Rooum

Oliver Onions

Table of Contents

Rooum

Oliver Onions

For all I ever knew co the contrary, it was his own name; and something about him, name or man or both, always put me in mind, I can't tell you how, of negroes. As regards the name. I dare say it was something hugger−mugger in the mere sound—something that I classed, for no particular reason, with the dark and ignorant sort of words, such as 'Obi' and 'Hoodoo'. I only know that after I learned that his name was Rooum, I couldn't for the life of me have thought of him as being called anything else.

The first impression that you got of his head was that it was a patchwork of black and white— black bushy hair and short white beard, or else the other way about. As a matter of fact, both hair and beard were piebald, so that if you saw him in the gloom a dim patch of white showed down one side of his head, and dark tufts cropped up here and there in his beard. His eyebrows alone were entirely black, with a little sprouting of hair almost joining them. And perhaps his skin helped to make me think of negroes, for it was very dark, of the dark brown that always seems to have more than a hint of green behind it. His forehead was low, and scored across with deep horizontal furrows.

We never knew when he was going to turn up on a job. We might not have seen him for weeks, but his face was always as likely as not to appear over the edge of a crane−platform just when that marvellous mechanical intuition of his was badly needed. He wasn't certificated. He wasn't even trained, as the rest of us understood training; and he scoffed at the drawing−office, and laughed outright at logarithms and our laborious methods of getting out quantities. But he could set sheers and tackle in a way that made the rest of us look silly. I remember once how, through the parting of a chain, a sixty−foot girder had come down and lay under a ruck of octer stuff, as the bottom chip lies under a pile of spellikins—a hopeless−looking smash. Myself, I'm certificated twice or three times over; but I can only assure you that I wanted to kick myself when, after I'd spent a day and a sleepless night over the job, I saw the game of tic−tat−toe that Rooum made of it in an hour or two. Certificated or not, a man isn't a fool who can do that sort of thing. And he was one of these fellows, too, who can 'find water'—tell you where water is and what amount of getting it is likely to take, by just walking over the place. We aren't certificated up to that yet.

He was offered good money to stick to us—to stick to our firm—but he always shook his black−and−white piebald head. He'd never be able to keep the bargain if he were to make it, he told us quite fairly. I know there are these chaps who can't endure to be clocked to their work with a patent time−clock in the morning and released of an evening with a whistle—and it's one of the things no master can ever understand. So Rooum came and went erratically, showing up maybe in Leeds or Liverpool, perhaps next on Plymouth Breakwater, and once he turned up in an out−of−the−way place in Glamorganshire just when I was wondering what had become of him.

The way I got to know him (got to know him, I mean, more than just to nod) was that he tacked himself on to me one night down Vauxhall way, where we were setting up some small plant or other. We had knocked off for the day, and I was walking in the direction of the bridge when he came up. We walked along together; and we had not gone far before it appeared that his reason for joining me was that he wanted to know 'what a molecule was'.

I stared at him a bit.

'What do you want to know that for?' I said. 'What does a chap like you, who can do it all backwards, want with molecules?'

Oh, he just wanted to know, he said.

So, on the way across the bridge, I gave it him more or less from the book—molecular theory and all the rest of it. But, from the childish questions he put, it was plain that he hadn't go the hang of it all. 'Did the molecular theory allow things to pass through one another?' he wanted to know; 'Could things pass through one another?'

and a lot of ridiculous things like that. I gave it up.

'You're a genius in your own way, Rooum,' I said finally: 'you know these things without the books we plodders have to depend on. If I'd luck like that, I think I should be content with it.'

But he didn't seem satisfied, though he dropped the matter for that time. But I had his acquaintance, which was more than most of us had. He asked me, rather timidly, if I'd lend him a book or two, I did so, but they didn't seem to contain what he wanted to know, and he soon returned them, without remark.

Now you'd expect a fellow to be specially sensitive, one way or another, who can tell when there's water a hundred feet beneath him; and as you know, the big men are squabbling yet about this water−finding business. But, somehow, the water−finding puzzled me less than it did that Rooum should be extraordinarily sensitive to something far commoner and easier to understand—ordinary echoes. He couldn't stand echoes. He'd go a mile round rather than pass a place that he knew had an echo; and if he came on one by chance, sometimes he'd hurry through as quick as he could, and sometimes he'd loiter and listen very intently. I rather joked about this at first, till I found it really distressed him; then, of course, I pretended not to notice. We're all cranky somewhere, and for that matter, I can't touch a spider myself.

