

"MR. CRADDOCK'S LIFE-LINE."

by

Temple Williams.

I.

The bus went swishing through the night, little fountains of rain water spurting from under its tires.

Mr. Craddock rubbed the sleeve of his overcoat against the misty window beside him and peered through the smeary patch of comparative transparency which he thus created.

It was very dark outside, and all he could see was the shining wet sidewalk sliding by, edged on the far side with the faintly gleaming spokes of iron railings, and beyond that the black blur of houses. It was not enough to tell him just what part of Cranston High Road he was passing, and he waited impatiently for the bus to reach a recognisable landmark.

Presently a large red neon sign came floating along through the darkness, and Mr. Craddock scanned it.

A.P. BURSLEM & SON.

Mr. Craddock reflected. "Let me see now, that's the shoe shop. My road is the next turning but two. I'll start to get off when I see Flaxman's, the baker's, sign."

Mr. Craddock was a very methodical man, or, as his late wife had often put it, he "always wanted everything just so." He always tried to stop the bus exactly at the corner of his road, so that he had a minimum of walking to do. He particularly wanted to accomplish this to-night, for the rain was simply teeming down.

He kept a keen look-out for Flaxman's, and presently saw the red glow of another neon sign ahead.

"There's Flaxman's," he thought.

As the bus drew level with the sign, he cast a perfunctory glance at it as he was rising from his seat, and next moment flopped back again, the most surprised man in Cranston.

For the sign read as plainly as could be:

A.P. BURSLEM & SON.

As we have said, Mr. Craddock was a methodical man, and as soon as he had recovered from his initial surprise he sat methodically to work to find a logical explanation.

He thought of three:

1. The bus-driver had mistaken his route and gone round in a circle.
2. The whiskey at the "Grayhound" was extraordinarily potent.
3. He (Mr. Craddock) had been mistaken.

The latter was perhaps the most probable, yet he could have sworn that the first shop sign had been Burslem's.

And then the true explanation struck him. Why, of course, Burslem's must have opened another branch! How stupid of him not to have thought of that! Then this next neon sign they were approaching must be Flaxman's.

But it wasn't.

The astounded Mr. Craddock read for the third time:

A.P. BURSLEM & SON.

It was a dazed and somewhat frightened little man who scrambled from his seat and dropped off without troubling to stop the bus.

He found he had alighted too soon, and had some distance to walk. As he trudged along, hat brim down and coat collar up against the pelting rain, his mind was whirling with thoughts of his peculiar experience, though he stopped when he came to Flaxman's, the baker's shop, to assure himself that it at least was in its rightful place.

His apartment was just around the next corner, and soon he was mounting the steps to the front door, reaching automatically for his key. He let himself in, closed the door behind him, and began climbing the stairs to his tiny flat on the top floor - the only rooms in the house that were tenanted at the time.

He was still deep in his thoughts and taking little heed of his surroundings, but presently he could not help noticing that the stairs felt unusually hard to his feet, as though the carpet had been removed.

"What the dev--" began Mr. Craddock glancing down, and then stood transfixed, his heart thumping wildly.

For the stairs were of stone, and streaming wet. He was once again mounting the steps to the front door!

Picture him standing there, a rotund little figure in an overcoat that fitted none too well, a felt hat rendered shapeless by the rain, and a cheap scarf of frightful hue. His very ordinary features were dominated at the moment by bulging blue eyes which mirrored his mixed feelings of bewilderment and fright. He was trembling rather badly, too. This sudden reverting of things, this recurring experience of being shunted helplessly back by some unknown power, had come into his quiet, well-ordered life with something of the shock of a bombshell.

Mr. Craddock loved peace and security. He liked to know where he stood. His day was always methodically arranged. He rose at 7.30., caught the 8.22. train to his office, went to lunch at noon, caught the 5.20. home, went to bed on the stroke of 10.30. He'd done that for years with hardly a variation.

and now -- this.

One moment he was climbing the stairs exactly as he had done a thousand times before, and the next he was back in the street without knowing in the least how he got there. To put it mildly, it was darned uncanny.

A sudden gust of wind drove a hundred stinging rain-drops into his face, and he shivered and reached again for his key -- and discovered that somehow it was already back in his hand.

But still he hesitated. No, he couldn't face those stairs again. He would go round and up the back stair-case. And so by this devious route he reached his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

II.

