

CHICK

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Chick by Edgar Wallace

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EDGAR WALLACE

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WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

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CHAPTER I

CHICK

MR. JONAS STOLLINGHAM was station-master, head porter, local switchman, ticket-collector, and dispatch clerk at Pelborough Halt. He was also Chief of the Information Bureau. He was an aged man, who chewed tobacco and regarded all innovation as a direct challenge to Providence. For this reason he spoke of aeroplanes, incubators, mechanical creamers, motor-cars, and vaccination with a deep growling "Ah!" Such intangible mysteries as wireless telegraphy he dismissed as the invention of the newspapers.

Jonas knew most of the happenings which had occurred within twenty-five miles of Pelborough Halt during the past forty-seven years. He could tell you the hour and the day that Tom Rollins was run over by a hay-cart, and the number of eggs laid at Poolford Farm on a record day. He knew the Vicar's family skeleton, and would rattle the same on the slightest encouragement. €

He had had time in his life to form very definite

ideas about most subjects, since only four trains stopped at Pelborough Halt on week-days and half that number on Sundays.

It was a cold, moist Sunday in January that the 10.57 "up" discharged a solitary passenger, and Jonas moved toward him with a gathering frown.

"Where's your ticket?" he demanded.

The passenger, who carried no baggage, dived into the pockets of his worn overcoat, and, increasing the pace of his search till Jonas could hardly follow his movements, he patted and prodded successively his trousers, waistcoat, and jacket pockets.

"If you ain't got a ticket, you've got to pay," said the hopeful Jonas. "You ain't supposed to keep me waiting here all day. I'm only doing the company a favour by being here at all on Sunday."

He was disappointed when the young man produced a piece of pasteboard, and scrutinized it suspiciously as the train moved out.

"Date's all right," he confessed.

"Mr. Stollingham—er—is my—er—uncle well?"

Mr. Stollingham fixed his steel-rimmed spectacles nearer his eyes.

"Hullo!" he greeted. "Mr. What's-your-name?"

"Beane," murmured the youth apologetically.

"Charles Beane. You remember I was here for a month."

"I know ye."

Jonas chewed accusatively, his rheumy eyes on the passenger.

"The old doctor ain't well." He emphasized the negative with some satisfaction. "Lots of

people round here don't think he's all there." He tapped his forehead. "He thinks he's a dook. I've known fellows to be took off to the lunyctic asylum for less. Went down to Parliament last month, didn't he?"

"I believe he did," said "Chick" Beane. "I didn't see him."

"Asked to be made a lord! If that ain't madness, what is it?"

"It may be measles," said Chick gravely. "The doctor had an attack last year."

"Measles!" The contempt of Jonas was always made visible as well as audible. "We don't like your uncle's goings-on; it's bringin' the village *down*! If a man's a lord, he's born so. If he ain't, he ain't. It's the same with these airypplanes. Was we intended to fly? Was we born with wings? Suppose them crows over there started to chew terbaccer like a human bein', wouldn't the law stop it?"

"But chewing tobacco isn't human, Mr. Stollingham—it's nasty! Good morning!"

He left the station-master gazing after him with a baneful stare.

Charles Beane had never had any other name than "Chick." It had been given to him as a child by one of his father's "helps."

For Chick was born at Grafton, in the State of Massachusetts, whither his male parent had gone as a young man to seek the fortune which rural England had denied to a gentleman-farmer. There he had married and died two years after his wife, and Chick, at the age of seven, had been brought to England by an aunt, who, on passing from this