of ten, because they were so thirsty; the iron bent, but it did not give way, and the padlock held. "Pull again—now." They pulled like Samson, and with much the same result. Craunch! Craunch! Crush! Crush!

They were lying on the floor under a wreck. The uprights of the house had given way with everything, safety bin, sideboard, and the two thirsty men—and all lay on the floor together in mingled wreck.

"Jack: I believe my left thumb's cut off. Are you dead?"

"Very nearly," Jack replied faintly. "There was oil in the broken lamp and my head's in it."

"Get up and look for the whiskey and the soda. They're somewhere about."

They were. The liquid was on the floor. The bottles were in fragments. It was all over. There was nothing more to be hoped. The worst had happened. Their hands were cut by the broken glass; the side of the house pulled over; their table and sideboard wrecked; their lamp and their water-jug broken; and their ponies gone. The job was complete. They threw themselves upon their beds and lay there in sleepless silence.

At five in the morning Arakham appeared. It was beginning to get light, and the wreck was visible. He stood in the door and gazed. Everything broken, and the side of the house gone, and his two masters lying pale and livid on their beds, but not asleep.

"Where the devil were you last night?" asked one of the men,

from his bed.

"Sahib give leave. Go to port. Yesterday more whiskey come—plenty soda come."

"What?" It was now rapidly getting lighter. The thirsty man sprang to his feet. "Where are they?" Arakham pointed to the corner of the room. There was the case of whisky open. Beside it were soda water bottles—rows of soda water bottles—dozens of soda water bottles.

"And they were here all the time! At our very hands—within reach, and we didn't know it, Jack!"

Gurgle—gurgle—gurgle. It was the opening of the soda. What other reply did he expect?

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