Presently, after he had removed his wet things, gulped a peg of brandy, and poked a nearly dead fire into a glow, he felt somewhat easier and sat down in his armchair with a pipe. He reclined there puffing jerkily, staring up at the clock on the mantel and reflecting on the strange events of the evening.

"It certainly had me scared," he mused. "I'm not sure now that it wasn't that whiskey after all. Think the best thing to do is to go to bed and try to forget it. I'll feel better in the morning."

It had just gone half after ten, his usual bed-time, and so he arose, knocked out his pipe against the fire-place, and began undressing.

All the time he was doing this he tried to think of other things, of ordinary commonplace things; of that money he had to come from the bookmaker; the film he had seen at the Star Cinema yesterday; the new tobacco he was trying....

But it was no use. At the back of his mind, yet persistent and

dominating, was the question; "What in heaven's name happened to me to-night?"

Long after he was in bed the query reiterated itself maddeningly, until at last, unable to bear it any longer, he sat up and shouted into the darkness as if at some watching entity:

"I don't care who or what it was - I'm not afraid! And I'm not going to worry myself any longer. I'm going to sleep."

Defiantly he flung himself back, pulled the bed-clothes up to his chin, and strove to make his mind a complete blank, a method of getting to sleep he often used.

In a measure he succeeded. He sank into a doze, half aware that he was still in bed, yet at the same time wandering through a queerly distorted version of recent events.

Here he was leaving the bar of the "Grayhound" and waving good-night to Charlie - or was it Bill? But no matter, for the "Grayhound" went sliding rapidly away to one side, shrinking as it went until it became a mere doll's house far behind.

And he was riding along Cranston High Road in the bus. There in front was the red glow of Burslem's sign; but as he approached he saw that it was really the glow of a fire, and leant forward to stir it up with the poker in his hand. At that moment, however, the fire exploded, disintegrating into a shower of flying embers.

Mr. Craddock felt himself being lifted by the force of the explosion. For a space he whirled dizzily in nothingness; then came a sickening sensation of falling. He landed with a frightful jar in a sitting position, a great white light blinding and dazzling his eyes.

He blinked at the glare, gave a terrific involuntary yawn, and then came back with a rush to full consciousness.

The dazzling white light was the room lamp, which was full on. He was not holding a poker, but his pipe. He was sitting again in his chair before the fire. And the clock on the mantel showed exactly half after ten....

Comprehension came like a douche of cold water, and left him shuddering, with an unpleasant void where his stomach should have been.

"Oh, God, what has come over me?" he whimpered. "What has come over me?"

He sat huddled in the chair till dawn, afraid to move.

III.

Ten o'clock the next morning found him in the consulting room of Dr. Chalmers, the young doctor at the corner of Bromley Grove.

Although only an ordinary G.P., Dr. Chalmers had a local reputation of being something of a brain specialist, and so Mr. Craddock had chosen him in preference to stolid, unimaginative old Dr. Evans, his own doctor, whom he knew would dismiss him with a gruff admonition not to mix his drinks.

Dr. Chalmers also specialized in the study of the higher mathematics, and the theories of Albert Einstein held no mysteries for him, though he did not always agree with that profound mathematician. Indeed, he had formulated several original theories of his own.

He listened to Mr. Craddock's story with interest, nodding his head thoughtfully from time to time, and occasionally asking for some detail to be repeated. At the end, he sat for a while in contemplation. Then at length he spoke:

"Your case is not one of mental disorder - you are obviously quite fit and sane. No, it's really a problem in hyper-spacial geometry."

Mr. Craddock looked blank, but the doctor continued unmercifully:

"What has happened to you is that you have bumped into the Fifth Dimension, and the impact has sent you flying backwards across the Fourth Dimension."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Craddock hesitatingly, "but I never could understand geometry."

