

FIRELIGHT.

Above the glowing embers I hear the crackling fire. The music it remembers Of some remembered spring. Back to the branch forsaken Return its jocular choir. And in the chimney waken A melody of fire.

MR. TESTER'S TROUSERS.

It is not very long since that young Jack Cocky went down by himself to Woodleigh hall, Dumfriesshire, to spend a week or so with his Uncle Tester. Jack, who had only just left school, and was barely nineteen, did not look forward to his visit with much pleasure, for his uncle was a most crotchety and cantankerous old gentleman, of whom he stood in considerable dread. Indeed, he had only accepted the invitation from interested motives, the fact being that his uncle, who was very rich, had hinted his intention of defraying the expenses of Jack's projected career at Oxford, and as his parents were too poor to give him a university education themselves it was especially needful for him to keep in Uncle Tester's "good books."

Before he had left home on his dreaded visit both his parents warned him what a whimsical, crotchety old fellow his uncle was, and how exceedingly careful he must be in his behavior while at Woodleigh; for the old gentleman was apt to take offense at trifles which ordinary mortals would not even notice, and the smallest piece of carelessness on Jack's part might engender a fatal prejudice against him in his uncle's mind. Fully imbued, therefore, with the necessity of being on his best behavior, Jack started off to Woodleigh. On arriving there he was not especially pleased to find that the only other visitors to the house, were a few old fogys, contemporaries of his uncle and aunt, and as he sat at dinner on his first night, in company of these prim and rather antiquated persons, he felt decidedly like a fish out of water. Indeed had it not been for the presence of his cousin Lily—his uncle's only child—who kept him in countenance as far as youth was concerned, he felt that he should have collapsed altogether.

Youth was not Lily Tester's sole attraction either. She was pretty, kind hearted and companionable. And Jack found her society so agreeable that before he had been at Woodleigh three days he imagined himself, according to his boyish lights, violently in love with her. Of course he was too bashful to declare his passion in words, but he showed it by the silent admiration of his looks, by constant attendance at her side, and by continually fetching and carrying for her, and in a general way, making himself as useful to her as he could. One afternoon, in her cousin's hearing, Lily happened to bewail aloud the fact that she had no means of procuring a new novel, which she was very impatient to read, from the circulating library in their neighboring town, as the horses were otherwise occupied that day and the servants were all too busy to be sent upon such an errand. Jack said nothing, but instantly determined to go for the novel himself. And having consulted his watch and seen that he should have time to get there and back before dinner he started off alone without telling anybody where he was going.

He reached the town all right and obtained the novel which Lily wanted. But the walk took him longer than he had expected, so that, instead of being back at Woodleigh with a comfortable half hour to spare before dinner, he found that he had barely five minutes. As he hurried into the hall, hot and breathless, he met Lily on her way to the drawing room, dressed ready for dinner, and he immediately took the opportunity of giving her the novel which he had bought. "Oh, this is good of you, Jack," she exclaimed, her face lighting up with a grateful smile, "to go all that long walk on my account. Why, you look as hot and tired as can be. I am afraid" (glancing anxiously at the clock) "that you have made yourself late, too. Oh, Jack, do you think you can possibly dress in four minutes? For papa is dreadfully particular about people being in time for dinner. And I should be quite miserable if you got into a scrape with him through serving me."

"Oh, I'll manage it all right," replied Jack. "My dressing won't take long." And he ran off quickly up stairs to perform his hasty toilet, determined not to be late, for he knew that Lily had used no exaggerated phrase in saying that her father was "dreadfully particular about people being in time." Indeed, in the eyes of this crotchety and whimsical old gentleman to be late for dinner was something very like a deadly sin. And Jack, as we know, had strong reasons for keeping in his uncle's favor. He rushed, therefore, through his toilet at a breakneck pace, until he came to his dress trousers, and then he received a check. Something appeared to be wrong with the articles in question. They were so small and tight that Jack could scarcely get his muscular limbs into them. In fact, it was evident that they were not his own at all, but the property of somebody else who was very much smaller and thinner than himself.

"Hang it!" he soliloquized in a vexed tone, as he surveyed the tight and scanty garments clinging to his legs almost as close as fishings, "those confounded footmen have made a stupid mistake and exchanged my breeches for somebody else's. I must ring the bell at once and have my own brought up, for I can never go down stairs in these things." He leaned across his bed to pull the bell rope, which hung on the other side of it from where he stood. But, alas! the movement laid too great a strain upon the skin tight inexpressibles in which he stood encased. There came a

loud crack, followed by an ominous sound of tearing. And Jack saw, to his no small dismay, that one of the seams had split right up the leg! What the deuce was he to do? The owner of the trousers might—nay, certainly would—send up for them in a minute or two. And what a rage he would be in when he found what had happened to them! If Jack had been a few years older and gifted with a trifle more self-possession, he would have regarded the affair as rather a good joke, and though he might have been a little embarrassed he would not have been seriously disturbed by it. But being a nervous, awkward boy, and very shy of the prim old gentlemen who were his uncle's guests, his accident caused him quite unreasonable agitation.

