

The Westerfield Scare.

CHAPTER. I.

I have been so often asked to tell the following story in the course of the forty years which have come and gone since the events narrated in it took place, that at last I have made up my mind never to open my lips about it again, but just to write it down in my own homely fashion, so that if anybody bothers me to tell it in time to come, I can put it before them in black and white, and bid them read it for themselves, which will be a saving of time and trouble to every one concerned.

My name is Reuben Holditch, and I was born and brought up in the little town of Westerfield, in the north of England, where my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and, for aught I know to the contrary, a generation or two of ancestors still further back, had filled, with credit to themselves and satisfaction to the public, the office of sexton to the grand old abbey church of St. Mary's.

This ancient and reputable post having been held by a Holditch for something like a hundred and fifty years, it was looked upon, from the time I can remember anything, quite as a matter of course, and as one of those things which are not open to question, that my father's son should one day follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, and earn his daily bread after the same fashion in which they had earned theirs. How the knowledge came to me that such was the mode of life which an unkind fate had mapped out for me, I cannot now call to mind, but from the very first I looked forward to it with loathing and dismay. Many a time my father would make me stand by him while he scooped out a grave in the black loamy soil, with the view, I suppose, of teaching the young idea how to dig. He was very proud of his handiwork, and would bid me observe the artistic finish—only those weren't the words he used—of all the details; but sometimes his spade would throw up the skull or thigh-bone of some previous tenant of the space he was now getting ready for another, and then I would turn away, disgusted and sick at heart, while my father would laugh lightly and say: "It's nowt, lad, nowt at all, when a body gets used to it." But whatever my secret thoughts and feelings might be on the question of my future, I said no word to any one about them, and certainly my father was the last person in the world to have any suspicion of the degeneracy of his only son.

My father eked out his livelihood by making and cobbling shoes, as his father and grandfather had done in their time, so that the lapstone might be said to be as much an inheritance of the Holditch family as the churchyard itself. I, however, had little more liking for the cobbler's awl than for the spade and pickaxe; my thoughts and wishes went out and clung to something very different from either.

From the time when I was a child I had a great fondness for flowers. I know not whence the liking came, nor why it came, but there it was. One day, when I was about twelve years old, I was sent by a neighbour with a message to the head-gardener at Penigarth, Sir William Verinder's country-house, about four miles away. To me, the poor sexton's son, the gardens and glass-houses at Penigarth came as a revelation of beauty undreamed of before. The gardener, a kindly Scotchman, was evidently pleased with my enthusiasm, and was at the trouble to show me over the place, eliciting from me by the way sundry particulars of my history. "Weel, laddie," he said to me at parting, "everybody to his likes; but for my part, I'd sooner tend my bit flowers than hawke fowls." I need hardly say that I was entirely of the same way of thinking.

From that hour my heart was set on becoming a gardener. My father, for his position in life, gave me what was considered in those days a fairly good education; but with my fourteenth birthday my schooling came to an end. He was a reticent man, and had said no word to me of his intentions; but I foreboded only too surely what they were. I was to be apprenticed to a shoemaker in the town, in order that I might learn the business thoroughly, then, after I should be out of my time, and as years crept over my father, I was gradually to work into the position of assistant-sexton, with the view of ultimately succeeding to all the emoluments and dignities which so many of my predecessors had enjoyed before me.

Hereupon ensued the only serious difference of opinion that ever divided my father and myself even for a day. I told him plainly how utterly hateful to me was the idea of becoming a shoemaker, and how my heart was set on being a gardener. He was "struck all of a heap," as the saying is, and said some hard things in the heat of his temper. For a week or more he remained in the "dumps," hardly speaking a dozen words to me all that time. Then came another explosion; and then, finding I was not to be moved from my purpose, he gave away and told me I might do as I liked. All this had reference only to be as I liked, this had reference only to the shoe-making; not for a moment did he dream that when the proper time should come, a Holditch could be other than a proud man at succeeding to what might with reason be called the family estate in the abbey churchyard, and I was careful not to undeceive him. One day I overheard him say to his partner or crony, Peter Philip: "After all, when one comes to consider, there isn't such a vast difference between a grave-digger and a gardener. They both get their living out of the mould, and both have to be handy

with their shovels. And who knows, if this new-fangled notion of planting folks graves with flowers and shrubs comes into fashion, but what Rube may be doing a good thing for himself by learning all about em."