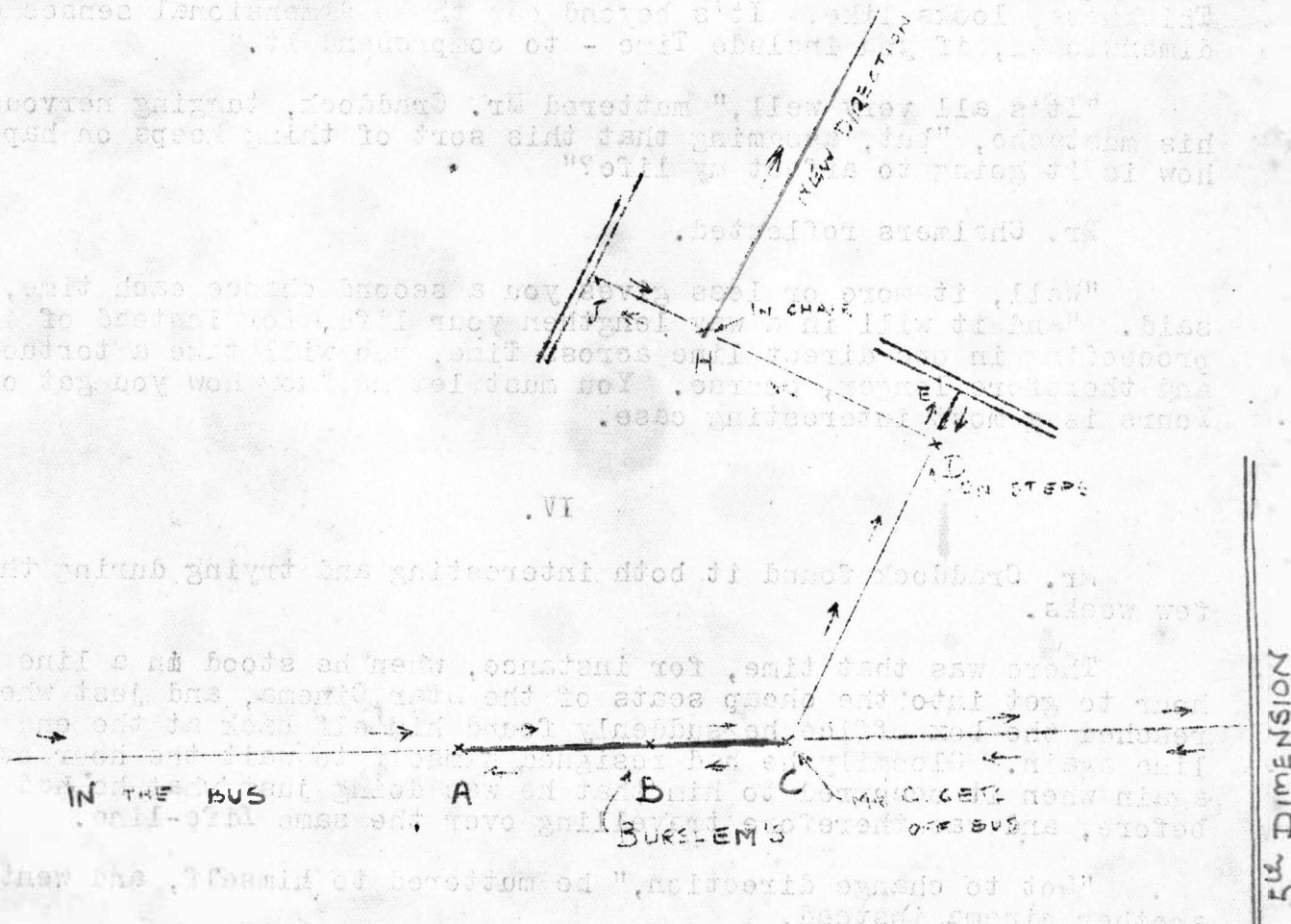
"Let me try to explain it simply. The Fourth Dimension is, in many scientists' opinion, Time. Imagine Time to be only two-dimensional, a flat surface - say the surface of a billiard table. You, then, are a billiard ball rolling quietly along in a straight line - your life-line - across Time. Then suddenly you bump squarely into the cushion (the Fifth Dimension) and the impact bounces you back along the line you have been travelling, so that you find yourself back at some point on your life-line that you have already passed once. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'm still a little hazy," confessed Mr. Craddock, who was very hazy indeed.

"I could explain it better, perhaps, with a diagram," said Dr. Chalmers, seizing a pencil and paper. "This is your Life-line" (drawing a thin straight line) "at the time you were going along the Cranston High Road. At point B you pass Burslem's. At point F you strike the Fifth Dimension (which I will show as a thick double line at right-angles to your Life-line) and are shot back very quickly, almost instantaneously, to point A, which you notice is before you get to Burslem's.

"As you remain in the bus, you are doing exactly what you did before, and so traverse the same Life-line as before. Twice more you pass Burslem's and are flung back by the Fifth Dimension, until you change the course of your life by getting off the bus at point C. Proceeding along this fresh Life-line you reach the door-steps at point D, but unfortunately come up against the Dimension at point E and are flung back to D.

