

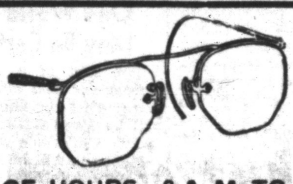
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The Mudlark... A New Novel

By Theodore Bonnet

Synopsis: Wheeler (also known as the Mudlark) is an East End orphan boy with a lively curiosity. On this foggy November evening in the 39th year of Victoria's reign, he has managed to slip by the sentries at Windsor Castle and has just fallen down a dark hole in the courtyard.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WASN'T a dungeon Wheeler had fallen into: it was a clean, well-lighted tunnel. Down the middle ran a narrow railway track, upon the track stood a little cart filled with coal, and it was upon this coal that Wheeler was sitting. For the Great Courtyard of Windsor Castle is pierced in several places by coalholes, which, when not in use, are supposed to be covered with iron lids, and the lids arrow pointed him on; then the passage turned, and abruptly it stopped. It stopped dead at a narrow, winding staircase dimly lighted by an oil lamp hanging by a rusty chain; and, taken by surprise, Wheeler stopped short of it.

Clearly the staircase wasn't a way out; it would only lead him up the castle. Yet even as he hung back, he remembered that it was the castle he had come to see, and as nothing further occurred to alarm him, he commenced to waver in his mind between escape and his original intention. He approached the staircase warily, laid his hand on the heavy, blackened newel post, and stopped.

Then he heard sounds in the tunnel. He listened. A low laugh, hollow, as in a tomb; someone talking; and then—unmistakably—approaching feet. He scrambled to the ground, retreated in the opposite direction, and hid behind a turn of the passage.

TWO GRIMY navies hove into view, thick-chested, slope-shouldered, swinging their long, toll-warped arms like a couple of orangutans.

"It ain't as if yer'd been to sea like wot I 'ave, 'Arry," one was saying. "Ah, that'd change yer mind quick enough, that would. But ignorance is bliss, every time, I s'y, and if a bit of English fuff contents yer, where's the 'arm?"

"Hear, 'ear," jeered the other. "You and yer blinkin' Eyetallians! 'Op it and lend a 'and 'ere. I want me supper, 'if you don't." "Right you are, then, but you needn't get yer back up. It's like I s'y—all a matter of 'where yer been an' wot yer seen, Easy does it; 'ere we go."

He watched them wheel the car down the tunnel, round a corner, and out of sight. Then he went and stood where the car had stood, and looked forlornly up at the coalhole in the roof. It now was hopelessly out of reach.

Panic seized him. He felt himself trapped in this treacherous hole! It flashed upon him he would be hunted down his lengths and taken, then that he might be left here to die—shut up in Windsor Castle for ever, he and Henry the Eighth! Desperately he determined to brave a bit of exploration in search of another exit.

He could not read the sign, but had been born with the confidence of all honest citizens in arrows, and noting that the direction recommended by this one went opposite to that taken by the navies, he followed its advice, walking as quietly as possible and with an eye out for trouble.

IT WAS a broad passage of whitewashed stone. The floor was flagged and swept clean, the roof at first low and gently rounded, but at a little distance vaulted into a fine Gothic arch, as if at this point the modern burrow joined a medieval one, and from here on the flags looked older, worn as by a procession of servants passing over with the centuries. Gas jets, spaced at reasonable intervals, burned low, blue and flickered a little.

He passed platoons of stout oaken doors, each presenting to him a polished brass plate with a number surmounted by a crown. All were locked. Once the passage intersected another, but a second—

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again, looking up, large-eyed, listening. There wasn't a movement, not a sound.

A little thrill passed over him, half of fear, half of downright elation in his unobserved proximity to the world above stairs. His throat was dry. "Lawks!" he whispered, and swallowed hard. He took a grip on his courage and began to cautiously climb his Beanstalk.

THERE REALLY was such a boy as this. What he did in the Queen's house that night stirred all Britain at the time, and so pushed it as to move the people in charge to amass a power of official reports on the case, which you may read for yourself if you choose.

The historians have entirely missed the point of the boy; his very character has eluded them, and they understand neither what he did nor what came of it in circles widening far out from the ignominious coalhole down which he slid into the Wonderland of Britannic Majesty. For as with many another piece of inner lore from every time and reign, much of the story of Wheeler is preserved only among the vanishing hereditary servants of the Royal Household, to be handed down discriminatingly in the Servants' Hall after hours.

