PAST MASTERS 158

Arthur Leo Zagat
Otis Adelbert Kline
J. S. Fletcher
Percival Wilde
Alice C. Tomholt
Harold Mercer

and more

PAST MASTERS 158

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker from short stories in magazines, newspapers and other sources, and all in the Life + 70 years public domain.

V2, 30 March 2024

Contents

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Some novelettes mean this issue has fewer stories for its 100,000 word length.

1: The Curse of Vasartas

Eva M. Henry

fl 1888-9

Belgravia Annual, 1889

Nothing is known about the author of this entry in the "Mummy" story cycle which flourished between 1860s and 1910s. Only one other of her stories is known.

'WHAT IS keeping Mr. Blake?' was the question uppermost in my mind as, after dinner, I stepped out on the verandah of the sittingroom I shared with him at the Hotel des Pyramides, Grand Cairo. He had gone out in the morning to explore among some rocks and ruins about a couple of miles down the river, but he had told me he would come back in time for *table-d'hôte* dinner at seven; so that now as the clock struck nine and he had not yet put in an appearance, I began to feel a little uneasy. Perhaps he had met with some accident, or had fallen among a marauding band of Arabs, or had tramped by mistake on a crocodile lying sleeping by the rivers edge. The night was dark, for the new moon was a mere half-hooped line of silver, and, as far as I knew, Mr. Blake had not taken a lantern with him.

I had come to the end of my cigar and was revolving the question as to whether it would be any use my going in the direction of the ruins in case any mischance had befallen him, when I heard his voice, from within the window behind me, exclaim excitedly:

'Montague, Montague, I have found—'

Then he stopped suddenly as he remembered there might be other listeners besides myself.

'Any of those Arab devils about?' he whispered.

'No— no one,' I replied, after taking a turn up and down the verandah to satisfy myself.

'Come in and shut the window: it's safer,' he said; and he himself closed the door, first making sure there was no one in the passage outside to overhear his communication. Then he came close to me, and, lowering his voice, said, 'I have found a tomb!'

I was so much taken aback at the nature of the communication that I did not at first understand the full significance of the remark.

'I have found a tomb— a royal tomb,' he repeated; then he sank down on a chair as if there was no more to be said.

I became interested, for I knew that Mr. Blake's dearest wish was to discover something belonging to the hidden past, something of the far-away glory of Egypt lost for goodness knows how many centuries. Mr. Blake was an

archeologist, but, unlike most 'ologists,' he was not taken up wholly and solely with his 'fad,' to the exclusion of every other interest in life. He was the most agreeable companion I had ever met, and a man whom to know was to love. He was a gentleman and a real good fellow in the true sense of the word. It had been my good fortune to fall in with him on board the P. and O. steamer *Egyptian* on the voyage out to Alexandria, for which place we were both bound— I for pleasure or sight-seeing or enlarging my knowledge of men and things, and he *en route* for the interior, where he was to superintend some excavations.

Why we became friends I know not, seeing that we had not many points in common. To begin with, Mr. Blake was a widower of fifty, with a daughter at a boarding-school in London. I was twenty years younger— gay, careless, without any particular object in life save that of making the best of it. Mr. Blake was learned in the lore of the ancients, whereas my accomplishments were distinctly modern. I could play the banjo fairly, sing a comic song and tie an evening tie at the first trial.

Whether it is that on hoard ship people fraternise more than under any other conditions of life I cannot say; anyhow, before the *Egyptian* was out of the English Channel, Mr. Blake and I had joined the hands of friendship. To Mr. Blake Egypt was as familiar as the land of his birth, so when he offered to become my guide and philosopher until the time came for him to start on his expedition, I felt that the pleasure of my trip was assured.

I agree with Tom Moore that the beauty of a place doesn't depend so much on the brightness of its waters and the green of its verdure, as on the presence of friends— the beloved of one's bosom. Of course I went straight to work (for it is work, and hard work too), to 'do' the lions— the Pyramids and the Sphinx and Memphis and all that— and at the end of a week I had seen all that was to be seen— 'the least interesting part,' as Mr. Blake remarked.

'How?' I asked, not quite understanding.

'What about all the ancient splendour?' he replied. 'Where is it? Not lost. Where is all the wealth of the Egyptian kings? It was not taken out of the country or we should have traced it. It is buried, and for all we know, we may be at this moment standing on a perfect mine of wealth.'

Involuntarily I glanced down as he spoke, but I saw nothing save yellow sand.

When I had 'done' the place, I began to take matters more easily. After all said and done, life is pretty much the same everywhere— we eat, we drink, we smoke and we sleep: only in hot climates variety is given to sleep by the gambols of the mosquitoes. Mr. Blake's expedition was not to start for some weeks, owing to inundations, so he spent his time in pottering about among

ruins in the neighbourhood of Cairo; spent it profitably too, since the result was the finding of a royal tomb.

When, after telling me of his great good fortune, he had recovered somewhat his composure and had swallowed some refreshment, for he had eaten nothing since morning, he proceeded to relate the manner of the discovery of the tomb. He had come upon it quite by chance, by what indeed might have proved an unhappy chance for him. In descending a wall of rock, he had slipped and fallen heavily to the ground beneath. All he was conscious of at the moment was a slight, clinking noise, as though one stone knocked against another.

For some time he had lain senseless, stunned by the force of the fall; then, in the cool evening breeze, he recovered, and as he rose to his feet and tried to recall the circumstances of his accident, he remembered the slight, clinking noise, and marvelled that a fall in the sand should have been so heavy. The particular spot where he fell was a hollow, caused by the wind having blown away the sand, and, as he glanced down he caught a glimpse of a little bit of dark surface on which the sand lay sparsely. In an instant he was on his knees, and had laid bare a slab of stone about two feet square, in one corner of which was rudely cut a dragon-fly, the sign of an ancient royal house.

Unable to move the stone unaided, he had deemed it wisest to hide it from view once more by covering it with sand, and had remained in the neighbourhood until dusk, lest the Arabs should come on his treasure.

'But how do you know it is a tomb?' I asked.

'What else could it be?' he answered. I really didn't know, so I asked him what he meant to do about it.

'I am going to sit and watch it all day to-morrow, for fear the sand should be blown off it again, and the Arabs should spy it; I will show you the spot, and when it is dusk you will bring some Englishmen, and we'll open the tomb. There is to be a fete tomorrow night at a village four or five miles off, to which all the Arabs will go, so we shall not be observed. Once these fellows get wind of a tomb they would murder us to get the amulets.'

IT IS NEEDLESS to relate how, in the guise of artists, in order to divert attention and to account for our presence in one spot, we watched that hollow in the sand all through the heat of the day; or how, as the shadows of evening deepened and the tall palms grew dim and indistinct, and only here and there a black glimmer showed where the Nile pursued its course between fields of rice and maize, a little band of English workmen, bearing ropes and lanterns, crossed the black waters in a track-boat, and crossed back again ere two hours

had passed, carrying in their midst a long and very heavy object— the stone sarcophagus found in the tomb.

The next day, in the presence of several gentlemen interested in antiquarian research, the sarcophagus was opened. It contained the embalmed body of a woman in perfect preservation. She was apparently in the prime of life, and her thick, dark hair, drawn down on either side and confined at the ends with gold bands engraved with dragon-flies, emblematical of her royal lineage, reached almost to her feet. Her heavy gold necklace, from which depended various precious stones, was similarly engraved, and on the forefinger of the left hand she wore a gold ring, on which was the name 'Vasartas,' wrought in strips of agate beaten into the metal. The same name appeared also cut in the stone inside the lid of the sarcophagus. The linen wrapped round the mummy, although almost brown, was still quite good. About the left ankle there was rolled a strip of parchment, confined by a gold torque, which, however, was not so tight but that the parchment might be unrolled.

Not doubting but that by this parchment the identification, so to speak, of the mummy could be effected, Mr. Blake removed it carefully, but found, to his surprise, that the writing it contained was in a language totally unknown to him. A native professor, learned in Arabic and other Eastern tongues, was likewise unable to decipher it.

'It is in a peculiar dialect,' he said, 'and I doubt if any man can translate it save one.'

'And who is that one?' asked Mr. Blake. ' Ahmed Ben Anen the seer, but he lies nigh unto death at this moment.'

Mr. Blake showed this parchment to all the professors and experts in the neighbourhood, but they all failed to understand the hieroglyphics. Unless Ahmed Ben Anen recovered, therefore, there was no chance. Meantime, what was to be done with the mummy? It was an awkward kind of possession, and hotel-keepers objected to it as being liable to attract robbers. Besides, Mr. Blake daily expected to be sent on his expedition, so he determined to despatch Vasartas to the British Museum at once, and so get rid of his responsibility.

As the period of my stay was at an end, I undertook to look after the lady on the homeward journey, though, truth to tell, I didn't half like the idea; but, as fate would have it, luckily from the mummy-escort point of view, unluckily from every other, two days before my departure I was stricken down with fever. Of course there was no knowing how long it might be until I should recover, or if ever I should recover at all, so it was decided that Vasartas should

not wait for me but go by herself, protected in some measure by a heavy insurance.

Mr. Blake set himself to nurse me back to health and strength, and a more tender nurse never smoothed a sick man's pillow, or helped by his presence to lessen the tedium of weary hours. Fortunately, my illness was not serious, and I had turned the corner before Mr. Blake got his orders to proceed up country, and, when the day of his departure came, I was strong enough to accompany him a few miles on his way.

In a little grove of palm-trees we parted, and our parting was none the less manly that there were tears in the eyes of one of us— for Mr. Blake had been like a father to me. This parting, too, meant more than a clasping of hands, and that sad, sad word 'farewell'; for, if behind us lay the shadows of peace and friendship, and the memory of happy days spent together, in the vista of the future lay what? We knew not any more than we knew what lay a thousand miles beyond in that yellow sand stretching away before us out of sight.

As I turned my face again towards Cairo, I felt the sense of having lost something— lost it past all finding; and when I traversed once more the narrow streets of the town, I thought I had never been in so dreary a place. I resolved to leave for England by the next steamer.

ii

ON THE EVE of my departure, three days after I had taken leave of Mr. Blake, what was my astonishment when I received a letter from him, brought by a messenger who had ridden all night and all day in order to reach me that evening. Still more was I surprised at the contents of that letter, which ran thus:

*My dear Harry (*he had taken to calling me Harry when I was ill*), you once told me that if ever you could serve me in any way you would do so gladly. Little did I think that the time was at hand when I should ask your service, not for myself alone, but for my child Llora. For her sake, then, I pray of you to return to England at once (this may reach you in time for the next steamer), and bring back Vasartas. This favour I ask of you is a great one, but I ask it under a terrible necessity. Go and see my Llora, and you will the more readily believe how fearful is the thought to me that she may be in danger, and alas! through me. At all costs bring back Vasartas, ere it may be too late, for we cannot know how Fate will reckon time, or whether we may live a day or a year. Bring back Vasartas, and if I am not' (here a word was erased) 'in Alexandria to meet you I will leave instructions for you, which I beg of you, in the name of a father's love, to carry out. I have written to my bankers to place £5,000 to your credit to defray expenses connected with the recovery of Vasartas. To save Flora's life bring back Vasartas I implore you, and you will earn the heartfelt gratitude of your true friend,*

John Blake.

P.S.—Llora is a boarder at Miss Bussell's, Devonshire House, Lower Norwood. Please see her and make sure that she is well.

J . B.

I read this letter over and over again, and each time I read it I became but the more perplexed as to its meaning. With what earnestness it besought me to bring back Vasartas! Four times the request was repeated, and always the safety of Llora was pleaded. In what way could the whereabouts of a mummy affect Flora's well-being, nay, her life?

It was a hopeless enigma. Once it struck me that perhaps Mr. Blake was overcome by some strange hallucination. At length I recollected that he had taken with him the mysterious strip of parchment, as Ahmed Ken Anen, who was said to be recovering, lived but a few miles off the track of his route. I inquired of the messenger who had brought me the letter if Mr. Blase had visited the seer, and found that such indeed was the case. This letter then must, I argued, be due to something Ahmed Ben Anen had told him. I made vain conjectures as to what that 'something' might be. All that was clear to me was that for some reason or other Vasartas must be brought back.

A fortnight afterwards I was back in England, and a letter awaited me from Mr. Blake's bankers stating that £5,000 had been placed to my credit. I rather wondered why he had deemed so large a sum necessary. At once I made application to the authorities for the return of Mr. Blake's gift, much to their horror and astonishment. A mummy was even more precious then than it would be now, for Rameses II. and Seti, and several other gentlemen now on view in the British Museum, had not been discovered.

Besides, Vasartas was quite attractive-looking in her own way, and mummies are generally hideous. Baineses and Seti certainly are. The charms of Vasartas had not yet been displayed; so I argued that to give her up would not he depriving the British public of its possessions, whereat the authorities hemmed and hawed, and said they would consider the matter.

Meantime I had another mission— to see Mr. Blake's daughter, over whom hung, apparently, some mysterious doom. So I betook myself to Miss Bussell's high-class establishment for young ladies, and expected to make acquaintance with the usual type of unfledged hobbledehoy with which one generally associates the idea of a school-girl.

I was ushered into Miss Bussell's own sittingroom, and I smiled at the idea of myself, a young fellow of thirty, coming to pay a sort of fatherly or brotherly visit to a girl at a boarding-school. Miss Bussell herself— a prim lady of some three-score summers, in a black silk dress and a little white shawl and a violet beribboned cap, between which and her face on each side were three grey curls kept in place by little combs— Miss Bussell herself inspected me before she allowed me to see the object of my visit.

Was I a relative of Miss Blake? No? An old acquaintance, perhaps? Had I any particular message to deliver, as she did not care for the young ladies of her select establishment to be upset by visitors? I mentally remarked that the equilibrium preserved by the said young ladies must be uncertain, as it was so easily upset, but I didn't dare to say so. That cap with the violet ribbons and those three curls on either side of the lady's face had produced something akin to awe in me. She asked several other questions, and finally told me in so many words that she didn't believe I had come from Mr. Blake— that I was an impostor in fact— a wolf sneaking into her fold. Then I hit on a bold plan, and tried what a bit of real imposition would do. It's astonishing how people mistake the real for the counterfeit and the counterfeit for the real— just to suit their inclinations.

'By the way,' I said, 'will you he so very kind as to let me have a prospectus of this splendid establishment. My aunt, Lady Belgrave, has three daughters who—'

That was enough to have gained an audience with all the girls in the school, had I wished it. A change came over the spirit of Miss Bussell; she became affable to me directly, and enlarged upon the advantages which would be reaped by my aunt's three daughters if under her charge. The aunt and daughters were fictitious, of course, but they gained my point. Llora Blake was summoned.

Llora Blake! How shall I describe her? I cannot, and yet that first sight of her remains an imperishable image of beauty on the negative of my memory. She was petite but exquisitely graceful, and a certain hauteur about the carriage of her pretty head impressed one with the idea that she was tall. Her face was perfectly oval, with small but delicately chiselled features and finely pencilled brows, and her eyes— to what shall I compare them? I know not. Once I plucked a violet on which a drop of dew had fallen, because somehow it reminded me of Llora's eyes; yet the dew on the violet was fathomable, and her eyes were deeper than the sea. Her red-gold hair gave the idea of sun's rays that were tangible.

When my eyes first met hers she was pale, but the next instant a soft rosy hue had suffused all her face and throat. I have taken a good many words to tell what perhaps any moderately far-seeing individual could sum up, and rightly too, in three words— 'I loved her.'

There, the truth is out! and the knowledge of that truth came to me pretty quickly, as quickly as the soft pink rushed to Llora's cheeks, and I do believe if Miss Bussell had not remained in the room I should have imparted my knowledge to Llora herself then and there. As it was, we talked commonplaces,

Miss Bussell doing the largest share, and not forgetting to remind me every moment that my aunt had three daughters.

When I returned to town I found a reply from the authorities of the British Museum stating that on no account could they return Yasartas to the giver; that now they had her they meant to keep her. I thought of Llora, for whose sake I would have made an effort to transport St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey to Egypt, had it been necessary, and I determined to see if money would be of any avail.

What a fool I had been not to offer it at the very first! Of course Mr, Blake must have remembered that in these days money will accomplish anything, especially in England, and that was why he had placed 5,0001. to my credit. I do believe that if anybody offered the British public enough for it, they'd sell the Throne itself, for all their professions of loyalty. I therefore offered Mr. Blake's £5,000 for what he had given freely. They haggled over it, whereupon I tried the effect of another thousand, and the business was done. Vasartas was no longer a possession of the British public.

Of course I decided to start at once; but first I went to see Llora once more, on the plea that she might wish to send a message to her father. I saw Miss Russell, but alas! not Llora. She had caught a bad cold and was feverish. The doctor was not alarmed, though he could not yet say for certain if it was only a mere cold.

My memory reverted to those words in the postscript of Mr. Blake's letter, 'Please see her and make sure that she is well.' Had Mr. Blake any reason for saying this? No, assuredly not. How could he know that his daughter would catch cold nearly a month after he wrote? It was a mere coincidence, and yet he had said plainly enough that Llora's life was in danger because Vasartas was in England. The construction I had put upon this was, that perhaps some Arab, Ahmed Ben Anen himself in all probability, had vowed vengeance if the mummy was not returned to its rightful possessors. Llora's cold could not have any connection with the matter.

Nevertheless, I plied Miss Russell with my fictitious aunt and cousins, and extracted from her a promise to wire me tidings of Llora to Gibraltar or Alexandria. Next day I left England with Vasartas for Llora's sake, though for Llora's sake I would fain have remained in England. At Gibraltar I was terribly disappointed to find no news awaiting me from Miss Russell, though I flattered myself into the belief that no news was good news. We all of us, even pessimists in spite of themselves, believe what pleases us most; without these self-deceptions, indeed, life would be unbearable. Pandora's box is the common inheritance of everybody. I told myself there was no need for anxiety

on Llora's account; besides, if the presence of Vasartas had really any baneful influence on her, that influence was now at an end.

Then I fell to wondering what Mr. Blake meant to do with Vasartas now that I had brought her back to him. When the mails were brought on board off Alexandria a telegram was handed to me. Hastily I tore it open and read the fatal words: 'No hope of Llora,'.

I sank down on a deck chair and all power of thought or action seemed to leave me. I was like a man in a dream. People with whom I had been on friendly terms during the voyage went to and fro and addressed me, but I heard not what they said. The hurry and bustle of getting into the boats passed by me unheeded.

How long I might have remained thus, with senses dulled to everything save the reality of Llora's danger, I cannot tell, had not a hand been laid on my shoulder, and a voice said:

'Mr. Montague.'

I looked up. The man who addressed me was a Mr. Frampton, who carried on business as a solicitor and general legal adviser to the English residents in Cairo and Alexandria. 'Mr. Montague,' he repeated, ' I had instructions to deliver this into your hands so soon as you landed, and as I was afraid I might miss you on the quay I came on board.'