DR. CHALMER'S DIAGRAM
OF MR. CRADDOCK'S LIFE-LINE.



"This time, however, you change the course of your life straight away by going round the back-stairs, and so branch out in this direction. Still, you haven't changed it sufficiently. At point H you are sitting in the chair; at point J you are in bed, and after you have crossed a narrow strip of Time you meet the Fifth Dimension again, and wake up to find yourself back at point H, in the chair. You change direction again by remaining in the chair instead of going back to bed, and so far along this new Life-line you haven't met with obstruction. Are you clearer now?"

"Well, I've got the general idea, I think," said Mr. Craddock dubiously. "But why do I have to move along this Life-line, anyway? Can't I stop still?"

"You will when you die," rejoined the doctor grimly. "The propelling force driving you along your Life-line is your MIND. It is like the engine of a car: the faster it works, the faster you go, and vice versa. After all, Time is purely relative, you know - it is only what you THINK it is. For instance, if you are waiting for the doctor to come to the succour of a friend who might die at any moment, the time waited may measure only an hour by the clock, but to you it seems like several hours. Again, you might go to sleep, and sleep soundly for seven or eight hours, but when you wake up it seems as it were only a few minutes ago since you got into bed."

"I suppose in the first case—" began Mr. Craddock, but the doctor took him up.

"In the first case your mind was working quickly with anxiety, almost feverishly, and so actually carried you across those apparently illusory hours of Time. In the second case your mind was at rest, and you remained practically stationery in Time. And whilst on the subject of your mind, one part of it - the memory - receives a definite impression from the Life-line as it passes along it, so that after one of your peculiar return trips your memory still retains the impression of the Life-line which in fact lies ahead."

"I see that," said Mr. Craddock after a pause. "But then there's this Fifth Dimension. What does it look like? Why can't I see it?"

"Because it's something absolutely outside of human perception. We can't even begin to imagine what it looks like, no more than 'Flatlanders' - hypothetical people living in a flat plane of only two dimensions, Length and Breadth - could imagine what the Third Dimension, Thickness, looks like. It's beyond our three-dimensional senses - four-dimensional, if you include Time - to comprehend it."

"It's all very well," muttered Mr. Craddock, tugging nervously at his mustache, "but, assuming that this sort of thing keeps on happening, how is it going to affect my life?"

Dr. Chalmers reflected.

"Well, it more or less gives you a second chance each time," he said. "And it will in a way lengthen your life, for instead of proceeding in one direct line across Time, you will take a tortuous, and therefore longer, course. You must let me know how you get on. Yours is a most interesting case."

IV.

Mr. Craddock found it both interesting and trying during the next few weeks.

There was that time, for instance, when he stood in a line for an hour to get into the cheap seats of the Star Cinema, and just when he reached the box office he suddenly found himself back at the end of the line again. Gloomily he had resigned himself to wait the hour over again when it occurred to him that he was doing just what he had done before, and was therefore travelling over the same Life-line.

"Got to change direction," he muttered to himself, and went to another cinema instead.

There were occasional compensations, however.

Feeling unusually hungry one evening, he went to the best restaurant in Cranston and had a real feed. He was something of an epicure, and enjoyed to the full everyone of the seven courses. And when the waitress handed him his check it gave a little quiver like something out of "Alice in Wonderland" and changed into the menu she had handed him before he ordered the dinner.

Of course his hunger had returned too, but then he had the pleasure of eating two dinners. (The second was entirely different from the first. Mr. Craddock was getting experienced in the art of changing direction.)

There were several little affairs of this nature, until one day Mr. Craddock had a great idea.

Could not this affliction of his be turned to some account? Surely it had money-making possibilities?

He sat down to think the thing out. But he was a man of limited horizons, and apart from stocks and shares (of which he knew nothing) he could only think of his main interest, horse racing.

So off he went to the race course one day with most of his savings in his pocket and high hope in his heart. He did not bet on the one o'clock race, but carefully noted the winner. In the same way he made mental notes of the second, third, and fourth race results.

By the time the fifth race started he was beginning to feel a little anxious. Would he never strike that Fifth Dimension again?

"Just when I want it, it won't come," he muttered savagely. "And here I am with all today's winners in my pocket. Such lovely odds, too. Oh, to be back at one o'clock!"

The fifth race finished - "Gooseberry Bush" at 100 to 8.

