

A COLONIAL REMINISCENCE.

It was past ten o'clock when the ponies left the hard, white road and turned into the dark avenue of palms which formed the approach to the little country box where the two men lived. The night was hot and dry; there was a gentle breeze, but it was the hot wind which lifted the white dust and floated it—all of it, as it seemed—exactly on the level of the riders' breathing apparatus, so as to parch the tongue, and dry up the throat.

They were two railway engineers, and they were getting home after a long and fatiguing journey. They had been up and on the line before six in the morning; they had spent the great heat of the day drawing plans in a stifling, hot office; they were afield again when the sun got low; they had taken a hasty dinner with the chief, and they were now home again. The monotony of the day, needless to explain, had been varied by many draughts of mingled soda and whiskey.

As they turned into the avenue, one broke the silence, and said briefly, "Whiskey and soda, Jack?"

The other replied "Two, my boy. It's a thirsty country, but thank heaven! there's lashins to drink."

The tumbled-down shanty where they lived had been put up for a hunting box. It contained one room, roughly furnished with a table, a couple of chairs, a couple of small iron bedsteads, a sideboard, and a safety bin. The box was built of half a dozen uprights, rudely hewn out of trees and its walls were of thin wood taken from packing cases. It had a small lean-to by way of verandah. Outside, there was a stable for four horses, a servant's cottage, and a kitchen. Nothing more. Behind it lay a narrow valley running up to the mountains thick with forest; in front, separated by the avenue of palms, was the long, white road; there was no house within five miles. The two men lived here, because it was convenient to their section of the line.

They threw themselves off their ponies.

"Arakham!" shouted one of them.

Now, Arakham was their groom, cook, and general servant. Nobody else would have Arakham, because he was a convicted burglar, a suspected murderer, and a terrible blackvised rogue to look at.

"Arakham!" No reply "Arakham, where are you!" No reply.

"Gone a burgling, I suppose. Got a crib to crack. With a murder. Let's put the ponies in the stable. Hang it! I'm too thirsty to look after them. Will go and get a drink. Then we'll come back. They won't hurt."

They opened the stable door, led the ponies into their boxes and went out, putting up the bar.

The house door was standing open—it always was open, day and night, but there was nothing for anyone to steal except the bottles, and they were in the safety bin.

"Phew!" They threw off their hats. "What a night it is! Let's get some drink for Heaven's sake!"

The speaker drew out a silver box and struck a light. The match flared up for a moment, and then went out. He struck another. This behaved in the same disappointing manner. "Nasty, cheap, weedy things they are!" growled the engineer. He lit a third. "Now then," said he, "where's the lamp?" It ought to have been on the table, but it wasn't.

"There it is, on the sideboard—quick!"

Too late. The third match went out while the lamp was borne from the sideboard to the table.

"Never mind. Here's another."

He lit the fourth match. This burned well and steadily. *He lifted the glass of the lamp and ignited the wick.* "There!" he said. "Now for the padlock. Oh! give me a soda, quick. I pant—I die."

There stood by the sideboard, screwed into the uprights of the house, a small and very useful article of furniture known as a safety

bin. The beauty of this kind of bin is that nobody can take anything out of it unless he have the secret of the letter padlock which guards the contents. You can see the bottles, but you cannot get them out. The other man was by this time on his knees before the safety bin. Not praying to the bottles, but using the attitude most convenient to get at the padlock, which was about two feet from the ground, and at the side.

"Hold the lamp, Jack," he said, "I can't see the letters."

Jack took up the lamp. Just then the wick suddenly flared up and went out, leaving a fragrance of oil, but no light.

"What's the matter with the thing?" asked Jack.

"No oil. I believe. The burglar has forgotten the oil."

"Well, we must make a match do. Strike another. I'm like a lime-kiln."

Jack struck another match.

"Now, then, make haste."

"All right. D R O P. That's the word. Here's the D. Here's the R. Confound it!" For the match at this point went out. "I have lost the letters again. Strike another, Jack. Haven't we got a candle somewhere? Or a bit of paper? Now then—"

It was pitch dark, otherwise he might have seen his friend turn pale and stagger.

"Make haste, Jack."

"I haven't got any more matches. Give me your box."

The other man rose from his feet and began, carelessly and confidently at first, to search his waistcoat pockets. No match-box there. He then felt in his trousers pockets. Not there. Then he became a little alarmed, and, in some precipitation, began to feel his coat pockets, of which there were many. No match-box anywhere. He then dragged everything out. Keys, purse, pocket-book, handkerchief, knife, pencil, foot-rule, pocket-tape, note-book, letters—everything—throwing all on the floor.

"Jack," he said solemnly, after a long search, "are you quite—quite—sure that you've got no matches?"

"Quite."

"No more have I. Let's call Arakham. Perhaps he has come back."

They went out into the verandah and shouted for their retainer. There was no reply; the stars winked at them; they heard their voices echoing from side to side of the narrow valley, growing fainter and fainter.

"He must have another burglary on," said Jack. "The beast is never content."

They returned to the room.

"Hang it," said the other, "there must be matches somewhere. It's impossible that we should be left without matches. Let's hunt about. You take the table. I'll search the sideboard."

Nothing at all was on the table, except the lamp, which the searcher upset and smashed. The sideboard was covered with a miscellaneous collection and glasses. It was difficult to find anything in such a collection. At the edge stood a large red earthenware jug filled with water. He who looked for matches found the jug, but, unfortunately, found it on the wrong side, so that he toppled it over, and it was broken.

"Well?"

"There are no matches. Try to find the letters by feeling."

"I wish I hadn't broken the jug. Even a drink of water would have been something."

"Well—Let us try again."

He found the padlock, and began to feel with his fingers.

"D is a good fat letter," he said. "D. Here's D, I think. Unless it's B. R is—is—I think I've found R. And here's O—round fat O. Where's P?" He continued to feel, murmuring hopefully. "Here's P, I believe. Here's P, I'm sure—now then. Hang the thing! The other letters have slewed round." Everybody knows that with a letter padlock it is necessary to keep the letters in line.