'Mr. Blake is not here?' I queried; but I did not notice that silence was his only answer. 'Thank God!' I exclaimed, 'I shall not have to tell him yet.'

'Mr. Blake is— dead,' said Mr. Frampton quietly.

'Mr. Blake dead? Impossible! and Llora dying!'

'He met his death in a sad way,' continued Mr. Frampton. 'On the march inland with the expedition the party stopped to shoot some elephants. Mr. Blake was a good shot; I 've been out with him. But however it was, he fired at a great bull elephant from the open and missed, or at any rate the shot only grazed the beast's ear. He fired again and missed, and before he had time to get to shelter the infuriated animal was on him, and he was literally trampled to death. They buried him on the spot, poor fellow, and one of the party came back to Cairo with the sad news.'

The horror of the thing took from me all power of expression, and the lawyer went on:

'About three days after the expedition started, a messenger returned and brought me this package from Mr. Blake. I think the same messenger had a letter to you also. Mr. Blake sent instructions that I was to deliver this into your hand immediately on your return from England, in case, through delay or accident, he might not be in Alexandria to meet you himself. How little he thought when he wrote to me that death would prevent the meeting!'

I took the packet and opened it mechanically. First I came on a letter to myself in Blake's handwriting. Trembling, I tore it open and read:

My dear Harry,—As I may not have returned from the expedition when you arrive with Yasartas, I must tell you the terrible secret which has been revealed to me by Ahmed Ben Anen the seer. Had it concerned only myself it would be of small account, as all men must die, and I have lived into middle life, and I thank God my life has been a happy one, therefore it is not for me to murmur at what must be. But it concerns also my Llora, whom by this time you have seen. She is beautiful, she is young— too young to die— and for her sake I implore you to carry out this trust if aught should occur to prevent my meeting you when you come with Vasartas. You will see in the translation of the parchment, which, with the original, I send you, that the curse ou my children only lasts until Yasartas is laid once more in the tomb. This I implore you to do, first replacing the original parchment where I found it. Then shall the curse pass from Llora, and I alone shall suffer for what I did, Heaven knows unwittingly.

If it should be that I may not see you or Llora again, tell her that I thought of her always, but keep secret from her the story of Yasartas. In after years watch kindly over that young life which I ask you now to save. We may meet again, but I cannot tell, for life seems now a thing of the past to your true friend,

John Blake.

Hastily I withdrew the paper enclosing the parchment, attached to which was the translation in Mr. Blake's writing. At the top of the sheet on which it was written I read:

'Ahmed Ben Anen's Translation.' Then came the terrible words—

Vasartas of ten kings of the Royal House of Namoth.

Cursed be the man that shall disturb the tomb of me Vasartas. To him shall death come with violence and his bones shall be scattered with the winds. Also his children shall be cut off from life until I, Vasartas, be laid to rest and no more seen.

I, Vasartas of mighty kings have spoken.

The curse had fallen on Blake. And Llora? Was there yet time to save her, or was she by this cut off from life? The telegram stated that she was dying. While there is life there is hope, so I explained to Mr. Frampton the necessity for haste, and he undertook to assist in the re-burial of Vasartas.

It was night when we reached the site of the tomb underneath the wall of rock from which Blake had removed the sarcophagus in such triumph only a few weeks before. Unfortunately, a great pile of sand had collected where the hollow had been, and it took a dozen men about an hour to dig down to the stone slab which closed the opening to the subterranean cavern. Once more we removed it and let the sarcophagus down by means of ropes. Scarcely had we got it into position when one of our party called out:

'Here's a sand storm coming up. Quick ! Get to the other side of this wall, or you're all dead men!'

Helter-skelter we clambered out of the vault, not even waiting to replace the stone, and took refuge behind the old wall that had withstood the storms of thousands of years; and not a minute too soon were we, for the great blinding sand-cloud was on us. At one moment we thought that even with the protection of the wall we were done for, as over the top of it came a great avalanche of sand, burying some of us up to our waists.

Then, as the air cleared, we saw the dark-moving mass in front of us rolling away out of sight, and we knew that the danger was past. We helped each other to scramble out of the loose sand, and having shaken out our clothing as best we could, we went round to the other side of the wall. But there was no wall to be seen— for there was a great bank of sand right up to the top of it. The tomb of Vasartas was well hidden, and, as it was open when we fled round the wall, the sand must have completely filled the cavern.

The next day I started up country with the messenger who had brought the news of poor Blake's death, as guide; for I wished to remove the body from its desert resting-place and have it buried in the English cemetery at Cairo. After a six days' march we reached the sad spot, but there was no trace of the grave, although my guide told me they had raised a mound over it some six or eight feet in height, and marked it with a wooden cross.

In a neighbouring village I learnt the cause of the strange disappearance. A terrific hurricane had swept over the place, and thus the curse of Vasartas was fulfilled to the letter. When I returned to Cairo news of Llora awaited me— good news too. She was recovering, and her recovery, strangely enough, dated from the night we laid Vasartas once more in her tomb.

WHEN I returned to England I became a pretty constant visitor at Miss Russell's high-class establishment for young ladies, and she countenanced my visits on account of my aunt and three cousins. At length, however, I was obliged to confess that those four personages were myths, and that instead of bringing pupils to her, I was going to rob her of one. She forgave the deception, for she was a woman; besides, a marriage from her school was really a magnificent advertisement. The fame of the school spread amongst mothers, and she had twenty additional boarders the term after Llora and I were married.

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2: Held For Ransom

J. S. Fletcher

1863-1935

The Idler Magazine, May 1910

Englishman Joseph Smith Fletcher was one of the most prolific authors of detective fiction of his time.

IN THE FIRST FLUSH of the fresh spring morning Rome was waking to joyous life. Out of the purpling mists rose the domes of church and basilica; across the Tiber the great cross which crowns St. Peter caught the rays of the rising sun. Market carts attended by country folk in picturesque costume came rattling through the Pincian Gate and across the Piazza del Popolo; already the hum of the crowded quarter between the Corso and the river stole up to the tree-crowned heights of the Pincian Hill. And something in the air, in the indescribable atmosphere which is Rome, told that it was to be a good day.

It was barely six o'clock when a young man came quickly across the corner of the Piazza del Popolo from the direction of the Hotel Russie and began the ascent of the long flights of steps which led up to the crest of the Pincian. He made that ascent so quickly that a shrewd— and perhaps a cynical— observer would have had little difficulty in deciding that he had an appointment of an interesting character to keep. But he was the sort of young man who could easily run up any amount of stairs at a time without feeling the exertion in wind or limb— a tall, athletic Englishman, apparently not more than twenty-three or twenty-four years of age, with a candid, boyish face and the clear alert eyes and complexion begot of a devotion to sport and out-door life. He was fresh and rosy from his morning tub; his suit of grey tweed looked as if it had been put on for the first time; in everything he gave the impression of nice, healthy young manhood. And a certain young lady, hidden behind a marble

statue surrounded by cypress and ilex, and watching for his coming, said to herself, as she saw his eager face and rapid spring up the stairways, that he was the handsomest and the dearest boy in the world, and that nothing should ever make her give him up— no, nothing! He of whom these tender sentiments were thought, although quite unconscious of them, came bounding to the promenade at the top of the steps and looked round him with an air of anxious expectation. Seeing nothing but trees, shrubs, and marble figures, he took out his watch and looked at it. Then he put it back and stared across the intervening space between the Pincian and St. Peter's. Then he turned and looked in the opposite direction, down the vista of the gardens. After that he looked at his watch for the second time, and subsequently beat the air viciously with his walking-cane. Upon which the girl concealed behind the marble statue laughed. And if the statue had had eyes to see, it would have witnessed the spectacle of the young man making what seemed to be one leap to the girl, taking her quite unceremoniously in his arms, and kissing her with a fervour which to a jaded onlooker would have been quite refreshing.

"There!" said the young lady at last. "Be good, Bob. Supposing anyone sees us!"

"Pooh!" said the young man, helping himself to a final salute. "There's nobody about at this time. Sadie, darling!"

"Well?" said the young lady demurely.

"It's seemed ages since Florence— ages!"

"It's exactly fifty-six hours since we parted," said Sadie. "There, be sensible, and let's talk; I can't be out more than an hour. Where are you staying, Bob?"

"Down there, at the Russie."

"And we're down there, at the Quirinal. And the poppa is— not well."

"Which means his temper is not too good."

"Just so. I tremble to think of what he will say, Bob, when he finds you're in Rome; that is, if he does find out."

"Of course he'll find out, for I shall call this very afternoon," said the young man with determination.

The girl's face grew troubled. She was pretty and of the best American type, with honest grey eyes and a firm mouth, which betokened a strength of will while it also revealed a sense of humour. The young man regarded her with unconcealed admiration. He, too, began to look anxious as he saw a slight line pucker itself between her eyebrows.

"Don't, Sadie," he said gently. "Don't, darling!"

But Sadie sighed deeply.

"Oh, dear!" she said. 'It's a stupid world. Why don't you pack pork, Bob, or make corners, or float companies, instead of doing nothing?"

"Who says I do nothing?" demanded Bob. "There are few men as busy as I am! What with golf in winter and cricket in summer, my time's pretty well occupied when I'm at home, I can tell you. Why, I never had a single day off last season, I was pretty well done up by the time it was over!"

Miss Sadie Flack looked at her lover with amusement.

"Innocent!" she said. "The poppa calls that idling. He says you're a lazy, improvident, empty-headed British aristocrat; there!"

The Honourable Robert Monke-Royal's disingenuous face flushed a little.

"Oh, well," he said, "1 suppose everybody's entitled to his opinion. But I'm not lazy, for I was always keen at whatever I took up; I'm not improvident, for I don't owe anything; and as to being an aristocrat, well, it isn't my fault that my father was a peer. He was a jolly good sort, anyway."

"I'm sure he was," said Sadie, slipping her arm through his as they walked along the paths of the Pincian. "And so's mine when his liver lets him be. And you really haven't any debts, Bob?"

"Not a blessed one!" replied the Honourable Robert. "I've always barred debts."

"Good boy; I hope you always will."

"I'd do anything to please you, Sadie, you know I would. Besides, when a chap's got fifteen hundred a year, what's he want to get inte debt for? I only spent about fourteen hundred last year."

Sadie laughed and squeezed his arm.

"What's it feel like to have fifteen hundred a year, Bob?" she said.

"Jolly nice," replied Bob. "A lot nicer than you'd feel if you hadn't got it."

"I spend much more than that on my gowns and hats," said Sadie.

Mr. Monke-Royal frowned and bit the corner of his small moustache.

"We're not all American millionaires, Sadie," he said. "And I say, look here— don't you think you'd be just as happy if you'd only me and my fifteen hundred? Eh?"

The girl's eyes softened, and once more she pressed her lover's arm.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit if I should, dear," she said. "We would live in a cottage, and I should do all the work and grow ugly and old in two years, and— oh, why can't you make the poppa take to you, Bob?"

"Funny thing," replied Bob meditatively. "Most people do, you know."

"Yes, but he only likes people who do something. Men must be doers to please him," said Sadie.

"I've won I don't know how many medals and challenge cups," said Mr. Monke-Royal, "and I made two centuries last season for the County, let alone several fifties."

"Dear donkey! I tell you he calls that idling!" said Sadie, shaking his arm. "Couldn't you do something big? break a bank or make a trust, or go fighting and win the Victoria Cross?"

"I don't know anything about banks, nor yet trusts, and we're not at war, and if we were I'm not a soldier," said Bob. "I'm quite content to be what I am— a gentleman and a sportsman. It's what I'm fitted for— I know the part. And it's quite as good a part as that of an American millionaire."

"From what I've seen it can easily be a good deal better," said Sadie. "But, Bob, dear, that doesn't help us any. What are we to do?"

"Run away and get married," replied Bob promptly.

"And then the poppa would never give me another cent!" she said.

"Well, which do you want— me or the money?" he demanded.

"Don't be silly!" she said. "Of course I want you— but I want some of the money, too."

"And supposing you can't have both— supposing it becomes a question of me, or the money?" he urged.

"Well, in that case I suppose I shall have to be satisfied with you," she answered demurely. "But, seriously, Bob, you know, I don't want to grieve the poppa. I'm very fond of him, and I'm all he's got, too. And though I'm not mercenary, I know the value of money."

Mr. Monke-Royal shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sure I don't want to come between you and your father, Sadie," he said. "I could get on all right with him if he'd only be decent to me, and he always was, you know, until we hit it off. But after that ..."

He made a wry face, and Sadie laughed.

"Ah, yes, after that!" she said. "But that, of course, makes all the difference. If only you would do something to prove yourself his sort of man! Bob— can you swim?"

"Never went in for it," replied Bob. "Why do you ask?"

"I thought perhaps I would fall into the Tiber, and you would pull me out. That's usually a sure card with fathers," said Sadie.

"The Tiber's beastly dirty," said Bob; "and it smells."

"Couldn't you arrange a motor smash and perform some heroic deed— carefully rehearsed?" she asked.

"Rot!" said Bob. "I'm going to do no such thing. I'm going to call and demand your hand, and tell him that we're determined to marry each other. Isn't that a brave thing to do?"

"Yes, it will make him mad,"' replied Sadie. "He was wild enough when he found you'd followed us from Monte Carlo to Geneva; wilder still when you

came on after us to Florence the other day; and now when he finds you're in Rome— well! He'll just rave— perhaps he'll lock me up."

"I'm going through with it, however," said Bob doggedly. "You'll stick to me, Sadie, won't you? Honest Injun?"

"I'll stick," she answered. "I'll stick like glue. I promised."

They retreated once more behind the convenient marble figure and kissed each other solemnly, and presently Miss Flack went off in the direction of the Quirinal Hotel by one route, while Mr. Monke-Royal sought the Russie by another. He was in a brown study as he crossed the Piazza del Popolo, now flooded with sunshine, but all of a sudden he woke out of it, and decided to pay a visit to his dear friend, Victor Deschamps.

Unfortunately for the Honourable Robert Monke-Royal (who was really a very estimable young man, and very genuinely in love), it so happened that Sadie's father, not because he usually did so, but because he had passed a bad night, had risen from his bed only a little later than his daughter, and had strolled out into the streets and squares of Rome with the view of seeing what that ancient city is like. It also happened that— being unacquainted with the place— his chance wanderings led him down the steps into the Piazza del Spagna, where at that pleasant hour of the morning the flower girls (who are the only people now left in Rome who seem to wear Roman dress or colour) were beginning to ply their trade. Mr. Abraham P. Flack, believing in getting all that he could for his money, was walking around the Piazza gazing at these young women, and wondering what had taken Sadie out so early, and where she had gone to, when he suddenly came face to face with his daughter's lover, who was certainly not anxious to meet Mr. Flack at that moment. The old eyes and the young eyes looked into each other, and the old eyes glared.

"How do you do, Mr. Flack?" said the Honourable Robert, extending a hand which seemed somehow to typify appeal. "What a delightful morning!"

Mr. Flack took the hand and dropped it limply.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "It is, as you say, a delightful morning, sir, but I allow that I had not expected to meet you upon it, Mr. Monke-Royal."

"All roads lead to Rome, Mr. Flack," said the young man lightly, with a very forced smile.

Mr. Flack shook his head.

"That, sir," he said, "is a statement which I cannot admit. It appears to me, sir, that your own particular road leads to those cities which my daughter and I propose to visit. In my country a young man of your age would find roads which led him to industry and to wealth."

The Honourable Robert scarcely knew what to reply to this, and he dug the point of his cane into a crevice of the pavement.

"I— I don't know that I care such an awful lot about— about making a big fortune, Mr. Flack," said this foolish young man. "You see, I—"

But Mr. Flack, who for an American was portly, blew himself out.

"I can quite believe, sir, from my acquaintance with you, that those are your exact sentiments," he said. "They are not mine. It would have made me much more impressed in your favour, sir, if you did something useful— yes, if you were even a soldier or a sailor, or had even rescued a human being, a fellow creature, from fire, or water, or peril— instead of spending all your time playing games which are profitless, or wandering about from one place to another in fine clothes, doing nothing. Also, sir, I am bound to say, finding you in this city as I do, 'that I cannot approve of your evident following about of my daughter, and I must request you to cease from forcing your attentions upon her. I am not one of those who desire to unite American daughters with the younger sons of an effete and improvident aristocracy."

"But, I say, hang it all, you know, Mr. Flack," began the representative cf younger sons; "I say, really, you know—"

However, Mr. Flack had already turned away with a decisive wave of the hand, and there was nothing whatever for it but that the Honourable Robert should pursue his way towards the studio of his friend Deschamps, who was an artist, and occupied certain very lofty rooms in one of the highest houses of the Via Nazionale. For the past half hour he had felt a sort of intuition that Monsieur Deschamps might help him. From a fairly long experience of him in England (that is, considering that they were both young men), he knew the artist to be of considerable resource and invention, and he thought it would be a profitable way of spending his morning if he poured all his troubles into his ears. Moreover, although Deschamps was a Frenchman, he had been educated at Rugby with the Honourable Robert, spoke English like a native (or, to be exact, after the fashion of youthful Englishmen), and was always what is commonly called good for a lark.

M. Victor, when Sadie's suitor found him, was engaged in making his own coffee in a studio which was more or less in that state of confusion which seems so dear to the souls of the artistic. He was a handsome youngster of about Monke-Royal's age, and as a mark of his devotion to Art he wore his hair rather long, but very effectively arranged, displayed a neck-tie large enough to make a small bed quilt, and sported a curious blouse which was confined at his waist by an equally curious belt. He greeted his old friend with joy and cordiality, and learning that he had not yet broken his fast, made more coffee and set out fruit, bread, and cognac. And then the Honourable Robert poured out his woes.

"And it makes you feel so jolly cheap, you know, when you're told that you're a worthless sort!" he concluded half disconsolately. "I've never been used to being told that I couldn't do anything. I always rather fancied myself at cricket and golf, though I can't afford to do much hunting."

M. Deschamps looked his friend over with a smiling eye, and glanced round at his own canvases.

"Oh, you're a hard-working chap, in your way, Bob, my son," he said, "but you'll have to do something to show the stern parent that you are a man of grit, or there'll be no Miss Sadie for you."

M. Deschamps stroked his beautiful hair.

"You couldn't go and discover either of the Poles?" he suggested.

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Or strike something new in the shape of a gold or a diamond mine?"

"Bosh!" said Bob. "Suggest something reasonable!"

M. Deschamps, in spite of his Englishism, elevated his shoulders, spread out his hands, and made a grimace.

"Well, my friend," he said, "there are three suggestions for you, either of which would result in fame, fortune, and Miss Sadie Flack. But listen— I have an idea. We will consult East."

"And who is East?"

"East, my friend, is like your Flack, an American. But he is also an artist, and is a good boy. And he has ideas."

