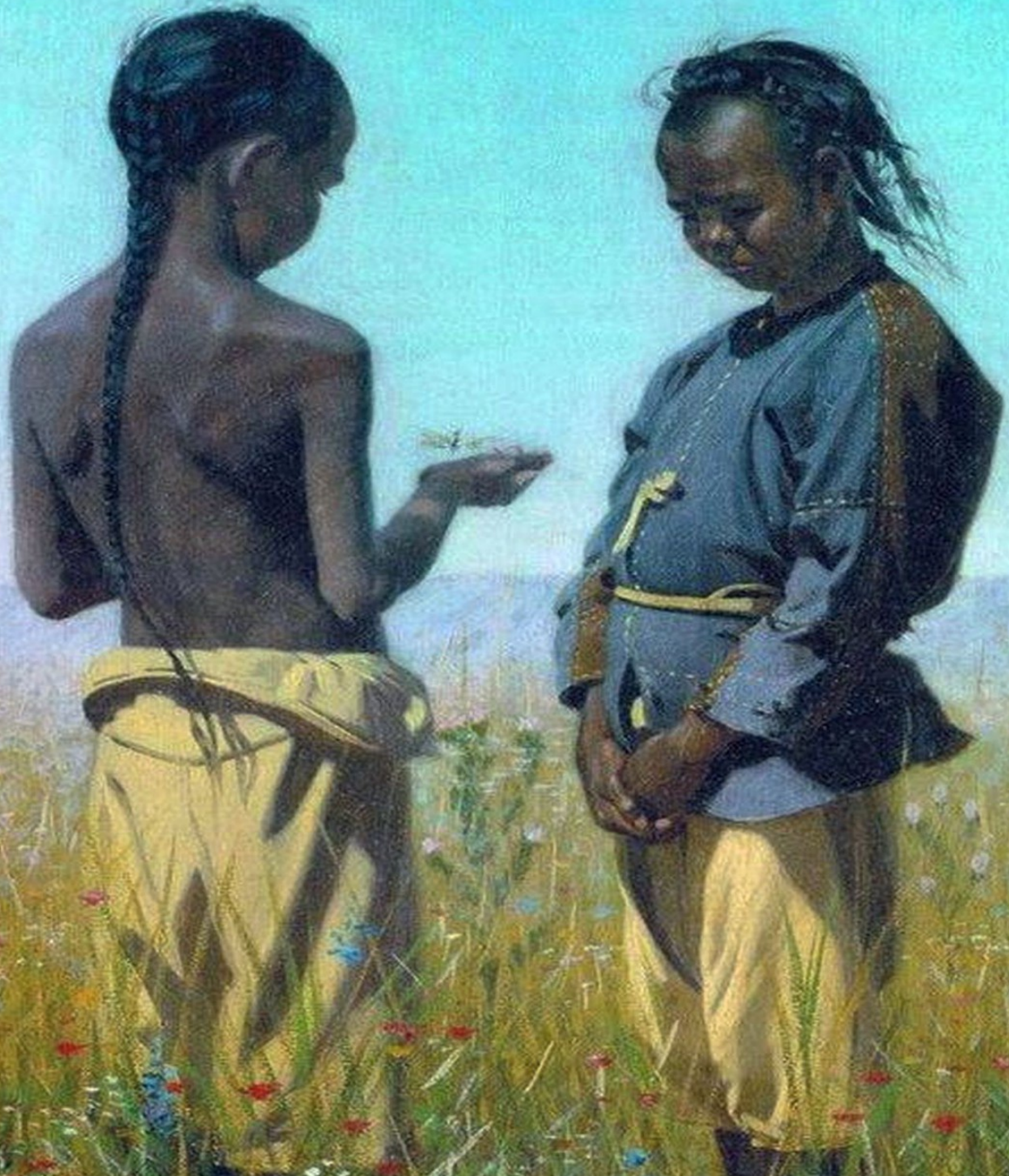


CHILDREN OF THE WIND



M. P. SHIEL

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CONTENTS

I. ROLLS	
<u>II. ROLLS STABBED</u>	
<u>III. ROLLS LAID LOW</u>	
<u>IV. THE "CASTLE" LINER</u>	
<u>V. THE VOLUNTEER</u>	
<u>VI. A QUESTION OF TEETH</u>	
<u>VII. DUELLO</u>	
<u>VIII. THE SIGODHLO</u>	
<u>IX. THE ROYAL HUT</u>	
<u>X. "THE ELEPHANT"</u>	
<u>XI. DZINIKULU</u>	
<u>XII. THE QUEEN'S RETURN</u>	
<u>XIII. THE GUEST-HOUSE</u>	
<u>XIV. IN SUSPENSE</u>	
<u>XV. DZINIKULU MOVES</u>	
<u>XVI. THE RENDEZVOUS</u>	
<u>XVII. IN THE BAOBAB</u>	
<u>XVIII. WAR-DRUMS</u>	
<u>XIX. BATTLE</u>	
<u>XX. COUP D'ÉTAT</u>	
<u>XXI. SUEELA SPEEDS</u>	
<u>XXII. SUEELA WASHED WHITE</u>	
<u>XXIII. SUEELA CHANGING SIDES</u>	
<u>XXIV. COBBY'S "BANQUET"</u>	
<u>XXV. THE ENTRÉE</u>	
<u>XXVI. SUEELA SCHEMES</u>	
<u>XXVII. THE CAPTURE IN THE PASS</u>	
<u>XXVIII. SUEELA MARRIED</u>	
<u>XXIX. SEBINGWE</u>	
<u>XXX. IN THE CANES</u>	
<u>XXXI. NIGHT-RIDE</u>	
<u>XXXII. THE WAGGONS</u>	
<u>XXXIII. THE BANKNOTES</u>	
<u>XXXIV. CALAMITY</u>	

XXXV. CRASH
XXXVI. QUEEN SUEELA
XXXVII. BELLADONNA
XXXVIII. REINSTATEMENT
XXXIX. THE SWINGONI
XL. EN ROUTE
XLI. AFRICA

CHILDREN OF THE WIND

I

ROLLS

Mr. R. Warren Cobby writes in his diary (June 8th):

"Tea in the Carlton tea-room with Jeffson of the F. Office, when in walks Stead of the Bank, with a man of Greater-British type—"flash" hat, rather handsome person, black-bearded, blue-eyed, brown-baked—forty-five, fifty. Stead, on seeing me, throws up a finger, as who should say 'the very man,' and, coming to my table, introduced the colonial as 'Mr. R. K. Rolls,' adding: 'By special request, Cobby.'

"'Mr. Rolls knew of me,' I remarked.