For the remarkable thing that overtook Rooum—(that, by the way, is an odd way to put it, as you'll see presently; but the words came that way into my head, so let them stand)—for the remarkable thing that overtook Rooum, I don't think I can begin better than with the first time, or very soon after the first time, that I noticed this peculiarity about the echoes.

It was early on a particularly dismal November evening, and this time we were somewhere out south−east London way, just beyond what they are pleased to call the building−line—you know these districts of wretched trees and grimy fields and market−gardens that are about the same to real country that a slum is to a town. It rained that night; rain was the most appropriate weather for the brickfields and sewage−farms and yards of old carts and railway−sleepers we were passing. The rain shone on the black handbag that Rooum always carried; and I sucked at the dottle of a pipe that it was too much trouble to fill and light again. We were walking in the direction of Lewisham (I think it would be), and were still a little way from that eruption of red−brick houses that. . . but you've doubtless seen them.

You know how, when they're laying out new roads, they lay down the narrow strip of kerb first, with neither setts on the one hand nor flagstones on the other? We had come upon one of these. (I had noticed how, as we had come a few minutes before under a tall hollow−ringing railway arch, Rooum had all at once stopped talking—it was the echo, of course, that bothered him.) The unmade road to which we had come had headless lamp−standards at intervals, and ramparts of grey road−metal ready for use; and save for the strip of kerb, it was a broth of mud and stiff clay. A red light or two showed where the road−barriers were— they were laying the mains; a green railway light showed on an embankment; and the Lewisham lamps made a rusty glare through the rain. Rooum went first, walking along the narrow strip of kerb.

The lamp−standards were a little difficult to see, and when I heard Rooum stop suddenly and draw in his breath sharply, I thought he had walked into one of them.

'Hurt yourself?' I said.

He walked on without replying; but half a dozen yards further on he stopped again. He was listening again. He waited for me to come up.

'I say,' he said, in an odd sort of voice, 'go a yard or two ahead, will you?'

'What's the matter?' I asked, as I passed ahead. He didn't answer.

Well, I hadn't been leading for more than a minute before he wanted to change again. He was breathing very quick and short.

'Why, what ails you?' I demanded, stopping.

'It's all right. . . You're not playing any tricks, are you? . . .'

I saw him pass his hand over his brow.

'Come, get on,' I said shortly; and we didn't speak again till we struck the pavement with the lighted lamps. Then I happened to glance at him.

'Here,' I said brusquely, taking him by the sleeve, 'you're not well. We'll call somewhere and get a drink.'

'Yes,' he said, again wiping his brow. 'I say. . . did you hear?'

'Hear what?'

'Ah, you didn't . . . and, of course, you didn't feel anything. . . .'

'Come, you're shaking.'

When presently we came to a brightly lighted public−house or hotel, I saw that he was shaking even worse than I had thought. The shirt−sleeved barman noticed it too, and watched us curiously. I made Rooum sit down, and got him some brandy.

'What was the matter?' I asked, as I held the glass to his lips.

But I could get nothing out of him except that it was 'All right—all right,' with his head twitching over his shoulder almost as if he had touch of the dance. He began to come round a little. He wasn't the kind of man you'd press for explanations, and presently we set out again. He walked with me as far as my lodgings, refused to come in, but for all that lingered at the gate as if loath to leave. I watched him turn the corner in the rain.

We came home together again the next evening, but by a different way, quite half a mile longer. He had waited for me a little pertinaciously. It seemed he wanted to talk about molecules again.

Well, when a man of his age—he'd be near fifty—begins to ask questions, he's rather worse than a child who wants to know where Heaven is or some such thing—for you can't put him off as you can the child. Somewhere or other he'd picked up the word 'osmosis', and seemed to have some glimmering of its meaning. He dropped the molecules, and began to ask me about osmosis.

'It means, doesn't it,' he demanded, 'that liquids will work their way into one another— through a bladder or something? Say a thick fluid and a thin: you'll find some of the thick in the chin, and the thin in the thick?'

'Yes. The thick into the thin is ex−osmosis, and the other end−osmosis. That takes place more quickly. But I don't know a deal about it.'

'Does it ever take place with solids?' he next asked.

