THE BROAD HIGHWAY

A Tale of 19th Century England, Full of the Thrills of Adventure and Spirit of Romance

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By JEFFERY FARNOL

Peter Vibart, an English scholar, depending upon his uncle, Sir George Vibart, for his allowance, receives only 10 guineas ($75) by the death of his father, Maurice "Buck" Vibart, a noted prize-fighter, and rake, a cousin of Peter, is left 20,000 pounds ($100,000). Against the protestations of his old nurse, with whom he lived, Sir Richard Lancaster, decides to go down "The Broad Highway" to Kent, and live. He plans to leave where the money is gone.

The first day, while passing a gallows where a highwayman is hanging as a "bad example," Peter is held up and his money taken. He returns to The White Hart, an inn he had left but a few minutes before. There Tom Cragg, an ignorant prize-fighter, boasts of his prowess.

Peter, without funds, accepts Cragg's offer of $20 to the man who will stand with him for 10 minutes. As the stations are nearing completion Cragg suddenly seems to recognize Peter, and, prize-stricken, leaves the inn. Still without money, Peter continues on his way, but the scaffold Cragg reappears and raves incoherently of recognizing Peter, the prince regent, Sir Jasper Trent, and a kidnapping affair in London. The pugilist then disappears in the darkness.

The next morning Peter sells his fancy waistcoat for a ridiculously small amount. He then proceeds to a neighboring tavern for breakfast, and enters into conversation with the pretty young waitress.

CHAPTER VIII—(Continued).

"THE very same, sir, and they do be handsome whiskers, though I do say it."

"The finest I ever saw. I wish you every happiness," said I.

"Thankee sir, I'm sure," said she, and, dimpling more prettily than ever, she tripped away, and left me to my repast.

And when I had assuaged my hunger, I took out the pipe of Adam, the groom, the pipe shaped like a negro's head, and, calling for a paper of tobacco, I filled and lighted the pipe, and sat staring dreamily out of the window.

Happy is that man who, by reason of an abundant fortune, knows not the meaning of the word hunger; but thrice happy is he who, when the hand of famine clutches, may stay his craving with such a meal as this of mine. Never before, and never since have I tasted just such eggs, and such ham—so tender! so delicate! so full of flavor! It is a memory that can never fade. Indeed, sometimes (even now), when I grow hungry (about dinner time), I see once more the surly-faced man, the rosy-cheeked waiting-maid, and the gloomy chamber of the "Old Cock" tavern as I saw them upon that early May morning of the year of grace 18——.

So I sat, with a contented mind, smoking my pipe and staring out at the falling summer rain. And presently, chancing to turn my eyes up the road, I beheld a chaise that galloped in a smother of mud. As I watched its rapid approach, the postilion swung his horses toward the inn, and a moment later had pulled up before the door. They had evidently traveled fast and far, for the chaise was covered with dirt, and the poor horses, in a lather of foam, hung their heads, while their flanks heaved distressfully.

The chaise door was now thrown open, and three gentlemen alighted. The first was a short, plethoric individual, bull-necked and loud of voice, for I could hear him roundly cursing the post-boy for some fault; the second was a tall, languid gentleman, who carried a flat, oblong box beneath one arm, and who paused to fondle his whiskers, and look up at the inn with an exaggerated air of disgust; while the third stood mutely by, his hands thrust into the pockets of his greatcoat, and stared straight before him.

The three of them entered the room together, and, while the languid gentleman paused to survey himself in the small, cracked mirror that hung against the wall, the plethoric individual bustled to the fire, and, loosening his coats and neckerchief, spread out his hands to the blaze.

"A good half-hour before our time," said he, glancing towards the third gentleman, who stood looking out of the window with his hands still deep in his pockets; "we did the last 10 miles well under the hour—come, what do you say to a glass of brandy?"

At this, his languid companion turned from the mirror, and I noticed that he, too, glanced at the silent figure by the window.