"'That's so, Mr. Cobby: happy to make your acquaintance,' Rolls said, and we four had tea and talked, or three of us, for the tongue of my Rolls was still: not so the man's eyes though, I noticed, for I think that nobody entered, went out, or moved in the place, that he did not see it—apprehensive, haunted perhaps I might say; and though one gets a general impression from his air and gait of a laggard and languid swagger, some of his motions and glances are as sharp as a panther's—middle-sized man, straight in the legs, his blue eyes broody, sleepy—sleep of the spinning-top, perhaps—and written all over him '*Experience*.'

"He interested me—apart from my curiosity as to what the man wanted to know me for.

"'You know Australia, I think, Mr. Rolls?' I said to him.

"'Oh, yes,' he answered absently, eyeing under his brows a man who stood up

some way off; adding: 'African mainly, Mr. Cobby.'

"Stead put in: 'Explorer, I think we may say, Mr. Rolls?'

"Well, not quite,' Rolls said, twisting now quickly away to peer at someone coming in, then adding with a twinkle in his eye: 'never mind, "explorer" is near enough.'

"Then Jeffson invited the trio of us to Jermyn Street, and thither the journey was—stupid waste of time and life! Inane people these super-clerks, and all their kind 'about town.' When they have forgotten Greek, there is nothing left in them, and before they forget there is nothing. Then, why associate with them? I won't; not good enough: they waste life. Fifty of 'em aren't worth one Rolls, I think. Dinner with them at 'The Troc'; then 'The Empire,' to show girls in tights to Rolls, who has been in England only two weeks; but Rolls said that he was accustomed to see 'more elegant' legs than those without any tights on. Oh, the 'Empire'! What's Empire to me, or I to Empire? No, I was not amused. Then, walking up Regent Street, Rolls with me, the other two ahead, says Rolls: 'Do me the honour to dine at my expense to-morrow?'