What was he driving at? I thought; but replied: 'I believe that what is commonly called "adhesion" is something of the sort, under another name.

'A good deal of this bookwork seems to be finding a dozen names for the same thing,' he grunted; and continued to ask his questions.

But what it was he really wanted to know I couldn't for the life of me make out.

Well, he was due any time now to disappear again, having worked quite six weeks in one place; and he disappeared. He disappeared for a good many weeks. I think it would be about February before I saw or heard of him again.

It was February weather, anyway, and in an echoing enough place that I found him—the subway of one of the Metropolitan stations. He'd probably forgotten the echoes when he'd taken the train; but, of course, the railway folk won't let a man who happens to dislike echoes go wandering across the metals where he likes.

He was twenty yards ahead when I saw him. I recognized him by his patched head and black handbag. I ran along the subway after him.

It was very curious. He'd been walking close to the white−tiled wall, and I saw him suddenly stop; but he didn't turn. He didn't even turn when I pulled up, close behind him; he put out one hand to the wall, as if to steady himself. But, the moment I touched his shoulder, he just dropped—just dropped, half on his knees against the white tiling. The face he turned round and up to me was transfixed with fright.

There were half a hundred people about—a train was just in—and it isn't a difficult matter in London to get a crowd for much less than a man crouching terrified against a wall, looking over his shoulder as Rooum looked, at another man almost as terrified. I felt somebody's hand on my own arm. Evidently somebody thought I'd knocked Rooum down.

The terror went slowly from his face. He stumbled to his feet. I shook myself free of the man who held me and stepped up to Rooum.

'What the devil's all this about?' I demanded, roughly enough.

'It's all right . . . it's all right, . . .' he stammered.

'Heavens, man, you shouldn't play tricks like chat!'

'No . . . no . . . but for the love of God don't do it again! . . .

'We'll not explain here,' I said, still in a good deal of a huff; and the small crowd melted away—disappointed, I dare say, that it wasn't a fight.

'Now,' I said, when we were outside in the crowded street, 'you might let me know what all this is about, and

what it is that for the love of God I'm not to do again.'

He was half apologetic, but at the same time half blustering, as if I had committed some sort of an outrage.

'A senseless thing like that!' he mumbled to himself. 'But there: you didn't know. . . .You don't know, do you? . . . I tell you, d'you hear, you're not to run at all when I'm about! You're a nice fellow and all that, and get your quantities somewhere near right, if you do go a long way round to do it—but I'll not answer for myself if you run, d'you hear? . . . Putting your hand on a man's shoulder like that, just when . . .'

'Certainly I might have spoken,' I agreed, a little stiffly.

'Of course you ought to have spoken! Just you see you don't do it again. It's monstrous!'

I put a curt question.

'Are you sure you're quite right in your head, Rooum?'

'Ah,' he cried, 'don't you think I just fancy it, my lad! Nothing so easy! I thought you guessed that other time, on the new road . . . it's as plain as a pikestaff . . . no, no, no! I shall be telling you something about molecules one of these days!'

We walked for a time in silence.

Suddenly he asked: 'What are you doing now?'

'I myself, do you mean? Oh, the firm. A railway job, past Pinner. But we've a big contract coming on in the West End soon they might want you for. They call it "alterations", but it's one of these big shop−rebuildings.'

'I'll come along.'

'Oh, it isn't for a month or two yet.

'I don't mean that. I mean I'll come along to Pinner with you now, tonight, or whenever you go.'

'Oh!' I said.

I don't know that I specially wanted him. It's a little wearing, the company of a chap like that.

You never know what he's going to let you in for next. But, as this didn't seem to occur to him, I didn't say anything. If he really liked catching the last train down, a three−mile walk, and then sharing a double−bedded room at a poor sort of alehouse (which was my own programme), he was welcome. We walked a little further; then I told him the time of the train and left him.

He turned up at Euston, a little after twelve. We went down together. It was getting on for one when we left the station at the other end, and then we began the tramp across the Weald to the inn. A little to my surprise (for I had begun to expect unaccountable behaviour from him) we reached the inn without Rooum having dodged about changing places with me, or having fallen cowering under a gorse−bush, or anything of that kind. Our talk, too, was about work, nor molecules and osmosis.

The inn was only a roadside beerhouse—I have forgotten its name—and all its sleeping accommodation was the one double−bedded room. Over the head of my own bed the ceiling was cut away, following the roof−line; and the wall paper was perfectly shocking—faded bouquets that made V's and A's, interlacing everywhere. The other bed was made up, and lay across the room.