Mr. Craddock groaned!

"Matches, sir?" queried a hoarse voice in his ear.

"No!" snapped Mr. Craddock.

The old match-seller, in retreating, stumbled over his own feet and sent the contents of his tray flying.

"Clumsy devil!" thought Mr. Craddock peevishly, watching the old man groveling for his scattered stock, and then turned his attention to the 3.30., the last race of the day.

A quarter of an hour later, "Diplodocus" romped home at 33 to 1.

"Oh, well," thought Mr. Craddock, turning away, "there's another day's racing tomorrow...."

"Matches, sir?"

"No!" said Mr. Craddock almost fiercely.

The same old match-seller went shuffling away, stumbled, and sent his boxes cascading to the ground.

The coincidence gave Mr. Craddock sudden pause. Strange, that happening twice! Strange, too, that one particular match-box over the should fall and remain poised on one corner just as it did before....

Abruptly he jerked out his watch.

3.20.

Good God! He had hit the Dimension after all!

He had not been shunted back so far as he would have wished. But there was still time to clean up on that last race - "Diplodocus" at 33 to 1. He had ten minutes to lay his bet. Anxiously he looked around for a bookmaker.

He chose a cheerful-looking red-faced gentleman standing under the banner of "CHARLIE BRIXTER. KNOWN EVERYWHERE."

"Fifty pounds to win on Diplodocus", he said, passing the notes over with a slightly trembling hand.

Mr. Brixter jovially approved his selection, and gave Mr. Craddock a voucher. That worthy crammed it in his pocket, and paced fretfully up and down until the race began.

All happened exactly as before: Diplodocus won by three lengths at 33 to 1.

Mr. Craddock gave a sigh that denoted joy and relief. Then he hurried back to the bookmaker and handed over his voucher.

His head was spinning with figures. How much was fifty multiplied by thirty-three? Three fives were fifteen, one to carry —

(Ah! The bookie was counting out the notes now.)

Now, what was it again? One thousand and —

"Fifty quid," came the bookmaker's voice cutting across his thoughts. "Diplodocus to win, you said? A darn good pick, pal. Stand a fine chance."

Mr. Craddock's brain was numbed for a moment; then it began working fast.

Those notes were merely his fifty pounds! Back again to the point where he was putting the money on! Oh, to hell with that dimension! It was no use making his bet over again - not with that bookie at any rate. The Fifth Dimension barred his way. He must find another bookie.

"I've decided not to bet," he said gruffly, and snatched the money from the astounded Mr. Brixter's hands.

As he dodged through the crowd he spied another bookmaker, one Sid Street, a tubby little man very much like Mr. Craddock himself.

And presently he was back at the rails with Mr. Street's voucher in his pocket.

For the third time that afternoon he saw Diplodocus canter aloofly past the post exactly three lengths ahead of his nearest pursuer.

"And I hope it's the last time too," he thought to himself as he made his way back to where the yellow banner of "SID STREET — THE STREET CALLED STRAIGHT." flaunted over the bobbing heads of the crowd.

He tried to push his way through the crowd, but everyone else was apparently trying to do the same. As he surged helplessly to and fro, his ears caught sundry words and phrases voiced by the people around him.

"The fat little welsher!"

"...called straight - the liar!"

"If I lay my hands on that guy, I'll...."

It did not take a Sherlock Holmes to deduce what had happened. Mr. Street had packed up and gone - presumably up the "street called straight" - leaving only a mocking banner to further infuriate the punters he had swindled. The banner came down with a rush and was instantly shredded by the mob. It was the only way they could show their feelings for the absent Mr. Street.

Mr. Craddock, still trying to swallow his own bitter pill, thought it best to be going. The crowd was getting too rough. The crowd was getting too rough. Besides, he wanted peace to think over this new misadventure. Almost all his savings gone! He could scarcely credit it, even now.

He became aware that several people near him were staring at him.

peculiarly. He wondered why.

"That looks like the fellow", said a pugnacious-looking man suspiciously.

Mr. Craddock went suddenly cold. He remembered that the bookmaker very much resembled himself in appearance. Under the stare of a score of mistrustful eyes he walked away.

He was almost at the station before he realised he was being trailed. Four rough-looking men were following him at a never varying distance behind. They trooped into the station after him and stood apart, eyeing him covertly.

For a moment Mr. Craddock forgot even his lost cash in this fresh threatening crisis. Anxiously, but with a fine outward appearance of unconcern, he began to stroll up and down, humming untunefully, contriving the edge further away from the group without appearing to notice them.