"The honour'—'at my expense.' If he had not said 'at my expense,' I should no doubt have said no, but this naïf, and so true, way of putting it won me, so that I answered: 'Since you wish, Mr. Rolls. Why do you?'

"He looked about and behind before he answered: 'You see, I know you better than you know me. Quite five years ago I did business with you, but you've forgotten; seen you several times before to-day. Then I'm a bit of a thought-reader in my way—"psychometrist," they call it here—seen enough of that out there'—throwing his hand toward the Equator: 'I could tell you quite a lot about yourself.'

"Tell me something,' I said.

"For one thing,' he began, and then, quick as a wink, he span on his pins, calling out sharply to a man now close upon us: 'Well, sir! How can I be of service to *you*?'

"I saw a big man in a cloak, whose collar covered his ears, he standing now with shoulders shrugged up high, his innocent palms expanded, a picture of French astonishment, and says he to Rolls: 'Mister addresses himself to me by

chance?'

"Rolls made no answer, peered into his face, looked him up and down, then said to me: 'Come on'; on which the other laughed, with some effort, I fancied, and crossed the street, as we moved on.

"And presently Rolls remarked: 'You see, we are of interest to others'; and when I asked him if he really believed that that man had been eavesdropping upon us, he answered: 'I know.'

"What for, though?' I asked him.

"This he did not answer, but said: 'I was to tell you something about yourself: check me, if I go wrong. Age thirty-two. Residence, Tillington, Sussex. Living alone with a sister. Man of means—no need to swot at work. Yet you do. Hard worker, energetic, always glancing at the clock. If I didn't know it otherwise, I could spot it from the roan red of that hair of yours, from the style it grows upward and backward in a thicket of wires that curl, or from that fresh flush of your colour, or from the style your elbows work up and down when you walk, like an engine on the jig. Stern worker. Proud of your head-piece. Proud of your Age and Continent. "Nourishing a youth sublime with the fairy-tales of Science"—quotation from a poet. Now engaged for the Government at Teddington in discovering the best camber for aeroplane-wings. Fond of flight, of rush, of getting things over and done. *I* know you. For wealth you care nothing——'

"Don't I, though, by Jove,' I said: 'love wealth—any form of Energy. Wealth is stored Force, Power, that is, God, and is well named *goods*; is potential Energy—Power to do good to oneself and others.'

"Well said,' Rolls muttered: 'yet you have two or three rich relatives, one of them'—he flung a flying glance behind—'an emperor of wealth—a cousin—and little you bother about him, because he's not of the intellectual set. And you have another cousin—female cousin'—now he put his lips to my ear—'a *Queen*, this one——'

"I could not help laughing out at the earnestness with which he imparted this absurdity; and I said to him: 'No, there the "thought-reading" is miscarrying: no female cousin—certainly no queens in the family.'

"He did not answer at once, but then suddenly patted my arm, saying: 'I may see fit to tell you more when we are better acquainted.'

"Soon after which, having arranged to meet to-morrow at the Hotel Cecil, we parted; and I walked back home by the Embankment under a black sky bright with Sirius and the three present planets."

II

ROLLS STABBED

The next night Cobby and Rolls duly dined together; and Cobby writes of it:

"Such a care about the selection of the table! for Rolls must have one in a corner, whence to survey all the *salle à manger*.

"When this had been obtained, I showed him the note that had come to me by the morning's post, on which Rolls produced spectacles, saying, as in apology: 'I have the best of eyesight in sunlight, Mr. Cobby, but artificial light bowls me over for reading purposes.' Then he muttered over the note 'type-written,' and read it half-aloud drawingly: 'The man, R. K. Rolls, is nothing else than a common jail-bird, well-known in the Rand as an assassin, a slave-trader, a swindler and thief, a scoundrel of the deepest dye. To be connected in any shape or form with this dirty rascal spells certain disaster. Be warned in time, Cobby. A well-wisher.'

