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, dependent upon his uncle, Sir George Vibart, is bequeathed only 40 guineas ($75) by the old man. Maurice ("Buck") Vibart, a notorious prize fighter and rake, a cousin of Peter, is left 20,000 pounds ($100,000). The will also provides $500,000 for the one who marries the Lady Sophia Sefton within a year. Peter, against the protestations of his old friend with whom he lived, Sir Richard Anstruther, decides to go down "The Broad Highway" of Kent and live. He plans to work after the money is gone.

Book I tells of his exciting adventures until he reaches Sissinghurst village, where he becomes a blacksmith in the employ of "Black" George. Peter goes to live in a "haunted" house in a hollow. The principal feature in the first book is that Peter is three times mistaken for his cousin Maurice. The only difference between the two is that Peter is clean shaven and Maurice has a beard.

Peter, at the beginning of Book II, is suddenly awakened by a maid's voice calling "Charmian!" Rushing from his bedroom, he finds a strange woman about to shoot at a man entering his home. It is his cousin Maurice, whom he beats into insensibility after a fierce struggle. A position helps Peter remove the prostrate form.

"Black" George, whose jealousy of Peter has been growing steadily, suddenly leaves the shop. Prudence, who loves George, comes to Peter for advice, and the two decide to induce him to return. George, however, is convinced that Prudence and Peter are in love.

A few nights later Peter meets a broom vender, who tells him that "Black" George has vowed to fight "t'e cove" who has stolen his sweetheart's love until one or the other is dead.

One morning, while Peter is at work, the postilion who helped him remove Maurice's body looks in. The postilion tries, vainly, to bribe Peter into telling him where Charmian is.

That night Peter meets "Black" George, and, after a terrific fight, lasting until both men are nearly exhausted, the latter manages to land a tremendous blow on Peter's head. Peter falls as if dead. When he regains consciousness he is in Charmian's arms.

Peter later asks Charmian to marry him, but she delays her answer.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER XXV—(Continued).

"BUT surely, Peter, surely there are thousands, millions of women with mouths and eyes like—the Humble Person's?"

"It is possible," said I, "but none who have the same way with their lashes."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't tell; I don't know."

"Don't you, Peter?"

"No—it is just a way."

"And so it is that you want to marry this very Humble Person?"

"I think I have wanted to from the very first, but did not know it—being a blind fool!"

"And—did it need a night walk in a thunderstorm to teach you?"

"No—that is, yes—perhaps it did."

"And—are you quite, quite sure?"

"Quite—quite sure!" said I and as I spoke I laid my pipe upon the table and rose; and, because my hands were trembling, I clenched my fists. But as I approached her she started up and put out a hand to hold me off, and then I saw that her hands were trembling also. And standing thus she spoke very softly:

"Peter."

"Yes, Charmian?"

"Do you remember describing to me the—the perfect woman who should be your—wife?"

"Yes."

"How that you must be able to respect her for her intellect?"

"Yes."

"Honor her for her virtue?"

"Yes, Charmian."

"And worship her—for her—spotless purity?"

"I dreamed a paragon—perfect and impossible; I was a fool!" said I.

"Impossible! Oh, Peter! what—what do you mean?"

"She was only an impalpable shade quite impossible of realization—a bloodless thing, as you said, and quite unnatural—a sickly figment of the imagination. I was a fool!"

"And you are—too wise now, to expect—such virtues—in any woman?"

"Yes," said I; "no—oh, Charmian! I only know that you have taken this phantom's place—that you fill all my thoughts—sleeping and waking——"

"No! No!" she cried, and struggled in my arms, so that I caught her hands and held them close and kissed them many times.

"Oh, Charmian! Charmian!—don't you know—can't you see—it is you I want—you, and only you forever; whatever you were—whatever you are—I love you—love you and always must! Marry me Charmian!—marry me! and you shall be dearer than my life—more to me than my soul——" But, as I spoke, her hands were snatched away, her eyes blazed into mine and her lips were all bitter scorn, and at the sight fear came upon me.

"Marry you!" she panted; "marry you?—so and no and no!" And so she stamped her foot, and sobbed and, turning, fled from me, out of the cottage.

And now to fear came wonder, and with wonder was despair.

Truly, was ever man so great a fool!