Just as he thought he'd put a fair distance between himself and them, a hand caught his shoulder and swung him round.

The four men had walked quietly up behind him, and were standing there watching him grimly. The toughest member of the bunch kept his grip on Mr. Craddock's shoulder.

"Name of Street, ain't it?" he growled.

"N-No," stammered Mr. Craddock. "N-Not me. My name's Craddock. I'm -"

"Can it!" snapped the man. "You wouldn't be so blinkin' nervous if you wasn't our man. So you'd scam with our winnings, would you?"

A train came rumbling into the station, drowning Mr. Craddock's panic-stricken reply. The man growled again, and drew back a ham-like fist preparatory to smashing it into Mr. Craddock's face.

Mr. Craddock gave a yell, wrenched himself free with a sudden twist, and turned and ran as fast as his short legs would carry him.

"Stop him, boys!" came a shout from behind him.

The train was almost half-way into the station, and Mr. Craddock, with a wild idea of putting it between himself and his pursuers, tried to dash across the line. But his too hasty feet slipped on the metals. He fell awkwardly and heavily, twisting so that he landed with a jolt on his back across the permanent way, in the very path of the oncoming train.

The moment he landed, life seemed to slacken speed enormously, to become the slowest of slow-motion films.

The train, which had entered the station at a furious rate, was now standing almost still, a motionless cloud of white smoke perched like a bit of cottonwool on its funnel. To the side, Mr. Craddock glimpsed his four pursuers, an irregular group frozen in the act of running, each poised ridiculously on one foot.

The explanation of this flashed upon him. When death is imminent, one's whole life is supposed to pass rapidly before one's eyes. This did not happen to Mr. Craddock, but his brain became extraordinarily lucid and clear, and was racing at such a speed that by comparison the normal procedure of life seemed funeral. What was it Dr. Chalmers had said about the brain working quickly?"

"...YOUR MIND...IS LIKE THE ENGINE OF A CAR: THE FASTER IT WORKS, THE FASTER YOU GO..."

Then he must be tearing along his life-line at a terrific speed. If he hit the Fifth Dimension now!

The locomotive had approached perceptibly. He could distinctly see the gleaming rim of the nearest wheel. He lay there watching its deathly slow approach, while yet his brain was sending a message through his nerves to his muscles telling them to get him out of this. But he

knew he could never arise in time.

Nearer and nearer.

The whole front of the engine was looming over him....

Then the whole scene was ripped asunder by a violet ribbon of light. It was as though a terrible thunderstorm had broken out without warning. Through vivid and incessant blue flashes near the train, the depot, and the figures of the four men becoming small receding into the depths of a great black thundercloud. The cloud expanded rapidly, came whirling about him, engulfed him in sudden silence and utter darkness.

There was an indefinable sensation of flying bodilessly, which changed into a steady upward movement, a feeling of being borne up on something. He became of a faint and growing murmur of voices, an increasing glimmer of daylight, as if he were approaching the top of a long, dark lift-shaft.

There was a strap around his waist binding him down to -- what?

An operating table?

But no, that could not be. He was in the open air, staring up into a blue sunny sky.

He strove impotently to get erect. All his strength seemed to be drained out of him. He felt unnaturally feeble....

V.

Extract from the MORNING CHRONICLE, June 4th, 1891.

Cranston, Monday.

John Craddock, a nine-month's old infant prodigy, astonished a distinguished gathering of medical men here to-night.

This remarkable child is able to converse intelligently with any adult on everyday subjects, and although he has never been taught to read or write, he can do both perfectly.

His father, Mr. James Craddock, is at a loss to account for the phenomenon. Interviewed by our Special Correspondent, Mr. Craddock said: "Our baby was perfectly normal until about two months ago. One day he was being wheeled in his perambulator by his nurse when he suddenly started to kick and jerk, as if in a fit. Alarmed, the nurse bent down to attempt to quieten him, when the child (which had never spoken intelligibly before) astounded her by exclaiming: "What the devil's happened now!"

"Since then John has displayed an intellect far beyond his years, and has made some remarkable prophecies, many of which have come true. I am also able to announce that he has been engaged by the Apex Music Hall Circuit to appear at their theaters this coming spring at a very large salary."

Mr. Craddock — our Mr. Craddock — had embarked very successfully on his new Life-line.

THE END.