"Looking at Rolls, as he read, I saw his eyes twinkle. 'Oh, well,' he said, taking off the spectacles, 'you evidently don't reckon me up to be as black as I'm painted, or you'd not be here.'

"I told him no, that such a communication is without weight for me.

"Then, we need say no more about it,' he said, and: 'May I keep this pleasant missive?' and, on my saying yes, put it inside his watch.

"Then I had quite a pleasant evening with him. Though not exquisite in culture outside, he exhibits considerable shrewdness of wit on things in general, a sound sense, a trained intelligence, and such a storehouse of memories and world-lore as render him really an entertaining person, his lips once unsealed. I found myself liking, admiring, him—so much, that when he expressed a wish to feel what flight is like, I immediately offered to take him

into the air, he to come to-morrow to the aerodrome. It is not true that he is a rogue: I know better. Of the anonymous note he said nothing more until the dinner was over, we then smoking 'long Toms,' as he called them, cigar-sticks which he produced out of a tube of leopard-skin, his dress-clothes being constructed with quite a number of pockets apparently; and now he said to me: 'I suppose you couldn't reckon up who it was sent you that pleasant missive?'

"I said no, how could I without data? on which he, his voice dropping to secrecy: 'That comes from a cousin of yours.'

"This had the effect of tickling me, and I said, 'Really! You people the world with my cousins, Rolls?'

"I have only mentioned two all told,' he answered—'a male and a female.'

"I think I have only one cousin,' I told him—'a Yankee—millionaire—man named Douglas Macray——'

"Let's talk low,' he muttered; and added: '*he* is our man, sir.'

"Well, but,' I said, 'the man does not know me'; but then, remembering something, I mentioned that he knew *of* me, since, some years ago, I got from him an invitation to a ball, but didn't go; on which Rolls said: 'Aye, always giving big parties, fond of fal-lals and high jinks, especially in Paris. You've called him "a Yankee," but he's only half that, since, as you know, his mother and yours were English sisters, and he has mostly lived in France. Curious you never chanced to drop across him. I'll introduce him now to you.'

"On this Rolls picked something from a pocket, and, holding it within his fist, brought his fist into contact with my palm, on which he left a disc of cardboard, and I saw the photograph of a man of thirty or so—bearded—something hard-headed, cynical, self-seeking (I fancied)—man of some draught and horse-power, tearing toward his own ends—or that was my impression—something flat and flabby about the upper lip, as though he lacked upper teeth....

"Rolls, taking back the photograph as clandestinely as he had handed it, said: 'That's Douglas Macray—that's the gentleman. Never saw him in the flesh myself: but that's he.'

"Well, what about him?" I asked. 'Why are you and he bad friends?'

"Because"—he tossed down his 'long Tom' with emphasis—"I refuse to be bribed by his dirty hand; and because he drops to it why I am in England, and wants to bottle me up."

"Why are you in England?"

"Mainly to get *you*."

"How do you mean 'get' me, Rolls," I demanded.

"Get you out yonder,—he nodded away toward one of the continents.

"Get me to go to Africa?" I asked.

"That's about it."

"You won't do that, Rolls," I told him.

"On which he muttered, with his eyes cast down: 'Leave it at that for the present. Maybe when I see my way to put my cards down, you won't be off it. A Red Kaffir *inyanga*—that's a doctress—predicted that what I am now on would come off all right, though I might die in the attempt, said she. Well, you don't believe in *inyangas*, and yet I could tell you a tale or two——'

"That's right," I said, 'tell me tales ... though, of course, *I* am trained to believe in white people, not in black.'

"But this as little influenced his conviction as it unfixed the sculpture of those tough and weather-beaten wrinkles of his face. 'Well, no doubt,' he answered: 'but it appears, Mr. Cobby, that we are made with *two* minds—the conscious mind has talent, and finds things out, but the subconscious, that's really the cleverer fellow of the two, has genius, and *knows*, without swotting to find out: this being true, not only of humans, but of horses, dogs, elephants. I know a little Basuto pony that foreknew the date of his master's death—he now proceeded to relate several tales of African occultism, but without presenting any proof of their truth, while we each smoked another 'long Tom,' he finishing up with the advice, 'Don't despise the negro, Mr. Cobby,' and with the statement: 'After all, the savage is ahead of the civilized.'

