

# 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

There was an English scholar, devoted to his studies, Sir George Vinton, who had just returned from a tour of duty in the East, and was now in the city of London, waiting for a ship to take him back to his home in the West. He was a man of about thirty years of age, with a high forehead, a straight nose, and a pair of deep-set eyes. He was dressed in a simple, but elegant, suit of dark cloth, and he carried a book under his arm. He was walking along a quiet street, when he saw a man in a top hat and a long coat, who was walking in the same direction. The man in the top hat was looking at him, and he seemed to be waiting for him. Sir George stopped and looked at him. The man in the top hat spoke to him in a low, but firm, voice.

"What is it?"

"I am Mr. Crisp, and I am waiting for you."

"Why do you wait for me?"

"Because you are the man who was with me in the East."

"I was with you in the East?"

"Yes, you were. You were with me when I was in the East."

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servant a dog that he should do this thing."

"I told you to pick it up," he repeated, thrusting his hand toward me, "are you going to do so, or must I make you?"

His nostrils worked more than ever.

"For answer I raised my foot and sent the cane spinning across the room. Some-

body laughed, and next moment my hat was knocked from my head. Before he

could strike again, however, I raised my staff, but suddenly remembering its formidable weight, I altered the direction

of the blow, and thrust it strongly into the very middle of his fairly flowered waistcoat. So strongly did I thrust, in-

deed, that he would have fallen but for the timely assistance of his companion.

"Come, come," said I, holding him off on the end of my staff, "be calm now, and let us reason together like logical beings. I knocked down your cane by accident, and you, my hat by intent; very well, then, be so good as to return

my property from the corner yonder, and we will call 'quits'."

"No, by gad!" gasped my antagonist, bending almost double, "wait—only wait until I get my wind—I'll choke—the infernal life out of you—only wait, by gad!"

"Willingly," said I, "but whatever else you do, you will certainly reach me my hat, otherwise, just as soon as you find yourself sufficiently recovered, I shall endeavor to throw you after it." Saying which, I laid aside my staff, and buttoned up my coat.

"Why," he began, "you infernally low, dusty, ditch-digging blackguard—" But his companion, who had been regarding me very closely, twined him by the sleeve and whispered something in his ear. Whatever it was it affected my antagonist strangely, for he grew suddenly very red, and then very white, and abruptly turned his back upon me.

"Are you sure, Mostyn?" said he, in an undertone.

"Certain."

"Well, I'd fight him were he the devil himself! Pistols perhaps would be—"

"Don't be a fool, Harry," cried the other, and seizing him arm, drew him farther away, and, though they lowered their voices, I caught such fragments as "What of George?" "Changes since your time." "Run your chances at the start."

"Dead shot."

"Sir," said I, "my hat—in the corner yonder."

Almost to my surprise the taller of the two crossed the room, followed by his friend, to whom he still spoke in lowered tones, stooped, picked up my hat, and, while the other stood scowling, approached and handed it to me with a bow.

"That my friend, Sir Harry Mortimer, lost his temper is regretted both by him and myself," said he, "but is readily explained by the fact that he has been a long time from London, while I labored under a disadvantage, sir—until your hat was off."

Now, as he spoke, his left eyelid flickered twice in rapid succession.

"I beg you won't mention it," said I, putting on my hat; "but, sir, why do you wink at me?"

"No, no," cried he, laughing and shaking his head, "but, hal—devilish good! By the way, they tell me George himself is in these parts—incoo, of course."

"George?" said I, staring.

"Cursed rich, on my life and soul!" cried the tall gentleman, shaking his head and laughing again. "Mum's the word, of course, and I swear a shaven face becomes you most devilishly!"

"Perhaps you will be so obliging as to tell me what you mean?" said I, frowning.

"Oh, by gad!" he cried, fairly hugging himself with delight. "Oh, the devil in this too rich—too infernally rich, on my life and soul!"

Now all at once there occurred to me the memory of Tom Cragg, the pugilist; of how he, too, had winked at me, and of his incomprehensible manner afterwards, beneath the gibbet on River Hill.

"Sir," said I, "do you happen to know a pugilist, Tom Cragg by name?"

"Tom Cragg? well, I should think so; who doesn't?"

"Because," I went on, "he, too, seems to labor under the delusion that he is acquainted with me, and—"

"Acquainted!" repeated the tall gentleman, "acquainted! Oh, gad!" and immediately hugged himself in another ecstasy.

"I'll say I, 'you will have the goodness to tell me for whom you evidently mistake me—'"

"Mistake you?" he gasped, throwing himself upon the settle and rocking to and fro, "hal—hal—mistake you!"

Seeing I did but waste my breath, I turned upon my heel and made for the door. As I went, my eye, by chance, lighted upon a cheese that stood at the fat landlord's elbow, and upon which he cast amorous glances from time to time.

"That seems a fine cheese!" said I.

"It is, sir, if I might make so bold, a noble cheese!" he rejoined, and laid his hand upon it with a touch that was a caress.

"Then I will take three pennyworth of your noble cheese," said I.

"Cheese!" faintly echoed the gentleman upon the settle, "three pennyworth. Oh, I shall die, positively I shall burst!"

"Also a loaf," said I. And when the landlord had cut the cheese with great nicety—a generous portion—and had wrapped it into a parcel, I put it, together with the loaf, into my knapsack, and giving him a nod, I stepped to the door.

"Referring to George, sir—"

"George?" said I shortly. "To the devil with George!"

Now I could not help being struck by the effect of my words, for Sir Harry let fall his cane and stared upon me, while his companion regarded me with an expression between a frown and wide-eyed dink.

"Now I wonder," said I to myself as I descended the steps, "I wonder who George was?"

Before the inn there stood a yellow-whiskered stagecoach with a horse which

from his manner of trembling all over for no conceivable reason, and manifest desire to stand upon his hind legs, I conceived to be a thoroughbred; and, hanging grimly to the bridle, now in the air, now on terra firma, alternately coining and cursing, was my friend the Semiquaver Outter. He caught sight of me just as a particularly vicious jerk swung him off his legs.

"Damn your liver!" he cried to the horse, and then, to me: "If you'll just call Joe to 'old this 'ere black varmin' for me, I'll fill yer—ye eye."

"Thanks," said I, "but I much prefer to keep it as it is; really there is no need to trouble Joe, and as for you, I wish you good morning!"

And when I had some a little way, chancing to glance back over my shoulder, I saw that the Outside Passenger stood upon the inn steps, and was staring after me.

CHAPTER XI

FOLLOWING the high road, I came, in a little, to where the ways divided, the one leading straight before me, the other turning sharp to the left, where (as I remember) is a very steep hill.

"Willingly," said I, "but whatever else you do, you will certainly reach me my hat, otherwise, just as soon as you find yourself sufficiently recovered, I shall endeavor to throw you after it." Saying which, I laid aside my staff, and buttoned up my coat.

"Why," he began, "you infernally low, dusty, ditch-digging blackguard—" But his companion, who had been regarding me very closely, twined him by the sleeve and whispered something in his ear. Whatever it was it affected my antagonist strangely, for he grew suddenly very red, and then very white, and abruptly turned his back upon me.

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