

VINCENT'S MISFORTUNE.

I'd rather not tell the story, but I suppose I must, because you heard a garbled account of it; so I've got to tell it in self-defense. I assure you there was no row of any sort. People said all sorts of things, as they always do, and there was a scandal and a fuss, and the thing was a nine days' wonder. You needn't grin like that, Pumper; I came out of it with clean hands. Oh, you've heard several versions of the story, have you? I don't believe a word of it; you merely say that to draw me. You will have it. Well, then, here goes.

Harry Vincent belonged to a fast set. There was nothing particularly bad about them, but they had more money than was good for them; if it had not been for that I think I would have seen more of Harry Vincent. We came from the same part of the country, you know; we had known each other all our lives; we were both Magdalen men, and when I came up to Oxford for the first time, as a freshman, Vincent was already in his fourth term, and, of course, that made a considerable gulf between us. Vincent owed any amount of money at Oxford; the tradesmen were only too glad to get his name upon their books. It did not matter very much, for Vincent's father was a rich man, and, as everybody knew, the chairman of the Great Wango-doodle gold mine.

Then came the crash. The Wango-doodle gold mine turned out to be a swindle. Old Vincent fled to what is commonly known as "foreign parts," and then, to put it shortly, the Asseyan came down. Vincent did not come back to Magdalen; how could he, poor fellow?

I lost sight of Vincent for eight years; and, to tell you the truth, though once upon a time we had been as thick as thieves, he had dropped out of my mind altogether. But I went to the Fortico theatre one night, and whom should I see but Vincent. And where do you think I saw him? Why, of all places in the world, upon the stage. I could hardly believe my eyes. I looked at Vincent. I stared at him through my opera glass; then I consulted my play bill. This is what I read: "Capt. Jack Strongtharm, Mr. Vincent Malet." That settled it. Of course, Vincent Malet; there could not be a shadow of doubt. I had heard of Mr. Vincent Malet before, as a young actor who had had a great success, principally owing to his good looks. He was supposed to be an Antinous, a beauty-man; one's sisters and one's cousins and one's aunts always raved about him—particularly one's aunt. There could not be a doubt about it; it was Harry Vincent.

I was delighted to see him. I nodded. I winked; but he took not the slightest notice of me. So, directly the curtain fell, I marched round to the stage door, and sent my card in to Mr. Vincent Malet. "Down in two minutes, sir," said the stage door-keeper, who lived in little box which resembled a Punch and Judy show—after calling up the speaking tube and receiving his answer.

There was a big swing door covered with oilcloth, above which was nailed a rusty horseshoe. It did not look very inviting, that "fairy portal"; every now and again the door would swing open and some one or other would hurry out. With one exception, they all spoke to the door-keeper. The remark was always the same, "Any letters, Boul?" And he replied punctiliously, addressing them as Sir or Miss or Madame. Most of the people who passed out were shabbily and roughly dressed. I saw the popular favorite, Miss Lottie Titterly. I did not think much of Miss Lottie Titterly in private life; she was pale, not to say flabby looking; and her mouth was—well, it was not exactly a rosebud, and she must have left that arch smile of hers, which all so much admire, upstairs in her dressing room. Then a gorgeous vision appeared. It wore a tremendous fur coat, which was flung open to display its huge shirt front, its diamond solitaire and its gigantic earring; it wore dress shoes and dove-colored silk socks, its wrists were encased in its knuckles. On its fingers sparkled valuable gems. Its hair was scanty, and its nose was aquiline. The doorkeeper bowed very low as that glorious vision passed out. "At last I have seen him," I thought; "this is the man I have read about, the 'patron of the drama'—probably a belted earl."

"Who is that?" I asked the doorkeeper. "Him?" said the man. "Why, that's the gov'nor; that's Mr. Belshazzar, our manager."

Just then Harry Vincent came down. He seized me by the hand and told me he was uncommonly glad to see me. Let's go and have some supper at Spagoletti's, old man," he said. We went to Spagoletti's, and over that supper we got as thick as thieves once more. I congratulated him on his success.