So, with a fast-beating heart, I went to Penigarth and asked for Mr. Ayscough. The old Scotchman had not forgotten me; and a fortnight later, through his influence, I was offered the post of under-gardener's assistant at Linden Villa, the house of a rich merchant in the outskirts of Westerfield. There I stayed for two years, picking up every scrap of knowledge I could lay hold of, at the end of which time a berth was found for me at Penigarth itself. Here several years slipped away almost without my knowing how, so happy and full of content was my lot. Mr. Ayscough, who took great interest in me, had advised me to learn at least the rudiments of Latin, without which, he said, no horticulturist could be said to know his business in these days; so a great portion of my spare hours were given to the acquisition of that grand but difficult language. Almost as a matter of course, I had fallen in love by this time. The object of my passion was pretty Mary Lidford, the only child of her mother, who was a widow. Mary had nothing of her own in the way of this world's gear, and as my wages only just sufficed to keep myself, there seemed little likelihood of our being able to marry for several years to come. But that was a prospect which did not trouble us greatly. We were young, we loved each other, and we could afford to wait till brighter days should dawn.

I was a few months turned one-and-twenty when a sad accident happened to my father: he fell and broke his leg. The fracture was a bad one; it would be weeks before he would be able to leave the house, months before he would be strong enough to go about his work as usual. I was sent for at once, and had not been more than a few hours at home when word was brought that my father's services were needed. A parishioner was dead, and his grave would have to be dug the following day. In this emergency my father naturally turned to me, and when I hinted that, seeing how little I knew of such things, it might be advisable to call in the services of the sexton of St. Michael's, he gave me a look I did not forget for many a day. "There was never a Holditch born who couldn't dig a grave," he said. "It comes nat'ral to em."

After that, of course, there was nothing for it but to do as my father's son was expected to do.

If the affair had ended there, it would not have mattered greatly, but it could not. It was evident that my father would be disabled for a long time to come; he must either find a substitute, or give up his post; and to have had to do the latter would, I verily believe, have broken his heart. I was to be his successor—on that point everybody (but myself) was agreed, and everybody seemed to think I could do no other than act as his deputy at a time like the present.

Of course I had to tell Mr. Ayscough how matters stood. "There's no help for it, laddie," he said. "Thou must go and bide with thy father till he gets better, and we must try and get on without thee for a while as best we can."

It was in October, when the days seem to shorten so fast, and the lengthening nights are already full of the prophecy of the coming winter, that my father met with his accident. I had not been more than three days at home before I was told something—not by one person only, but by a dozen at the least—which surprised me greatly, and set me wondering what amount of truth there could be at the bottom of it.

What I was told was this: That of an evening after dark, especially on those nights when there was no moon, or when it did not rise till late, the town was infested by a creature which was said to be half-man and half-monkey in appearance—the 'man-ape' being the term applied to it by general acceptance. The account given of it by those who professed to have seen it varied in some of the details; but all agreed that its body was covered with long coarse hair, that its face resembled that of the ape tribe in general, that its footsteps were inaudible, that its activity was something marvellous, and finally, that on the two or three occasions on which certain bolder spirits than common had ventured to go in pursuit of it, it was seen to vault over the railings which crown the low wall that encloses the abbey churchyard, and disappear among the tombs and grave-stones inside. At first, this strange creature seemed to confine its pranks to frightening women and elderly people. It seldom or never made its appearance before nine o'clock, by which hour nearly all the shops were shut and the streets comparatively deserted. Then it would spring suddenly from some dark corner or covered entry—and in our old-fashioned town such 'entries' were to be found in every street—and encircling the neck of the passer-by, which, five times out of six, was that of a woman, with one of its dreadful hairy arms, it would give utterance to a shrill gibbering cry, which all who had heard it declared it to be like nothing human, and then releasing its victim as suddenly as it had grasped her or him, it would beat its breast for a moment or two with one hand, and then bounding away, vanished in the darkness. Several of the women thus assailed fainted with fright, and were ill for some days after; while on old Miss Glendov's the effect was that she became subject to 'fits of nervous