But there was worse in store. A minute later a knock came at his door, and a servant's voice inquired from the other side: "Beg pardon, sir; but did you ring for your dress trousers?" "Yes," replied Jack, hurriedly, making no movement to unlock the door. "Have you got them there?" "Yes," answered the footman. "And I expect you must have got master's, sir, for yours had been taken to his room by mistake, and he can't find his own nowhere." A horrible thrill of increased dismay shot through Jack at these words. The affair had seemed bad enough before he knew whose trousers they were he had split. But the fact of their being crumpled, crotchety Uncle Tester's made it a hundred times worse. What should he do? How should he manage to face the vials of the old gentleman's wrath, which would assuredly be poured upon him at dinner in the presence of all the other guests? This thought reduced the shy, foolish youth to a state of mind bordering upon frenzy. And almost before he knew what he was saying—certainly before he at all realized the consequences of his action—he had blurted out a desperate fib.

"No," he answered, "I have not. I have no dress trousers here at all." The man did not seem convinced, however, until Jack had repeated his asseveration two or three times. Then he went away, leaving the youth's own trousers (by his request) on the mat outside the door. When he was out of sight Jack opened the door and hastily took them in, and pulling off his uncle's breeches soon invested himself in his own. The former he then stuffed in his portmanteau, which he was careful to lock. And putting the key in his pocket he hurried down to dinner in anything but an easy frame of mind.

He reached the drawing room a minute or two before his uncle, who soon made his appearance in a pair of morning inexpressibles, with a particularly sour look on his face. The old gentleman, being absurdly prim and punctilious about accuracy of dress, was more upset by the disappearance of his garments than ordinary folk would imagine possible. And as he explained to his guests the cause of his lateness and of his hybrid attire, he inveighed in no measured terms against the "damned idiot" who was to blame for it, and expressed his determination of "sending him about his business" as soon as he could discover his personality. This threat, and the sour ill temper which his uncle displayed all the evening, quite frightened Jack out of any intention of confessing the truth which he might have entertained. On the contrary, he began to evolve desperate expedients for getting the trousers mended, and secretly restoring them to the old fellow's room; since, if the articles continued missing, there was no saying what steps their owner might not take to discover their whereabouts. And should they be traced to him, Jack—why, good-by to all his expectations from the avuncular quarter!

While he cast about in his mind for possible expedients, it occurred to him that he might seek the assistance of his Aunt Tester's maid, for she was rather a friend of his, having lived with his mother several years before she came to Woodleigh, and he felt sure she would help him to the best of her power. He knew where her workroom was, having been to it already to have little jobs of mending done. If he went there that very evening, after dinner, when his aunt and cousin were busy down stairs with their guests, he should be certain to find her alone. He could take the trousers to her, tell her exactly what had happened, beg her to run up the split seam with a sewing machine, and arrange with her some method for the secret restoration of the articles to his uncle's dressing room. As no other reasonable, or even possible, course suggested itself, Jack made up his mind to adopt this one. And he escaped to his room after dinner on the earliest opportunity for the purpose of putting it into immediate execution. Unlocking his portmanteau, he dragged the wretched trousers forth. Then doubling them up into the smallest possible compass, and taking them under his arm, concealed as much as was feasible by his coat, he looked out to see that nobody was in sight and started along the passage toward the workroom.

He had not proceeded far before he became aware of some one approaching with a light in the opposite direction. At present the light alone was visible, the bearer of it being hidden from him by a bend in the wall. What was he to do? As he was carrying the trousers they were but imperfectly concealed, and any one meeting him with a light was certain to remark them. He must hide out of the way till the person, whoever it was, had passed. But where? A bedroom door on his right stood temptingly open. He darted quickly in, and concealed himself behind it. But, as ill luck would have it, his hiding place proved a decidedly insecure one. The bearer of the light, who, from the sound of rustling skirts which accompanied her, was evidently a woman, did not pass by the door. On the contrary, she walked straight into it! Jack's heart sank to zero, and a sense of appalling dismay overwhelmed him. Of course she would shut the door, and

there he would stand helplessly and hopelessly exposed, with those miserable trousers in his possession. Escape was impossible. Nothing could save him. He was ignominiously run to earth. If ever any one felt desperate Jack did so at that moment. The new-comer, however, did not shut the door, but passed on into the room, leaving it open behind her. Jack could see her as she stood shivering in his hiding place, and it did not add to his comfort to recognize his aunt. But he was conscious of a blessed sense of relief when he saw her making for a door on the opposite side of the room, which apparently led into another chamber beyond. She opened it and went in. Now was his chance to escape! Looking nervously out, and dreading every moment to see her reappear, he slipped quietly round the door and into the passage. Then, fancying he heard his aunt emerge from the inner room, he scuttled off on tiptoe to his own bedchamber as fast as he could run.