"By all means," said he, "though Sir Jasper would hardly seem in a drinking humor," and, with the very slightest shrug of the shoulders, he turned back to the mirror again.

"No, Mr. Chester, I am not—in a drinking humor," answered Sir Jasper, without turning round, or taking his eyes from the window.

"Sir Jasper?" said I to myself, "now where, and in what connection, have I heard such a name before?"

He was of a slight build, and seemingly younger than either of his companions by some years, but what struck me particularly about him was the extreme pallor of his face. I noticed also a peculiar habit he had of moistening his lips at frequent intervals with the tip of his tongue, and there was, besides, something in the way he stared at the trees, the wet road and the gray sky—a strange wide-eyed intensity—that drew and held my attention.

"Devilish weather—devilish, on my life and soul!" exclaimed the short, red-faced man, in a loud, peevish tone, tugging viciously at the bell-rope, "hot one day, cold the next, now sun, now rain—— Oh, damn it! Now in France—ah, what a climate—heavenly—positively divine; say what you will of a Frenchman, damn him by all means, but the climate, the country and the women—who would not worship 'em?"

"Exactly!" said the languid gentleman, examining a pimple upon his chin with a high degree of interest, "always 'dored a Frenchwoman myself; they're so—so—ah—so decuced French, though mark you, Selby," he broke off, as the rosy-cheeked maid appeared with the brandy and glasses, "though mark you, there's much to be said for your English country women, after all," saying which, he slipped his arm about the girl's round waist.

There was the sound of a kiss, a muffled shriek, and she had run from the room, slamming the door behind her, whereupon the languid gentleman went back to his pimple.

"Oh! as to that, Chester, I quarrel only with the climate. God made England, and the devil sends the weather!"

"Selby," said Sir Jasper, in the same repressed tone that he had used before and still without taking his eyes from the gray prospect of sky and tree and winding road, "there is no fairer land in all the world than this England of ours; it were a good thing to die—for England, for that is a happiness reserved for comparatively few." And, with the words, he sighed, a strange, fluttering sigh, and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets.

"Die!" repeated the man Selby, in a jovial, boisterous way. "Who talks of death?"

"Deuced unpleasant subject!" said the other, with a shrug at the cracked mirror. "Something so infernally cold and gloomy about it—like the weather."

"And yet it will be a glorious day, sir. The clouds are thinning already," Sir Jasper went on; "strange, but I never realized, until this morning, how green—and wonderful—everything is!"

The languid Mr. Chester forgot the mirror and turned to stare at Sir Jasper's back, with raised brows, while the man Selby shook his head, and smiled uneasily. As he did so, his eye encountered me, where I sat, quietly in my corner, smoking my negro-head pipe, and his thick brows twitched sharply together in a frown.

"In an hour's time, gentlemen," purred Sir Jasper, "we shall write 'this' to a more or less interesting incident, and I ask you, in that hour, to remember my prophecy—that it would be a glorious day, today."

Mr. Chester filled a glass, and crossing to the speaker, tendered it to him without a word, as for Selby, he stood stolidly enough, his hands thrust truculently beneath his coat-tails, frowning at me.

"Come," said Mr. Chester persuasively, "just a bracer!" Sir Jasper shook his head, but next moment reached out a white, unsteady hand, and raised the brandy to his lips; yet as he drank, I saw the spirit slop over, and trickle from his chin.

"Thanks, Chester," said he, returning the empty glass; "is it time we started yet?"

"It's just half-past seven," answered Mr. Chester, consulting his watch, "and I'm rather hazy as to the exact place."

"Deendene Wood," said Sir Jasper dreamily.

"You know the place?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then we may as well start, if you are ready?"

"Yes, it will be cool and fresh, outside."

"Settle the bill, Selby, we'll walk on slowly," said Mr. Chester, and, with a last glance at the mirror, he slipped his arm within Sir Jasper's, and they went out together.

Mr. Selby meanwhile rang for the bill, frowning at me all the time.