trembling, which she was unable to control to the last day of her life. Nor did the men fare much better. Mr. Fybus, the tailor, was so scared that he took to his bed, and was not seen in his shop for a week to come; while Mr. Wakeling, the corn-chandler, the moment his tormentor released him, gave vent to a yell which brought half the people in the street to their doors and windows. Doveson, the butcher, who stood six feet one in his stockings, was so terrified one night that it was said he never went out after dark for weeks afterwards without being armed with one of his own formidable knives; while two of the town constables fared no better than ordinary mortals, but considerably worse in one respect, seeing that both of them had their hats knocked completely over their eyes by their all but unseen tormentor.

It is not too much to say that before long a scare set in the like of which had never been known in Westerfield. Hardly a female would venture out of doors after eight o'clock unless escorted by one of the opposite sex, and not a child was to be seen abroad after dusk. Even the members of the Apollo Club, a convivial gathering of well-to-do people who met two evenings a week at the King's Head for the promotion of harmony and good fellowship, were reported to be so far affected by the general scare that when they broke up a little before midnight they preferred wending their way homeward by twos or threes to running the risk of being pounced upon singly by an anomalous hairy being after a fashion which was enough to throw an elderly gentleman into a fit. All sorts of absurd stories and exaggerations got about as must inevitably be the case whenever the 'thousand tongues of Rumour' are all set wagging at once. It was reported that sometimes the man-ape had a plaster in his hand, which he tried to fix over the mouths of his victims; some who professed to have seen him would have it that he was at the very least seven feet high; while others averred that he was deformed and had a huge lump between his shoulders. Others of the more ignorant were firmly persuaded that there was a strong smell of brimstone about the creature, and that his eyes glowed in his head like live coals.

At length matters came to such a pass that a number of the bolder spirits among the young men of the town banded themselves together with the avowed intention of hunting down the man-ape. Dividing themselves into a couple of gangs, each member of which was armed with a stout cudgel, they perambulated the town night after night from eight o'clock till midnight, vowing vengeance on the most dire on the object of their hatred—if only they could come across it. This, unfortunately small as the town was, they never succeeded in doing. The creature seemed to derive a sort of malicious glee from setting them at defiance. Thus, on more than one occasion, the 'vigilance boys,' as they had dubbed themselves, on turning a corner would find a woman in a half-fainting state, who had been waylaid by the creature only a minute or two before they reached it. It may be that the 'boys' were too ready to attribute to chaffing each other, to rattling their sticks on pavement, and to acting in too demonstrative a manner generally, in the course of their perambulations, to render their services of any avail; but be that as it may, the outrages still went on heretofore. Not that they occurred every night by any means; sometimes four or five nights would go by without anything being seen or heard of the creature; while, as before remarked, it seemed to have a rooted dislike to moonlight; then for two or three nights together, its objectionable practices would be resumed. Westerfield was fairly at its wits' end with terror and rage.

So far the creature's pranks had seemed actuated by nothing worse than a spirit of mischief, such as might be supposed to be in accord with its ape-like attributes; but when one morning a rumour spread through the town that on the previous night Squire Dallison had not only been assailed in the usual way, but had, in addition, been robbed of his gold chronometer, his purse, and a valuable breast-pin, it was felt that matters were becoming serious indeed. Mr. Dallison, who was returning home from a friend's house at the time, was so provoked by the dastardly attack as to be unable to leave his room for a week to come. His first act was to offer a reward of twenty pounds for such information as should lead to the capture of his cowardly assailant.