M. Deschamps then made himself gorgeous in purple and fine linen, and he and Monke-Royal presently sallied forth in search of East, who, when discovered, proved to be a fine young New Englander, with sharp eyes, a massive face, and an athletic figure. He listened sympathetically to the story placed before him, and announced that he, too, had had trouble with the father of his own lady-love.

"But as Mr. Flack is right here in Rome, and as there are three of us against him, we ought to bring him to see reason," he said. "Say, let's go over and have a drink, and we'll put our heads together and see what can be done." So the three went to a restaurant, where they drank wine and smoked cigarettes and talked in low tones until it was time for dejeuner, during which light began to break through the clouds of difficulties, and the Honourable Robert began to feel more hopeful; when the three conspiritors parted he was almost elated.

"But we must have Miss Sadie in it," said East, as they separated. "That's sure."

"Leave it to me," said Mr. Flack's would-be son-in-law.

He had already arranged to meet Sadie next morning on the Pincian, and was there before she was, bursting with a proposal which he eagerly blurted

out as soon as they met. First Sadie shook her head; then she smiled; then she laughed.

"It's worth trying, Sadie," said the Honourable Robert. "And you must help."

It was, of course, because Sadie was willing to help in any reasonable scheme for removing her parent's objection to Monke-Royal that she happened to mention to her father, in a casual and half-careless fashion, the fact that she desired to visit a certain ruinous castle a few miles out of Rome which had once been the haunt of a famous robber Count, who in his time had behaved mighty naughtily towards the folk of his district. According to the guide books, there was the chance of making some fine sketches at this place, and Sadie was no mean artist in a small way. Whatever might be Mr. Flack's other policy about his daughter, he never denied her anything; he had come to Italy chiefly to please her, and it made little difference to him if he lounged his afternoon away at the hotel, in a carriage, or in looking over an old ruin. It was all— Italy.

So the following day saw Mr. Flack and his daughter descend from a motor-car in a wild valley, lonely and forbidding, in the Alban Hills, Sadie armed with sketching materials, and he with a Chicago newspaper which had just arrived as they left the city. Above them, perched on frowning rocks, rose the ruinous castle, dark and gloomy. It was one of those places in which prisoners' faces seem to glower at one through the barred windows. Mr. Flack gazed about him uneasily.

"It's a very lonely location, Sadie," he said. "I don't know whether..."

"Oh, it's delightful," exclaimed his daughter. "Let us climb this path to the castle, and then I'll sit down to sketch, and you can stroll about or read your newspaper. Oh, it's a glorious old place— we've nothing like this on our side!"

Mr. Flack was half minded to dilate on the superiority of the modern to the ancient, but he required all his breath for the ascent to the frowning walls above, so he put off what he would have said to another time. He let his daughter lead him about until, in an inner courtyard, where the sun was shining, she decided to sketch. Mr. Flack sat down on a stone close by and opened his paper. After a time Mr. Flack slumbered.

He woke with a start— woke because his daughter screamed— not loudly, nor with any cowardly fear, but with the sharpness of surprise. And as Mr. Flack rubbed his eyes and realised things, he understood sufficiently of what he saw to know that he and Sadie were in what he called a tight hole.

He had read of Italian brigands— now he knew that he saw them in the flesh. Big, black-bearded, fierce-eyed, white-teethed fellows— only four of them, it was true, but full of truculence and each carrying a perfect arsenal of

arms. And they were between father and daughter and the only way out— except by jumping over the parapet, beyond which was a precipice!

Mr. Flack was not by any means a man: easily daunted, and after the first shock of surprise, he gathered his daughter's arm within his own and, whispering to her not to be afraid, turned a bold front upon the picturesque gang which had closed in upon them. He glared at one man who appeared to be the leader of the party— a good-looking ruffian who smiled meaningly.

"Now, sir," demanded Mr. Flack, "what's the meaning of this? Don't suppose the fellow understands a word of English," he added to his daughter.

But the fellow replied in very excellent English.

"The plain meaning, Mr. Flack," he said politely, "is that you and your daughter are held to ransom. We have watched you for some days now, and your visit to this secluded spot, with which we are well acquainted, gives us our opportunity. Mr. Flack, you must pay."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," retorted Mr. Flack savagely. "You can't do that sort of thing nowadays. If we aren't back at our motor in an hour the chauffeur will give the alarm."

The chief brigand smiled and shook his head.

"The chauffeur," he said significantly, "is already accounted for."

"You don't mean to say you've killed the poor fellow," gasped Mr. Flack.

"Unpleasant things are apt to occur in our profession, Mr. Flack," replied the leader. "It will be our unpleasant duty to make you and your daughter prisoners until our claims are satisfied unless you accede to them at once."

Mr. Flack mopped his forehead. He felt Sadie's hand tremble on his arm.

"How much do you want to rob me of?" he growled.

"A million dollars," replied the chief.

"I'll see you at Jericho first!" vociferated Mr. Flack.

"1 think not," said the chief calmly. "Mr. Flack, you'll pay. I am sure you will pay. Come, is it yes, or no?"

"No!" thundered Mr. Flack. "No!"

Then he drew Sadie to his broad breast and, unconsciously assuming the attitude of a Roman father, glared at his tormentors as if he expected his offspring and himself to be put to death at once. But the chief merely bowed and smiled.

"Then we must conduct you to a place of detention, where you will have leisure to reconsider your decision, Mr. Flack," he said. "Please to accompany me."

Mr. Flack was inclined to make further protest, but he somehow found himself and Sadie being escorted into the ruins and ushered up a stone stairway which led to a turret tower.

"You're surely not going to imprison us in this old ruin!" he exclaimed.

"There are two apartments here, Mr. Flack, which you will find very comfortable," said the chief. "We have— er— used them for the same purpose. The fact is this castle belongs to one of our party— that is why you are as safe here as if you were in the ancient Bastille."

Mr. Flack groaned. Nor did his spirits improve when, after mounting a long flight of stairs, he and Sadie were shown into a vaulted stone chamber, out of which another opened, and told that here was their prison. And it was certainly a comfortable one; there were thick rugs on the floors, modern appliances to hand, comfortable beds to sleep in, and even armchairs to sit upon, and on a table in the first apartment was set out a handsome cold collation, with wine and spirits and mineral waters. Clearly they were not to be ill-treated nor starved. But the chief's face was implacable as he waved a hand round the place and addressed Mr. Flack.

"These are your quarters, Mr. Flack," he said. "You will be provided with every reasonable comfort. If you want anything, you have only to knock on this door, and whichever of us is on guard outside will come to you. But you understand that you are held for ransom. One million dollars, Mr. Flack."

Then, with a grave bow to father and daughter, the chief withdrew, followed by his men, and the outer door closed with much noise of falling bolts and rattling chains.

Sadie sank into a chair and threw her sketching book down.

"Well, I guess they've got us pretty safe this time," she said. "I'm afraid you'll have to pay, father."

Mr. Flack was gazing through the barred window. Far away in the distance he could see the wide stretch of the Campagna, shimmering blue and grey in the afternoon haze; as regards the immediate prospect, it seemed io him that the turret stood on the edge of a rock, which was steep and precipitous. He heaved a bitter sigh.

"I wish to Jehoshaphat that you'd never heard of this place, Sadie!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't know there would be brigands here," replied Sadie. Then she added thoughtfully, "What handsome men they all were, father!"

"Handsome cut-throats!" said Mr. Flack testily. He approached the table, examined its contents, and finally mixed himself a drink. Meanwhile Sadie's thoughtful eyes rested on nothing in particular.

"Father," she said suddenly, "how much money have you got with you?"

"Why?" asked Mr. Flack.

"Because," she said, "tip-toeing across to him and taking him affectionately by the lapels of his coat, "because perhaps I could bribe the man on guard. You know, I can speak Italian."

"Pooh— nonsense!" said Mr. Flack. "Bribe him indeed, when there's a fifth share of a million dollars in prospect for him? Nonsense, Sadie!"

"Yes, but that's problematical— he might never get it," said Sadie. "These Italians are very poor, you know, and a bird in the hand's worth two in the bush. What cash have you got on you?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mr. Flack. "Very likely a few thousand dollars, more or less."

"Two thousand dollars of our money means an awful lot of thousands of lira in theirs," said Sadie. "Give me your pocket-book, and you go into the other apartment and— well, just leave things to me. I'll fix them smart."

"But what will you bribe him to do?" asked Mr. Flack, as he handed over a bursting note-case.

"I shall bribe him," replied Miss Flack, gazing steadily at her parent, "to communicate with Mr. Monke-Royal in Rome. He'll rescue us."

Mr. Flack's mouth opened, closed, opened again.

"That young jack-a-dandy!" he said. "Pooh! Nonsense! He'd more likely run home to his Ma."

"Mr. Monke-Royal," said Sadie, "is a very brave man and full of resource."

"I won't hear of it," growled Mr. Flack.

Sadie stamped her foot and threw the pocket-book on the table.

"Then you'll lose a million dollars, and perhaps they'll shoot us, or cut off our noses, and perhaps— "

Then she showed signs of a storm, and Mr. Flack retreated towards the inner room.

"Well, well, Sadie, as you please," he said resignedly. "But..."

When he was safely stowed away Mr. Flack's daughter summoned the guard. And if he had seen what took place between the guard and Miss Flack, Mr. Flack would have had grounds for wonder and what he would have termed admiration. The bribing process occupied some little time, but at last Sadie brought her parent out and favoured him with a kiss on either cheek.

"I fixed him all right," she said triumphantly. "No Italian can resist the sight of ready money. He'll get a message delivered to Mr. Monke-Royal this very evening."

Mr. Flack mixed himself another drink.

"I allow," he said, "if that young man, whom I have hitherto regarded as merely idle, not to say a younger son of an effete and improvident aristocracy, should unexpectedly develop the resource and ingenuity to assist us in this

unforeseen contingency, my opinion of him will undergo a considerable change."

"British aristocrats always rise to the occasion when desperate remedies are needed," said Sadie. "They have the hearts of lions and the wisdom of serpents. They decide in an instant what should be done, and they instantly do it. They care nothing for death, either by air, or fire, or water. They just jump at glory— and they get there."

Mr. Flack regarded his daughter wonderingly, and then replied that that was an original way of stating the case, and one which had never struck him before, after which he remarked that even captivity might be made comfortable, so lighted a large cigar and took the easiest chair, while his daughter once more occupied herself with her sketch-book.

The golden Italian afternoon faded suddenly into the subtle Italian twilight, and that as quickly into the deep, mysterious blue of the Italian night. One of their captors— not the man whom Sadie had bribed— came in and favoured Mr. and Miss Flack with lights; in spite of their imprisonment they made a hearty supper, and were bound to admit that their jailers had a very pretty taste in the way of food and drink. Once more Mr. Flack mixed himself a comfortable glass and lighted another big cigar, and if they had not known they were held for ransom in a ruinous Italian castle, they would have had small cause for complaint.

Sadie had retired into her part of the prison, Mr. Flack was dozing, when there came a gentle tapping at the barred window. It was repeated until Mr. Flack heard it and went over to ascertain the cause. Now, this barred window was one which ran from the level of the floor to a height of some six feet, and it was just wide enough for a stoutish man to pass through. Peering in at it, his head on a level with the lowest panes, was a man who was now occupying himself in doing something at the glass. Mr. Flack heard a scraping sound, and presently a pane fell softly inwards at his feet, cut out by a glazier's diamond. Then he heard a voice— the Honourable Monke-Royal's voice:

"Mr. Flack!"

"Sir!" said Mr. Flack.

"Quick— take this: it's the key of the bars and the casement. Unlock them and let me in."

Mr. Flack's trembling fingers found the keyholes; a moment later and he rescuer stepped into the vaulted chamber. He made a strikingly dramatic entrance, held his fingers to his lips and looked anxiously round.

"Where's Sadie— safe?" he whispered hoarsely.

But at that moment Sadie appeared, and without ceremony threw her arms round the Honourable Robert's neck and kissed him. And in spite of himself Mr. Flack felt that he could not disapprove— just then.

"Quick!" said the intrepid rescuer. "They're all in the next chamber— they might come any moment. Now listen! There's a short ladder outside which leads to a little terrace, and that to a path down the rocks. I'll go first; you come next, Sadie; you last, Mr. Flack. And mind you don't slip on the ladder, for the terrace is narrow, and if you go over the parapet you'll fall a hundred feet.

Mr. Flack groaned, remembering his weight. But the rescuer was already descending, and Sadie after him, and then he found himself going backward out of the window. It seemed an age before he found himself on a narrow parapet, beneath which was blackness.

"Don't look down," said the rescuer. "Keep close to the wall and follow me."

A few yards brought them to an angle of the turret, and there, to Mr. Flack's unspeakable joy, was a flight of steps cut down the rocks. The rescuer stood aside.

"Hurry down there!" he said. "At the bottom turn up the road— there's a motor waiting."

"But you, Bob, you?" cried Miss Flack.

"I must cover your retreat," answered the hero. "We may be followed. I've got two revolvers. If you hear firing, don't stop or turn back— run. I'll hurry after you. If I'm not there soon, then— you'll know I'm dead."

He waved them majestically away, and took his stand at the end of the terrace. As Mr. and Miss Flack reached the foot of the steps firing broke out above them, and the surrounding rocks took up the sound and roused the echoes here and there, and Miss Flack shrieked and her father swore, but they both ran. When Monke-Royal had discharged every chamber of his two revolvers into the air he, too, ran, and, as he ran, he laughed. After which, going home in the car, he and Miss Flack sat very close together, holding each other's hands.

When the Honourable Robert Monke-Royal and Miss Sadie Flack were married a few weeks later, there were one or two men friends of the former's present at the ceremony whom Mr. Flack was certain he had somewhere encountered, though it was beyond him to remember when or where. There was one young gentleman in particular, a Monsieur Victor Deschamps, with whom he felt sure he had once had an interesting conversation on some important topic. But M. Victor's memory was as bad as his own, so they came

to the conclusion that the meeting must have been in Paris, because, as Mr. Flack said, that is where one meets with everybody.

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3: The Moorbank Mystery

Harold Mercer

(as by *"Hamer"*)

1882-1952

The Bulletin, (NSW) 26 Aug 1926

Harold Mercer

"YOU'LL have to excuse us if we're not the best sort of company tonight," said Jason between pants; "this robbery business has set our nerves on edge. It's simply a blessing to have friends whose nerves are not as rattled as our own ; but we make rather a poor return."

Although he had made the same remark several times since, meeting me in town, he had pounced upon me with a demand that I should go home with him to dinner, it impressed me more now than formerly. The Moorbank burglar had excited the whole city. The series of robberies in the fashionable, scattered suburb, which the police seemed powerless to check, was a natural theme for public excitement. Only once had the police been able to lay hands on the marauder, and the result was a badly-hurt policeman, in hospital, unable to give a coherent version of what had happened to him.

Hearing or reading about other people's robbers, however, is not pulse-stirring, and even Jason's nervy recounting of events in the train did not infect me with the fears obviously vibrating through his tissues. In Moorbank itself, however, with the misty shadows of evening upon it, I felt the brooding fear of the robber who struck first here and then there, and had shown himself capable of murderous violence; and the jerky hurry of Jason's walk, which, setting the pace, caused us both to pant, helped the infection.

"I'm sorry!" I exclaimed, as in the darkness I jostled into somebody. Without a word of apology, or even a check in his stride, the man walked past me, a rudeness which woke a warm flame of wrath.

"What are you waiting for? Come on," said Jason, pausing as he felt my absence from his side, and returned to pluck at my arm.

"You have some nice neighbors," I said loudly for the man who had passed to hear. "Do you know that bounder?"

Jason peered. "No, I don't know him," he said. "Come on, old man ; we want to get home as soon as possible. The wife is so nervous when it gets dark."

The man strode on to a street lamp, made dim by night-mist, but sufficient to show him square-shouldered, rather angular, sinister somehow in appearance, and so indifferent to my remarks that he did not alter in the slightest his steady stride. The indifference chilled my rage. There seemed something uncanny about it. I hurried on with Jason. His nervous pause at the gate and his searching glance at the garden shadows before

he ran towards the door gave me a fresh impression of the terror that gripped the place. Almost I ran after him; and his whispered colloquy through the door, as if he spoke to a beleaguered garrison, aided the impression. It was further helped by the sharp banging of the door directly we entered, and the relieved agitation of the two women, Mrs. Jason and the servant, whose pale faces confronted us.

"The Watsons' house was robbed last night!" The two women announced the fact together.

"The Watsons!" exclaimed Jason blankly. "When?"

"It must have been late. Everything was right when they went to bed; this morning they found a sweep made of everything. Mrs. Watson fainted when she found out, and she's had a breakdown. They had to take her to hospital."

"When they catch a burglar they ought to shoot him on sight, or hang him if they take him alive!" said Jason, blood-thirstily, as we sat at dinner. "It's not what he steals that matters; it's the effect of the shock on the nerves of the women. There's Mrs. Watson, now, in hospital through it. The Tysons have put a caretaker in their house, and gone to stay at the Dandenongs. But they can afford it. Young Halsey— you know Halsey— he can't; and since they've been robbed his wife has gone to live with her mother. She says she'll never be able to live in the house again ; and poor Halsey's only just paid probably all he had to get into that house, and has a heavy mortgage on it."

"It's hard on Halsey," I said.

"But you can't blame his wife," remarked Mrs. Jason with a sharpness in her tone

which I felt was intended for Jason. It brought an awkward pause. Then she went on : "The strain of living in a place like this is too much to expect a woman to stand. She has it all day, anticipating what is to come at night. Husbands who care about their wives' health are sending them away."

Jason's face flushed.

"May," he said awkwardly, turning to the servant who had been giving us an attention which had convinced me that Mrs. Jason would have made a fine principal of a school for domestics, "there is no need for you to stay; we will ring for what we want,"

"Mrs. Jason," began the girl, as if appealing.

"The girl's afraid of being in the kitchen by herself at night," interposed Mrs. Jason. "Stay here if you like, May; you'd better sit down somewhere."

That incident added to the sensation of weird apprehension. With the girl sitting awkwardly in the background I did my best to lead the conversation to other subjects; but the arrival of Professor Dumbrell brought us back again.

We were lingering over dessert when the ring came at the door.

"Do you mind coming with me?" said Jason as he moved towards the hall; and he did not admit the visitor until he had inquired his identity through the door.

Professor Dumbrell was a queer little man, very wrinkled, very wizened, with a face which combined a certain wizard-like austerity with an element that was almost child-like, that element being, to a considerable extent, vanity, apparently. It seemed that he began talking about the mysterious burglar simply that he might brag about himself. Obviously he liked to feel that he was admired for his courage in passing through the streets, which fear of the mystery man had emptied at night. That seemed absurd in itself; and yet so much had the fears of the Jasons impressed themselves upon me that thought of my own necessity to seek my train later presented itself as an unpleasant prospect.