I think I only spoke once while we were making ready for bed, and that was when Rooum took from his black handbag a brush and a torn nightgown.

'That's what you always carry about, is it?' I remarked; and Rooum grunted something: 'Yes .

. . never knew where you'd be next . . . no harm, was it?' We tumbled into bed.

But, for all the lateness of the hour, I wasn't sleepy; so from my own bag I took a book, set the candle on the end of the mantel, and began to read. Mark you, I don't say I was much better informed for the reading I did, for I was watching the V's on the wallpaper mostly—that, and wondering what was wrong with the man in the other bed who had fallen down at a touch in the subway. He was already asleep.

Now I don't know whether I can make the next clear to you. I'm quite certain he was sound asleep, so that it wasn't just the fact that he spoke. Even that is a little unpleasant, I always think, any sort of sleep−talking; but it's a very queer sort of sensation when a man actually answers a question that's put to him, knowing nothing whatever about it in the morning. Perhaps I ought not to have put that question; having put it, I did the next best thing afterwards, as you'll see in a moment . . . but let me tell you.

He'd been asleep perhaps an hour, and I wool−gathering about the wallpaper, when suddenly, in a far more clear and loud voice than he ever used when awake, he said:

'What the devil is it prevents me seeing him, then?'

That startled me, rather, for the second time that evening; and I really think I had spoken before I had fully realized what was happening.

'From seeing whom?' I said, sitting up in bed.

'Whom? . . . You're not attending. The fellow I'm telling you about, who runs after me,' he answered—answered perfectly plainly.

I could see his head there on the pillow, black and white, and his eyes were closed. He made a slight movement with his arm, but that did not wake him. Then it came to me, with a sort of start, what was happening. I slipped half out of bed. Would he—would he?—answer another question? . . . I risked it, breathlessly.

'Have you any idea who he is?' Well, that too he answered.

'Who he is? The Runner? . . . Don't be silly. Who else should it be?'

With every nerve in me tingling, I tried again. 'What happens, then, when he catches you?'

This time, I really don't know whether his words were an answer or not; they were these:

'To hear him catching you up . . . and then padding away ahead again! All right, all right . . .

but I guess it's weakening him a bit, too. . . .'

Without noticing it, I had got out of bed, and had advanced quite to the middle of the floor.

'What did you say his name was?' I breathed.

But that was a dead failure. He muttered brokenly for a moment, gave a deep troubled sigh, and then began to snore loudly and regularly.

I made my way back to bed; but I assure you that before I did so I filled my basin with water, dipped my face into it, and then set the candlestick afloat in it, leaving the candle burning. I thought I'd like to have a light. . . . It had burned down by morning. Rooum, I remember, remarked on the silly practice of reading in bed.

Welt, it was a pretty kind of obsession for a man to have, wasn't it? Somebody running after him all the time, and then . . . running on ahead? And, of course, on a broad pavement there would be plenty of room for this running gentleman to run round; but on an eight− or nine−inch kerb, such as that of the new road out Lewisham way . . . but perhaps he was a jumping gentleman too, and could jump over a man's head. You'd think he'd have to get past some way, wouldn't you? . . . I remember vaguely wondering whether the name of that Runner was not Conscience; but Conscience isn't a matter of molecules and osmosis. . . .

One thing, however, was clear; I'd got to tell Rooum what I'd learned: for you can't get hold of a fellow's secrets in ways like that. I lost no time about it. I told him, in fact, soon after we'd left the inn the next morning—told him how he'd answered in his sleep.

And—what do you think of this?—he seemed to think I ought to have guessed it! Guessed a monstrous thing like that!

'You're less clever than I thought, with your books and that, if you didn't,' he grunted.

'But . . . Good God, man!'

'Queer, isn't it? But you don't know the queerest . . .'

He pondered for a moment, and then suddenly put his lips to my ear.

'I'll tell you,' he whispered. 'It gets harder every time! . . . At first, he just slipped through: a bit of a catch at my heart, like when you nod off to sleep in a chair and jerk up awake again; and away he went. But now it's getting grinding, sluggish; and the pain. . . . You'd notice, that night on the road, the little check it gave me; that's past long since; and last night, when I'd just braced myself up stiff to meet it, and you tapped me on the shoulder . . .' He passed the back of his hand over his brow.