It was not until he reached that haven, breathless and trembling, that a consciousness of something missing came over him. He had not got the trousers! Terrible conviction! In the hurry and agitation of his escape from behind the door he must have dropped them. What on earth was to be done now? he asked himself in sickening dismay. Should he hasten back and make a desperate effort to recover them? No! His courage failed him at the thought. He should probably run into his aunt while doing so, and that would put the finishing stroke to everything. There was nothing for it but to let matters take their course. And wherever the trousers were picked up, whether behind the door or in the passage outside, there was, thank heaven! no evidence to connect their presence there with himself.

But in his existing uneasy and foreboding frame of mind, he felt it would be quite impossible for him to face the company again that night without exciting suspicion by his demeanor. So he locked himself into his room and retired straight to bed, though not to sleep, for he lay awake most of the night brooding miserably over this unhappy affair. Even the brief spells of slumber he enjoyed were disturbed by awful nightmares, in which a pair of black trousers, with a huge rent in them, were always the prominent feature. Next morning it was with the greatest difficulty that he could force himself to go down to breakfast. For if the discovery of those wretched trousers, in their torn condition, was mentioned—as it was, of course, certain to be—he knew he should betray himself to the others by his guilty blushes. He therefore experienced the most relieved surprise when the meal passed without any allusion being made to them. No one even appeared to notice that his face looked pale and haggard, except, perhaps, Lily, whose eyes he several times met fixed upon himself, with a certain anxious interest expressed in them.

The day dragged on with leaden wings, and at every minute, in his uneasy guiltiness of conscience, Jack expected to be summoned by his Uncle Tester and ordered to explain his scandalous and deceitful conduct, but no such summons came, and at last dinner-time was reached. That, of course, was certain to bring the subject of the dress trousers upon the tapis, and it was with a heavy, miserable heart that Jack entered the drawing room at the sounding of the gong.

What, then, was his surprise to see his uncle standing on the hearthrug, in case as to his nether limbs in evening inexpressibles, and to hear him say to a guest, who had made a jocular inquiry on the subject: "Yes, a most extraordinary thing. They had somehow got folded away by mistake inside Lily's riding habit, and sent up to her room. She found them there this morning."

After dinner, in the drawing room, while Jack was sitting by himself apart from the others, pretending to read, but really speculating on the extraordinary and inexplicable result of the trousers episode, Lily strolled across to him, and said in a low voice, with an amused twinkle in her soft, bright eyes: "Jack, it was an awfully bold stroke of yours to leave those—those—well, I suppose there is no harm in the world—those trousers in my bedroom last night. 'Oh, I say, it was an accident really,'" grasped Jack, seeing that the girl had somehow mastered his secret, and that denial would be useless. "But was it your room where I left them? And how did you find out it was me?"

"By guess work," she replied, laughing. "I am rather sharp in putting two and two together. * * * Why and how you managed to split the articles I failed to conjecture; but that you were the culprit your demeanor last night and today has sufficiently shown me. When I found them last night on the floor behind the door of my bedroom I did not quite know what to do. But having slept upon the matter and confirmed my over night suspicions of you by observation at breakfast this morning I determined (with an arch look) to take the hint given me in so pronounced a manner. I therefore stitched up the split seam and took the garments to father's room, telling him that harmless little fib which you have heard him unsuspectingly repeat tonight. Now, Jack, don't you think I have repaid you for your kindness, in fetching me that novel yesterday?"

"A hundred times over!" exclaimed Jack, his face beaming with gratitude and relief. Upon my word, you're a real brick, Lily!" We may add that this episode of the inexpressibles, which had come so near doing for Jack with his uncle, really became the making of him, for it originated the good understanding which subsequently sprang up between the lad and his cousin, and in after years, when he had married Lily and succeeded to the bulk of the old man's fortune, he was always telling his friends the above story and impressing on them how he owed his prosperity entirely to "Uncle Tester's Trousers."—London Truth.

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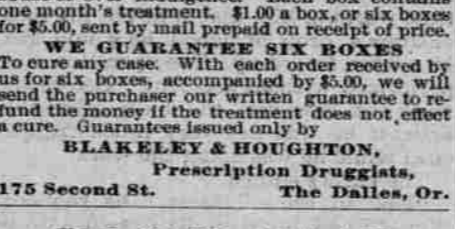
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