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BY
WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE.

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A MATTER-OF-FACT STORY.

BY

WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE,
AUTHORS OF "THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," ETC.

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READY-MONEY MORTIBOY.

A MATTER-OF-FACT STORY.

CHAPTER I.

AT MARKET BASING, in Holmshire, there are five or six good houses that were built, some of them eighty, some of them a hundred years ago—in a word, before the town was what it is. They stood there when the linendrapers, grocers, and silversmiths lived over their shops in the main streets, and not in pretentious villas of unenduring stucco scattered along the Hunslope road, as they do now. For in those honest days, strange to say, a shopkeeper kept his shop, and wasn't a bit ashamed of it. And these old houses are tenanted now by persons of the same class as those who occupied them when their bricks were new and red. The one by the church is Lawyer Battiscombe's. It was his grandfather's before him. That house a hundred yards nearer the middle of the town is Mr. Francis Melliship's; and a mile in Oxford Street and twenty perches in Market Basing mean about the same thing—for in these small towns, a house five steps from your door is in an out-of-the-way place it requires an effort to reach. Read the legend in dingy, gilt relief letters

over the door—they were much stared at when first put up, being a novelty from London—MELLISHIP, MORTIBOY, & Co. Melliship's Bank, for there is no Mortiboy in it now. Mortiboy's Bank is at the other end of the street, by the post-office. In many ways, the two banks are wide as the poles apart. At the other end of the town, in Derngate, is another of these old houses. Here lives Mr. Richard Matthew Mortiboy, by the courtesy of Market Basing—when addressing him in writing—styled Esquire, but commonly spoken of as Ready-money Mortiboy.

The reason why, I will tell you presently.

The blinds of two of these houses, from garret to kitchen, are drawn down, and the shutters farthest from the door pushed to.

But at the house in Derngate, the shutters next the door on either side are closed, and two mutes, with vulgar faces and silk covered broomsticks, stand on the steps.

Susan Mortiboy is dead, and is about to be buried in St. Giles's Church; and the mutes stand at her brother's door—one on the right hand, and one on the left, arrayed in funeral trappings, bearing the insignia of their order.

Sentinels of honour, to tell us that the Commander-in-Chief, Death, has himself entered the house, and receives the homage of Respectability, his humble servant, in this wise.

Outside, it is cold January frost: inside, in the parlour, are the mourners. They have a good fire, and are as comfortable as decency on such occasions will allow. Ready-money Mortiboy's parlour is a gaunt, cold room, with long, narrow windows, wire blinds,