"What the devil are you staring at?" he demanded suddenly, in a loud, bullying tone

"If you are pleased to refer to me, sir," said I, "I would say that my eyes were given for use, and that having used them upon you, I have long since arrived at the conclusion that I don't like you."

"Ah?" said he, frowning fiercer than ever.

"Yes," said I, "though whether it is your person, your manner, or your voice that displeases me most, I am unable to say."

"An impertinent young jackanapes!" said he; "damnation, I think I'll pull your nose!"

"Why, you may try, and welcome, sir," said I, "though I should advise you not, for should you make the attempt I should be compelled to throw you out of the window."

At this moment the pretty maid appeared, and tendered him the bill with a curtesy. He glanced at it, tossed some money upon the table, and turned to stare at me again.

"If ever I meet you again——" he began.

"You'd probably know me," I put in.

"Without a doubt," he answered, putting on his hat and buttoning his befrogged surtout; "and should you," he continued, drawing on his gloves, "should you stare at me with those damned, impertinent fishes' eyes of yours, I should, most certainly, pull your nose for you—on the spot, sir."

"And I should as certainly throw you out of the window!" I nodded.

"An impertinent young jackanapes!" said he again, and went out, banging the door behind him. Glancing from the window, I saw him catch up with the other two, and all three walk on together down the road. Sir Jasper was in the middle, and I noticed that his hands were still deep in his pockets. Now, as I watched their forms getting smaller and smaller in the distance, there grew upon me a feeling that he who walked between would nevermore come walking back.

And, in a little, having knocked out my negro-head pipe upon my palm, I called for and settled my score. As I rose, the pretty chambermaid picked up my knapsack from the corner, and blushing, aided me to put it on.

"My dear, thank you," said I, and kissed her. This time she neither shrieked nor ran from the room; she merely blushed a trifle rosier.

"Do you think I have fishes' eyes, my dear?"

"La! no, sir—handsome they be, I'm sure, so bright an' black an' wi' little lights a-dancing in them—there, sir, do ha' done, and go along wi' you!"

"By the way," I said, pausing upon the worn steps, and looking back at her, "by the way, how far is it to Deepdene Wood?"

CHAPTER IX.

SOME half-mile along the road, upon the left hand, was a stile and beyond the stile a path—a path that led away over field and meadow and winding stream to the blue verge of distant woods.

Now, midway between these woods and the place where I stood, there moved three figures, and, far away though they were, I could still make out that the middle one walked with his hands—those tremulous, betraying hands—thrust deep within his pockets.

And presently I climbed the stile and set off along the path.

"Sir Jasper!" said I to myself. Somewhere in the background of my consciousness I had a vague recollection of having heard mention of such a name before, but exactly when and where I could not, for the life of me, remember.

"Sir Jasper!" said I to myself again. "It is a very uncommon name, and should be easy to recollect." I had often prided myself on possessing a singularly retentive memory, more especially for names and faces, but upon the present occasion the more I pondered the matter the more hazy I became. So I walked on through the sweet, wet grass, racking my brain for a solution of the problem, but finding none.

When I again looked up, the three figures had vanished where the path took a sharp bend round a clump of pollard oaks, and, determined not to lose them, I hurried my steps, but when I, in turn, rounded the corner not a soul was in sight.

The path sloped up gently before me, with a thick hedge upon my right, and, after crossing a brawling stream, lost itself in the small wood or coppice, that crowned the ascent. Wondering, I hastened forward, and then, happening to look through the hedge, which grew very thick and high, I stopped all at once.

On the other side of the hedge was a strip of meadow bounded by the brook I have mentioned; now across this stream was a small rustic bridge, and on this bridge was a man. Midway between this man and myself stood a group of four gentlemen, all talking very earnestly together, to judge by their actions, while somewhat apart from these, his head bent, his hands still thrust deep in his pockets, stood Sir Jasper. And from him, for no apparent reason, my eyes wandered to the man upon the bridge—a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, in a buff-colored greatcoat, who whistled to himself, and stared down into the stream, swinging his tasselled riding-boot to and fro. All at once, as if in response to some signal, he rose, and unbuttoning his surtout, drew it off and flung it across the hand-rail of the bridge.

