

STRANGE STORIES FROM A MAGIC PEN By H. G. Wells

THE CATASTROPHE

THE little shop was not paying.

The realization came insensibly. Winslow was not the man for definite addition and subtraction and sudden discovery. He became aware of the truth in his mind gradually, as though it had always been there. A lot of facts had converged and led him to conviction. There was that line of cretonnes—four half pieces—untouched, save for half-a-yard sold to cover a stool. There were those shirtings at 43-4d—Bandersnatch, in the Broadway, was selling them at 23-4d—under cost, in fact. (Surely Bandersnatch might let a man live!) Those servants' caps, a selling line, needed replenishing, and that brought back the memory of Winslow's sole wholesale dealers, Helter, Skelter & Grab. Why! How about their account?

Winslow stood with a big green box open on the counter before him when he thought of it. His pale gray eyes grew a little rounder, his pale straggling mustache twitched. He had been drifting along, day after day. He went round to the ramshackle cash desk in the corner—it was Winslow's weakness to sell his goods over the counter, give his customers a duplicate bill, and then dodge into the desk to receive the money, as though he doubted his own honesty. His lank forefinger with the prominent joints ran down the bright little calendar ("Clark's Cottons last for All Time"). "One—two—three; three weeks a day!" said Winslow, staring. "March! Only three weeks and a day. It can't be."

"Tea, dear," said Mrs. Winslow, opening the door with the glass window and the white blind that communicated with the parlor.

"One minute," said Winslow, and began unlocking the desk.

An irritable old gentleman, very hot and red about the face, and in a heavy fur-lined cloak, came in noisily. Mrs. Winslow vanished.

"Ugh!" said the old gentleman, "Pockethandkerchief."

"Yes, sir," said Winslow, "About what price—"

"Ugh!" said the old gentleman, "Foggit handkerchief, quig!"

Winslow began to feel flustered. He produced two boxes.

"These, sir," began Winslow.

"Sheed tin!" said the old gentleman, clutching the stiffness of the linen. "Wad to blow my nose—not haggit about."

"A cotton one, please, sir?" said Winslow.

"How much?" said the old gentleman, over the handkerchief.

"Sevenpence, sir. There's nothing more I can show you? No ties, braces—"

"Damn!" said the old gentleman, fumbling in his ticket pocket, and finally producing half a crown. Winslow looked round for his little metallic duplicate book which he kept in various fixtures, according to circumstances, and then he caught the old gentleman's eye. He went straight to the desk at once and got the change, with an entire disregard of the routine of the shop.

Winslow was always more or less excited by a customer. But the open desk reminded him of his trouble. It did not come back to him all at once. He heard a fingernail softly tapping on the glass, and, looking up, saw Minnie's eyes over the blind. It seemed like retreat opening. He shut and locked the desk, and went into the little room to tea.

But he was preoccupied. Three weeks and a day. He took unusually large bites of his bread and butter, and stared hard at the little pot of jam. He answered Minnie's conversational advances distractedly.

The shadow of Helter, Skelter & Grab lay upon the teatable. He was struggling with this new idea of failure, the tangible realization, that was taking shape and substance, condensing, as it were, out of the misty uneasiness of many days. At present it was simply one concrete fact; there were thirty-nine pounds left in the bank, and that day three weeks Messrs. Helter, Skelter & Grab, those enterprising outfitters of young men, would demand their eighty pounds.

After tea there was a customer or so—little purchases: some muslin and buckram, dress protectors, tape and a pair of lisle hose. Then, knowing that Black Care was lurking in the dusky corners of the shop, he lit the three lamps early and set to refolding his cotton prints, the most vigorous and least meditative proceeding of which he could think. He could see Minnie's shadow in the other room as she moved about the table. She was busy turning an old dress. He had a walk after supper, looked in at the Y. M. C. A., but found no one to talk to, and finally went to bed. Minnie was already there. And there, too, waiting for him, nudging him gently, until about midnight he was hopeless awake, sat Black Care.

He had had one or two nights lately in that company, but this was much worse. First came Messrs. Helter, Skelter & Grab and their demand for eighty pounds—an enormous sum when your original capital was only 175 pounds. They camped, as it were, before him, sat down and beleaguered him.

He clutched feebly at the circumambient darkness for expedients. Suppose he had a sale, sold things for almost anything? He tried to imagine a sale miraculously successful in some unexpected manner, and mildly profitable in spite of reductions below cost. Then Bandersnatch, Limited, 101, 102, 103, 105, 106, 107 Broadway, joined the siege, a long caterpillar of frontage, a battery of shop fronts, wherein things were sold at a farthing above cost. How could he fight such an establishment? Besides, what had he to sell? He began to review his resources. What taking line was there to bait the sale? Then straightway came those pieces of cretonne, yellow and black with a bluish-green flower; those discredited shirtings, prints without bouyancy, skirmishing haberdashery, some despairful four-button gloves by an inferior maker—a hopeless crew.

