

## MY VISIT TO AN OPIUM DEN.

BY TOBA.

Boys, I believe I've been in an opium den. Yes, and not more than 200 yards from this Office, either! 'Twas on a blithering cold and wet evening one night last week, when I left this Office at the usual time—5.30—in company with one of our gallant S.Q.M.S.'s, a man whom you might have expected would know better than entice a man of my moral character into so vile a place. On leaving the Office he said to me: "Let's go and have some tea. I know of a good place." I consented to go with him, feeling rather chilled, and not a little glad at the prospect of getting out of the drizzle.

"We'll board a 'bus," said he; and before I knew what had happened we had not only boarded the 'bus, but had done our journey, paid our fare, and were jumping off, having travelled only a little over a hundred yards.

We had travelled east—that much I knew; but why take a 'bus for so short a journey when we could have walked it in three minutes? My suspicions were aroused for the first time. There was something more than tea in this! "Where the —— are we going?" I asked. "Down here," he said; and whisked me through a dimly lighted doorway on the right of the road, and DOWN SOME STEPS! I had not been used to going down steps to have my tea, and there was something uncanny about it. I felt a real villain. Anyway, I thought, I'll see this accursed affair through now, even at the risk of being late at the Office in the morning. But shall I ever forget my feelings when, on reaching the bottom of the stairs, my keen sense of smell at once detected something—something which the papers of two hemispheres have had their columns full of; something we have been reading about night and day; people have been dying with it, others dying without it; others have been locked up through it; and it was this latter thought that frightened me. I had got the wind up! IT WAS OPIUM!

Oh! that I should have ever have come here to tea. If mother knew I was here she would never look at me again! I little thought as I had been reading the papers lately, and decrying the use of opium, that I, above all persons, would find myself in an opium den.

It was too late now to turn back: I must face it; and I ventured beyond the oriental screen at the foot of the stairs. The carpet was lovely and soft to tread on. I felt like a horse walking on silk, and the ceiling was low, oak beams ran across it, and from these oak beams hung electric lights, shaded with oriental shades of the real Chinese pattern. The curtains, the little bamboo tables, the wallpaper—everything, in fact, told me I had struck a real opium den. And so near our civilised Office in the Old Bailey! But to go back to the den—the den with the low, long, soft velvety seats, and the low, soft, easy chairs; which sunk right down as you sat in them. They were lovely; everything was lovely, but—what a lot of

screens about! These were all over, but they did not seem out of place with the surroundings, as I soon found out. The room is not an extremely large one, but what one would term as "just nice," heated by a gas fire at the top of the room, which gave out a warm glow and light that blended beautifully with the dull yellow glow from the electric lights, shaded, as I have said, by the Chinese shades. But where was everybody? The place seemed empty. "Come on," says my S.Q.M.S., "let's sit down." We did, and presently I saw a thin stream of smoke going up behind one of those screens. Ah! opium, I thought. I've heard they smoke it, and that's the smoke? My gaze was fixed on this thin uncanny stream of smoke coming up behind a screen; there was something fascinating about it, and there was not a murmur behind that screen, either. How many people were there? I wondered. And were they in a trance, or dying, or what? I was tempted to go and peep, and in a few seconds I had picked up enough courage to pull myself up out of the soft chair. I gripped my S.Q.M.S.'s hand. "Shush," I said, "I'm going to look," and to my surprise he did not hold me back. I stole over the soft carpet, and, reaching the screen—PEEPED! Behold! a beautiful vision of a female, mixed up with a quite ordinary looking man! Tea laid for two! And they were smoking—CIGARETTE! Ah! I thought, this is only camouflage: they heard me coming and hid their opium pipes before I got there. They don't get over me that way. I crept back to where I had come from, and found my S.Q.M.S. was doing exactly the same thing as the two I had just left! He, too, was smoking a cigarette. Ah! I've got it; they were all smoking OPIUM CIGARETTES! But I was still puzzled, for he, too, had a female form at the side of him, and we never brought one in with us, I'll swear.

I sat down beside my pal, wondering if he would continue to be a pal to me after the opium had done its deadly work. I looked at him: his eyes were glassy, his face appeared to be a yellowish green—he looked awful. And the female beside him had her long white arms around his neck, stroking his face, kissing him, as though they had known one another for—well, for at least a day. What would be my fate? I had another good look round the room, and I could surely make out horrible shapes, weird forms, and other things huddled up amongst the many cushions. Yes, I had forgotten to mention the cushions. But it was hard at times to distinguish the cushions from the male and female forms that reposed thereon. I sat for a few seconds, fascinated by the two huddled creatures, and by the weird silence of it all, when I suddenly became aware of the presence of a female form divine at the side of ME! "Tea and toast, please," I muttered. "And, of course, I can have some with you?" she said; and before I had time to even agree to this proposal, she had

slid away and returned again with the tea and toast. The tea and toast were warm, and so was the atmosphere, and even I was not feeling uncomfortably cold. I had now and again caught sniffs of my friend's cigarette, and I knew that it was gradually taking effect on me. It was doing its deadly work. "Have a cigarette?" said my female form divine. Ah! I thought, at last my time has come; the vice is to be MINE. My gad, if my wife only knew. It was irresistible, and with trembling fingers I took a cigarette, placed it to my mouth, my female form held a lighted match to it, and I puffed, and again I puffed. What joy, what ecstasy, was this! All the world was mine, and yet I felt weak—weak as a mouse.

But what was this? I gradually became conscious of a beautiful, soft, white arm around my neck, and a velvet-like cheek and ruby lips touching my face. Oh joy! I'm in fairyland! Harems are dull compared with this place! I managed to turn my head and ventured to touch my female. I touched her neck, and it felt wonderful; her skin was like that of a peach, only softer. She was holding something in her beautiful white hands—something soft and silky. "What is that?" I ventured. "Oh! I am making some 'combs,'" she answered. Combs—combs; I knew the name. I had heard the wife speak of combs. "Say," she said, "I want some lace for these; it will cost four shillings; match your friend who pays for it!" Match my friend who pays for it!—and only last week I had refused to buy the wife two yards of baby ribbon! But then I mustn't think of those things here. I matched my friend: bang went my four bob. Yes, the opium was doing its work. We settled down again. The tea went cold, but what matter: we were angels of love—she and I. I looked up to see how my friend was getting on, but he and his lady were not to be seen. They were surrounded by one of those screens, and so were WE. We were camouflaged.

(To be continued Next week.)

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at Whitehall of AN EXISTING GRIEVANCE . . . . . When a soldier knows that things are being done in the best possible way in his interest, HE IS THE LAST TO KICK . . . . . soldiers in British uniforms breaking camp and commandeering lorries, etc., seemed to savour of Bolshevism; at the same time, NOTHING WAS FURTHER FROM THE MINDS OF THESE MEN, WHO, HAVING A GRIEVANCE, took things into their own hands temporarily."

Is THIS clear enough? Another thing, "Bolchey," in any further correspondence on this matter, you will have to cut out the *nom de plume*. It is a well-known "press law" that all published correspondence in which the management of the paper, the Editor, staff, or matter appearing in that paper are criticised, should be published under the writer's correct name. Otherwise the writer has the advantage right through.

EDITOR.