Mr. Chester was on his knees before the oblong box, and I saw the glint of the pistols as he handed them up. The distance had already been paced and marked out, and now each man took his ground—Sir Jasper, still in his greatcoat, his hat over his eyes, his neckerchief loose and dangling, one hand in his pocket, the other grasping his weapon, his antagonist, on the contrary, jaunty and debonair, a dandy from the crown of his hat to the soles of his shining boots.

Their arms were raised almost together. The man Selby glanced from one to the other, a handkerchief fluttered, fell, and in that instant came the report of a pistol. I saw Sir Jasper reel backward, steady himself, and fire in return; then, while the blue smoke yet hung in the still air, he staggered blindly, and fell.

Mr. Chester, and two or three more, ran forward and knelt beside him, while his opponent shrugged his shoulders, and, taking off his hat, pointed out the bullet hole in his white-faced second.

And in a little while they lifted Sir Jasper in their arms, but seeing how his head hung, a sudden sickness came upon me, for I knew, indeed, that he would go walking back nevermore. Yet his eyes were wide and staring—staring up at the blue heaven with the same fixed intensity as they had done at the inn.

Then I, too, looked up at the cloudless sky, and round upon the fair earth; and, in that moment, I, for one, remembered his prophecy of an hour ago. And, indeed, the day was glorious.

CHAPTER X.

IN DUE season I came into Tonbridge town and, following the High street, presently observed a fine inn upon the right-hand side of the way, which, as I remember, is called The Chequers. And here were divers loiterers, lounging round the door or seated upon the benches; but the eyes of all were turned the one way.

And presently as I paused before the inn to look up at its snow-white plaster and massive crossbeams, there issued from the stable yard one in a striped waistcoat, with top boots and a red face, who took a straw from behind his ear and began to chew it meditatively; to whom I now addressed myself.

"Good afternoon!" said I.

"Arternoon!" he answered.

"A fine day!" said I.

"Is it?" said he.

"Why—to be sure it is," said I, somewhat taken aback by his manner; "to be sure it is."

"Oh!" said he, and shifted the straw very dexterously from one corner of his mouth to the other by some unseen agency and stared up the road harder than ever.

"What are you looking at?" I inquired.

"'Ill," said he.

"And why do you look at the hill?"

"Mail," said he.

"Oh!" said I.

"Ah!" said he.

"Is it the London coach?"

"Ah!" said he.

"Does it stop here?"

"Ah!" said he.

"Do you ever say anything much besides 'ah'?" I inquired.

He stopped chewing the straw, and with his eyes on the distance seemed to turn this question over in his mind; having done which, he began to chew again.

"Ah!" said he.

"Why, then you can, perhaps, tell me how many miles it is——"

"Five," said he.

"I was about to ask how far it was to——"

"The Wells!" said he.

"Why—yes, to be sure, but how did you know that?"

"It's use!" said he.

"What do you mean?"

"They all ask!" said he.

"Who do"

"Tramps!" said he.

"Oh! so you take me for a tramp?"

"Ah!" said he.

"And you," said I, "put me in mind of a certain Semiquavering Friar."

"Eh?" said he, frowning a little at the hill.

"You've never heard of Rabelais, or Panurge, of course," said I. The hostler took out his straw, eyed it thoughtfully and put it back again.

"No," said he.

"More's the pity!" said I, and was about to turn away when he drew the nearest fist abruptly from his pocket and extended it toward me.

"Look at that!" he commanded.

"Rather dirty," I commented, "but otherwise a good, useful member, I make no doubt."

"It's a-goin'," said he, alternately drawing in and shooting out the fist in question, "It's a-goin' to fill your eye up."

"Is it?" said I.

"Ah!" said he.

"But what for?"