'I tell you,' he continued, 'it's an agony each time. I could scream at the thought of it. It's oftener, too, now, and he's getting stronger. The end−osmosis is getting to be ex−osmosis—is that right? Just let me tell you one more thing—'.But I'd had enough. I'd asked questions the night before, but now—well, I knew quite as much as, and more than, I wanted.

'Stop, please,' I said. 'You're either off your head, or worse. Let's call it the first. Don't tell me any more, please.'

'Frightened, what? Well, I don't blame you. But what would you do?'

'I should see a doctor; I'm only an engineer,' I replied.

'Doctors? . . . Bah!' he said, and spat.

I hope you see how the matter stood with Rooum. What do you make of it? Could you have believed it—do

you believe it? . . . He'd made a nearish guess when he'd said that much of our knowledge is giving names to things we know nothing about; only rule−of−thumb Physics thinks everything's explained in the Manual; and you've always got to remember one thing: You can call it Force or what you like, but it's a certainty that things, solid things of wood and iron and stone, would explode, just go off in a puff into space, if it wasn't for something just as inexplicable as that that Rooum said he felt in his own person. And if you can swallow that, it's a relatively small matter whether Rooum's light−footed Familiar slipped through him unperceived, or had to struggle through obstinately. You see now why I said that 'a queer thing overtook Rooum'.

More: I saw it. This thing, that outrages reason—I saw it happen. That is to say, I saw its effects, and it was in broad daylight, on an ordinary afternoon, in the middle of Oxford Street, of all places. There wasn't a shadow of doubt about it. People were pressing and jostling about him, and suddenly I saw him turn his head and listen, as I'd seen him before. I tell you, an icy creeping ran all over my skin. I fancied I felt it approaching too, nearer and nearer. . . . The next moment he had made a sort of gathering of himself, as if against a gust. He stumbled and thrust—thrust with his body. He swayed, physically, as a tree sways in a wind; he clutched my arm and gave a loud scream. Then, after seconds—minutes—I don't know how long—he was free again.

And for the colour of his face when by and by I glanced at it . . . well, I once saw a swarthy Italian fall under a sunstroke, and his face was much the same colour that Rooum's negro face had gone; a cloudy, whitish green.

'Well—you've seen it—what do you think of it?' he gasped presently, turning a ghastly grin on me.

But it was night before the full horror of it had soaked into me. Soon after that he disappeared again. I wasn't sorry.

Our big contract in the West End came on. It was a time−contract, with all manner of penalty clauses if we didn't get through; and I assure you that we were busy. I myself was far too busy to think of Rooum.

It's a shop now, the place we were working at, or rather one of these huge weldings of fifty shops where you can buy anything; and if you'd seen us there. . . but perhaps you did see us, for people stood up on the tops of omnibuses as they passed, to look over the mud−splashed hoarding into the great excavation we'd made. It was a sight. Staging rose on staging, tier on tier, with interminable ladders all over the steel structure. Three or four squat Otis lifts crouched like iron turtles on top, and a lattice−crane on a towering three−cornered platform rose a hundred and twenty feet into the air. At one end of the vast quarry was a demolished house, showing flues and fireplaces and a score of thicknesses of old wallpaper; and at night—they might well have stood up on the tops of the buses! A dozen great spluttering violet arc−lights half−blinded you; down below were the watchmen's fires; overhead, the riverers had their fire−baskets; and in odd corners naphtha−lights guttered and flared. And the steel rang with the riveters' hammers, and the crane−chains rattled and clashed. . . . There's not much doubt in my mind, it's the engineers who are the architects nowadays. The chaps who think they're the architects are only a sort of paperhangers, who hang brick and terracotta on our work and clap a pinnacle or two on top—but never mind that. There we were, sweating and clanging and navvying, till the day shift came to relieve us.

And I ought to say that fifty feet above our great gap, and from end to end across it, there ran a travelling crane on a skeleton line, with platform, engine, and wooden cab all compact in one.

It happened that they had pitched in as one of the foremen some fellow or other, a friend of the firm's, a rank duffer, who pestered me incessantly with his questions. I did half his work and all my own, and it hadn't improved my temper much. On this night that I'm telling about, he'd been playing the fool with his questions as if a time−contract was a sort of summer holiday; and he'd filled me up to that point that I really can't say just when it was that Rooum put in an appearance again. I think I had heard somebody mention his name, but I'd paid no attention.