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABROAD, white road; on either hand some half dozen cottages, with roofs of thatch or red tile, backed by trees gnarled and ancient, among which rises the red conical roof of some oast house. Such, in a word, is Sissinghurst.

Now, upon the left-hand side of the way, there stands a square, comfortable, whitewashed building, peaked of roof, bright as to windows, and with a mighty sign before the door, whereon you shall behold the picture of a bull: a bull rolling of eye, astonishingly curly of horn and stiff as to tail, and with a prodigious girth of neck and shoulder; such a snorting, fiery-eyed, curly-horned bull as was never seen off an inn sign.

It was at this bull that I was staring with much apparent interest, though indeed had that same curly-horned monstrosity been changed by some enchanter's wand into a green dragon or griffin, or swan with two necks, the chances are that I should have continued sublimely unconscious of the transformation.

Yet how should honest Silas Hoskins, ostler and general factotum of "The Bull" inn, be aware of this fact, who, being thus early at work and seeing me lost in contemplation, paused to address me in good faith?

"A fine bull 'e be, eh, Peter? Look at them 'orns, an' that theer tail; it's seldom as you sees 'orns or a tail the like o' them, eh?"

"Very seldom!" I answered, and sighed.

"An' then—'is nose-'oles, Peter, jest cast your eye on them nose-'oles, will ye; why, dang me! if I can't 'ear 'im a-snortin' when I lyooks at 'em! An' 'e were all painted by a chap—a little old chap wi' gray whiskers—no taller 'n your elber, Peter! Think o' that—a little chap no taller 'n your elber! I seen 'im do it wi' my two eyes—a-sittin' on a box. Drored 'is bull in wi' a bit o' chalk, first; then 'e sets wi' a couple o' brushes; dab 'e goes, an' dab, dab again, an'—by Goles! theer was a pair o' eyes a-rollin' theirselves at me—just a pair o' eyes, Peter. Ah! 'e were a wonder were that little old chap wi' gray whiskers! The way 'e went at that theer bull, a-dabbin' at 'im, 'ere, an' a-dabbin' at 'im theer till 'e come to 'is tail—'e done 'is tail last of all, Peter. 'Give un a good tail!' says I. 'Ah! that I will,' says 'e. 'An' a good stiff un!' says I. 'Ye jest keep your eye on it, an' watch!' says 'e. Talk about tails, Peter! 'E put in that theer tail so quick as nigh made my eyes water, an'—as for stiffness—well, look at it! I tell 'ee that chap could paint a bull wi' 'is eyes shut, ah, that 'e could! an' 'im such a very small man—wi' gray whiskers. No, ye don't see many bulls like that un theer, I'm thinkin', Peter?"

"They would be very hard to find!" said I, and sighed again. Whereupon Silas sighed, for company's sake, and nodding, went off about his many duties, whistling cheerily.

So I presently turned about and crossed the road to the smithy. But upon the threshold I stopped all at once and drew softly back, for, despite the early hour, Prudence was there, upon her knees before the anvil, with George's great hand-hammer clasped to her bosom, sobbing over it, and, while she sobbed, she kissed its worn handle. And because such love was sacred and hallowed that dingy place, I took off my hat as I once more crossed the road.

Seeing "The Bull" was not yet astir, for the day was still young (as I say), I sat me down in the porch and sighed.

And after I had sat there for some while, with my chin sunk upon my breast, and plunged in bitter meditation, I became aware of the door opening, and next moment a tremulous hand was laid upon my head, and, looking round, I beheld the Ancient.

"Bless 'ee, Peter—bless 'ee, lad!—an' a old man's blessin' be no light thing—'specially such a old, old man as I be—an' it bean't often as I feels in a blessin' sperrit—but oh, Peter! 't were me as found ye, weren't it?"

"Why, to be sure it was, Ancient, very nearly five months ago."

"An' I be allus ready wi' some noos for ye, beatn't I?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Well, I got more noos for 'ee, Peter—gert noos!"

"And what is it this time?"

"I be allus full up o' noos, bean't I?" he repeated.

"Yes, Ancient," said I, and sighed; "and what is your news?"

"Why, first of all, Peter, jest reach me my snuff-box, will 'ee?—'ere it be—in my back 'ind pocket—thankee! thankee!" Hereupon he knocked upon the lid with a bony knuckle. "I du be that full o' noos this marnin' that my innards be all of a quake, Peter, all of a quake!" he nodded, saying which, he sat down close beside me.