"I aren't a Semmy, nor yet a Quaver, an' as for Friers," said he, very deliberately, "why—Frier yourself, says I."

"Nevertheless," said I, "you are gifted with a certain terse directness of speech that greatly reminds me of——"

"Joe!" he called out suddenly over his shoulder. "Mail, Joe!"

Lifting my eyes to the brow of the hill, I could see nothing save a faint haze, which, however, gradually grew denser and thicker; and out from this gathering cloud, soft, and faint with distance, stole the silvery notes of a horn. Now I saw the coach itself.

In the midst of the confusion of arrival, down came the window with a bang, and out of the window came a flask, and a hand, and an arm, and, last of all, a great, fat face, round, and mottled, and roaring as it came:

"Oho—I say damn it! damn everybody's eyes and bones—brandy! O yoho, house—I say brandy! Guard, landlord, ostlers—brandy, d' ye hear? I say, what the devil!! Am I to die for want of a drop of brandy? Oho!"

Now, little by little, I became conscious (how, I cannot define) that I was the object of a close and persistent scrutiny—that I was being watched and stared at by some one near by. Shifting my eyes, therefore, from the mottled face at the coach window, I cast them swiftly about until they presently met those of one of four outside passengers—a tall, roughly clad man who leaned far out from the coach roof, watching me intently; and his face was thin, and very pale, and the eyes which stared into mine glowed beneath a jagged prominence of brow.

At the time, though I wondered at the man's expression, and the fixity of his gaze, I paid him no further heed, but turned my attention back to Mottle-face, who had, by this time, bellowed himself purple. Howbeit, in due time, the flask having been replenished and handed to him, he dived back into the recesses of the coach, jerked up the window, and vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

But now the four fresh horses were in and harnessed, capering and dancing with an ostler at the head of each; the Driver tossed off his glass of rum and water, cast an eye up at the clouds, remarked: "Wind, by Gemini!" settled his feet against the dashboard, and gathered up the reins. And now, too, the guard appeared, wiping his lips as he came, who also cast an eye up at the heavens, remarked: "Dust, by Jingo!" and swung himself up into the rumble.

"All right behind?" sang out the driver over his shoulder.

"All right!" sang back the guard.

"Then let 'em go!" cried the driver.

Whereupon the ostlers jumped nimbly back, the horses threw up their heads, and danced undecidedly for a moment, the long whip cracked, hoofs clattered, sparks flew, and, rumbling and creaking, off went the London Mail with such a flourish of the horn as woke many a sleepy echo, near and far. As I turned away, I noticed that there remained but three outside passengers; the pale-faced man had evidently alighted, yet, although I glanced round for him, he was nowhere to be seen.

Hereupon, being in no mind to undergo the operation of having my eye filled up, and, moreover, finding myself thirsty, I stepped into the "Tap." And there, sure enough, was the Outside Passenger staring moodily out of the window, and with an untouched mug of ale at his elbow. Opposite him sat an old man in a smock frock, who leaned upon a holly-stick, talking to a very short, fat man behind the bar, who took my twopence with a smile, smiled as he drew my ale, and, smiling, watched me drink.

"Be you from Lunnon, sir?" inquired the old man, eyeing me beneath his hoary brows as I sat down my tankard.

"Yes," said I.

"Well, think o' that now—I've been a-goin' to Lunnon this five an' forty year—started out twice, I did, but I never got no further than smocks!"

(CONTINUED TOMORROW.)

SCRAPPLE

AT WINKLE BEACH BOARDING HOUSE

Proprietress—I'm sorry to refuse you a second helping, Mr. Wiggles, but I've joined "The Eat Less Meat League" during the war.

—London Opinion.

Hooray for Ma!

"Mother, must I learn how to cook?"
"Yes, my darling daughter;
For a husband can't eat a cook book receipt,
So I think you oughter."

The Paper Was Right

Mrs. Snapp—Here's an article which says that meat causes bad temper.

