

The Clock and The Pillar Box

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)

"Father! Father!"

"All right, my lad," Mr. Bannister answered—rather feebly, because not quite sure of it yet.

"Thank God! . . . I heard something strike the house . . . by the doorway, it sounded. Not hurt!—sure you're not hurt? . . . Mother's alright I believe. . . . God, if I had eyes. . . . but scared almost to death of course. . . . I'm going back to her. . . . What about the stables?"

"The stables?" his father repeated dully. . . .

"Most of these bombs are incendiary. Can you get out for a look? . . . God, if I had my eyes!"

"That's all right, sonny," said Bannister who had been picking himself up heavily. "The College keeps up the insurance."

"But the horses?"

"Oh, ay," muttered Mr. Bannister, steadying himself. "I'll run out and see."

He made his way to the front door, groping at the wall of the passage, swaying as he went. Twilight had scarcely fallen, but the yard shone in another light and a strange one. It came from the south east corner where the door of a deserted building—it contained three empty loose boxes—had burst into a blaze.

"Nowhere near the stables," Mr. Bannister decided. . . . "Fire Brigade will be round presently and get the horses out" . . . a kind of paralysis held him. The fire showed the pavement, where the bomb had fallen, standing on edge like a ring of grave-stones. He cast a glance, out of dim remembered habits, up at the stable-clock.

There was no clock. The cupola stood there seemingly undamaged, but the clock had gone. This puzzled and annoyed him. Numbed in all his body, scarcely capable of locomotion, he yet found himself wondering impatiently why no one came to help, why no one seemed in any hurry. This had prompted him to glance up at the clock. . . . His gaze fell next on the entrance of the garage. . . . Horrex was there, stooping low with his back turned to the flame, apparently examining a tire of his silly ambulance car, just as if nothing had happened; yes, positively treating the light as if it had been turned on to help the examination! . . . Was everybody mad, then? . . . Why was nothing doing? What had taken the police? The fire brigade? Even the postman was late on his round, for some mysterious reason. . . .

As a matter of fact, the bomb had dropped less than three minutes ago, and the postman was barely due.

MR. BANNISTER found himself staring at the pillar-box. . . . A glancing shard had struck the edge of the case, wrenching it back, so that the small iron flap-door hung open, dangling by one hinge, exposing the letters to view. . . . Mr. Bannister's brain began to work anew, and now his muscles worked with it. Yet it was still as in a dream that he stepped to the box, caught up the pile of letters, abstracted the long legal-looking one which Horrex had posted. He crammed the rest back into place, and was turning to steal indoors with his prize when a cry smote on his ears.

"Help here—somebody! Bannister if that's you—O in mercy!"

It was Horrex's voice. Mr. Bannister opened a door on the left, a little way down the passage, flung the letter into the darkness of the front parlor and stepped forth again—calmly to all appearance.

"What's the matter?" he hailed, and at that moment a couple of policemen ran into the yard, followed by the postman.

"It's my Jim, here. . . . He's alive, but broken to pieces. . . . And I can't lift him—my arm's broken, I think."

"Steady!" said the policeman, who wore the stripes of a sergeant. "We'll get him out from under this car, gently as we can, and then ring up an ambulance. . . . Here, Webster, hand me your lantern while I have a look: and then run and ring up the fire brigade and ambulance, for your life. That fire yonder may be mischievous in another five minutes."

"Ambulance?" shouted Horrex, fairly beside himself and frantic. "Ain't this an ambulance staring ye in the face? Lift him in—Oh, my boy! my boy!—Lift him in and run him over to Guy's."

"All very well," said the sergeant, looking up from his inspection. His face was serious; his tone official but not unkindly. "But who's to drive? . . . Webster can't. I can, a bit, but it's out of the question, my leaving till that fire's got under. There don't seem anybody about. . . . Are you the lad's father, sir?"

"I am," said Horrex, and then with a sob, "Leastways I was."

"He's alive, sir. . . . broken about a bit;

but breathing and none so thickly, either. If there was anyone to drive ye—But, as it is, we'd best fetch up the regular ambulance. Constable—"

"Stay a moment," rung in Horrex. "My mechanic's at home having supper—and my left arm here is as you see it. But lift my boy in and I'll drive my Jim to Guy's one-handed, I will."

"No, you won't," said Mr. Bannister, stepping forward. "I don't know the crank and clutches and what-nots of these damned contraptions. But I see the half-baked that can steer 'em apparently; and by God, Horrex I can drive—or could, once on a time, eh? Lift the lad in, Sergeant. . . . And you, Horrex, slip in beside me and tell me about the breaks and clutches. I'll do the steering, and don't you interfere. Keep your sound arm to nurse your hurt one."

"You will?" asked Horrex, eyeing him wanly.

"Why the devil not?" retorted Mr. Bannister.

"Boss," stammered Horrex, "You're an—"

"No I'm not," Mr. Bannister cut in. "I'm three parts a criminal, if you want to know. . . . there, give me your sound hand and climb alongside. Now, if the others can lift the boy in? and—hullo! here's the postman! . . . Give a swig on that forra'd crank, my son, and fire the cattle up. . . . Ready? . . . Then hey—to go!"

Mr. Bannister being unhandy, the ambulance started with a wild forward leap, as a colt bounds from a bridle. But he, who in days gone by could work a tandem through a Derby crowd—was not to be fooled by a piece of clockwork that an errand boy could drive. . . . In ten seconds he had the feel of the brute's mouth (as he put it) and the van after taking a fine round, for all the world as though it were approaching a nobleman's portico, fetched its nose straight, opened out, and shot through the archway like an arrow.