"Peter."

"Yes, Ancient?"

"Some day—when that theer old stapil be all rusted away, an' these old bones is a-restin' in the churchyard—over to Cranbrook, Peter—you'll think, sometimes, o' the very old man as was always so full o' noos, won't 'ee, Peter?"

"Surely, Ancient, I shall never forget you," said I, and sighed.

"An' now, Peter," said the old man, extracting a pinch of snuff, "now for the noos—'bout Black Jarge, it be."

"What of him, Ancient?" The old man shook his head.

"It took eight on 'em to du it, Peter, an' now four on 'em 's a-layin' in their beds, an' four on 'em's 'obbin' on crutches—an' all over a couple o' rabbits—though theer be some fules as says they was pa'tridges!"

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Why, ye see, Peter, Black Jarge be such a gert, strong man (I were much such another when I were young)—like a lion, in 'is wrath, 'e be—ah!—a bull bean't nothin' to Black Jarge! An' they keepers come an' found 'im under a tree fast asleep—like David in the Cave of Adullam, Peter, wi' a couple o' rabbits as 'e'd snared. An' when they keepers tried to tak' 'im, 'e rose up, 'e did, and throwed some on 'em this way an' some on 'em that way—'t were like Samson an' the Philistines; if only 'e'd 'appened to find the jawbone of a ass lyin' 'andy, 'e'd ha' killed 'em all an' got away, sure as sure. But it weren't to be, Peter, no; dead donkeys be scarce nowadays, an' as for asses' jawbones——"

"Do you mean that George is taken—a prisoner?"

The Ancient nodded, and inhaled a pinch of snuff with much evident relish.

"It be gert news, bean't it, Peter?"

"What have they done with him? Where is he, Ancient?" But, before the old man could answer, Simon appeared.

"Ah, Peter!" said he, shaking his head, "the Gaffer's been tellin' ye 'ow they've took Jarge for poachin', I suppose——"

"Simon!" cried the Ancient, "shut thy mouth, lad—hold thy gab an' give thy poor feyther a chance—I be tellin' 'im so fast as I can! As I was a-sayin', Peter—like a fur'us lion were Jarge wi' they keepers—eight on 'em, Peter—like dogs, a-growlin' an' growlin', an' leapin', an' worryin' all round 'im—ah!—like a lion 'e were——"

"Waitin' for a chance to use 'is 'right,' d'ye see, Peter!" added Simon.

Ancient—Wi' 'is eyes a-rollin' an' flamin', Peter, an' 'is mane all bristlin'——

Simon—Cool as any cucumber, Peter——

Ancient—A-roarin' an' a-lashing of 'a tail——

Simon—And sparrin' for an openin', Peter, and when 'e sees one—downin' 'is man every time——

Ancient—Leapin' in the air, rollin' in the grass, wi' they keepers clingin' to 'im like leeches—ah! leeches——

Simon—And every time they rushed, tap ad go 'is "left," and bang 'ud go 'is "right"——

Ancient—An' up 'e'd get, like Samson again, Peter, an' give 'iself a shake; bellerin'—like a bull o' Bashan——

Simon—Ye see, they fou't so close together that the keepers was afear'd to use their guns——

Ancient (indignantly)—Guns!—who's a-talkin' o' guns? Simon, my bye—you be allus a-maggin' an' a-maggin; bridle thy tongue, lad, bridle try tongue afore it runs away wi' ye.

Simon (sheepishly)—All right, Old Un—fire away!

But, at this juncture, Old Amos hove in view, followed by the Apologetic Dutton, with Job and sundry others, on their way to work, and, as they came, they talked together, with much solemn wagging of heads. Having reached the door of "The Bull," they paused and greeted us, and I thought Old Amos' habitual grin seemed a trifle more pronounced than usual.

"So poor Jarge 'as gone an' done for 'isself at last, eh? Oh, my soul! think o' that, now!" sighed Old Amos.

"Allus knowed as 'e would!" added Job; "many's the time I've said as 'e would, an' you know it—all on you."

"It'll be the Barbadies, or Austrayley!" grinned Amos; "transportation, it'll be—Oh, my soul! think 'o that now—an' 'im a Siss'n'urst man!"