And that was his force against Bandersnatch, Helter, Skelter & Grab and the pitiless world behind them. Whatever had made him think a mortal would buy such things? Why had he bought this and neglected that? He suddenly realized the intensity of his hatred for Helter, Skelter & Grab's salesman.

Then he drove toward an agony of self-reproach. He had spent too much on that cash desk. What real need was there of a desk? He saw his vanity of that desk in a lurid glow of self-discovery. And the lamps? Five pounds! Then suddenly, with what was almost physical pain, he remembered the rent.

He groaned and turned over. And there, dim in the darkness, was the hummock of Mrs. Winslow's shoulders. That set him off in another direction. He became acutely sensible of Minnie's want of feeling. Here he was, worried to death about business, and she sleeping like a little child!

He regretted having married, with that infinite bitterness that only comes to the human heart in the small hours of the morning. That hummock of white seemed absolute without helpfulness, a burden, a responsibility. What fools men were to marry!

Minnie's inert repose irritated him so much that he was almost provoked to wake her up and tell her that they were "ruined." She would have to go back to her uncle; her uncle had always been against him;

and as for his own future, Winslow was exceedingly uncertain. A shop assistant who has once set up for himself finds the utmost difficulty in getting into a situation again. He began to figure himself "crib-bunting" again, going from this wholesale house to that, writing innumerable letters. How he hated writing letters! "Sir, referring to your advertisement in the Christian World." He beheld an infinite vista of discomfort and disappointment, ending—in a gulf.

He dressed, yawning, and went down to open the shop. He felt tired before the day began. As he carried the shutters in he kept asking himself what good he was doing. The end was inevitable, whether he

Minnie looked suddenly at his face. "I'll sew it now, Sid, if you like."

"Let's have breakfast first," said Winslow, "and do things at their proper time."

He was preoccupied at breakfast, and Minnie watched him anxiously. His only remark was to declare his egg a bad one. It wasn't; it was a little flavory—being one of those at fifteen a shilling—but quite nice. He pushed it away from him, and then, having eaten a slice of bread and butter, admitted himself in the wrong by resuming the egg.

"Sid!" said Minnie, as he stood up to go into the shop again, "you're not well."

and then reblocked a cretonne already faultlessly blocked. He was in a state of grim wretchedness—a martyr under the harrow of fate. At any rate, it should not be said he failed for want of industry. And how he had planned and contrived and worked! All to this end! He felt horrible doubts. Providence and Bandersnatch—surely they were incompatible! Perhaps he was being "tried?" That sent him off upon a new tack, a very comforting one. That martyr pose, the gold-in-the-furnace attitude, lasted all the morning.

At dinner—"potato pie"—he looked up suddenly, and saw Minnie regarding him. Pale she looked, and a little red about the eyes. Something caught him suddenly with a queer effect upon his throat. All his thoughts seemed to wheel into quite a new direction.

He pushed back his plate, and stared at her blankly. Then he got up, went round the table to her—she staring at him. He dropped on his knees beside her without a word. "Oh, Minnie!" he said, and suddenly she knew it was peace, and put



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bothered or not. The clear daylight smote into the place and showed how old, and rough, and splintered was the floor, how shabby the second-hand counter, how hopeless the whole enterprise.

He had been dreaming these past six months of a bright little shop, of a happy couple, of a modest but comely profit flowing in. He had suddenly awakened from his dream. The braid that bound his decent black coat—it was a little loose—caught against the catch of the shop door and was torn loose. This suddenly turned his wretchedness to wrath. He stood quivering for a moment, then, with a spiteful clutch, tore the braid looser, and went in to Minnie.

"Here," he said, with infinite reproach, "look here! You might look after a chap a bit."

"I didn't see it was torn," said Minnie.

"You never do," said Winslow, with gross injustice, "until things are too late."

"I'm well enough." He looked at her as though he hated her.

"Then there's something else the matter. You aren't angry with me, Sid, are you?—about that braid. Do tell me what's the matter. You were just like this at tea yesterday, and at supper time. It wasn't the braid then."

"And I'm likely to be."

She looked interrogation. "Oh! what is the matter?" she said.

It was too good a chance to miss, and he brought the evil news out with dramatic force. "Matter!" he said. "I done my best, and here we are. That's the matter! If I can't pay Helter, Skelter & Grab eighty pounds this day three weeks—"

Pause. "We shall be sold up! Sold up! That's the matter, Min! Sold up!"

"Oh, Sid!" began Minnie.

her arms about him, as he began to sob and weep.

He cried like a little boy, slobbering on her shoulder that he was a knave to have married her and brought her to this, that he hadn't the wits to be trusted with a penny, that it was all his fault, that he "had hoped so"—ending in a howl. And she, crying gently herself, patting his shoulders, said, "Ssh!" softly to his noisy weeping, and so soothed the outbreak. Then suddenly the crazy little bell upon the shop door began, and Winslow had to jump to his feet and be a man again.

