

ROBBING MISS HORNIMAN

By ALEISTER CROWLEY

I am getting very tired of sitting in the Café Royal without Fée. However, she may be back any day now; and thank God! her health is all right. But people are pointing me out as the lonely poet, which I bar. It must be nearly six months. We had certainly been setting the pace even to Hilda Howard and Campbell and Izeh and John and Euphemia and Shelley and Little Billie and that crowd; and one day Fée just dropped. I took her round to old Jensen. Milk all day, said he, by the gallon; lie about on the grass; general massage an hour every day; no love affairs; no books. When you can't stick it a day longer you'll know you're better. I gave her a monkey — just half my last thou. — and started to earn some more. I'm still starting. What the devil can I write about?

Talk of the devil, dere diry! Just as I wrote those words in came Harry Austin, and said he owed me a lunch. I let him pay. Over the coffee he said: Do write me something, cher maître! What? said I. Oh, there's a story in that Spalding business, only the journalists have hacked it about. Do it like a tale, only stick to the facts. "How many words, and how many quid?" I asked him, as a business poet should. Fifty pounds, said he; I'll trust you to do me your best; your wit must tell you how long to make it. He left me a tanner on account, and went off. Jolly decent. Well, here goes for the first draft: I'll call it

Robbing Miss Horniman.

The life of the little market town of Spalding in Lincolnshire is as flat as its situation among the fens. In consequence of this circumstance, death and its approaches do not seem to the inhabitants of any importance, since the states of life and death have no such sharp dividing line as in less favored spots. Miss Anne Horniman, although quite an important inmate, if one may use the word, of Spalding, by reason of her considerable wealth, excellent family, and personal refinement, aroused little attention by falling into a decline and going "abroad" for her health. The town was, however, slightly shocked at hearing of her return, especially as the announcement came in the shape of the arrival of a brisk young architect from London, with orders to make the house up-to-date for her reception. "Up-to-date," thought Spalding dully, "What's wrong with 1066?" However, the activities of the new-comer were not unduly revolutionary. He merely knocked the two main rooms of the ground floor into one, installed an acetylene gas system, and turned the steps that led into the garden and orchard into an inclined plane by the application of a little cement. He explained his object to the local builder. "Miss Horniman is a permanent invalid," he had said, "she lives between her bed and her bath-chair. So it must be easy to wheel her to and from the garden. There is just one other feature of the improvements; she is nervous of robbers, having lived for some years in South Africa; and she has asked me to establish a very complete and elaborate system of burglar alarms." Ten days later the house was ready, and Miss Horniman arrived with her nurse.

She was a little old lady laid up in lavender from the early days of Queen Victoria, timid and yet positive in her manner, a gentlewoman from her neat bonnet and gray ringlets to the mittens on her wrists and ankles. She covered her poor thin body

with a charming grey silk dress, and over her shoulders she wore a shawl of such lace as Venice used to make a century or so ago. The nurse was a stalwart woman, big yet gentle, as is needed where the patient has constantly to be lifted. Miss Horniman had written to the vicar of the parish, a chubby cheery old fellow, asking his assistance in finding servants. He had found her a capable cook, an industrious housemaid; also an honest yokel for the garden, and to wheel her chair should she deem it fit to venture far beyond the grounds of the house, which extended for about an acre, and were devoted to vegetables for use, and tulips for ornament, while some old apple-trees served to combine profit with pleasure.

Miss Horniman welcomed the vicar to tea on the day after her arrival. "I went to South Africa to seek health," she said in her soft faint voice, "but I was unsuccessful. So I thought that I would rather lay my bones beside those of my own people." "I trust indeed, under Providence," replied the vicar, "that the day may be far off for that, but we are all in His hands, dear lady. And we know that all things work together for good." But the old lady turned the subject to less distressing themes; she spoke almost brightly of her experiences in South Africa, where she had taken up the hobby of buying diamonds, and had indeed invested a great part of her fortune in them. She drew the attention of the vicar to a varnished chest that stood beside a walnut chiffonier. It was about eighteen inches square, and three feet high. "Here is where I keep my toys," she said to the clergyman; "perhaps you would like to look at them?" She wheeled her chair slowly across, with the aid of her visitor. "This case is of a special steel," she explained, "though thin, it would take a good deal of time and trouble to force it. But I am not afraid of thieves; surely there are none in dear old Spalding, of all places. And I have an efficient system of burglar alarms. Besides this," she added with a tightening of her thin lips, which showed the vicar that the spirit of Lincolnshire, the last stronghold of resistance to the Normans, was far from being extinct even in this charming old maid, "in South Africa one learns to protect oneself. Day and night for five years I have had this under my hand." And she produced from her chair an exceedingly deadly cavalry revolver of old pattern. "My hand and eye are still true," she said softly, "and I think I could hit an apple every time at thirty paces." She proceeded to open her little safe. The vicar fairly gasped. Tray after tray of perfect shining stones! Each bore a ticket, with the name of the mine where it was found, the date of the finding, the date of the purchase, the price paid, and the name of the seller.

The simplicity and beauty of the display reduced the vicar to admiring silence. "In my will," she said, as she shut up the trays again and closed the safe, "I have provided that you shall have the contents of whichever tray you choose, towards the rebuilding of the church. You see, I have made you my partner," she smiled gently, "and I will ask you not to mention the existence of these stones to anybody." The vicar was overwhelmed; he gladly promised; and presently he took his leave.

The ladies of Spalding made haste — for Spalding! — to welcome the strayed wanderer home; but Miss Horniman was too feeble to exchange more than the few polite words neces-