"An' all alon'g o' a couple o'—rabbits!" said the Ancient, emphasising the last word with a loud rap on his snuff-box.

"Pa'tridges, Gaffer!—they was pa'tridges!" returned Old Amos.

"I allus said as Black Jarge'd come to a bad end," reiterated Job, "an' what's more—'e aren't got nobody to blame but 'isself!"

"An' all for a couple o' — rabbits!" sighed the Ancient, staring Old Amos full in the eye.

"Pa'tridges, Gaffer, they was pa'tridges—you, James Dutton—was they pa'tridges or was they not—speak up, James."

Hereupon, the man Dutton, all perspiring apology, as usual, shuffled forward, and, mopping his reeking brow, delivered himself in this wise:

"W'ich I must say—meanin' no offense to nobody, an' if so be, apologizin'—w'ich I must say—me' avin' seen 'em—they was—leastways," he added, as he met the Ancient's piercing eye, "leastways—they might 'ave been, w'ich—if they ain't—no matter!"

Having said which, he apologetically smeared his face all over with his shirt sleeve, and subsided again.

"It do wring my 'eart—ah, that it do! to think o' pore Jarge a convic' at Bot'ny Bay!" said Old Amos, "a-workin', an' diggin', an' slavin' wi' irons on 'is legs an' arm, a-jinglin', an' a-janglin' when 'e walks."

"Well, but it's justice, aren't it?" demanded Job—"a poacher's a thief, an' a thief's a convic'—or should be!"

"I've 'eard," said Old Amos, shaking his head, "I've 'eerd as they ties they convic's up to posts, an' lashes an' lashes 'em wi' the cat-o'-nine-tails!"

"They generally mostly deserves it!" nodded Job.

"But 'tis 'ard to think o' pore Jarge tied up to one o' them floggin'-posts, wi' 'is back all raw an' bleeding'!" pursued Old Amos; "crool 'ard it be, an' 'im such a fine, strappin' young chap."

"'E were allus a sight too fond o' pitchin' into folk, Jarge were!" said Job; "it be a mercy as my back weren't broke more nor once."

"Ah!" nodded the Ancient, "you must be amasin' strong in the back, Job! The way I've seed 'ee come a-rollin' and' a-wallerin' out o' that theer smithy's wonnerful, wonnerful, Lord! Job—'ow you did roll!"

"Well, 'e won't never do it no more," said Job, glowering; "what wi' poachin' 'is game, an' knockin' 'is keepers about, 't aren't likely as Squire Beverley'll let 'im off very easy——"

"Who?" said I, looking up and speaking for the first time.

"Squire Beverley o' Burn'am 'All."

"Sir Peregrine Beverley?"

"Ay, for sure."

"And how far is it to Burnham Hall?"

"'Ow far?" repeated Job, staring; "why, it lays 'tother side o' Horsmonden—"

"It be a matter o' eight mile, Peter," said the Ancient.

"Nine, Peter!" cried old Amos—"nine mile, it be!"

"Though I won't swear, Peter," continued the Ancient, "I won't swear as it aren't—seven—call it six an' three-quarters!" said he, with his eagle eye on Old Amos.

"Then I had better start now," said I, and rose.

"Why, Peter—wheer be goin'?"

"To Burnham Hall, Ancient."

"What—you?" exclaimed Job; d'ye think Squire'll see you?"

"I think so—yes."

"Well, 'e won't—they'll never let the likes o' you or me beyond the gates."

"That remains to be seen," said I.

"So you'm goin', are ye?"

"I certainly am."

"All right," nodded Job, "if they sets the dogs on ye, or chucks you into the road—don't go blamin' it on to me, that's all!"

"What—be ye really a'goin', Peter?"

"I really am, Ancient."

"Then—by the Lord—I'll go wi' ye."

"It's a long walk!"

"Nay—Simon shall drive us in the cart."

"That I will!" nodded the innkeeper.