Mrs. Jason helped to explain the Professor's importance in the matter of the mystery man, to his child-like delight. He had a psychic gift, it appeared. Mrs. Tyson had recovered a ring, which had evidently been dropped or thrown away by the thief, by the directions the Professor had given her as a result of his queer power. It was the least part of the, spoils, but the ring had a sentimental value, and the Professor almost gloated as he described Mrs. Tyson's gratitude. He had made trifling recoveries for others, too.

"It's only for lack of a better name that I call my power psychic, though," he said. "I have a capacity at times of sensing scenes and things at a distance. It has nothing to do with the soul; I don't believe in the soul. It is just one of those powers science is commencing to investigate."

"I remember seeing mention of you and those recoveries in the papers, Professor." I said, "but it always struck me that if you could locate individual items you should be able to locate the whole loot — perhaps the robber himself."

"I may yet," he responded mysteriously. "I lay claim to no magical power, and what I have of it is limited, but I am following a line of study, and have already had success. You know, I suppose, that I told the police the Watsons would be robbed last night?"

That led to a general exclamation.

"The police, of course, were unwilling to treat my warning seriously. They put a guard on the place, but took it off at midnight; and the robbery must have happened later. I can't explain how the impression came to me, but it came, and the robbery might have been stopped if I had been taken seriously."

When, leaving Mrs. Jason and the servant to their duties, we went into the sitting-room, the Professor proved a most interesting, informative talker, with a surprising knowledge of modern developments in practical science— in radio and wireless control. He got up shortly, however, to retrieve his glasses, which he had left in the dining-room.

"It would be a very great favor," said Jason to me during his absence, "if you'd stay with us for a few days. You see how things are with us; your presence would help a lot. Don't refuse, old man. My wife thinks I ought to send her away, and, honestly, I can't afford it. With somebody else in the house she won't feel so badly about it."

I didn't like the idea much, but Jason made it a call of friendship, and I promised.

"I wonder what's become of the Professor," I said, and going to the door threw it open.

To my surprise the hall was in darkness, but as I held the door open the Professor's voice said, "Looking for me? I've lost my way back somehow," and came forward blinking in the light. He announced that he would have to go now, and Mrs. Jason— the servant hanging about her skirts — joined ns to farewell him.

"Perhaps with all this upset around I ought to walk home with you," I suggested not eagerly, but shamefaced and reluctant.

"Oh, I have no fears!" said the Professor. "I'll be all right alone."

"The Professor sleeps in his house all by himself," said Mrs. Jason with admiration in her voice.

"Yes," he agreed; "my housekeeper goes home in the afternoon after she has left my tea ready. But there's nothing in my house that would attract a burglar. My valuables are of the sort that a burglar wouldn't know what to do

with. There's a lot of things of interest, though. I'd like to show them to you. Suppose you come to see me— say the night after next?"

It was arranged— even to the servant, who made an outcry at the prospect of being left alone, going with us. The Jasons seemed relieved that the Professor did not want my escort; I must confess I was, though ashamed of myself for it.

"The Professor's remarks suggest it," I said, as we sat in the sitting-room : "why do people keep valuables about that would attract a robber when one is at large like this? Even you. When you took me into your bedroom I saw a jewel-case which— "

Jason looked at his wife.

She explained promptly: "If the robber does come, a desperate man like that would make you show where the things are if he can't lay his hands upon them."

Later we managed to talk about other matters; but Mrs. Jason did not forget to ask her husband to go with her, although it was only across the hall, where she wanted to get from her bedroom a photograph to show me.

Her shriek and his alarmed shout drew me with a rush to them, to find them white and shaking, Jason with his hands pointing as he gasped, "The window!" It was wide open, but the jewel-case was not taken. With a bound I reached the window, and looking out was in time to catch sight of a shadowy form disappearing through the gate.

And I recognised it. There was no mistaking those shoulders. It was the man who had collided with me earlier that night! The Jasons restrained me as I dashed for the door and I didn't take much restraining.

The arrival of the police brought some relief to our agitation. I was glad to recognise a man I knew, an exchange officer from Sydney, who had been allotted only that day to investigate the Moorbank burglaries. The disturbing incident of the evening, I believe, actually brought us calmness. We felt that we were under the guard of the police that night, when, after a supper eaten in more comfort than the previous meal and with the police as guests, we went to bed.

Next day I arrived early with a suitcase containing some belongings; and it seemed a fair thing that in the afternoon I should set out to meet Jason, who could not reach home until long after dusk. The mist had fallen heavily again, but ahead of me at times loomed shadows coming towards me— men walking to their homes. Then, turning from a side street a figure loomed which caused a twitch at my heart.

"Hey, you ! Stop !" I shouted.

I set off at a half-hearted run, but the man ahead seemed not to have heard me. His pace certainly accelerated, although he was still only striding along. Ahead of him suddenly I saw the figure of Jason.

"Stop him!" I yelled. "That's him!"

Just as I thought that Jason was going to make an effort to stop him, he staggered aside as if in a scramble to avoid the man, and half-fell against the fence. When I came level with him he grabbed my arm frantically.

"Don't go on!" he implored. "I meant to try to stop him; but I couldn't. He terrified me.' He's uncanny— why, there seemed to be fire in his face!"

By the time I had released myself, the man I pursued had vanished. Jason was obviously shaken ; but he improved when he got home, though, even when the police came he could only say "Uncanny!" and shudder when asked to describe the man I had chased.

It was not my Sydney friend Dalton who came from the police. That officer, one sergeant said, was pursuing a line of investigation which was keeping him busy. But when the sergeant used the 'phone to make a report on what we had told him, he turned to us with a portentous face.

"Mr. Walker's, in Atherton-avenue, has been robbed."

"That's the street you saw your man leave," cried Jason, excitedly, to me.

Surprisingly the evening settled to calmness. We played dummy bridge, and forgot the oppressive fears that were about us. When we did mention the robberies it was with some exultation. It was we who had discovered their perpetrator.

Next evening we set out together, after dinner, to visit the Professor, and met a surprise as we reached the street to find two policemen there. A motor-car with dimmed lights was backing away into the mist further up the street.

"Been told off to watch your place tonight," explained one of the men. "Understand some information has been given that our friend is paying you another visit."

"Well it's a comfort to know the place will be looked after while we are away," said Mrs. Jason.

Her attitude— she appeared glad to get away— settled the question as to whether we should forsake our excursion. I think we were all glad she gave us that lead. The Professor's house, set back in the weedy gardens surrounding it, was in darkness, except for one dim light upstairs, when we reached the door; and our knock met no immediate response. I had reached the knocker, to hammer it again, when a ghastly screech, followed by others, came from within. The house became suddenly full of thudding noises and other sounds. We fell back on the lawn, terrified by the sudden manifestations ; spellbound, shortly, when lights flashed in all parts of the house. The un-expected

developments created sheer terror; and we fell back towards the gate. It was a relief to see, in a car racing up to the gate, the caps of police; astonishing to recognise two of them as the men who had been standing by the Jasons' gate. We were further astonished when, from the house, Dalton walked amongst us.

"You people had better go home," he said. "Professor Dumbrell is dead."

"What? Murdered? By the burglar?"

"No, not murdered," said Dalton, with a grim smile, and a finger which pointed to the police car. "And the burglar is there. Don't be shocked— it's not a corpse."

"Only a mass of gadgets with a man's clothes on — well smashed up, now," said the policeman with a grin.

"The most wonderful bit of machinery ever made, probably," Dalton told us later. "A perfect automaton— only it wasn't an automaton. Dumbrell, who has gone further in wireless control than most people would believe, because they thought him mad, had perfected it in this doll. It could even see, feel and hear for him, wherever it went, conveying impressions back to him in his house, and he could direct it to the finest movements. An ideal machine for robbery without risk! Dumbrell might have made a fortune out of his ideas legitimately, but he couldn't get any backing here— and he'd spent all he had making his machine-man. He tried to raise funds in Sydney, but he was too eccentric in his manner to impress financiers. He really went mad when he was refused support. I was called in by one man he threatened— that's what put me on the trail; nobody else believed he had accomplished what he claimed.

"His failure must have put him on the idea of getting back the money he had spent by robbery. Then, vanity— the idea of being the god in the machine of a big sensation— carried him on.

"The policeman who was nearly killed was electrically shocked. I had my men at your place fitted to meet the emergency, and instructed them to sail in and smash the devilish thing as much as possible. They did their work well. Either some shocks travelled back to him when his machine was being destroyed, or knowledge of detection overcame the old man. He fell into a mass of live wires. My men, waiting to make a seizure, had to cut the electric mains before they could enter his room."

Dalton lifted his glass.

"Well, he had to die," he said. "Let's drink to him— he was mad, but a great genius!"

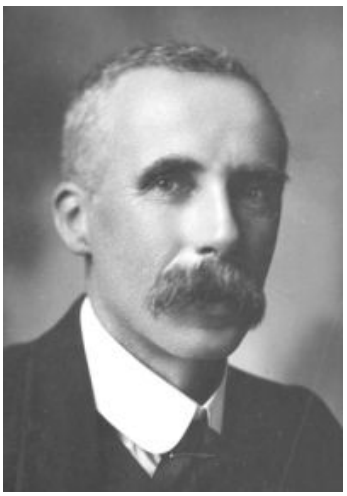
———————

4: Un Embarras de Richesse

D. H. Souter

1862–1935

The Bulletin, 26 Nov 1914



David Henry Souter

Sydney-based Journalist, writer, and black-and-white artist; an example of his stylish pen-and-ink work can be found in **Past Masters 142***. He had a drawing in every issue of the weekly magazine* The Bulletin *for 40 years from 1895.*

"I SEE by the paper that this Vanderbilt bloke is the richest cove in the world. He don't know what he's good for. He's got more brass than he can blew, and the responsibility of his vast inherrytance is bringing his young heirs in sorrer to the gryve."

It was the cook at Belah who spoke as we sat and smoked on the edge of his hessian verandah. Nobody offered comment, so he babbled on.

"I can symperthyse with Vandy, symperthyse 'eartily. I've bin in the same box myself.

"Yes! Larst Christmus twelvemonths.

"I'd bin 'avin' a rippin' time in Sydney. Did forty-eight hours for arskin' a cop ter jine me in prayer. Lorst two o' me teeth for speakin' outer me turn in Surry 'Ills, was rescued from the surf at Bondi, did in all me brass at the ponies, an' then I falls off the tram that's takin' me to the railway, an' wakes up in the horsepital with conclusion of the brain, an' me port and the end of me little finger both gone.

"I stays there a week while they fixes me thinker up, an' then they fires me. Sez they: 'We can't keep a cove till the end of his little finger grows again; so 'ook it. But drop in every other day, an' we'll do it up for you.'

"Nice sorter tale to pitch a cove three 'undred miles from 'ome an' only 'arf a dollar an' a few coppers in his kick.

"That day I'd a sprat dinner; two beers an' a ninepenny doss. Nex' day I was on me uppers, an' at night slep' in the grass paddick they calls the Domain.

"About sunup it blows a southerly, an' sends all the old tram tickets, dead leaves an' larst week's newspapers whizzin' through the hatmosphere fit to smother a cove what's only been used to a Wagga shower. I burrers me 'ead in me 'at an' me two 'ands, but that don't keep the rubbitch off, for when it lulls a bit, an' I shakes me nut outer the debreeze, there's a suspitchous bit o' paper tangled in me fingers— and when I examines it. It's a Fifty-pound Note.

"I nearly fainted; me brain still bein' a bit tender.

"I looks clost, an' it ain't no Bank of Eluphants or Victorian S. and B. Bank, but a fair dinkum, jist outer the box, Comminwealth Bank ov Orsetrailiar toad-skin.

"Fifty fluid! I nearly did in me block.

"I lays low an' kids I'm asleep— expectin' every minute to be trodden on by a bloke chasin' it up. But nothing 'appens, an' when the wind lulls again I pulls meself together, gets up on me hind legs, an' hoofs it towards the houses. For that way tucker lies, as some bloke says, an' I'm gettin' dam'ungry. The fust pub I sights I drops into.... blows the froth off, squints at the hempty glass, an' says to the cove be'ind the bar: 'Gan yous gimme me change fer a note?'

" 'So's it's a good 'un I can,' he chirps back. But when I shows it to 'im he shakes his 'ead an' says I shouldn't fire a thing like that at a stranger fust thing in the mornin'.

" 'It's the smallest I've got,' says I. 'What'll I do?'

" 'Seein' as you've scoffed the booze, an' I've jist swep' the bar,' says he. 'I suggests nothin'. It's a new one on me. but, be careful. A chap as hadn't my sense of humor might get nasty. Good mornin'.'

"So I travelled. But yous can't go far on one beer.

"I knew what cruelled me. I didn't look a bloke what used fifty quids for mornin' beers; but if I'd had a new suit on an' cigar stuck in me face they'd bin failin' over themselves ter serve me. When the shops opened I strolled into a tailor's an' said : 'Gimme a suiter cloes.'

" 'Lownge, business, mornin' or evenin' wear?' scoffs a bloke in a long banger, an' smilin' all over bis horrid countenance.

"I was up to him. 'One ov each,' I chips, an' winks.

"He was suttinly abashed, but he'd hardly touched the ropes when he was at me again. 'Our terms for new customers are cash.'

"That was where he thought he had me. but I flaps the note at him, an' he goes down on his hands an' knees an' bumps his for'ead on the floor three

times. 'Pardon me, sir,' he wailed. 'I bad no idea you had the beans on you. Here.' and he pinted to stacks of cloth piled like railway sleepers, 'is the latest styles from Londing. As worn by the Prints of Wales, George Reid, Willie Kelly and all the old nobility.'

" 'That's no good ter me,' says I. 'I want the finished article. Coat, vest, pants, hat, shirt, boots'

" 'We only make to horder,' says he. 'And we couldn't possibly undertake delivery under three months.'

"I took it is a polite way of intimatin' that he didn't want my business, so I trails up George-street, gettin' hungrier and every minute, an' no sign of a bite o' tucker comin' my way at all. Towards midday I picks out a quiet pub, slips in an' orders a beer, leavin' it on the counter while I sidles over to the free-lunch table an' exercises me teeth some. When I drifts back to the bar again, bust me, if there ain't a cove tossin' off me pot.

" 'Here,' I sings out to the boss, 'Wot sorter joint is this where a man can't set his glass down without it being shook?'

"The cow slopes and the boss wants to know wots up.

" 'That bummer as jist gone out shook me beer.'

" 'If a man ain't got sense enuff to mind his pint he deserves ter loose it,' says he, quite narsty.

" 'Is that so?' I says. 'The fault is mine. I thought I was in a respecterble pub, not a randyvoo ov tugs.'

"He reaches over the bar, taps me in the eye, and I sits down in the sawdust. 'Now,' says he, 'git after yer mate, if it's your turn to swig the lush nex' time while he has a free feed. An' I hope the Lord 'll put his eye in a sling, same's yours is.'

"There was no use argyin' with him. He wasn't in the humor to lissen to anythink, so I buzzed off.

"I was scared. Honest, I was fair rattled. Why, if I showed my plaster in that den, I'd never got out alive. But I got a kind of a feed out of them anyhow. So I camps in Hyde Park until after sundown, sufferin' the pangs of thirst. Me! with enuff sugar on me ter buy a pub.

"I tried a fish-shop about ten o'clock. Ate arf a lobster, two large plates and about a hatful of prawns. Then I tries for a beer— that is, I orders a beer, but the Dago waits for the traybit and I'm up against it once more. While I'm roominatin', this spagetti-eater gets seized with the idea that I'm a takedown. His face assoomes a swarthy pallor and he staggers back repeatin' the alphabet in a loud vice. Two other Dagoes comes at me with ister knives. One I outs with the anchovy sarse, puts the remains of me repast over his mate an' dove for the back country. When my wind guv out I was in a side lane near a swell pub.

Fellers in swaller-tailer suits were there in mobs. I crep' up and sighted them through the side door. It gave me an idea. It was indeed a bright thought.

" 'Hoo-bloomin'-ray!' I yells, bustin' in on the gay throng. 'Boys, it's my shout! All-up to the bar.'

"Some of them never turned their heads.

" 'I got the stuff,' I beefed, wavin' my fifty. They shrunk back as if I'd the small-pox. Some of them smiled a sorter 'pore feller' smile at me. The queen-bees at the beer-pumps never batted an eyelash. I nearly wep'. One chap comes and pats me on the shoulder an' advises me to go 'ome. Wasn't it sickenin'? It was the very thing I was trying to do. A cove dressed up like an area-officer depossits me on the door-step and a passin' cop lumbers me for righteous behavior.

"The P.M. was a kind old gent with wife hair, an' when the John pitched his tale about me offerin' to shout drinks all round in the Australia bar, his eyes nearly popped outer his head.

" 'Dear, dear,' he gurgled. 'How long is it since you were in Sydney before?'

"I told him: 'Two years larst shearin'.'

" 'Sad, very, very sad,' he mumbled. 'My good man, can't you see how foolish it is of you to waste the result of two years' harduous toil in such a senseless manner? You ought to be very grateful to the police that they took charge of you and your money. If I let you off with a small fine, will you promise to go back to the country at once?'

"I accepted his offer with several expressions of delight that set me back ten bob for slanguage. The free-drink offer cost me two quid.

" 'Is there any officer here who will undertake to see this person safe on the train?' says his nibs.

"A Salvation captain took me on. I gave him two quid outer the change I got back from the sergeant and a quid to pass on to the cop that lumbered me.

"I might as well hav' guv him the lot. because two gents what got in at Strathfield eased me of the rest before I got to Lawson. They were bosker euchre players. It wasn't until I finally sobered up that I remembered seein' them in the court when I paid my fine.

"Now, if they could get in touch with Vandy, he'd be outer his trouble in one act."

5: The Astrologer:
A Freak of Wanton Wealth.
C. A. Jeffries
1869–1931
The Bulletin, 5 Oct 1911

SQUATTER HOWARD ate his breakfast in silence; and so did I. He was trying to think, and I was too hungry to talk. But having gracefully topped off with some choice fruit, he pushed his plate away, and remarked that he was tired of the monotony of eating and living in general.

"You used to have an imagination, but since you've made your pile, it seems to have disappeared," he remarked savagely.

"It has served its purpose!" I replied.

"Not at all," he snorted. "Any fool can make money, but only men of taste and imagination can enjoy it. It is when a man has made his pile that he requires imagination. For the love of heaven, get it back, or grow a new one. See if you can't invent a new sin. I'm dead tired of everything."

Then he picked up the paper and waded into the news, keeping up a running fire of comment as he straggled down the columns.

"I see they've jugged a bloke for calling himself an astrologer, and casting horoscopes for half a dollar each. Why the devil shouldn't I be able to get my horoscope cast if I'm fool enough to want it?"