Well, our Johnnie Fresh came up to me for the twentieth time that night, this time wanting to know something about the overhead crane. At that I fairly lost my temper.

'What ails the crane?' I cried. 'It's doing its work, isn't it? Isn't everybody doing their work except you? Why can't you ask Hopkins? Isn't Hopkins there?'

'I don't know,' he said.

'Then,' I snapped, 'in that particular I'm as ignorant as you, and I hope it's the only one.'

But he grabbed my arm.

'Look at it now!' he cried, pointing; and I looked up.

Either Hopkins or somebody was dangerously exceeding the speed−limit. The thing was flying along its thirty

yards of rail as fast as a tram, and the heavy fall−blocks swung like a ponderous kite−tail, thirty feet below. As I watched, the engine brought up within a yard of the end of the way, the blocks crashed like a rain into the broken house end, fetching down plaster and brick, and then the mechanism was reversed. The crane set off at a tear back.

'Who in Hell . . .' I began; but it wasn't a time to talk. 'Hi!' I yelled, and made a spring for a ladder.

The others had noticed it, too, for there were shouts all over the place. By that time I was halfway up the second stage. Again the crane tore past, with the massive tackle sweeping behind it, and again I heard the crash at the other end. 'Whoever had the handling of it was managing it skilfully, for there was barely a foot to spare when it turned again.

On the fourth platform, at the end of the way, I found Hopkins. He was white, and seemed to be counting on his fingers.

'What's the matter here?' I cried.

'It's Rooum,' he answered. 'I hadn't stepped out of the cab, not a minute, when I heard the lever go. He's running somebody down, he says; he'll run the whole shoot down in a minute— look! . . .'

The crane was coming back again. Half out of the cab I could see Rooum's mottled hair and beard. His brow was ribbed like a gridiron, and as he ripped past one of the arcs his face shone like porcelain with the sweat that bathed it.

'Now . . . you! . . . Now, damn you! . . .' he was shouting.

'Get ready to board him when he reverses!' I shouted to Hopkins.

Just how we scrambled on I don't know. I got one arm over the lifting−gear (which, of course, wasn't going), and heard Hopkins on the other footplate. Rooum put the brakes down and reversed; again came the thud of the fall−blocks; and we were speeding back again over the gulf of misty orange light. The stagings were thronged with gaping men.

'Ready? Now!' I cried to Hopkins; and we sprang into the cab.

Hopkins hit Rooum's wrist with a spanner. Then he seized the lever, jammed the brake down and tripped Rooum, all, as it seemed, in one movement. I fell on top of Rooum. The crane came to a standstill halfway down the line. I held Rooum panting.

But either Rooum was stronger than I, or else he took me very much unawares. All at once he twisted clear from my grasp and stumbled on his knees to the rear door of the cab. He threw up one elbow, and staggered to his feet as I made another clutch at him.

'Keep still, you fool!' I bawled. 'Hit him over the head, Hopkins!'

Rooum screamed in a high voice.

'Run him down—cut him up with the wheels—down, you!—down, I say!—Oh, my God! . . . Ha!'

He sprang clear out from the crane door, wellnigh taking me with him.

I told you it was a skeleton line, two rails and a tie or two. He'd actually jumped to the right−hand rail. And he was running along it— running along that iron tightrope, out over that well of light and watching men. Hopkins had started the travelling−gear, as if with some insane idea of catching him; but there was only one possible end to it. He'd gone fully a dozen yards, while I watched, horribly fascinated; and then I saw the turn of his head. . . .

He didn't meet it this time; he sprang to the other rail, as if to evade it. . . .

Even at the take−off he missed. As far as I could see, he made no attempt to save himself with his hands. He just went down out of the field of my vision. There was an awful silence; then, from far below . . .

They weren't the men on the lower stages who moved first. The men above went a little way down, and then they too stopped. Presently two of them descended, but by a distant way. They returned, with two bottles of brandy, and there was a hasty consultation. Two men drank the brandy off there and then—getting on for a pint of brandy apiece; then they went down, drunk.

I, Hopkins tells me, had got down on my knees in the crane cab, and was jabbering away cheerfully to myself. When I asked him what I said, he hesitated, and then said: 'Oh, you don't want to know that, sir,' and I haven't asked him since.

What do you make of it?