"This dictum disappointed me in him, as I had thought better of his intelligence; but even here it turned out that he had a meaning, and he can be very convincing when he sets himself to prove. He said: 'That, to you, is all-out nonsense, no doubt. But reflect a bit: what is it that all are after—all dogs, men, Martians, angels? "Happiness," you'll say, since nothing else can possibly be of any interest to any life for one instant. Yonder hangs a Christ on his Cross: what's he there for? The good of others? Sure thing: but that's what makes *him* happy, look; and he bears the nails, that "he may see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied," or happy. Or look at that man yonder flying from a prairie-fire—staring he is, crazy for life; then look yonder at that other holding a revolver at his forehead: both flying from sorrow, both after happiness. Same with you brooding in your laboratory: for *you* the discovery of truth spells happiness, and your interest in truth is an interest in happiness: for why should you care more for truth than for untruth, for pudding more than for putty, for any one thing more than for any other thing, but that truth and pudding make for happiness? Happiness is the aim of the race of life; and, of course, those nearer the aim are ahead of those not so near.'

"To this I readily agreed, since really it is an axiom; but asked him if he considered savages happier than I; to which he answered: 'No, not than you; but such as you aren't Civilized Man: you're an accident of civilization. Like you are half a million, say, in England—foreigners looking on at the forty million real English inspanned to the buck-waggon of England, dragging at the trek-tow, sweating great drops. Well, of course, that's not practical politics; that's no chop any road: Unhappy is the name of it. Hence, when the crew of the *Endeavour* made acquaintance with Otahito, some of 'em did a bunk, thinking: "No more England for *us*." But when I say that the savage is "*ahead*," don't take me for a fool. Here is a river, the river of life—he drew it in pencil on the table-cloth—'and here is the sea to the East. Let the sea represent Happiness, Bliss and no end. Well, the river runs East to A, and at A is the savage; but then it winds back West toward B, and between A and B is the civilized: evidently A is nearer the sea, and so ahead of B, but B is further on nearer bliss, and so ahead of A. At B, as I pan it out, the river breaks into cataracts and rapids—revolution there—civilized man grabbing the planet's crust out of the grasp of the foreign onlookers who now hold it,

and thence the course toward Happiness may be rapid, and the savage soon be nowhere in comparison. The same may be true of the two minds—the conscious, and the subconscious. As life in becoming civilized, has lost something for a time, so, in becoming intelligent, it has lost something: dogs and horses are more psychic, or "sensitive," as they say, than men, and will see an apparition quicker, and black men more than white men. But maybe when the river of Mind turns again toward the sea, men may be more psychic than any dog for being more intelligent, just as they will be all the more happy for being civilized. So I pan it out. Don't look round suddenly: one of the enemy has entered—the man at the table behind that lady with the diamond spray.'

"I glanced, and saw a young man, who might have been a Neapolitan count—handsome, but for his loutish, foul mouth. He was in talk with a garçon, and seemed to be thinking of anything but Rolls.

"One of the enemy,' I said: 'who are they? and—how do you know?'

"Agents of Macray,' he answered, 'who is out to get me, and it's no chop when a rascal has power. How I know? By the movement of an eyelid. Besides, I live here, and so does yonder carrion-crow.'

"All this I found difficult to realize; and, reverting to the previous question, asked him if he was sure that the savage is the happier.

"Down to the ground sure!' was his answer: 'your savage is likelier to die sudden, I admit: but you come with me to Basutoland, that belongs to the nation like the air, and for every rag and groan in Glasgow or Bethnal Green you will see a grin of gladness, and a toe that dances. "Here," the Barotse say, "hunger is not known." Or come with me—— Yes, I think I may tell you now of another country: Wo-Ingwanya—but don't pronounce the "I," Ngwanya say; the people are Wa-Ngwanya; one of them is a Mo-Ngwanya; their language is Se-Ngwanya. Far up country—South-Central Africa—not far from the Indian Ocean—"Children of the Elephant," they call themselves, either because they are Zulu in origin, or because of an enormous rock, bigger than London, that stands on four low legs; but I in my own mind always call them "Children of the Wind," because in those uplands the breezes of heaven don't cease from streaming through their feathery head-