"Well," I retorted, "when you get to that stage, I shall suggest that the Master in Lunacy take over your estate— otherwise you might have to work for your living. Once a man or woman starts going to astrologers, card-readers, crystal-gazers and those sort of people, he's a gone coon. They spend all they have on the harpies, and a wise, paternal Government has decreed that these dupes shall be protected from themselves."

"H'm; yes— perhaps so. But do you know why the poor go to the astrologer and such-like? Of course, you think it is foolishness. It isn't. The wizard and the sibyl give them hope. They bring an atmosphere of romance into a dull grey life. This enactment is going to take the rare gleams of sunshine out of many and many a dull, drab life. Gosh! I've got an inspiration! We'll turn astrologers !"

"And get run in !"

"Run in be d—d! We're millionaires; and surely you know by this time the law never jugs a millionaire. Even if he commits murder, it is put down to insanity; and the worst that can happen him is a private suite in a madhouse."

"We'd certainly get some rare glimpses of life," I meditated.

"And do a little good bringing back lost sunshine to people who need it badly. Let's get this bloke's address."

WE DID the thing properly. As fortune-telling, astrology and so forth were illegal, Howard put on his shingle, which replaced that of the jugged astrologer, these words:—

SPENCER HOWARD,
Adviser
Consulting Hours
11 till 12.30.
2.30 till 4.
8 till 10 Wednesdays and Saturdays.

We had knocked two large rooms into one to make the temple; and a weird sanctuary it was. Money was no object. The walls were painted deep crimson and hung with pictures of saints and devils— especially devils. One masterpiece represented the ejection of Satan and his angels from Heaven. A fearsome daub it was, but it possessed considerable strength, of a kind. A dado of beaten copper gave an atmosphere of gorgeous luxury. Silver statues held electric globes surrounded by ruby shades; and at the far end, where there used to be a window, rose the gilded pipes of a small organ. In front of it was a brass altar, with demon heads at the corners, on which burned perpetually (in business hours) a small fire of sandalwood sticks.

This I attended to, arrayed in a close-fitting costume of golden-tinted material over which fell in loose folds a jet black cloak lined with the same deep tint that gleamed from walls and electric globes. As for Howard, he was just it. He was a gigantic man, and his 6ft. 3in. of hard bone and meat was sheathed in a costume of shiny black silk. From his shoulders hung a heavy crimson cloak. On his huge head he wore a sort of helmet surmounted by a crown built to order (it nearly caused the jeweller who got the job to take a fit). Last, and most important of all, a gilded respirator made him like neither beast nor human, but just plain jim-jam.

He entered the room through a heavily curtained door just behind his throne. I came in through a panel in the organ. He seated himself on his eminence, and I stood beside my altar and lit the sticks of sandal wood. He surveyed me interestedly for a few moments, and then burst into a wild guffaw:—

"A pretty-looking blanky object you are!" he howled.

As I knew he would make this inane remark I had brought a mirror with me, and I walked up to him and held it so that he could see himself in all his hideousness.

"Fetch the camera!" he murmured.

"Gosh, I'm just dying to see the effect this will produce on the first copper who comes sniffing round to get a case. Ho, ho!"

We had secured the father-in-law of the jugged astrologer for a door varlet, and had clad him in a rich black costume that contrasted elegantly with his head of silver hair. He was well known, and would give a feeling of security to the clients. He entered to announce that two people were waiting counting the minutes till 11 o'clock.

"To your altar, high priest and chief bottle-washer!" Howard said in a tone of dignity, gathering his lurid cloak around him like a Roman toga.

A man and woman were ushered in. They looked round the room, gaped, paused, and then recovering themselves, walked steadily to the chairs the silver-headed usher had placed for them. One glance at the gentleman's feet revealed the fact that he wore the regulation bobby s boots. He wanted his hand read, or his horoscope cast, or something— anything to convince his wife that he had not been carrying on. He rather thought the stars might disprove her charges. And, drawing back for a moment, he gave the apparition on the throne a most corrupt wink.

I added fuel to the altar fire, and the burst of sandalwood perfume caused him to cough. The vast form on the throne leaned forward, and pointing a long and curiously-carved wand at them, said in a sepulchral tone:—

"My son, the stars never lie! Thou hadst better consult a private detective!"

"Well, if your science can tell my wife anything wrong about me by all means tell it. I'll pay for it, whether it's good or bad."

"My son, jest not in the temple. The woman beside thee is no wife of thine. Every cook along thy beat hath a better title to that Sacred designation. At least, they feed thee. This female but shares in thy reward, and drinks thy beer. Go: the wisdom of the seers, like, the titbits of the kitchen and the beer of the midnight pub, is free to the police. Corrupt bobby, avaunt!"

I threw a handful of mixed incense and sulphur on to the altar and dived into the organ. Through the glass panel I saw the couple rush for the door. The seer rose in haste, and started to sneeze violently. A minute later he was in the organ with the whisky bottle!

"Gosh, old man, don't put so much sulphur with that incense— I nearly blew up before I could get out."

Opening the ventilators, we set all the fans going, and in a few minutes had the atmosphere clear. Howard once more assumed his respirator, and

deposited himself on his throne. I touched a button and a tiny peal of bells gave the signal to admit the next.

She was a demure and obviously worried little woman of about 30. She nearly fell down dead when she entered that awful room. A rolling cloud of incense drifted down on her. From the organ came a tiny peal of bells, and a *vox humana* rose and fell in a musical whisper. The silver-haired usher placed her in the chair, bowed three times to the apparition on the throne, and retired backwards.

"Yes!" inquired Howard in a voice that came from the bottom of his boots.

Three times the little woman tried to speak, and failed miserably. I approached her with a glass of port. She gulped it down eagerly, and then looked at me appealingly.

"Fear not, but lay bare thy heart without reserve, my sister!" I said as sweetly as my mask would let me.

"it's about me husband," she started with a sudden jerk, "he's got another. What must I do to win him back? Can you tell me if I will get him away from her? Can you make him leave her?"

The draped and crowned monster on the throne sat silent. I knew what was passing in his mind. Suddenly he shook himself,

"Hast seen this other?"

"Oh, yes, I saw her at the moving pictures with him," she replied brightly, forgetting her nervousness in the intensity of her jealousy. "She's common-lookin'. Wears fine feathers, like all her sort. Of course, she isn't really in love with him, an' only does it to take him away from me, an' to get what she can out of him."

As she spoke, across her face swept a look of fearful hatred.

"if I give thee unlimited power over this woman, what will thou do unto her?"

"I'd like to burn her alive, but I s'pose I'll have to be content with seeing her compelled to go to work again."

"Methinks thou hatest the woman more than thou lovest thy husband, woman!" said the grim object above, struggling hard to preserve the dignified style of utterance which he thought fitted his character.

"Oh no, I love him well enough. More than he deserves. But I hate her because she has ruined my life. What she gets I ought to have. What he spends on her should be going to pay for a home or into the bank. He was a good husband till she came. Now we haven t spoke a word for a fortnight.

A harsh bellow of maniacal laughter rang through the room: The woman cowered under No wonder— I nearly dropped the censer when I heard it.

"Woman, what is thy husband?" said Howard in a capacious voice, checking the cachinnation as suddenly as he had let it go.

"He writes poetry— for advertisements and memorial cards. Sometimes he writes it for papers and magazines, but that's only since he knew her. An' he does a bit of reporting. He has to do something to make extra money for her."

"Cease, woman! bellowed the seer. "Thy talk is the quintessence of foolishness. This woman— the woman thou deridest—"

"She ain't a woman, only a thing!" howled the angry wife.

"Rats!" slanged the seer. "She brings to him the atmosphere of romance. She comes into his life like the breeze of the ocean, and gives him thoughts, ideas and expressions— all very useful in writing memorial verses and other advertisements, and in reporting the case of the man who was run over by a meat van in the suburbs. She nourishes his heart, stimulates his imagination, gives him the joy of life. Naturally the man cleaves to her. Wouldst have thy husband back?"

"What do you think I came here for?"

"God knows! Well, get thee home. Put buttons on his shirts and sponge his faded black suit with cold tea. Deck thy hair with flowers and ribbons. Make love to him. Be coquettish. Be skittish if thou canst skit. Laugh at his jokes. Admire his verses, and ask him to read them again to thee. Learn them by rote, and bring him more inspiration than this other one, and, if he is a fool, he will forsake her for thee. Begone! This effort to keep to the second person singular groweth wearisome. Behold my jaw acheth."

"Can't you read the future, and tell me how it'll pan out?"

"The gods help them who help themselves. They have given thee the inside blanky running, though why is beyond human comprehension. There is no future to read for thee— the gods are not interested. They have given thee the dashed inside running— it is enough."

He waved his sceptre towards the door.

"But—"

On went the sulphur, as the gigantic figure reached the curtained doorway. She caught a full breath, coughed, sneezed and scrambled out.

I was already out.

The fame of our temple spread fast, and the street outside was blocked. People who came in private carriages and motor-cars had to sign cheques for hospitals before they could secure tickets. Those who trooped along on foot in shabby clothes with worried expressions got a preference, came in freely, and usually went comforted away.

Then there were other callers. Detectives broke in with search warrants. Badly disguised policemen were foiled by our refusal to take money.

Journalists came with cameras hidden in paper parcels. Artists tried to make surreptitious rough sketches.

It was an interesting time.

Then society girls, sniffing at romances, floated in and were told strange truths about themselves. But it was as an adviser to women who wanted to regain the affections of their husbands that Howard showed his genius. He sent them away loaded up with worldly wisdom, and impressed with the fact that they only lost their husbands because they deserved to do so. They went home and spent the vegetable money on hair ribbons, roses for their ear-locks, and suchlike vain things.

Howard was never weary of congratulating himself that we were doing good work.

"I believe we've reunited more couples than the parsons have married fresh ones," he chuckled with the same feeling that another man feels when he sends an anonymous donation to a hospital."

HE SLUNK IN nervously, carrying a faded hard hat in one hand and a portfolio, somewhat the worse for wear, in the other. He slipped anxiously into the big chair, and seemed prepared to bolt at any moment. He eyed the room with wonder, and then gazed in a horrified way at Howard's weird form, gripping the sides of the chair convulsively as he glared.

When the organ music breathed through the room he turned to stare, and half-rose as a thick cloud of scented smoke drifted down on him. But Howard cut short the agony:

"Speak, O man!" was the tenor of his observation.

But the alleged man remained inert, a shrivelled heap in the chair. I offered whisky. He gulped it down too quickly and choked. The second dive at the glass brought better luck.

"Tell him what you want to know!" I whispered; "he is the soul of kindness."

He muttered some thanks, and once more fixed his blinking eyes on the tower of brawn on the throne.

"Its this way," he commenced. ''A few weeks ago my wife went to someone— well, it was you. She told about the other girl I'd got. The feller told her to doll herself up before I came home, to listen to me poetry, and ask me to say it again. I was in love with my girl, but, somehow, I said to meself, if the wife's always going to be like this I don't want any girl. I write advertisements in verse, memorial cards, all sorts of things. Sometimes I write political skits. My girl put me up to it. She used to polish them up, too. I got on. I was the best on the market, and had more work than I could get through. I was doing well.

My wife found out about the girl; but I stood the racket. She couldn't be worse than she was before, and I felt it was the price I had to pay for the girl's assistance. It was worth it. She stimulated me. We had good times. We went everywhere. And then one night I came home, and found my wife dolled up with flowers in her hair and a smile on her face and her lips painted. She held out her arms to me:

" 'What has my beloved been writing today?' she inquired.

" 'Come off,' I said, for I knew it was a put up thing. 'What's your game, anyhow?'

" 'Oh, Alfred,' she said, 'I'm a new woman. I'm going to make myself attractive to you, and try to be a joy to you. I'll never nag at you any more. You'll find me a changed woman from this out. You can kiss me if you like.'

"And I believed it," he groaned. "I saw the girl, and explained to her that it wasn't right of me to let her waste her life on me. She said she'd sooner waste it on me than anyone else. But I argued with her, and brought her round to see the wrong of it all. And in the end she went to service— housekeeping for a widow man— and last week she married him. As soon as my wife heard of it, and that was the day it happened, she dropped wearing the roses. She gave me a piece of her mind, and told me how she had fooled me. She never wants to hear my verses. She never puts flowers in her hair. Sometimes— very often, in fact— she goes out and leaves me to cook my own tea. Now I want advice. I've been a fool. I've thrown away the girl that was my inspiration. I can't write verses, or adverts., or anything else. I'm on the down-grade. Last night I found it was you who told her how to fool me. Now I want you to square the account. How can I fool her?"

The giant on the throne said never a word.

He was a graven image.

"I'm a ruined man. I must have congenial companionship. Without it I can't work. What can I do? Tell me what I am to do."

But the draped idol on the throne said never a word. The broken man beat the atmosphere with his hands. He grew sarcastic.

"You could tell her, but you haven't a word for me!" he said reproachfully. Then he fell back in the chair as Howard heaved himself up, and flung his helmet, crown and respirator from him.

"Stop that stink," he shouted to me as I threw some more incense on to the altar. "And fetch my cheque book."

The faded little object in the chair looked at the cheque closely. It was for £500, and he went away comforted.

But Howard went out and took to drink. At time of writing he is still out.

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6: At the Sign of the Talkative Ghost

Percival Wilde

1887-1953

The Popular Magazine, 7 Aug 1926

Playwright, novelist and short story writer, Wilde wrote a number of tales featuring Bill Parmalee, a reformed gamble who now exposes fraud.

1. Out of His Element.

IT was the hour when afternoon changes slowly into evening, and the three men were sitting on the steps of the west porch of the Parmelee homestead, watching the last rays of the sun paint the clouds every hue of the rainbow before disappearing gradually from sight beyond the mountains. Through the stillness came the mournful low of a cow; and a gentle breeze ruffled through the peaceful meadows; and from somewhere in the apple orchard came the singing of an early cricket.

William Parmelee, ex-gambler and unwilling corrector of destinies, threw back his head, breathed deep, glanced about him, and reveled in the perfection of the moment.

John Parmelee, his father, sucked at an unlighted pipe, and stared toward the hills behind which the sun was sinking. For more than sixty years, at sundown, he had lifted up his eyes to those hills, and had never found them twice the same. The play of colors beyond their tops, the amazing blending of yellows into reds, and reds into purples and greens and violets, the fantastic shapes which the familiar ridges and indentations assumed— these were all part of a picture that was different every time one chose to feast one's eyes upon it. At it John Parmelee gazed every evening, gazed as if he would never see it again Tony Claghorn, however, was as uneasy as a small boy in church. He found himself uncomfortable, shifted his position, and shifted it again. He knocked the ashes from his cigar, discovered that it had gone out, and relit it.

He untied and retied his right shoelace, then he did the same for his left shoelace.

He removed a blue-silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, flicked an invisible grain of dust from an immaculate knee with it, and replaced the handkerchief with proper solicitude that just enough and not more than enough should expose itself to the view.

He glanced at the faces of his hosts. They were impassive, and Tony felt the silence becoming unbearable.

He twisted his mustache, slapped at the silk-clad ankle which a mosquito had just punctured, glanced sagely at the succulent grass under his feet, and remarked: "This land's worth a lot of money, I guess."

Only Tony could have delivered himself of a sentiment so utterly inappropriate to the moment.

John Parmelee started as if he, too, had been stung, yet he turned to his guest. "Did you say something?" the inquired courteously.

If he had hoped for a negative answer, he was disappointed.

"Yes," said Tony resolutely, "I said something. I said this land must be worth a lot of money."

"It is."

John Parmelee raised his eyes to the hills again.

"What's it worth?" persisted Tony, after a pause.

"What ?"

"The land. This land."

John Parmelee sighed as he shifted his glance to the city man. "Want to buy some?" he inquired.

"No," said Tony.

"Because if you do, there's some you might pick up reasonably hereabouts."

"I'm not thinking of buying."

"It would be no trouble to me to help you— no, no trouble at all. There's none of mine for sale, of course, but I know a man who's anxious to sell. T'll run right in and call him up on the phone."

Tony shook his head. "I don't want to buy," he said firmly. "I wouldn't buy no matter how reasonable the price was. I'm a New Yorker, and I don't want to live outside of New York. I wouldn't take land here as a gift. I wouldn't know what to do with the land if I had it."

John Parmelee raised his eyebrows. "Then why were you asking how much it was worth?"

Tony smiled engagingly. "No particular reason," he admitted. ''Nohody was saying anything, so I was just trying to make conversation. That's all."

John Parmelee glanced at his son, and William Parmelee glanced at his father.

"Tony," Bill inquired gently, "were you looking in the same direction that we were?"

"Toward the west?"

"Yes, toward the west."

"Yes I was." said Tony.

"Did you see anything there?'

"Why, of course—"

"What did you see?"

"Cows."

"Anything else?"

"Mosquitoes."

"No more than that?"

Tony scratched his head. "I might have seen more if the sunlight hadn't been shining right in my eyes," he admitted.

Bill broke into a roar of laughter. "I've heard of the man who couldn't see the forest for the trees, but I never expected to meet him!"

Tony gazed at him in utter bewilderment. "Forest? Forest?" he echoed, "I didn't see any forest, if that's what you mean."

No incident, perhaps, could have typified Tony's reactions to the country more eloquently. The country— a collection of trees and earth and rivers and things which one saw from a Pullman window; the country— what one looked at when one played bridge at a summer hotel and was the dummy; the country— a large expanse devoid of taxicabs, apartment houses, paved streets, subways, and policemen; the country— where the charities which nicked one for contributions around about Christmas time sent sick children; the country— the mysterious no man's land where the milk came from; the country— the place from which one would depart in a hurry when the weekend was over.

Any of these definitions, had Tony looked candidly into his innermost thoughts, would have expressed his views on the subject, and he had acquired a large store of misinformation upon its details.

Trees were of two kinds— oaks and pines. In the first category Tony included every tree that shed its leaves in winter; in the second, every tree, whether it was a cedar or a spruce, a fir or a hemlock or an *arbor vite*, that did not. Growing vegetables were either corn or not-corn. Grass was grass— unless it grew more than six inches tall, when it was wheat. Beef cattle with horns were bulls; without them, cows. And towns were villages unless one

could not speed through them without tisking arrest. In that latter event they were suburbs.

It would doubtless be interesting to deal at length with Tony's numerous misconceptions. It is not necessary. They were merely those of the average city man, who is happiest when a crowd jostles him, and who is distinctly ill at ease when he can glance for miles in any direction and see only a network of plowed fields, unredeemed by a single hosiery advertisement,

But it follows, as night follows day, that if Tony, holding such opinions upon nature and upon her works, had deserted his beloved metropolis for the seclusion of West Woods, Connecticut, an excellent reason hovered not too far in the background.

2: Trickery Afoot.

TONY had gently steered the conversation in the desired direction during the afternoon. "I was wondering," he had inquired blandly, "if you ever knew a man named Ames?"

"Ames? Ames?" repeated Bill. "I've known a good many men of that name."