"Ay, lad," cried the Ancient, laying his hand upon my arm, "we'll up an' see Squire, you and me—shall us, Peter? There be some fules," said he, looking round upon the staring company, "some fules as talks o' Bot'ny Bay, an' irons, an' whippin'-posts—all I says is—let 'em, Peter, let 'em! You an' me'll up an' see Squire, Peter, sha'n't us? Black Jarge aren't a convic' yet, let fules say what they will; we'll show 'em, Peter, we'll show 'em!" So saying, the old man led me into the kitchen of "The Bull," while Simon went to have the horses put to.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CHEERY place, at all times, is the kitchen of an English inn, a comfortable place to eat in, to talk in, or to doze in; a place with which your parlors and withdrawing rooms, your salons (a la the three Louis) with their irritating rococo, their gilt and satin, and spindle-legged discomforts, are not (to my mind) worthy to compare.

And what inn kitchen, in all broad England, was ever brighter, neater, and more comfortable than this kitchen of "The Bull," where sweet Prue held supreme sway, with such grave dignity, and with her two white-capped maids to do her bidding and behests?—surely none. And surely in no inn, tavern, or hostelry soever, great or small, was there ever seen a daintier, prettier, sweeter hostess than this same Prue of ours.

And her presence was reflected everywhere, and, if ever a kitchen of an inn possessed a heart to lose, then, beyond all doubt, this kitchen had lost its heart to Prue long since; even the battered cutlasses crossed upon the wall, the ponderous jack above the hearth, with its legend: Anno Domini 1643, took on a brighter sheen to greet her when she came, and as for the pots and pans, they fairly twinkled.

But today Prue eyes were red, and her lips were all a-droop, the which, though her smile was brave and ready, the Ancient was quick to notice.

"Why, Prue, lass, you've been weepin'!"

"Yes, grandfer."

"Your pretty eyes be all swole—red they be; what's the trouble?"

"Oh! 't is nothing, dear, 't is just a maid's fulishness—never mind me, dear."

"Ah! but I love 'ee, Prue—come, kiss me—theer now, tell me all about it—all about it, Prue."

"Oh, grandfer!" said she, from the hollow of his shoulder, "'t is just—Jarge!" The old man grew very still, his mouth opened slowly and closed with a snap.

"Did 'ee—did 'ee say—Jarge, Prue? Is it—breekin' your 'eart ye be for that theer poachin' Black Jarge? To think—as my Prue should come down to a poachin'—"

Prudence slipped from his encircling arm and stood up very straight and proud—there were tears thick upon her lashes, but she did not attempt to wipe them away.

"Grandfer," she said very gently, "you mustn't speak of Jarge to me like that—ye mustn't—we mustn't—because I—love him, and if—he ever—comes back—I'll marry him if—if he will only ax me; and if he—never comes back, then—I think—I shall—die!" The Ancient took out his snuffbox, knocked it, opened it, glanced inside, and—shut it up again.

"Did 'ee tell me as you—love—Black Jarge, Prue?"

"Yes, grandfer, I always have and always shall!"

"Loves Black Jarge!" he repeated; "allus 'as—allus will! Oh, Lord! what 'ave I done?" Now, very slowly, a tear crept down his wrinkled cheek, at sight of which Prue gave a little cry, and, kneeling beside his chair, took him in her arms. "Oh, my lass!—my little Prue—'t is all my doin'. I thought—Oh, Prue, 't were me as parted you! I thought—" The quivering voice broke off.

"'T is all right, grandfer, never think of it—see—there, I be smilin'!" and she kissed him many times.

"A danged fule I be!" said the old man, shaking his head.

"No, no, grandfer!"

"That's what I be, Prue—a danged fule! If I do go afore that theer old, rusty stapil, 't will serve me right—a danged fule I be! Allus loved 'im—allus will, an' wishful to wed wi' 'im! Why, then," said the Ancient, swallowing two or three times, "so 'ee shall, my sweet—so 'ee shall, sure as sure, so come an' kiss me, an' forgive the old man as loves 'ee so."

"What do 'ee mean, grandfer?" said Prue between two kisses.

"A fine, strappin' chap he Jarge; arter all, Peter, you bean't a patch on Jarge for looks, be you?"

"No, indeed, Ancient!"

"Wishful to wed 'em, she is, an' so she shall. Lordy Lord! Kiss me again, Prue, for I be goin' to see Squire—ay, I be goin' to up an' speak wi' Squire for Jarge—an' Peter be comin' too."

"Oh, Mr. Peter!" faltered Prudence, "be this true?" and in her eyes was the light of a sudden hope.

"Yes," I nodded.

"D' you think Squire 'll see you—listen to you?" she cried breathlessly.

