

No sooner said than done; and in another minute two pairs of stout boots had been selected, and Michael stood by while the doctor sat down to try them on. The left foot was excellently accommodated and he forthwith set himself to negotiate the right boot. But here he was doomed to meet with disappointment. When half-way on, his toes were balked of their expected lodging.

"Hallo," he cried, "this boot's got something in it. It's blocked up at the end."

"By jove," said Michael, "how infernally stupid of me. I forgot all about that."

"Forgot all about what?" said the Doctor, quickly.

"Why, about my uncle's toes, of course. Surely you know he has none on his right foot?"

"No toes on his right foot! Why, what's become of them?"

"Well, there, you ask me what a good many people would like to know. I'm sure I don't."

"Do you mean to say, seriously, that all your uncle's right boots are padded like this because he has got no toes?"

"Well, you can go and see for yourself. He's supposed to have lost them just before he went to New Zealand, about forty years ago, but, of course, nobody ever refers to it."

"Now you mention it, too, of course Mr. Smith does walk a bit lame. I always assumed that the old gentleman was gouty. Indeed, he's said as much, more than once."

"That's what the lawyers call a legal fiction," said Michael, laughing, as he led the way back into his uncle's room.

A further examination showed that the boots and shoes for the right foot were one and all blocked up inside for about one-third of their length from the toes.

During the whole of that day Dr. Carious's mind kept recurring to the subject, and Michael showed no anxiety to prevent him from continually dwelling on the mystery.

The next morning at breakfast the Doctor announced his intention of returning forthwith to town. He had, he said, received news which made it impossible for him to trespass longer on Mr. Smith's hospitality. He was evidently in an extremely perturbed state of mind, and, when Michael hoped he had slept well, he answered shortly that, on the contrary, he had passed a very disturbed night indeed.

The following day Miss Lamia Smith received this letter:—

Harley Street, W., October 6.

Dear Miss Smith,—By an extraordinary concatenation of circumstances I have become the depository of a most tragical secret, having very intimate connection with your family. It is a secret which, from its very nature, I know you to be ignorant of—a secret which, if you ever did become aware of it, would hopelessly

embitter your existence; but still, it is a secret which need never be made known, and in being uninformed of which you will be most happy.

As I have more than once told you, I consider that between those who are destined to be united in marriage there should be no concealment. You will, therefore, I am sure, realise with me that, terrible though it is to utter these words of farewell, I am bound to ask you to release me from an engagement which untoward circumstances render practically impossible. I pray you not to ask me to be more explicit. It would only be under the most stringent compulsion that I could be induced to divulge what, by such an extraordinary coincidence, has come to my knowledge.—I am, yours sincerely, Charles Carious.

Lamia promptly handed the letter to her father, and watched his face.

"Why, what the blazes is the fellow referring to?" roared Mr. Smith, when he had read it. "With his 'concatenation of circumstances,' and his 'tragical secret,' which would embitter your existence if you ever became aware of it," and his 'not being induced to divulge it but under the most stringent compulsion'? Why, I suppose the fellow thinks we shall bring an action against him for breach of promise of marriage, and force him in the witness-box to give his reasons for jilting you. What did I tell you, Lamia? This saw-bones isn't the man for you, and you're damned well rid of him."

"Mr. Smith, Mr. Smith, please remember your manners before ladies!" cried his better half.

"Mrs. Smith," said her husband, who was somewhat over-excited by what he had read, "ladies, or no ladies, I repeat, Lamia's damned well rid of him; and I think she'll agree with me that I've been perfectly right all along, and that I'm justified in saying so."

The long and short of the matter was that Mr. Smith undertook, with Lamia's consent, to write a reply to Dr. Carious, which reply, as may be imagined, was clothed in language rather more strong than courteous, and in which he told him that nothing could exceed his regret that he had ever been engaged to his daughter except his joy that he had now ceased to be so.

A few months later, Doctor Carious read the announcement in the Times of a marriage between Michael Careless, of Montreal, Canada, and Lamia, daughter of Joseph Smith, Esq., of Rabnet Manor, Crampshire. He at once sat down, and despatched a small, carefully-packed parcel to the bridegroom.

"Why, Michael, here's a belated wedding present, I do believe," cried Lamia, the morning after their return from their

honeymoon to her father's house. "It's addressed to you, and I do believe the handwriting is Dr. Carious's."

"Let's see it," said Careless, and forthwith he proceeded to undo the parcel. Under the paper was a wooden box, with a sliding lid. As he pulled this away a piece of paper fluttered to the ground. Lamia picked it up and read allowed the following extraordinary note:—

Sir,—Enclosed I send you what circumstances force me to believe are your father-in-law's toes. You will, no doubt, do as you think fit about returning them, after so long a separation, to their original owner.—I am, yours faithfully, C. C.

Whilst Lamia was reading this letter aloud, Michael was gazing, with a broad smile upon his face, at a small bottle which he held in his hand, and which contained, in spirits of wine, a very remarkable object. This object was the toe-piece of a stout boot, with a felt sole, containing five human toes and the fragment of a thick woollen sock, cut as cleanly off a booted foot as though it were the section of a German sausage. Pasted on the bottle was a fragment of newspaper dated just forty years ago, Michael volunteered to read it aloud.

It contained a partial description of what had evidently been a ghastly tragedy. Amongst other things it stated that the room in which murder for the sake of plunder had been committed was in a state of terrible confusion, which evidenced that a desperate struggle had taken place, and that the deceased had evidently at one time during the encounter been in possession of a large axe which lay on the floor, since the only trace of the murderer left behind was the toe-piece of his boot cut clean off, with the five toes remaining in it.

These last words were underlined in red ink, and in writing was added, evidently by Dr. Carious's father:—

Owner of the toes still at large, and now two years since murder was committed! John Carious.

"And what the deuce does it all mean?" cried Mr. Smith.

"Well, said Michael, rather shamefacedly, for he was uncertain what sort of reception his story would receive, "the fact is, I saw this curiosity in Dr. Carious's museum the night I dined with him, and, when he came down to shoot with me, I took the liberty of blocking up all the toes of your right boots, and—and—he chose to draw the unwarrantable inference—"

"You mean that you chose to make him believe, to forward your own personal schemes, you dog," roared Mr. Smith, "that I—that your uncle—that his future father-in-law was a toeless murderer, at large!" and, what between indignation and laughter, Lamia's father was within measurable distance of succumbing to a premature fit of apoplexy.