"The man I mean," Tony amplified, "came from this part of the country— from Wassaic, I think."

"Oh, Daniel Ames!"

"Daniel was the name."

"Of course I know Dan," said Bill. "Dan Ames and I were boys together. Dan played shortstop for Wassaic— they used to have an amateur baseball team— and I played first base for West Woods. A nice fellow, Dan."

"He was killed in the war."

"No?" ejaculated Bill.

John Parmelee corroborated Tony's statement.

"I remember hearing about it. It happened at Belleau Wood, I believe."

"Quite so," said Tony.

"Dan volunteered in 1917. He lied about his age, said he was nineteen when he was only eighteen. They sent him to Quantico with the marines; he went across with them, and was in the thick of all the fighting. Too bad Dan couldn't have come back, a great pity— he was just a boy."

"It's the first I've heard about it," Bill admitted. "I was somewhere out West when it happened."

Then the conversation, under Tony's skillful guidance, glided away from the subject of Daniel Ames as easily as it had approached it.

"That must have been in the days when you were learning what you know about cards," he said.

Bill smiled reminiscently. "It was in the days before I turned over a new leaf."

Tony returned his smile. Parmelee's uncanny knowledge of gambling games, his past-master's acquaintance with every cheating device used in them, had forced him into a profession so remarkable that no name existed for it, a profession in which he had, with singular suecess, exposed a large number of dishonest players for the benefit of their dupes.

It had been profitable for Parmelee.

Tony was conservative when he estimated that the fees that had been forced on Bill during the last twelve months had totalled not less than a hundred thousand dollars; but he knew his friend well enough to realize that every case had been taken under compulsion of one kind or another. Upon more than one eecasion the fees offered had been so large that Parmelee, who was by no means a rich man, had not, in justice to himself, been able to decline.

Upon at least as many occasions the circumstances had been so extraordinary that their interest had compelled his. Upon other occasions the opportunity to come to the relief of the under dog had been so obvious that no man with red blood in his veins could have drawn back. There was a crying need for a Robin Hood to come to the aid of the honest players who wereabeing fleeced by others less scrupulous. Parmelee had filled it.

One adventure had led to others— to two others, for Tony, bubbling over with admiration for his friend, had been an advertiser par excellence. If Parmelee came to the rescue of Jones, Smith was pretty sure to hear about it— and Tony had made it his business to see that Robinson learned the facts as well. The result had heen a steadily increasing demand for the services of the man who had no competitor in his field, and that demand had been accompanied by a willingness to disburse surprisingly large fees.

It stood to reason that a man who was being looted by a sharper would be inclined to pay well for help; and it stood to reason, too, that if he recovered the major part of his losings, as was not infrequently the case with Parmelee's clients, he would not grudge his rescuer a substantial fraction of them. Parmelee, the reverse of mercenary, had actually been embarrassed by the size of the checks that flowed in upon him.

Unthinkingly he had started upon a career. Like a snowball rolling downhill, it had acquired momentum, had grown so hugely that one might not foresee when it would stop.

KNOWING these things, Tony was curiously unquiet as he glanced at his friend's youthful countenance, and awaited the moment when he might best spring his news. Had he intended merely to interest Parmelee in still another card-cheating adventure, he would not have been so hesitant. But his plans were much different upon this occasion. Tony had reasoned that the talents which were so valuable in one field might be equally valuable in another; he had hopes, and he moved with extraordinary circumspection on the way to the realization of them.

He returned to the attack after supper. "Do you believe," he inquired, out of a clear sky, "that the dead ever come back ?"

The Parmelees— father and son— stared at him. Tony stood his ground. "Do they stay dead? Or do they return to communicate with the living?"

John Parmelee lowered his pipe from his lips. "It's usually a flapping shutter," he said.

"What?" gasped Tony.

"I've heard of lots of cases like that. Why, there was one not half a mile from here last summer. But when they came to investigate it, they found it was nothing but a shutter which made a lot of noise at night."

The light of discovery came into Tony's eyes. "Oh, you're talking about haunts!"

"Well, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about dead men who come back to give advice to their relatives."

John Parmelee grinned. "I guess I've had as many ancestors as the next man, but there's not one of them that's ever taken the trouble to come back and tell me how to run this farm; leastwise, not that I know of."

Tony saw the chance to drive home a telling thrust. He leveled a long forefinger at the older Parmelee.

"They haven't come back. Very well, then. But suppose, just suppose, one of them did come back."

"All right, I'm supposing."

"Suppose he started giving you no eid of advice—"

"About the farm?"

"Exactly. Now if you wanted to investigate, whom would you go to? Would you go to a layman? Or"— and Tony's mustache bristled with triumph as he flung his bomb— "or would you go to a man who is an expert on cheats and cheating, who knows how things may be made to appear very different from what they really are?"

In the language of the law, it was a leading question, and Tony's quivering finger was ready to point victoriously at the younger Parmelee.

But Parmelee, Sr., failed to rise to the bait. "If a spook started advising me how to run a farm, and if I wanted to investigate—"

"Yes?" prompted Tony.

"I'd go to a farmer."

"T-to a farmer?"

"To a farmer."

"But a farmer knows nothing about ghosts!"

"No, but he knows a lot about farming."

The point was so well taken that even Tony saw its force.

"Ah, yes!" he chuckled half-heartedly. "Ah, yes! Quite so, indeed! Very funny!" His laugh was anything but convincing, for the danger that the Parmelees might agree was too great.

As hastily as he dared, Tony turned to a safer angle of the subject. "Speaking of Daniel Ames," he began afresh, "I suppose you knew his father—Noah Ames?"

"For forty years, until he moved to the city," said John Parmelce.

"And you?" Tony turned invitingly to Bill.

"I met him only once— but you wouldn't call that a meeting. A crowd of boys was stealing watermelons out of his patch. It was a dark night— but it wasn't dark enough to stop the old man from scoring bull's-eyes when he loaded his shotgun with rock salt and turned it loose."

"I suppose you helped him run the ruffians off of the place?" said Tony.

Bill smiled reminiscently. "TI helped! I helped all right! I had a watermelon in my arms, and I had a load of rock salt somewhere else— where Noah Ames had shot it— but I managed to set a pretty fast pace for the crowd anyhow!"

John Parmelee laughed. "Noah wasn't any too popular hereabouts," he commented. "He had plenty of money— he was a big landowner— but he was mean, and they used to say that not even his own son could get along with him. It wasn't Dan's fault, either. Dan was a nice boy. Noah was to blame."

Tony cleared his throat. "If Noah Ames couldn't get along with his son, that didn't prevent him from getting along with his nephew."

"His nephew? I didn't know he had a nephew."

"His name is Higgins." said Tony, "Robert Eugene Higgins, his sister's son. He couldn't be on better terms with anybody than he is with him."

It was then that a long, satisfied laugh came from the depths of the morris chair in which the younger Parmelee had ensconced Iimself.

"What's the joke, Bill?" inquired Tony.

"You're trying to be subtle,' chuckled the ex-gambler. "In a minute you're going to come to the point. Let me see if I can beat you to it. Dan Ames was killed in the war. wasn't he? But his spirit has been appearing to his father—

that right? And the nephew, Robert Eugene, wants the whole thing investigated."

Tony nodded. "I don't know how you guessed it."

"I've been trying to fit the land into the story; it's the one puzzling detail. I've been trying to reason out why you wanted to know what land hereabouts was worth."

"It's because—"

"Don't tell me," Bill interrupted. "I'm beginning to see it now. It's because Dan's ghost wants the old man to deed the land to somebody—"

"To the medium."

"Of course! To the medium! And the nephew can't see it. No, he wouldn't. He's Noah's heir—"

"His sole heir."

"Exactly, and he wants to stop the old man from making a fool of himself."

"Those were his very words," Tony admitted.

"It all fits together like a jig-saw puzzle, doesn't it? Well. I don't like Noah Ames. I never did like him. But if Dan's spirit has returned, I want to see what it looks like. I always did like Dan. You can tell the nephew that I'll take the case."

It was Tony's turn to smile. "It's not necessary," he poiiied out. "Acting as your business manager, I did that little thing before I left the city."

3: An Air of Mystery.

THE room was unique— at any rate, Mersereau, the medium, its proprietor, had expended more than nine tenths of all that he had in the world in an effort to make it so. First impressions counted, counted heavily, counted in terms of reputation and in terms of money. Feeling thus, Mersereau had stopped at nothing that might make the room a background suitable to the unusual scenes that were to take place in it.

The walls were black— a deep, dead black that reflected no light, and gave the effect of great spaciousness. Indeed, a newcomer could not say where the walls began and ended unless he followed them with his hand— and that liberty Mersereau never permitted. Not the least virtue of the walls was that they concealed unsuspected doors. It would never do for unsympathetic souls to learn of their existence.

The floor was carpeted with a single large rug, as dark and as lusterless as the walls. Into its thick pile, footfalls sank as into a cushion. In walking over it, it was unnecessary to proceed on tiptoe. Any ordinary tread became noiseless; it was only when one stamped deliberately that there was any sound at all. It was an expensive rug, but Mersereau knew that it was worth what it had cost.

The windows, at one end of the room, were covered with a translucent material which Mersereau had dyed a deep purple. Sometimes a little light came through them. It was sucked up and smothered in the blackness of the room. And heavy shades were in place, quite impervious to the sun, ready to be drawn whenever Mersereau considered it desirable.

There were neither chandeliers nor wall brackets. Instead, a dozen or more bulbs of curious colors, sunk into the dead-black ceiling and into the walls in unexpected places, responded to the touch of hidden buttons. Some of the lights were faint and flickering. They served to distract attention from other parts of the room. Others of them, almost blinding in intensity, were located where their dazzling rays would shine full into the eyes of Mersereau's clients. An application of a few seconds was enough to narrow every iris to a pin point, and to render it incapable of dealing with the profound darkness that followed.

A study of the furniture, during times when guests were absent and when the windows were opened wide, would have shown that Mersereau pampered himself in a manner denied to his visitors. A large chair, well upholstered and almost ostentatiously comfortable, was provided for him; a row of four-legged camp chairs, frail and deliberately rendered insecure by an operation which had amputated an inch from one rear leg of each, was provided for his prospective callers.

Mersereau's reasoning was simple— perhaps too simple. A man placed on a camp chair which wabbled uncontrollably, in a room plunged into Stygian darkness, compelled to inhale the sweetish odor of burning incense while listening to old-fashioned hymns played over and over on a broken-winded phonograph in the next room, forced, moreover, to wait for long stretches of time during which nothing— nothing at all— happened, and blinded, whenever it pleased Mersereau, by shrewdly placed lamps, would be in no condition to observe what Mersereau did not want him to observe. This much was obvious; but to Mersereau it was not equally obvious that an intelligent man, given a single glance at his arrangements, would promptly brand him a charlatan.

To a colleague, Mersereau might have admitted that his methods were crude; but he might have added that, with the majority of his sitters, they produced the results he wanted.

The fact that a client parted with money for services of the nature that Mersereau rendered indicated a surrender of intellect to emotion. Knowing this, the medium pandered to feeling and not to intelligence, to sentimentality, and not to the cold-blooded thought that might reach too deeply into whys and wherefores. A clear-headed sensation seeker might come once and never again; but the rank and file of Mersereau's patrons, the men and women who

devoutly credited him with supernatural powers, listened to the hymns, inhaled the incense, gaped at the lights, marveled at his shoddy tricks, and recommended him to their friends. From them he extracted a small, but steady income.

AS he sat at his desk, hands folded, awaiting the arrival of his clients, he was emphatically a striking figure. He had once been fat. He had lost weight—enough to make his flesh hang loosely upon him, and to furnish great, cavernous pouches under his china-blue eyes; but he had not lost strength, and could, when so inclined, shake hands with a grip that all but crushed the bones.

His hair was sparse, but long. It had once been red. It was now shot through with rusty gray. Below the ample expanse of his forehead, however, it beetled out in huge, bushy eyebrows of deepest black.

His mouth was unusually large and mobile. His chin and nose were prominent. His height was a shade under six feet, and the Prince Albert coat in which he was attired made it look more. A visitor would have guessed his age at between forty-five and fifty-five, and would have underestimated by at least ten years, for Mersereau's past reached farther back than any of his clients suspected.

The child of strolling players, he had been introduced to the stage in his infancy, having crossed the papier-maché ice with Elisa when less than a month old in a long-forgotten performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." He had been a pretty baby; he grew up to be a handsome boy and a more than passably good-looking young man. But there had never been the slightest ability of any kind to back up his pleasing appearance, and it had served only to secure him a succession of badly paid positions, which he lost as rapidly as he found them.

He had toured the country with tenth-rate theatrical companies; he had been discharged or stranded oftener than he could remember, and he had walked his quota of railroad mileage many times. He had worked for every circus that would employ him. He had helped to stretch the canvas and to take it down; he had collected tickets at the door; he had been a side-show barker and a pitch man; he had paraded through towns, arrayed in a gorgeous red-and-gold uniform, eliciting ghastly sounds from a trombone; he had even acted as understudy for one of the animal men, and had nearly been killed by a leopard. Through it all, however, he had failed signally to develop a single quality that might make for success. Genial, easygoing, lazy, improvident, he had radiated sheer incompetence and unreliability so visibly that he had never been able up to that time to stay long in any one berth.

His prepossessing exterior, his gentle, lovable personality, had had one far-reaching consequence. At one of the times when he could afford it least, it had led him into marriage, and when his wife, whom he had cared for tenderly, died in childbirth, it had made him the sole support of an infant girl.

It would have been logical for Mersereau to have turned the child over to some more prosperous person for adoption—she was pretty, and offers were plentiful— but then Méersereau never did the logical thing. He loved the wee bit of humanity— it was all that remained to remind him of his wife— and he never hesitated at a personal sacrifice if it meant more comfort for his daughter.

In some mysterious manner he provided her with clothing, with shelter, with food, with medical care, with a vast quantity of toys, with an education. He suffered. He walked great distances to save a few pennies. His shoes were disreputable. His clothes were patched in weird and uncanny fashions. Many a night he went to bed cold and hungry. But the child never knew the meaning of want.

WHEN she grew up, she was sent to a good school. Its bills, by some unexplainable process, were met promptly, though it taxed Mersereau's resources to the breaking point. Yet he had never complained. Life, to him, had been the reverse of a bed of roses. Perhaps he understood that it was chiefly his own fault; perhaps his was a nature so stoical that it was prepared to endure much, for endure much he did. If he could have settled down, he might conceivably have made a success of some kind of skilled manual labor, for he was strong, and his hands were clever with tools. But the roving spirit inherited from roving parents gave him no rest.

He had tried gambling, but lacked the card sense to make a go of it. He had attempted to sell goods of one kind or another, and had not been enough of a business man to succeed. He had celebrated his sixtieth birthday while traveling with a medicine show, disposing of quack remedies to a gullible public, and when his employer decamped the same night, taking Mersereau's weck's wages with him, he consoled himself with the reflection that his daughter, now twenty years of age, had secured an excellent clerical position, and was not in pressing need of money.

It was not until some years later, while he was making a precarious living as an assistant to a fashionable medium, that his great stroke of luck— the one and only in his career— came to him. A lottery ticket, bought in one of the discreetly hidden places where such things are sold, brought him an unexpected prize. It was more money than he had ever owned before. To him,

it was a huge fortune, and for twenty-four hours he reveled in an unaccustomed feeling of independence.

At the expiration of that time he followed his daughter's advice, and bought out Devlin, the proprietor of the establishment in which he had been working. He substituted the name Mersereau for that painted on the gilded sign at his eutrance, and he managed to expend by far the larger part of what he had left on a black rug, black paint, and new electrical installation. The principal articles which he had acquired from his predecessor were the phonograph, a supply of battered records, several pounds, assorted varieties, of incense, and the services of Omar, a little mulatto whom Devlin had trained to make himself useful; also what good will there was.

To his new venture Mersereau brought highly dubious assets. He had picked up the patter of the profession from his former employer; he had mastered a few of the tricks, automatic writing, table lifting, and the like, that were the stock in trade of the confraternity of mediums; he knew how to execute one or two simple sleights of hand, and had been known, under favorable circumstances, to escape detection while attempting them. But despite the fact that his daughter, who worshiped him, considered him a very wonderful person, the insight into human nature, the instinctive grasp of psychology, the understanding of mental processes which enabled other mediums to amass comfortable fortunes were qualities as far beyond him as if they had been nonexistent.

He had seen certain things done in certain ways. He did them in what he thought was the same way, with the improvements, in the way of lighting, that suggested themselves to his childlike mind; and he was mightily surprised when he noticed that the clientele of the place was changing, and that the prosperous individuals who had visited it regularly in the past failed to reappear, while their places were taken by men and women whose willingness to be impressed was as obvious as was their lack of well-lined pocketbooks. The revenues of the places, while steady, became smaller— until the lucky day that Noah Ames first ascended the creaky stairs— and there were many weeks during which Mersereau, for all of his alleged supernatural powers, did not clear as much as did his daughter.

As he sat at his desk, with hands folded, awaiting the arrival of his clients, a snap judgment might have condemned him as an impudent charlatan, a man who preyed upon the superstitions of his fellows, and who deserved nothing so much as a coat of hot tar and feathers. But a kindlier imagination, looking beneath the surface, secing through his imposing exterior into the childlike, incompetent, unfortunate soul hidden under it, might with more justice have set him down asa very pitiable, very tragic, very pathetic little big man.

4: The Seance.

THE servant, factotum, and general assistant, who swept out in the mornings, and worked the offstage effects in the afternoons, a slim little mulatto dressed in a worn Tuxedo coat with red-silk facings, black-satin knee breeches, red-silk stockings, and outlandish shoes lavishly sewn with rhinestones, came to Mersereau's desk, and, without speaking, informed his master that callers were waiting.

That trick of silent conversation was something that Devlin. Mersereau's predecessor, had taught Omar. Devlin had listened just once to the mulatto's guttural voice, to his harsh accents, and to his ungrammatical English. Then he had had an inspiration— Devlin had many such— and had decided that the establishment would be more impressive if visitors to it were greeted by a deaf mute.

He had shown the man how, without making a sound, he might form the words he wished to utter with his lips— for Devlin and Mersereau alone to read. Callers were welcomed by gesture, were assisted out of their coats and waved to chairs in the diminutive anteroom without speech. It was a novelty— and it was certainly more in keeping with the atmosphere of the place for Omar— what his name had originally been does not matter— to nod gravely and extend his hands, palms downward, in a more or less Oriental gesture, than to grin and croak hoarsely: "Yaas, sur!" It was a novelty which had been a success from the very beginning, for Omar, who was not lacking in intelligence, acted his part with unction.

Mersereau raised his head slowly in leonine fashion—it was a trick he had copied from Devlin— nodded solemnly, and the mulatto backed to the door as if leaving a royal presence. Even when the two were alone, their rdles were never dropped.