dress, breathing upon their faces health and freshness—at least, they didn't during the weeks I was there—and sometimes terrific tempests visit them. It is sixteen years since I first heard of that country, and then I heard one and another assert that no such country is on earth; ey, but there *is* that country, for not nineteen months gone I was in it with a caravan of negroid Arabs, and saw the men inlay metals—noblest lot of blacks I've dropped upon. They trekked north, like Umzilikaze; but long before Chaka's day—before any Zulu King whose name is known to us; yet are so conservative, that I could still drop to much of their lingo. Well, those darkies are in Paradise in comparison with St. Pancras—scream with laughter of heart in the face of sun and moon, their moochas of ox-tails and plumes of ostrich and saccaboola feathers, that stream on the breezes, seeming to scream with laughter, too—so long as they don't get killed, look, by enemies, or by "our mother"—that's their ruler: for *she's* a devil of a despot. "Our mother" owns each inch of Wo-Ngwanya for her people, and is paid rent for it; no man may say "this acre is *mine*"; and that's where the laughter comes from, if I am a man that knows anything. Eh, but she's a hot un, is "our mother"; *I* ought to know: the beggar sentenced me to death—ugliest bit of road I've yet got over. If a Mo-Ngwanya girl slips, without "our mother's" consent, that's a sure case of "off with her head"—harsh, bloody. And who do you think "our mother" is?'—here Rolls laid his hand on mine, hard, with the knuckles whitened—'You'd never guess; hear it *now*: girl of seventeen—eighteen by this time. *White* girl. Hear her name: *Spiciewegiehotiu*.'

"His voice had risen and risen, his eyes had brightened, and he uttered this procession of a name, 'Spiciewegiehotiu,' in such a crescendo of loudness, that most of the diners glanced our way. It seemed to be uttered in defiance and challenge, the defiance of one breaking through long restraint, for at the same time fire shot out of his eyes toward the Neapolitan-looking man seven yards away. Immediately afterwards he smiled on me, nodded, rose, and saying: 'Back in two minutes,' walked away out.

"A minute afterwards I saw the foreigner also saunter out.

"Well, Rolls did not return in 'two minutes'—I wished that he would, for just then I felt sick at my second 'long Tom'—horridly strong and raw—and presently I became aware of some commotion in the entrance-hall west of me

—running feet, calls—so, among others, I hurried out to see, and there by the Office stood a mob, craning to see something in their midst, the hotel-people fussing about, begging them to stand back.

"I, being taller than most, soon caught sight of a form—'the enemy,' the Neapolitan—lying unconscious, and one of the diners, probably a doctor, kneeling near, whom I heard say: 'Only a faint—right arm broken'; and I understood that the injured must have been on the way to seek aid for his arm, but had fainted before reaching the portal.

"Some moments afterwards my left eye caught sight of Rolls strolling in from the inner, south, *salle*, and saw him throw himself upon a lounge at the inner side of the entrance-hall.

"When I went to him, I saw him rather pallid under his tan, rather scant of breath, and, showing me a dagger, he told me, 'I went to the lavatory—thought myself alone—he stabbed me in the back with this—I cracked his arm.' He showed me some blood on his fingers.

"'Come,' I said, and led him toward the front, where a crowd and two constables were now watching the foreigner being carried into a cab for hospital; and Rolls I soon had in a cab for Essex Court, where, after 'phoning Dr. Hammond to come, I undressed Rolls; but the wound, an island in an ocean of tattooing, I at once saw to be of no importance, so 'phoned Hammond not to bother, and dressed it myself.

"'But what about the legal aspect?' I then said to Rolls: 'this is London in Europe.'

"'Oh, the incident is ended,' Rolls said, putting on his vest: 'it's no chop my charging him, and he, you may bet, won't charge me. May the stink-cats all catch it as hot, and may the devil get their master, his son.'

"I gave him to drink, and he stayed with me, telling tale after tale of venture and escape, funds of lore, till eleven, then went back to the hotel, saying he'd be at the aerodrome at two, I soon to hear more of his Spiciewegiehotiu, or 'Hot Spice,' I called that lady, 'our mother.' Rolls is a man, and not at all a bad sort."