"I think he will, Prudence," said I.

"God bless you, Mr. Peter!" she murmured. "God bless you!"

CONTINUED TOMORROW.

SCRAPPLE

LONGSHOREMAN'S LOGIC

"That son of yours is a likely lad, Sam. Why don't you let him join up and help us to end the war?"

"What! My boy, Bill? Naw, naw. What I say 'is, that there Kayser, 'e started the war, let 'im finish it 'isself!"

—The Passing Show.

THE PADDED CELL

Poor Punster

Jones—Say, Mose, how am I going to get down?

Johnsing—Try some of this tonic, boss; it'll grow hair on anything.

On Time

Brave Lad

"I wish I could go out with you, Tom. I don't trust them Germans."

"Don't you worry, mother. You leave 'em to me."

—Punch.

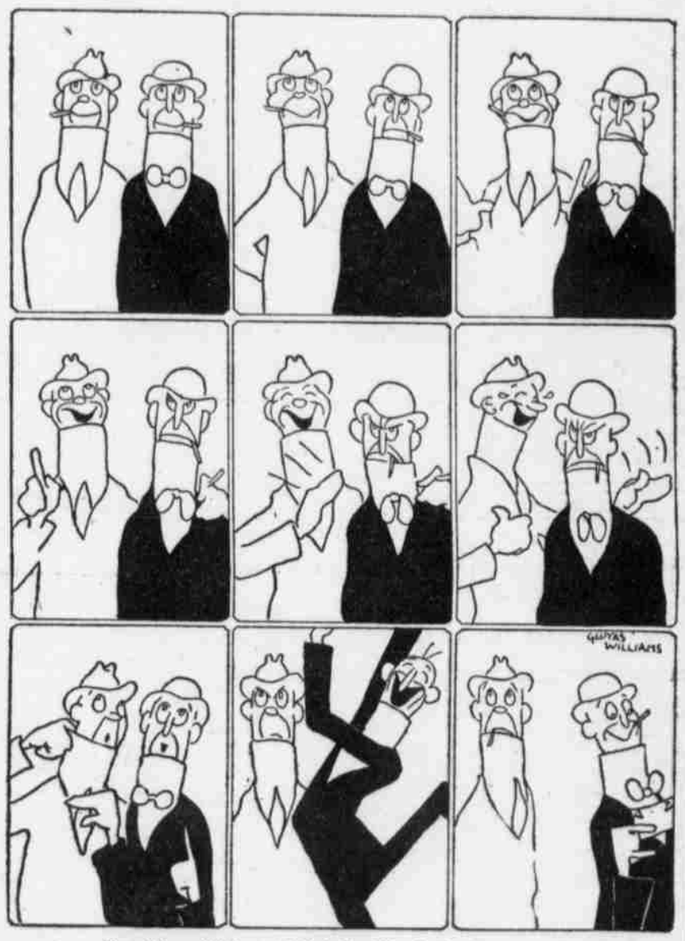
Guaranteed

Irene—Father bought a painting by an old master.

Corinne—Are you sure? There are so many copies nowadays that one can easily be fooled.

Irene—Oh, yes indeed! The man he bought it from gave him a written guarantee that the painter was past 70 before he did a stroke of it!

SONGS WITHOUT WORDS



Two Fans With a $5 Bet Up Watch the Scoreboard

"Hey, mister, there's a fly on your chin—no, not that one, the next one."

Probably So

Nora—I wonder why we are growing tired of each other?

Jack—I haven't an idea.

Nora—Maybe that's the reason.

Very Likely

Flatbush—They say there are 925 separate operations in the manufacture of a watch that sells for a dollar.

Bensonhurst—Does that mean that a fellow has to make 925 turns to wind it up?

Bad Service

Employe—I'm nearly starved. Just got in from a three-hour trip on the New York Central.

Boss—But couldn't you get anything to eat on the train?

Employe—Nope; it was a fast train.

Irene—Is Mrs. Gillet a well-informed woman?

"Well, she's on a party wire."

A Bad Bill

—AND THE WORST IS YET TO COME

Salesman (explaining all about puttees to young man who has just got a commission)—You'll find it best to wind them up every night directly you take them off.

Young Man (formerly in the watch business)—Er, I see; but haven't you any eight-day ones?