Omar opened the door wide and bowed.

There entered two men contrasting strangely in appearance. Noah Ames, who was visiting the medium for perhaps the sixth time, was elderly, lean, short, carelessly dressed, with a badly knotted bow tie at his scrawny throat, and an old-fashioned gold watch chain, heavy enough to anchor a boat, festooned across an untidy vest. He was so nervous that his hands trembled. Indeed, he began speaking before he had actually crossed Mersereau's threshold.

Robert Eugene Higgins, his nephew. youthful, sleek, debonair, well groomed. faultlessly attired, might have posed for a fashion plate. Fate had

tried to make him commonplace by naming him Higgins; he had done his best to parry the blow by spelling out the Robert Eugene in full.

He had progressed through life quietly and shrewdly, always the master of himself, always looking far ahead. His parents had not been affluent. but his uncle was more than well to do, and after the death of Daniel, Robert had become his sole heir.

Noah Ames had never been able to get along with his son. He had always been on the very best of terms with his nephew, who had given in to him. had flattered him, had wheedled and cajoled him, had, even from his boyhood days. humored and indulged the old man's whims.

Robert Eugene Higgins was no mental giant, but his mother, Noah's sister, had made him understand upon which side his bread was buttered. Always bearing that fact in mind, never losing sight of Noah's wealth, which he overestimated, but in which he knew he would share some day, he had cultivated tact in his relations with his uncle— and foresaw that it would ultimately be profitable.

For years everything had gone well. Most obligingly Daniel had enlisted in the marines, and had had his head shot off for his pains. Robert's rosy prospects had thereupon become still rosier, and then, one fatal day, Noah had climbed Mersereau's stairs, and the spirit of Daniel Ames, resurrected for Noah's benefit, had commanded the old man to deed some hundreds of acres of valuable farm land to the medium.

At every other time Robert had humored Noah, but when he learned of developments, and reflected that one deed would probably be followed by another and another and another, until Noah was stripped clean, he decided that it was the moment to call a halt.

He had always considered his uncle shrewd and hard-headed. He was surptised when he discovered that he was seriously considering the spirit's command. He tried to reason with him, and could make no headway. Noah was quite convinced that the spirit was what it claimed to be; Robert's skepticism failed to impress him.

"It isn't hearsay, Robert," he pointed out; "he's talked to me himself— and he's told me things that only Dan'l would know."

"Why does he want you to deed land? What does a spirit want with a farm?"

"He doesn't want it himself. He wants it for the medium."

"What for?"

"The medium's his friend."

Robert sneered, but after attending a single séance, he sought out Tony Claghorn, and commissioned him to enlist the services of Parmelee at any cost.

It was necessary to expose the medium at once, while Noah was still hesitating. Time was precious. A few drops of ink, and the fortune which Robert had eyed so covetously for so many years would begin to evaporate.

Yet he was outwardly calm as he entered Mersereau's sanctum with Noah. Indeed, he laid a soothing hand on the old man's arm.

"Don't, Robert!" piped Noah Ames. "Don't do that. I don't like it, so don't do it." He used precisely the language that one might have expected of a threeyear-old child.

Querulously he brushed his nephew's hand away and turned to his host.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Mersereau," he shrilled, "good afternoon. I'm here on time, you see. On time, right to the minute. Are you ready to start?"

The medium nodded gravely.

"Very well then," jabbered Noah Ames, "very good indeed! I have no time to lose. Our appointment was for three o'clock, and it's one minute after three already. We'll start at once."

THE value of time, clearly, was one of Noah's obsessions. Having retired from all active occupations, and having only to spend the income which came to him periodically, the worth to him of any one of his waking hours might have been calculated, with some exactness, as nil. But that fact did not prevent him from attaching exaggerated importance to every swiftly passing minute.

He seated himself on a camp chair, and his nephew followed his example, while Mersereau turned his own chair around to face them. A wave of the medium's hand, and the mulatto drew the shades and extinguished the lights.

Skinny fingers clawed at Mersereau's arm, and he recognized Noah's nervous clutch. diy

"Wait," said Mersereau.

"What for?"

"Wait until Omar has gone out of the room and locked the doors. I always begin my séances by locking the doors. I want my clients to know that if there are any supernatural manifestations they, are genuine. I have no assistants."

"I'll take your word for it," shrilled. Noah. "Go ahead! Don't waste time; I'm in a hurry."

But Mersereau could not be moved until he had heard both doors close, and until keys had turned gratingly in their locks. Then he stretched out his hands,. and allowed each of his visitors to grasp one.

"Make a circle," he commanded, "an endless chain— a chain-which neither begins nor ends— a complete circle. Now concentrate. Concentrate hard. Concentrate. Concentrate on what you want to see most. Concentrate. Then, perhaps, my spirit control will come to me. Concentrate!"

Noah Ames had enjoined him to waste no time. Mersereau, apparently, did not take the injunction seriously, for in the darkness the minutes sped by, and the three men sat motionless in their chairs. Nothing, Mersereau knew, exercised so profound an effect as a long wait. He counted the ticks of the clock on his desk, and did not hurry.

From the next room came the strains of "Rock of Ages," repeated over and over again on the decrepit phonograph. The record had been cracked, and with every revolution the needle protested noisily. From censers placed in the corners of the room came the sickly sweetish odor of burning incense. And in the ceiling, over Mersereau's head, a tiny purple light flickered on and off feebly.

Ten minutes passed, a quarter of an hour.

"Well?" whispered Noah Ames excitedly.

"Shh!" Mersereau replied with gravity. "The spirits are near."

He began to groan, to move his limbs nervously, to twitch convulsively.

THEN a large dinner bell began to ring. Mersereau could feel Noah's hands trembling— and could sense the skepticism with which the elegant nephew observed the first of the "manifestations."

The bell, phosphorescing in the dark, rose into the air, ringing loudly, and circled the room at a height of seven or eight feet from the floor. It returned to its starting point, set itself down upon a table, rocked from side to side, and presently table and bell fell together with a jingling crash.

Merserean felt Noah's grip tightening— and could picture the sneer on the nephew's lips.

"Old stuff," Robert Eugene Higgins would be reflecting, "a bell covered with luminous paint, and carried around the room by wires and pulleys."

Old stuff, Mersereau admitted, even though it was not done that way. But it was one of the most satisfactory tricks in his repertory, and even if it failed to convince Higgins, it had never failed to raise the goose flesh on Noah Ames.

Mersereau said: "The spirits are very near— very near indeed. If you wish to speak to them, ask. Ask!"

Noah lifted a quavering voice in the darkness. "Is anybody here?" he demanded.

From the center of the room came two loud knocks.

"The spirits have answered," said Mersereau. "They are here. Ask! Ask!"

"Whoever you are— whatever you are— will you speak to me?" entreated Noah.

The two knocks were repeated.

"You— you— Who are you?"

Robert Eugene Higgins interjected his first comment. ''That's not a question that can be answered with a knock," he pointed out irritatingly.

But the visitor from the other shore was fully equal to his task. From somewhere in the utter darkness came the sound of a deep, resonant voice, speaking in measured accents. "I am the spirit of Daniel Ames!"

The voice of the medium was heard. "The spirits are here."

Robert Eugene Higgins noted methodically that never at any time had he heard the two voices simultaneously. If the spirit spoke, the medium was silent. If the medium spoke, the spirit held his peace. Never did one interrupt the other. Robert Eugene Higgins drew logical conclusions. Noah Ames, however, was visibly impressed.

"Dan'l!" he piped. "Is that you, Dan'l?"

"Daniel, your son, your only son, killed in the war," replied the sonorous voice.

In the dark, Mersereau could feel the old man's shoulders shaking.

"Are you happy, Dan'l?" Noah asked at length.

"No."

"You're not happy ?"

"I'm not happy."

"Why aren't you happy?"

"Because you didn't do what I asked."

Robert Eugene Higgins felt his gorge rising. If the medium had demanded only a fee— even a large fee— it would not have been so bad. Noah could afford to pay fees. But to ask for land— which was capital, which created income, which would continue to pay the equivalent of many fees until the crack of doom— that was an outrage.

Noah was speaking again. "I've been thinking it over, Dan'l; I've been thinking it over. You wouldn't want me to do anything as important as that in a hurry, would you?"

"If it means happiness to me—"

Noah sobbed openly. '"Dan'l! Dan'l!"

Robert Eugene Higgins cleared his throat. "How do we know that you are really what you pretend to be?"

"Bobby! Bobby!" protested the spirit.

At the previous séance, his first one, the nephew had been unwillingly surprised when the spirit had addressed him by name. He had recovered from his surprise.

"How do we know that you are the ghost of Daniel Ames?" Higgins asked querulously.

"Don't you recognize my voice?"

"I haven't heard it in eight years. How could I?"

"Doesn't he recognize my voice?"

"Yes, Dan'l, I do," said Noah. "That's your voice all right. I'd know it in a thousand."

"You wouldn't know any such thing," Higgins protested,

"Then if I don't know it, I think I know it,' Noah quavered.

"You'll have to be surer than that before vou sign away land worth thousands of dollars! Your best land, too, isn't it?" He addressed the unseen speaker. "Look here! I think you're a fake, a cheap fake, that's what!"

"Bobby! Bobby!"

"If you're not, prove you're not."

"Ask me any question you like."

"What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Sewall." The answer came without an instant's pause.

"And her mother's name?"

"Hendrickson."

"That's right! That's right!" interrupted Noah Ames.

"You had a cousin who died as a boy," barked Higgins.

"Your brother," said the voice instantiy, "his name was Edward."

"What did he die of?"

"The doctors said pneumonia."

"Wasn't it that?"

"It was kidney disease."

Noah gasped his amazement, and Higgins came very near to losing his temper. It was only too obvious that the medium had unearthed every fact having to do with the Ames family. It was equally obvious that by answering questions having to do with those facts, he was making a gigantic impression on Noah Ames. And when Higgins gave him an opening, by asking a question as careless as his last one, it was easy for the medium to rise to the opportunity and make a startling statement which could not possibly be refuted.

To state that the doctors' diagnosis had been wrong in the case of Daniel's long-buried cousin— that was a brilliantly clever impromptu, and while cursing himself for having made it possible, Higgins searched his memory for another question which might not be so tellingly answered.

He thought he found it.

"Do you remember," he demanded, "about fifteen years ago when we were boys?"

"Years are as nothing where I am living now," said the resonant voice. "The past— the present— the future— all are one. Time is a dream— a delusion—"

Hastily Robert Eugene interrupted. This sort of nonsense, he was fully aware, impressed Noah too deeply.

"Look back fifteen years. If a year is nothing, it ought to be easy for you to do it," he scoffed.

The deep voice declined to be irritated. "It is easy," it declared.

"Look back to a time when I spent two weeks with you in the country. Are you doing that?"

"I am."

"Your father had a watch— a gold watch— which was a family heirloom. One day, while I was visiting him, he lost it." The elegant nephew began to chuckle over his approaching triumph. "Now, if you're the real thing in spirits, if you know the past and the present and the future, maybe you'll tell us where we can find that watch!"

"It can't be found."

"Why not?" chortled Higgins.

At last the alleged spirit was in a tight place.

"It's at the bottom of the sea."

"How did it get there?"

"In a sailor's pocket. The sailor was drowned. His ship went down."

"How did the watch get into the sailor's pocket?" The elegant nephew's assurance was rapidly diminishing.

"The sailor bought it in a pawnshop."

"How did it get into the pawnshop ?"

"It was pawned there."

"Who pawned it?"

"A thief— the man who stole it from my father."

"And who was that?" The nephew's confidence was returning again. "Tell us his name. Perhaps we can find him to-day."

"The thief?"

"Yes, the thief."

"It was you, Bobby!" boomed the deep voice. "You stole that watch yourself, and you know you did it!"

Robert Eugene Higgins leaped to his feet, breaking the circle. "You're a damned liar!' he howled, as his sense of injured innocence overcame him, "you're a liar!"

The room lit up suddenly as a dozen bulbs scattered in the ceiling responded to the touch of a switch under Mersereau's foot. The medium blinked, and opened his eyes.

"Was the séance a success?" he inquired blandly.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" shrilled Noah Ames. "Most wonderful!"

Robert Eugene Higgins glared. "Ugh!" he remarked eloquently. Upon him the old man turned wounded eyes.

"To think that you stole my watch! You, Robert! And I never even suspected you!"

The elegant nephew's reply was very profane.

5: A Good Guess

THERE are many ways in which one can fight an adversary— but very few of them are of use when the adversary is a disembodied spirit. One cannot, for instance, pommel a spirit; one cannot blacken his eyes and smash his nose; one cannot trip him up, fling him to the ground, and sit on him; one cannot even call a policeman, and give him in charge.

All of these things Robert Eugene Higgins longed to do as he made his irate way toward his bachelor apartment. He was angry— he was very angry— and precisely as one may be so overjoyed that he treads on air, so Robert Eugene was so furiously wrathful that, to continue the figure, he trod on nitric acid as he left his uncle and plunged into the streets.

In the turmoil of his thoughts certain facts stood out boldly. He had hoped to expose the medium as an arrant impostor. He had failed. He had hoped to convince Noah that the alleged spirit of Daniel Ames was a fraud. If anything, he had created the opposite impression. He had counted on his ability to rout any person, real or unreal, who claimed a supernatural knowledge of his family affairs, and in the battle of wits which had taken place, he had come off an extraordinarily bad second best.

Being a fashion plate, and being, moreover, a polished young man, Robert Eugene prided himself on his sense of humor; but whatever humor there was in the manner that the ghost had put him to flight was not, at the moment, apparent to him. To be accused of stealing a watch that he had not stolen— a third person might have considered it funny, but Robert Eugene's thoughts centered upon the fortune that was slipping from his grasp, and he failed to discern laughable elements in it. To him the encounter that had just taken place was fraught with serious consequences.

He was in an outrageously bad humor as he opened the door of his apartment, and he hardly acknowledged Tony Claghorn's introduction of Parmelee.

"If you'd only been here a few hours sooner, I might have taken you along this "afternoon!" he fumed.

"You've just been to a séance?" inquired Bill.

"I've just been to a disaster." His tone made it unnecessary to ask who had been the victim.

"Indeed?" murmured the ex-gambler. "Suppose you tell us about it."

Robert Eugene Higgins wheeled upon him. "Look here," he prefaced, "I want to know if you believe in spooks."

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't, and because I want that clearly understood at the start. I'm hiring you to prove that there was nothing supernatural in what happened this afternoon— not the other way around, remember that!"

Parmelee chuckled. "I've met many mediums," he admitted, "but I have yet to be introduced to the real thing in ghosts."

The nephew nodded his approval. "Hold on to that thought— hold on to it tight! Now I'm going to tell you my story."

IT would have been a shorter story if Higgins had not begun to describe himself, and had not become so interested in his subject that he nearly lost himself in it. He was, according to his own uncontradicted testimony, a most exemplary man. His life was spotless; his ideals were pure; his character was lofty, honorable, not to say noble, and it was with an admirable absence of false modesty that he painted himself as a saint on earth. In one person he combined many virtues. He dwelt upon them lovingly, and as he warmed to his theme, tears almost— but not quite— stood in his eyes.

Parmelee listened with an expression that could not have been graver. His glance took in and appraised the nephew's fashionable exterior— his beautifully manicured nails— his rose-leaf tipped cigarettes— a row of pulchritudinous photographs suspended from the wall— and he swallowed a smile. According to his code, a man's morals were his own excessively private business, concerning nobody else except when they conflicted with the law. Good or bad, they were not to be paraded in public; in either case, it was best for them to blush unseen.

Higgins shifted to another angle of the main topic. No human being on earth, he admitted, could have treated Noah as he had treated him. He had watched over the old man with a love which no son could have given. He, an inhabitant of the city, hence a being vastly superior to a mere farmer, had nevertheless taken Noah under his protecting wing from the beginning. In kindly fashion he had tolerated his many whims— his vagaries— his eccentricities. Any other man might well have been irritated by them. He, Robert Eugene Higgins, had exercised patience that bordered upon the sublime.

Parmelee reflected that the speaker was Noah's heir— that his devotion would eventually be rewarded by a fortune— that he had probably drawn upon that fortune already— and he swallowed a second smile.

THEN Higgins paused. Parmelee took advantage of the opening to edge in a word.

"Both Mr. Claghorn and I are flattered to know a man of such character," he declared. His face could not have been more serious.

"Eh? I beg your pardon?" ejaculated the nephew.

"Go on."

Robert Eugene Higgins looked at him blankly. "Where was I?"

"You were going to tell us about the medium, weren't you?"

"Was I?"

"I may be wrong, but it's my impression that that's why I came to New York to-day."

The thinly veiled sarcasm made no impression upon Robert Eugene Higgins. He took himself so seriously that the thought that another man might not do so never struck him. "I'll tell you about him," he said. "I'll tell you about him, never fear!"

He did. In well-chosen language, none the less well chosen because of the anger that boiled within him at the mere recollection of what had taken place, he narrated the events with which the reader is already familiar. He described Mersereau's room, the man himself, the manner in which the spirit had outmaneuvered him.

"It's all a fake!" he concluded heatedly. ''Perhaps Mersereau can pull the wool over another man's eyes. He can't do it with me. He thinks I don't know how he did his tricks. Well, I do. I've heard of ventriloquism. I know that a man can be in one place, and can make his voice come from another. I know that Mersereau can sit in his chair, and can throw out his voice in such a way that it appears to come from the other side of the room. It's easy enough for him to lower his pitch, to talk way, way up when he's speaking as Mersereau, and to drop to a deep bass when he's speaking as the spirit. Why, it's as simple as ABC!"

"Not quite."

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't done that way."

Higgins glanced at Parmelee suspiciously. "You weren't there," he pointed out.

"What's the difference? You've described what happened."

"Well, I'm not through," said Robert Eugene. "The medium could answer my questions. That was easy; he had found out all about my family affairs in advance; he was prepared. But he overlooked one thing— that I never heard his voice and the spirit's voice at the same time. That was a dead give-away."

"Not quite," said Parmelee again,

"It didn't prove that the medium was playing two parts?"

"Not at all," said Parmelee, "if you're really keen about hearing the two voices at one time, I dare say you will have your wish gratified. It's just accident that it hasn't happened already. It's even money that it will happen at the next séance."

"Even money— for a hundred ?"

"Gladly."

"You're on!" snapped Robert Eugene Higgins. "The next séance takes place to-morrow. You can see for yourself."

Parmelee nodded gravely. "I expect to, not that it matters in the least. "There's just one conclusion to be drawn from what you've told me— and that you haven't drawn."

"And that is?" rasped Higgins. Being Parmelee's temporary employer, he expected greater deference than this from him. It irritated him that the young countryman presumed to do his own thinking. "And that is?" he reiterated.