"I didn't think you had it in you, Harry," I said.

And then he told me that he had drifted into the theatrical profession because there was absolutely nothing else he could turn his hand to—partly that, and partly because he was in love with a very pretty girl. "I married her," said Harry Vincent with a sigh; "and we got 23 a week between the pair of us. We earned that 23 a week, and we had to work uncommonly hard for it. Now I get my 116, and I don't let Hetty work now. She has her hands full with the children—five of them my boy. You remember Hetty Summerleigh, Jack?"

Of course I did. I had seen her play Cordelia when Boanerges Bawler had come down to "star" as King Lear at our little theatre at Bury St. Edmunds.

"It's hard work to make both ends meet," said Harry Vincent. "But I've saved a little money in case of a rainy day, and now I think we are all right. Come and look us up at Balham next Sunday, Jack," said Harry Vincent; and he gave me a card—"Mr. Vincent Malet, Palmerio cottage, Lath-and-plaster road, Balham."

I did go down to Balham. Harry introduced me to his pretty wife, his four small children and his prize baby. Harry Vincent and his wife were evidently very fond of each other, and pretty Mrs. Vincent was evidently very proud of her husband. "Harry has got the ball at his foot now, you see," she said, "and all he has got to do is to go on kicking."

I did not see anything more of Harry Vincent for three years. That was not my fault, but because my governor sent me out to our Lisbon house under the pretext that I ought to learn the business. When I got

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"When I was a boy, in the Sugar Swamp deserts," Peleg, the Old Settler, began, "wolves was plenty nigh on plenty in the woods ez chipmunks is now. I've had to get up many a night 'fore I were ez old ez you yet, 'n' go out 'n' shoot half a dozen wolfs or so in our yard 'fore I'd get to sleep, they hollered 'n' yelled 'n' fit so. My pap, which 'd be your great-grand-pap now, he were on this side 'n' Jordan, sonny, but he ain't, though you'll see him one of these days if y' behave yerself, 'n' hear him playin' on a harp, which 'll be worth yer wile, 'gosh 'n' he handles it any way nigh like he usety handle his fiddle! Well, he 'p' a good many sheep, for them days, my ol' pap did, 'n' to keep 'em safe 'n' well, he was pasturin' somebody had to stan' around 'em with a gun to plug wolfs ez they kin sneak in 'n' outen the woods on the lookout for mutton. But for all the watchin' o' the sheep, ev'ry wint in a wile some ram-pagin' ol' wolf 'd git in 'n' grab a lamb or tear open a sheep."

"One day pap were on the trail of a wolf nigh our clearin', but she were a cunning ol' she one, 'n' she give him the slip. He run ag'in her nest, though, 'n' foun' a suckin' cub that 'd had 'n' got its eyes open yet. Pap picks up the little wolf 'n' lugs it home. He were ginter drownd it, but I took a sort o' hankerin' for it, 'n' pap let me hev it to see 'n' w'at I'd to 'ards raisin' o' it by hand."

The day afore pap gathered in the wolf cub one o' ol' ewes had a lamb. The lamb were ez black ez the ace o' spades, all 'cept a band ez wide ez yer hand right around the middle of its body, 'n' that were ez white ez a new snowbank. Well, sonny, the day after pap lugged the wolf cub home that lamb turned up missin'. Nobody 'd seen it, but I sent it to give him. I beliered w'at a weasin' call 'n' I heard the portly lamb were gone, but that didn't go tur 'n' 'ard gittin' it back. We couldn't git no trace of it, 'n' I nat'ally considered 't some sly ol' wolf had gobbled it."

"Now w'at 'd y' p'ose struck me, sonny, pooly soon arter that lamb turned up missin', 'n' pap picks up the little wolf 'n' lugs it home. He were ginter drownd it, but I took a sort o' hankerin' for it, 'n' pap let me hev it to see 'n' w'at I'd to 'ards raisin' o' it by hand."

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