After that scene they "talked it over" at tea, at supper, in bed, at every possible interval in between, solemnly—quite inconclusively—with set faces and eyes for the most part staring in front of them—and yet with a certain mutual comfort. "What to do I don't know," was Winslow's main proposition. Minnie tried to take a cheerful view of service—with a probable baby. But she found she needed all her courage.

And her uncle would help her again, perhaps, just at the critical time. It didn't do for folks to be too proud. Besides, "something might happen," favorite formula with her.

One hopeful line was to anticipate a sudden afflux of customers. "Perhaps," said Minnie, "you might get together fifty. They know you well enough to trust you a bit." They debated that point. Once the possibility of Helter, Skelter & Grab giving credit was admitted, it was pleasant to begin sweating the acceptable minimum. For some half hour over tea the second day after Winslow's discoveries they were quite cheerful again, laughing even at their terrific fears. Even twenty pounds, to go on with, might be considered enough. Then in some mysterious way the pleasant prospect of Messrs. Helter, Skelter & Grab tempering the wind to the shorn retailer vanished—vanished absolutely, and Winslow found himself again in the pit of despair.

He began looking about at the furniture, and wondering idly what it would fetch. The chiffonier was good, and there were Minnie's old plates that her mother used to have. Then he began to think of desperate expedients for putting off the evil day. He had heard somewhere of Bills of Sale—there was to his ears something comfortably substantial in the phrase. Then why not "go to the money lenders?"

One cheering thing happened on Thursday afternoon: a little girl came in with a pattern of "print" and he was able to match it. He had not been able to match anything out of his meager stock before. He went in and told Minnie. The incident is mentioned lest the reader should imagine it was uniform despair with him.

All of them dead! Then he saw, as in a vision, a row of seven cottages, each let at seven shillings a week, a timber yard, two villas, and the ruins—still marketable—of the avuncular residence. He tried to feel a sense of loss and could not. They were sure to have been left to Minnie's aunt. All dead! 7x7x52—20 began insensibly to work itself out in his mind, but discipline was ever weak in his mental arithmetic; figures kept moving from one line to another, like children playing at Widdy, Widdy Way. Was it 200 pounds about—or 100 pounds? Presently he picked up the letter again, and finished reading it. "You being the next of kin," said Mr. Speight.

"How awful!" said Minnie, in a horror-struck whisper, and looking up at last. Winslow stared back at her, shaking his head solemnly. There were a thousand things running through his mind, but none that, even to his dull sense, seemed appropriate as a remark. "It was the Lord's will," he said at last.

"It seems so very, very terrible," said Minnie; "auntie, dear auntie—Ted—poor, dear uncle—"

"It was the Lord's will, Minnie," said Winslow, with infinite feeling. A long silence.

"Yes," said Minnie, very slowly, staring thoughtfully at the crackling black paper in the grate. The fire had gone out. "Yes, perhaps it was the Lord's will."

They looked gravely at one another. Each would have been terribly shocked at any mention of the property by the other. She turned to the dark fireplace and began tearing up an old newspaper slowly. Whatever our losses may be, the world's work still waits for us. Winslow gave a deep sigh and walked in a hushed manner toward the front door. As he opened it a flood of sunlight came streaming into the dark shadows of the closed shop. Brandersnatch, Helter, Skelter & Grab had vanished out of his mind like the mists before the rising sun.

Presently he was carrying in the shutters, and in the briskest way; the fire in the kitchen was crackling exhilaratingly with a little saucypan wallowing above it, for Minnie was boiling two eggs—one for herself this morning, as well as one for him—and Minnie herself was audible, laying breakfast with the greatest eclat. The blow was a sudden and terrible one—but it behoves us to face such things bravely in this sad, unaccountable world. It was quite midday before either of them mentioned the cottages.

She was kneeling before the fireplace, blowing the fire. She had her housemaid's gloves on and the old country sunbonnet she wore of a morning, to keep the dust out of her hair. She turned, saw the envelope, gave a gasp and pressed two bloodless lips together.

"I'm afraid it's uncle," she said, holding the letter and staring with eyes wide open into Winslow's face. "It's a strange hand!"

"The postmark's Hull," said Winslow.

"The postmark's Hull." Minnie opened the letter slowly, drew it out, hesitated, turned it over, saw the signature. "It's Mr. Speight!"

"What does he say?" said Winslow.

Minnie began to read. "Oh!" she screamed. She dropped the letter, collapsed into a crouching heap, her hands covering her eyes. Winslow snatched at it. "A most terrible accident has occurred," he read; "Melchior's chimney fell down yesterday evening right on the top of your uncle's house, and every living soul was killed—your uncle, your cousin Mary, Will, and Ned and the girl—every one of them, and smashed—you would hardly know them. I'm writing to you to break the news before you see it in the papers—" The letter fluttered from Winslow's fingers. He put out his hand against the mantel to steady himself.

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