Mr. Snapp—It certainly does, the way you cook it.

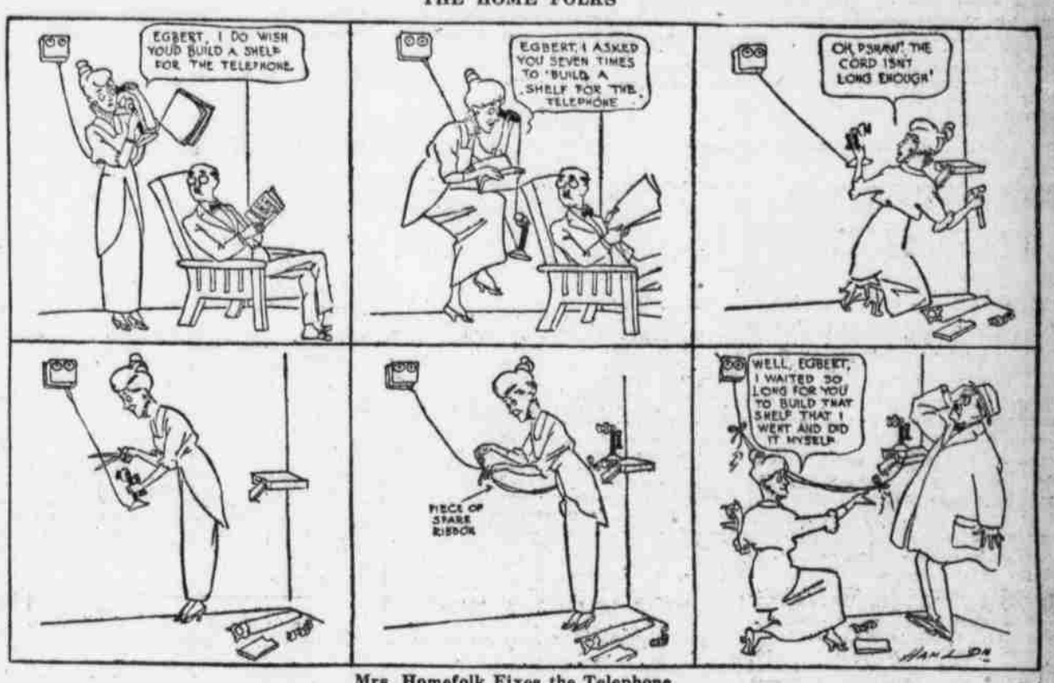
THE PADDED CELL

Can't Get Away

Mr. Jollysport—Binks tells me that the rich Miss Coyne's fiance lost both his legs in a railway accident, and she is going to marry him anyhow.

Mrs. Jollysport—A very sensible girl. She'll know where her husband is at night, anyway.

THE HOME FOLKS



Mrs. Homefolk Fixes the Telephone

Mistaken

Fat—And you also said I hadn't the manners of a hog.

Lean—Oh, no I didn't. I said you had!

Old Gent (directing perspiring Tommy)—Turn to the left at the end of this road and you'll see an inn, the Jug and Bottle; you'll go straight past that——

P. T.—Not if I know it, mister.

—London Opinion.

Mary—Johnny, why are you feeding your chickens with hot water?

Johnny—So they'll lay boiled eggs.

A Neutral's View

—Amsterdammer.

The advance on Paris and Berlin.

Handicapped

"How do you happen to be so small?" asked the angular female who was taking in the sights at the freak museum.

"My nurse stuffed me with condensed milk when I was a kid," explained the midget.

Butler—There's a man outside who said he would give $100 to see you.

Boss—Who is he?

Butler—A blind man.

Up-to-date

"What on earth are you children burning those fierce-smelling rags for?"

"Aw, we're playin' auto, an' we have to have somethin' fer de smell!"

—AND THE WORST IS YET TO COME

IN GALLIPOLI

British Tommy—I've told him hands up, twice—I s'pose that's the highest way o' doin' it.

—The Passing Show.