As to the historians, with their versions of things culled from newspapers, books, and old manuscripts, their conflicting sources, their queer mixed habits of scientific analysis, respectable reticence, and mere loose talk, they are notoriously misleading on occasion, and the earnest student will do well not to believe all he reads in books of theirs.

They are fond of referring to Victoria's reign as an era of peace and prosperity in Britain; after which the student may find it confusing to read their accounts of the "Hungry Forties," which were distinguished mainly by famine, a wrathful insurrection of the poor, the First Afghan War, the Sikh affair, and the brutelike drudgery and brutal beating of small children of both sexes in coal mines and cotton mills; of the stinking, jam-packed slums that were sinks of misery and degradation until the century's close; of the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the commercial

deadly game.

panic and bread riots of the fifties; of the Fenian outrages of the sixties, the Kaffir War, the Zulu War, the Second Afghan War, the Ashanti expedition and the final collapse of English agriculture in the seventies; of Majuba, Khartoum, the Doctors' Strike, the plight of the girls in the match factories, and the bayonets fixed against an army of jobless men in Trafalgar Square in the eighties; finally, of Kitchener's two-year campaign in the Sudan, and the most conspicuous event of the fin de siècle, the Boer War. Peace and prosperity they call it.

WHAT THE historians mean is that in Victoria's time Britain never felt her security seriously threatened from abroad, but attained a new pinnacle of power in the world, broadened her empire, extended her trade, increased on a vast scale her capital goods and means of production, developed her resources, raised up a new breed of wealthy, enterprising sons, and, at the end, had improved her general standard of living to a degree not dreamt of by practical men at the reign's beginning.

But the process was attended by violent dislocations and convulsions. Britain was changing rapidly from an agricultural nation to an industrial one, so rapidly that she scarcely grasped the significance of what was happening. And at a moment in this greatest of British revolutions, the singular unit of humanity with whom we have to deal is climbing the stairs of Windsor Castle.

It is the Age of Progress. Slag heaps blacken the Welsh countryside, furnaces like the watch fire of armies redden the night sky of the Potteries, steam boilers drive the mills of Lancashire, ships from every corner of the seas crowd for room on Thames and Mersey, and smoke hangs thick over a very grimy London. It is the Age of Acquisitiveness, expressing itself in ugly villages and cluttered drawing rooms; of Large Families, Eminent Respectability, Enormous Dinners—and of Mudlarks, Rookeries, and Malnutrition. It is the Age of the Railway, the Steamship, the Telegraph; the tempo of life quickens and competition has become a deadly game.

IT WAS COMING on to be the kind of night on which it once was commonly believed that the horrid figure of Herne the Hunter prowled the Park, and on which sentries still thought they saw Anne Boleyn ascending to her bower in the Dean's Cloister. In that fog, the castle seemed a place where the living only trespassed, and only the dead belonged. Without half trying, one might fancy Tudors and Stuarts, Yorkists and Lancastrians, Plantagenets and Normans silently intermingling there, each upon a separate dead world's business, and all keeping watch upon the trespassers; so that tonight the porter of the Round Tower might hasten his steps a bit as he passed by the armour of King David of Scotland, and a page, going down a lonely corridor, stum over the gallery where it was said that still, when the mood was on her, Elizabeth walked.

But from the tales of Windsor's ghosts, its living tenants had at least some comfort in numbers, for in the twelve acres of buildings girded round by its walls dwelt some more than two thousand persons with bodies. There were officers of the castle and of the Garter, equerries and ladies and gentlemen-in-waiting, Military Knights and Royal Guardsmen, canons and choristers of St. George's, custodians and antiquarians, secretaries and clerks, and sufficient domestic servants alone to have destroyed a besieging army with boiling soup from the battlements.

There were master cooks, assistant cooks, roasting cooks, and bakers, all senesched by a lordly chef at nearly seven hundred a year, and there were footmen and stewards, housekeepers and butlers, storekeepers and pantries, kitchenmaids and chambermaids, sempstresses and valets, laundresses and table deckers, gardeners and greenhouse-men, not to mention apprentices in almost every line, nor the coachmen and postilions, grooms and farriers from the Stables, nor the lads from the Kennels either. So you may imagine what a busy place it was, and perhaps something of the bickering and gossip, dalliance and intrigue, dreaming and weeping that still went on in it.

To Be Continued

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