A few nights later, three young men made sure they had secured the reward. They were returning together from a dancing party, and having got over their shoes, they made scarcely any noise in walking. Turning a corner, they came full upon the creature, who was advancing from the opposite direction, and who instantly turned and fled. The young men were so startled that for a moment or two they lost their presence of mind, but five seconds later they were in full pursuit. They were all good runners, and the chase was an exciting one. The night was clear and starlit, the time was between eleven and twelve o'clock, and the streets were deserted. Presently the creature, with its pursuers some forty or fifty yards behind, emerged upon the 'angle' of side streets among which the chase had begun, into the main street of the town, which led almost in a direct line, to the abbey, some quarter of a mile away. It was apparently bent on escaping as it had escaped before, that is by scaling the spiked railings of the churchyard and being lost among the wilderness of tombstones inside. The pursuers put on an extra spurt; but their quarry, as if aware of it, did the same. Suddenly, to the intense surprise of the young men, the creature turned sharply to the left and disappeared up a narrow covered way known as Cooper's Court. But this move was explained a moment or two

later by the appearance of a couple of constables approaching from the opposite direction. Cooper's Court being a cul-de-sac, with houses on three sides of it, the young men now felt themselves as sure of capturing their prey as any one may reasonably feel sure about anything. They shouted to the constables to hurry up, and rushed hither-asker through the passage into the court. Then they paused to gather breath and look around. But what had become of the creature? Three pairs of keen eyes scanned every corner of the court, but to no purpose. Then an exclamation broke from one of them; and the others, following the direction of his finger with their gaze, could just make out a dusky figure climbing ape-fashion up the iron water-spout which ran from the roof to the ground between two of the corner houses of the court. The creature was climbing slowly, hand over hand and foot over foot, and was already three parts of the way up. The young men were so struck that they could not utter a word. Half a minute later the creature had reached the roof of one of the houses; then it turned and relieved itself by giving vent to a gibbering derisive laugh, if laugh it could be called, and scrambling nimbly up the tiles of the roof disappeared on the other side. By this time the two constables had come up, and they, as a matter of course, took the direction of the affair into their own hands. By the time they had succeeded in knocking up the people in one of the houses and in getting leave to go through into the garden at the back, the creature could easily have got away three or four times over.

(To be Continued.)

BREAKING THE SAD NEWS.

Railroad Men on Special Duty to Notify Bereaved Wives When Accidents Occur.

"We formerly left it to some of the employees to inform wives that their husbands had been killed," said a railroad boss, "but now regular men do it—men who know how to break the sad news to widows and orphans at home. I did it myself for thirteen years. The company chose me because I was fatherly looking, and I stuck to the job as long as I could, but it's wearing work. To go into a home and hear the wife singing about her work and be compelled to tell her that her Jack's just been killed down in the freight yard takes nerve."

"Of course, I had different ways of breaking the news. Sometimes I asked what time Jim would be home, or where he was going that night, anything to get started, especially if I knew the woman. Strange to say, whenever I came near the fact, saying I'd heard that Jim was hurt, the women would scream out they were sure he was killed. Then I let them cry awhile until they'd get ready to ask further about it. It was not so hard after that. I often thought that the women saw so much sorrow in my face from my long serving in the business that they knew what I came for. I tried to look cheerful, but there was a weight in my heart that I couldn't throw off."

"I once called at the home of a young wife. Her husband, an engineer was killed at a bridge that morning. When she opened the door and looked at me she dropped in a dead faint without saying a word. Afterward she told me that she had taken a nap after breakfast that morning and had seen me in her dream standing in front of her, telling her that Harry was killed. Once the wife I came to warn was making bread. She was up to her elbows in dough. I asked where Mr. Jones lived, walked off and waited for half an hour until she got her bread in the pans, and then I went back and told her the sad story of her husband's death by a cave-in at a culvert. At another house, the mother and two children, neatly dressed were ready to go to a Sunday school picnic. It took me a long time to break the news. I began by saying that there might be rain. It was cloudy. Then I said to the wife she had better not go as Tom might be back from work pretty soon. Then she knew."

"I asked the company to be relieved of my job three times before they found some one to take my place."

CAN PREVENT SUICIDES.

Michigan's Health Board Secretary Has a Novel Theory About Rheumatism.