"Sorry to shake you up like that," he found time to growl to Horrex. "Fraid it hurt your arm a bit. . . . But everything must have a beginning you know."

Outside, the police herded back a gathering crowd to give the van passage; and beyond, the road was fairly clear, the asphalt smooth. The City had long since discharged its traffic centrifugally. But Mr. Bannister was in a mood to have welcomed difficulties of steering. The engine purred beneath his feet like a wild beast that knew its master; and for a master again he knew himself.

ABOUT three weeks later, a little before sunset, Mr. Horrex—discharged from hospital but still carrying his left arm in a splint—walked home to Quocunque Livery; where his housekeeper, duly forewarned, had supper ready for him. He did not make straight for his own door, however; but having paused at the entrance for a survey of the enceinte, walked slowly across to Mr. Bannister, who stood smoking a pipe in his doorway, much as he had stood on the evening of the explosion.

"Good evening," said Horrex.

"Good evening, Horrex," said Mr. Bannister. "Glad to see you about again. How's Jim?" The enquiry was pitched in a hearty key; yet Mr. Bannister's face wore a shade of weariness.

"Mending—mending steadily, thank the Lord. Those doctors 'll make a man of him yet. We were in time, thanks to you."

Upstairs, Dick's typewriter ran on ticking.

"They'll never make a man of mine again," said Mr. Bannister gloomily.

Horrex was for changing the subject. "New glass everywhere, I see," said he with a glance around—"and the pavement relaid—new stable door—yes, and upon my word, there's the old clock back in place and working? How the dickens have you managed it, in the time?"

"College sent down its Bursar," answered Mr. Bannister, shortly and yet somewhat shiftily. "But I don't mind telling you a funny thing about that clock. It was hale and hearty all the time. Some darned sparrow had built in the works, and when it fell and shook out the nest, I'll be shot if the affair didn't start working again, there on the pavement. The firemen found it there, making up for lost time."

"You don't say!" said Horrex. "Well, it's no more wonderful than other things. . . . What's that beside you in the door-post?"

"Just a souvenir," Mr. Bannister answered. "A bit of the blamed thing struck and sucked itself into the post, here, not three inches from where I was standing just as I'm standing now. Just

take a hold on it and try to pull it out. . . . You can't! No, nor anyone else. I'm just going to let it bide there—as I say—for a souvenir."

"But—but I don't understand," said Horrex, looking around him helplessly. . . . "One would say the old place hadn't changed at all, or only for the better. And the clock's going. . . . Did you say they sent the Bursar down?"

"They did, and he hustled things ship-shape."

"Well, that's queer," Horrex mused aloud. "I wrote him a letter—in point of fact I'd posted it that very evening, asking him to come down and survey. . . . Never an answer did I get, though maybe it was overlooked and is waiting for me." Horrex was turning to go.

"No, it isn't," confessed Bannister with an effort. "Look here, Horrex, I've been meaning to get it off my chest. . . . I'm a rotten hand at business as you pretty well know. . . . but somehow thieving is not in my line—and—well, I'm glad to get it over. That blessed pillar-box, when I came to look about, was knocked all askew, and the door hanging. I—well as the saying goes, the temptation was too much for me. . . . I picked it out, and, what's more, I opened it. What's more I kept it back and wrote one of my own in its place. . . . You see, there was the door of the loose boxes blazing and I counted on the insurance money to tide me over. That's all. Now you have it, and can call me what you like!"

Horrex stepped back to the edge of the kerb, stared at his old master and broke into a laugh—yes into a laugh long and hearty.

"Boss," said he, "I remember well what was in that letter, but you ain't the only criminal as has suppressed part of this correspondence. You may remember being extra sharp that evening, and my picking a letter out of the heap and pocketing it? . . . well, it was your letter, addressed to you and stamped. . . . I'm wearing the same coat as I wore that evening. My left arm is not serviceable yet: but if you'll pick it out from the left pocket here, you can read what belongs to you."

Mr. Bannister obeyed, drew from out Horrex's left pocket a pile of letters, found one stamped and addressed "Mr. Bannister, Quocunque Livery, E.C.," broke the seal and read:

"Mr. Bannister, Sir,—

"It was my hopes in the old days that, some time, my son Jim might grow up and share as partner with yours in carrying on the business. Now, Sir, that all is wrong and I hear your brave lad practising all day to be a clerk, and all for having served his Country, it aches my heart. I write this to say that I can't give up my opinions as to the future lying with motor traffic, if the same could hold good and your son take over writing work with a view to partnering mine, it would still be an honor to

"Yours respectfully,

"P. H. HORREX."

"And, father," said Dick, when he heard the news, "if it prospers, we'll put a set of chimes into that clock. Turn again, Whittington—that sort of thing—You can't think how friendly it sounds to a blind man, just hearing something every fifteen minutes. . . . But the difficulty will be to find chauffeurs in these times."

"Well, you may try me for a stop-gap," said Mr. Bannister. "I rather like driving motors. They're easy enough to suit a man at my time of life."

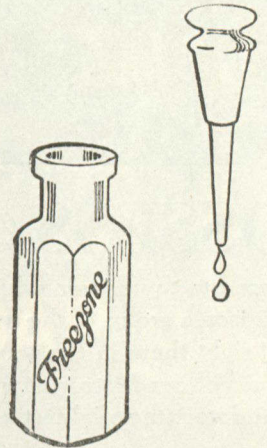
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