Secretary Baker of the Michigan State Board of Health, is at work upon a theory which is somewhat novel. He thinks he can prevent a large number of the suicides which annually occur in Michigan. There is, he explains, a tendency to suicide by persons afflicted with rheumatism. They are the class of individuals who get up early in the morning, and hang themselves or put a bullet through their heads before the rest of the family is stirring. This character of suicides constitutes a numerous class. They are mentally unbalanced, the doctor says, because of the pressure upon the brain of that something in the blood which produces rheumatism. During the sleeping hours the acid in the blood, or whatever it is, finds its way to the brain, and upon awakening the person is deranged. After exercise the acid is taken into the circulation again and the individual is in a normal condition.

Such persons are liable to commit suicide in the early morning. The idea is not new to Dr. Baker, although he has been making a deep study of it, and is prepared to write a paper on the subject.

On the Farm.

MOST OF MANURE.

The first lesson in making stable manure effective is to partially rot it before it is applied. If the manure is fermented its nitrogenous and mineral elements are in form for the roots of plants to take up at once. If coarse manure is plowed under on dry, sandy soil it holds up the furrow and makes the soil more dry than ever. If there is much straw among it, such manure will not rot the first year, even on heavier soil, and does more harm than good in a dry season. But as a rule manuring for effect in future years is much more common on heavy soil than on that which is sandy or gravelly. By using coarse manure as top dressing in winter, the moisture in the soil is preserved from evaporation, and then if plowed under on heavy soil it is the best preparation for either wheat or potatoes, neither of which can be profitably grown on sandy soil, as they will not bring enough money to pay for the manure that is required to grow them.

The second lesson in making manure effective is to seed with clover and secure a whole season's growth the second year before it is plowed under. This is necessary for market gardeners who manure highly. Much of this manure sinks into the subsoil, and it requires the full-grown clover roots to bring it to the surface again. It was sandy-soil farmers who first learned the need of 'growing clover' every two or three years to keep their soil in good heart for all kinds of crops. But with improved machinery for pulverizing clay soils the vegetable matter in these is reduced very nearly as fast as it is in sandy soil, and they need clover nearly as often to keep from exhaustion.

The third lesson in making manures effective is to cultivate thoroughly and often. It is true this cultivation helps more rapidly to exhaust fertility, but it does it by increasing the value of the crop, and thus paying for more manure, or growing the forage and grain to be fed to stock and made into manure. It makes, of course, a great deal of difference what crop the manure and the cultivator are applied to. Some will not pay except on good land that can be bought cheaply, because remote from markets. In every case, however, the better the land and the more expensive the manure, the cultivation that is to make it available must be increased proportionately.

THE RIGHT TIME TO SPRAY.

In the use of all the poisons for destroying the insects of trees and bushes and plants a great deal of the success depends upon doing the spraying at the right time. Usually the insects must be caught when just before emerging from the eggs or when they emerge from the bud or leaf. Spraying at this critical time will prevent further multiplication, and will save trouble and expense. Early spraying is thus essential to effective work. While the fruit trees are nearly all sprayed in summer, an early spring application is quite necessary. This is made to forestall the fungi, scab, blights and moulds that will inevitably appear in early spring. Some insects must be killed before the leaves appear to be killed at all. One cannot always decide whether the trees are being attacked by insects, but if on a hasty examination signs of their presence are apparent, the safest course is to take the matter immediately in hand. If the insects or diseases are allowed to get such a headway that they are troublesome, it is almost impossible to make up for lost time. It will just take twice as much spraying and hard work to accomplish what could have been done earlier with ease.

When a blight takes such a hold of the trees or plants that the leaves and bark begin to lose color and strength, it will not be an easy matter to check the spread of the disease in time to save much of the fruit. Often the diseases do not make their full appearances until summer, but the spores and germs have been sown and are working out their mission of destruction in spring. The apple scab and the apple canker both begin their work of destruction early, one causing the black spots on leaves and fruit and the other the black rot on the fruit, and they can only be headed off by spraying before the buds unfold. The oyster-shell bark louse, a destructive insect to orchard trees, must likewise be killed early in the spring. Strong doses of whale-oil soap will be necessary for this insect. The presence of the insects will be found on the bark of the trees. They look very much like the bark in color, and many pass them by without noticing them. But on young orchard trees they do a vast amount of damage that will sometimes kill some of the trees.