Parmelee smiled. "Isn't it perfectly clear? Isn't it more than evident? You've described Mersereau to me. He's a medium, a medium who doesn't know any better than to fit up his place in a way that drives away intelligent clients— if you can call any man who goes to a medium intelligent. He goes in for flashy electric lights, black walls, black ceilings, black rugs, and that sort of thing. Isn't it obvious that he isn't overburdened with brains?"

"What's the point?"

Parmelee rubbed his hands. "The ghost, on the other hand, is clever. He answered your questions, and he did so in such a way that you wished you hadn't asked them. He met you on your own ground, and he made a monkey out of you. Isn't the inference clear?"

Higgins flushed. "I don't admit that anybody made a monkey out of me."

But Tony, who had contributed nothing to the discussion, burst out with his first remark. "It's as clear as day!" he declared. "Why, I see it all!"

"What do you see?"

"He's shrewder than he wants us to know, that medium. When he plays the part of the spirit, he lets himself go; when he plays his own part, he makes believe he's stupid."

Parmelee laughed. "If that were true, Tony, we wouldn't be here today."

"Why not?"

"Noah Ames has been visiting him for a month, hasn't he? Well, a medium clever enough to sham stupidity would have cleaned him out long, long before this!" He smiled. "I'm afraid you haven't caught my point. The medium could change his voice easily enough. But could he change his mentality? He could talk high or low, as he pleased But could he be both a very average medium and a clever, a very clever spirit? No, I don't think so."

"You mean," gasped Higgins, "you mean—"

"I mean that a man you don't know anything about was in that room with the three of you! I mean that somehow— some way— a fourth man got into that room! I mean that he— not the medium— spoke for the spirit of Daniel Ames!"

"The doors were locked!"

"Not all of them."

"There are only two."

"There is at least one more you haven't seen."

Robert Eugene Higgins stared at him with eyes that popped out of his head. "You think another man came into the room— in the dark— through a secret door— "

"I don't think it," Parmelee interrupted, "I know it."

"By George!" ejaculated the nephew. "By George! If that's so— if that's true— if you can only prove it to my uncle!"

"I'm going to try to," Parmelee promised.

6: Behind the Scenes.

LET us return, for a few minutes, to one of the most interesting persons in this tale— the man Mersereau. As Parmelee had pointed out, the medium's brain power might have been greater. But intelligence, by itself, is not so interesting as is sheer humanity, and above all else, Mersereau was human. An unfortunate, untalented man with nothing but his striking appearance and his great love for his daughter to set him apart from the average failure, he had blundered through life humanly— most humanly. His very failings were human. . His ambitions were human. And if, in the pursuit of those ambitions, he stretched such modest qualifications as he had to the breaking point, that, too, was human.

Let us look in for a few moments as he sits in state in his cubby-hole of a dining room, waited on by Omar, the slim little mulatto, enjoying a hearty supper. The fact that Omar obsequiously hands him his dishes must not be interpreted at its face value. One must not forget that Devlin, Mersereau's predecessor, managed to earn perhaps twice as much as Mersereau, and that

without working so hard. Devlin, being a luxurious creature, added the réle of waiter to the many other roles played by Omar— and Mersereau, since Omar's pay is so much a month whether he waits on table or not, has continued the comfort giving practice.

It is extravagant, let us admit. Mersereau could get along without a servant. He could discharge the man, and reach for his dishes himself. He could don an apron, and sweep out in the mornings. He could sacrifice a little dignity, and admit clients himself. But that would be a confession of failure, and Mersereau is too much of a failure to confess it. The flattest failure of all is the man who never admits it.

Mersereau sits at his table, and he is happy, for he is surrounded by those who are near and dear to him. On his right is the daughter for whom he has sacrificed himself all his life. Even though she earns more than he does today, an absurd pride will not allow him to accept anything toward the expenses of his establishment from her. On his left is the young man whom his daughter is to marry. He is a good-looking young man, and Mersereau approves of him. The hearty meal is better than the medium has been accustomed to for many months past. The fees that Noah Ames has been yielding have not gone for luxuries. They have bought better cuts of meat— and more of it.

Let us forget, while we peer in and watch, that these persons are conspirators, the villains of this particular tale, if you will, and let us consider them solely as human beings. That much claim upon our sympathy they surely possess.

Mersereau finished his dish, wiped his mouth with his napkin, raised his striking head, and smiled. At his left, his assistant and accomplice, the good-looking young man who hoped to become his son-in-law, smiled back. And at his right, his daughter, pretty, for all of the serious look that had come into her gray eyes, managed a smile, too. From her mother, Dorothy Mersereau had inhetited qualities which her father did not possess— stubbornness, determination, intelligence of a high order. Yet, perhaps mercifully, she had never learned that Mersereau was not quite so wonderful as she thought him.

"If you've eaten all you want," ste said, "perhaps you'll answer my questions,"

Mersereau grinned happily. "I thought we'd answered them all." He winked at his assistant.

"I thought we'd answered them, too," the good-looking young man chimed in.

Dorothy Mersereau was not to be put off. "You didn't tell me what happened after the spirit of Daniel Ames told Bobby that he was a thief."

Her fiancé, who had played the part of the ghost, grinned in his turn. "What happened after the spirit of Daniel Ames did that isn't fit to tell a lady. Bobby went up in the air— way, way up. He used strong language. He said things. He called me indelicate, unmentionahle names."

"He didn't really steal the watch, did he?"

The ex-ghost broke into most unghostly laughter. "How should I know?" he disclaimed. "It's enough for me that Bobby can't prove he didn't."

Mersereau shook his head. "I think you made a mistake."

"How so?"

"By saying what you did, you made an enemy of Higgins."

The young man laughed. His assurance was contagious. "Do you know of anything I might have said that would have made a friend of him?"

Mersereau cocked his head to one side. "It wasn't necessary to make an enemy of him. Just watch— from now on he'll be fighting us every inch of the way."

"He's been doing that already."

"He'll fight harder."

"Let him. Let him! The harder he fights, the better I'll like it. The more he hates me, the more cheerfully I'll play my part."

Mersereau's mind did not work as 'quickly as that of his assistant. "Why so?" he inquired.

"Don't you see it? If we get that deed, it will be against Bobby's wishes. The sooner he and his uncle get on bad terms, the better it will be for us."

Mersereau frowned. ''Perhaps— perhaps," he admitted. 'You know, I've let you guide me in this from the very beginning."

"You haven't regretted it?"

"Not so far," the medium admitted cautiously.

"Well, you're not going to. To-morrow, when they come again, we're going to play our trumps. We'll materialize Daniel Ames. We'll answer their questions, and then, when they can't think of anything more to ask, we'll let them see a face with plenty of phosphorescent paint on it, and a bullet hole right through the forehead. That will bring action— take my word for it."

BEING engaged to Mersereau's daughter, the ex-ghost moved his chair to a spot where he might more easily hold her hand. "I know exactly what I'm doing. I can read Bobby like a book— and I can read the old man, too. Even in the dark, I can tell what's passing in their minds, and I can promise you that that deed will be signed within forty-eight hours !"

His voice became tenderer. 'Just think where we'll be in a week— in a month, at the most! We'll be living in the country, the three of us." From the

background came a hoarse croak. The ex-ghost smiled. "The four of us, I meant; we won't forget you, Omar, We'll chuck up this bum business. We'll be through with waiting for visitors, kidding them along, resurrecting the spirits of their relatives for them.

"I'll be running a farm. It's what I've wanted to do all my life, and I'll have the very best land the old man's got to experiment with. I've got ideas of my own about farming, and I'll have a chance to try them out.

"Dorothy'll be the lady of the house." He pressed her hand.

"Milking the cows and feeding the chickens?" laughed the girl.

The good-looking young man smiled. "There will be too many of them for that," he pointed out. "You can have a try at it if you want to, but we'll have half a dozen farm hands to do the chores.

"We'll live close to nature. We'll live as the Lord intended men to live— and we'll live longer— and happier! We'll see the sun rise. Do you know the people in this infernal city don't know there is a sun? They think all their light is supplied by Edison. Well, we know better."

"And dad?" murmured the. girl. "What about dad?"

Mersereau raised a deprecatory hand. "Oh, don't bother about me!"

"But we will!" asserted the young man. "You bet we will! There should be some use for a medium on a modern dairy farm."

"What use?"

"I'll be darned if I know," admitted his prospective son-in-law, "but I'll find it."

The girl rose, and slipped her arms about her father's neck. 'You'll come, dad, won't you?"

Before Mersereau's eyes flickered pictures impressed by many, many years of hard, unprofitable toil; and they were wiped out by a picture of a peaceful old age, spent amid congenial surroundings, with the daughter and her husband at his side. He bowed his head. He said: "Ves,"

It is time for us to go elsewhere. If we remained longer we should see Mersereau unlocking a very secret cupboard, and producing a dusty bottle of the very finest port from its depths. We should see him uncorking it, pouring it with due solemnity, and we should see the conspirators, Omar not excepted, drinking to the success of their nefarious schemes.

It is no place for us.

We drop a curtain.

7: The Talkative Ghost

IF the séance which Robert Eugene Higgins had described to Parmelee was a disaster, the one which followed might without exaggeration have been described as an utter rout. From beginning to end, the spirit showed that he was the master of the situation; from beginning to end, the allies met with crushing defeat.

After the lights had been extinguished, the unearthly visitor gave prompt evidence of his presence. He wasted little time with rappings. He merely upset a table or two and smashed a cheap vase that had been purchased for the occasion, Then Mersereau announced :

"The spirits are here."

It was Tony Claghorn's first séance, and he was thrilled. He had read of séances; he had heard of them from friends who had attended; but never before had he been in the presence of what claimed to be the supernatural, and the goose flesh rippled up and down his spine delightfully. The darkness, the music, the incense, the uncomfortable chair, the strange surroundings— all had had their effect upon him. He was terrified, yet he knew that he would not be hurt. The sensation was pleasantly uncomfortable. And he felt each individual hair on his scalp standing on end as a ghostly voice, booming out of the darkness, suddenly addressed him as "Mr. Claghorn."

"How did he do it?" Tony whispered to Parmelee, whose left hand he was holding.

"Shh!" whispered Bill.

But the ghost had overheard. tell him how I did it," said the sonorous voice, "tell him that everything, no matter how secret, is an open book to a disembodied spirit. Tell him that, Mr. Hudson."

Mr. Hudson! Tony's mind reeled. It was not an hour ago that Parmelee, pointing out that his only meeting with Noah Ames had been a disagreeable one, had asked to be introduced to the old man under an assumed name. His choice had fallen upon the name of Hudson— and here was the spirit greeting him by that name, known only to the four who had been present at the introduction!

It was uncanny; it was more chat uncanny ; and Tony, who had entered Mersereau's rooms overflowing with skepticism, felt himself beginning to be an unwilling believer. It was one thing to be told about the spirits by some incredulous person who would never be convinced; it was quite another thing to see them at work at firsthand, to be an actual witness of a feat-as remarkable as that which had just taken place. For one of the many times in his life, Tony was overwhelmed; he retained enough self-possession, however, to make a mental note that Parmelee had won his bet, that the spirit had actually

begun to speak before the medium had uttered his last word. He had heard the two voices simultaneously.

BUT Robert Eugene Higgins had come primed with questions; Tony listened while he propounded them.

"You say you're the spirit of Daniel Ames?" rasped the nephew.

"I do,"' replied the unseen speaker.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I have allowed you to question me."

"That proves nothing."

"I have answered your questions."

"That proves still less. Anybody could do as much by digging out the history of my family."

A pause— a long pause— as if the spirit disdained to reply.

"Are you still here?' demanded the nephew.

"Still here." The voice was unruffled.

"You want my uncle to make out a deed?"

"Yes."

"To Mersereau ?"

"To Mr. Mersereau."

"For his best farm land?"

"Yes,"

"What is Mersereau going to do with it?" challenged Higgins.

"Whatever he wants to. Mr. Mersereau is my friend. If it were not for him, I would be unable to speak to you now."

Noah's voice came through the darkness. "That's so," he assented; "that's so, Robert!"

The nephew's tones indicated his rising anger. "My uncle may believe that you're the spirit of his son, but I want to tell you that I don't believe it!"

"No, you wouldn't," asserted the ghost.

"What do you mean?"

"Believe something that would cost you money? Not Bobby Higgins! Believe something that would cut a slice from what your uncle is leaving you in his will? Never! Never!"

Hastily the nephew interrupted. "I'm not thinking of myself," he declared.

"Then it's for the first time in your life," boomed the spirit.

Came Noah's quavering voice: "Dan'l, you're not telling me anything new. I've known that right along, and he's got a surprise coming to him when they open my will!"

Parmelee, listening with amusement, regretted the darkness most of all because it concealed the expression on the nephew's face. He could feel his hand clenching; he could guess at the emotions that were surging within him; but he could only imagine the rage which was convulsing his features.

"Uncle!" protested a much-chastened voice. "Uncle Noah!"

"Why have you been fighting me if it wasn't that you wanted the land yourself? Answer me that!" piped the old man.

The medium interrupted the flood of Robert Eugene's explanations with a groan. "The spirit is sending me a message," he announced. "Quiet! Quiet!"

Through the darkened room came a strong current of cold air, while a tiny blue lamp over the medium's head glowed faintly.

"The message has come," said Mersereau. 'Believe, says the spirit, believe, and he will show himself to you as he was when in the flesh."

Noah gasped audibly. "Dan'l!" he murmured. "Dan'l!"

The blue light vanished suddenly. The current of cold air became an icy blast. For an instant a blinding beam, issuing from an unsuspected recess in the ceiling, dazzled the visitors' eyes.

There came a half scream from Noah. "I felt Dan'l's hand!"

Tony shuddered. Then he cried out suddenly: "So did I!" Ice-cold fingers had rested for a second on his brow.

"So did I!" said Parmelee.

"Here, too," admitted the nephew.

The blast of cold air suddenly ceased.

The medium's voice cut through the darkness. "Believe! Believe!" said Mersereau.

In a corner of the room, high up, near the ceiling, a curious radiance began to glow. It spread over the black walls like a liquid. It changed color. It reached out luminous tentacles and withdrew 'them. It changed shape; it was oblong; it was round; it was oval; it was a pin point— it was nothing.

Then Tony's heart seemed to stop beating as in the space that the light had occupied a face slowly became visible. It was deathly pale. Its eyes were closed. In its forehead was a bullet hole. And from its cheeks radiated an unearthly glow.

"Dan'l!" screamed Noah Ames. "Dan'l! Dan'l!"

As if his voice had been a signal, the face disappeared. It did not disappear gradually; it disappeared suddenly, abruptly, decisively, like a flame that is blown out. Where it had been remained only blackness— smooth, velvety 'blackness, melting into the blackness of the room.

Presently the ordinary lighting returned. Shamefacedly Tony gazed to either side. Despite himself, he had been overwhelmingly impressed. He did not like to admit it.

He found Noah Ames with head bowed. His shoulders were shaking with emotion.

He glanced at Parmelee. His face was impassive.

He glanced at the nephew. A curious mixture of emotions, awe and anger, fear and fury, struggled for the mastery of his countenance.

He glanced at the corner of the room in which the ghastly face had appeared. It differed in no visible respect from the other corners. It seemed to be quite solid.

Mersereau rose. "Gentlemen," he said, "the séance is over."

8: A Wonderful Clew

BEFOREHAND, Robert Eugene Higgins had arranged to have a long talk with Parmelee immediately upon the conclusion of the performance. There would be notes to be compared, impressions to be discussed, ways and means of action to be determined upon, and the nephew had intimated more than strongly that he wished to be consulted at every step. He would have valuable contributions to make to any discussion; he had said as much.

Yet all recollection of his plans seemed to have vanished from his mind as Omar opened the door and began to assist the visitors into their coats. Perhaps Robert Eugene had no priceless thoughts to offer; perhaps he had decided that the necessity of squaring himself with his uncle was too pressing. This last consideration must have been uppermost in his thoughts, for he took Noah's overcoat from the mulatto, and insisted upon helping the grumbling old man into it himself. With equally beautiful solicitude he saw that Noah's silk muffler was in place around his scrawny throat before they turned to go. Tenderly he took his uncle's arm— a picture of pious vigilance, if ever there was one!— and helped him to descend the creaking stairs.

Parmelee, following at a discreet distance, could not repress a chuckle.

" *'Lean on me, grandpapa,' says Little Lord Fauntleroy*," he whispered to Tony, "and all the time he's hoping the old codger will fall and break his neck!"

Tony grinned— but he was in too seri ous a mood to enjoy the nephew's embarrassment. He gazed at the familiar street— at the familiar brownstone-front houses— at the familiar corner, around which a taxicab was whirling Noah Ames and his solicitous relative, and he rubbed his eyes. Here was reality, matter-of-fact reality; but upstairs was magic, enchantment, mystery.

"Wasn't it wonderful?" he ejaculated. "Wasn't it wonderful? Why, I wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

"The first time you went to the theater, Tony, you thought it was wonderful, too."

"You can't compare them at all," declared Claghorn. "The theater— well, it's the theater, and the supernatural— well—"

"It's the supernatural."

"Exactly," said Claghorn,

Parmelee smiled. "The second time you went to the theater you still thought it was wonderful— but not quite so wonderful. And the third time you began to criticize the acting— the lighting— the scenery— the play."

Tony frowned. "You mean that after I've been to half a dozen séances, I won't be so much impressed by them?"

"Something like that, old fellow."

Tony glanced at his friend suspiciously. "Well, what was your reaction?" he demanded.

Parmelee half closed his eyes. "Well, first of all, and most of all, I'll say that the spirit of Daniel Ames is the chattiest ghost I ever met. No monosyllabies, no 'yes' and 'no,' no 'ask me a question and I'll answer by rapping on the table' for Dan'l. He has a flow of language that's something exceptional for a spirit, and he doesn't hesitate to turn it on full cock. Why, he talked more than the medium did; he talked more than Noah did; he talked nearly as much as the nephew did!"

Tony knew something of the working of his friend's mind. "What's the conclusion?" he inquired.:

"That the man who is playing the part of the ghost is clever— very clever— but he's an amateur," declared Bill. "He hasn't been long in the business, or he would know that you get results more quickly if you don't talk so very, very much."

Tony mulled it over. "If that's so, why didn't you interrupt?"

"What?"

"If you saw through the whole thing right off, why didn't you say a word? I expected you to."

Parmelee laughed. "To tell the truth, I was enjoying myself too much."

"Enjoying yourself— at a performance which you just told me was amateurish ?"

Parmelee broke into a roar of laughter. "Oh, don't make any mistake, Tony," he begged. "The performance I was enjoying wasn't the performance put on by the medium and the spirit! I've seen better performances than that lots of times. What I was enjoying was what was taking place in the audience,

the impromptu affair being staged by Noah and his loving nephew. Why, I would no sooner have interrupted that than have done the same thing in a first-class theater! Mersereau and the ghost of Daniel Ames were only play acting; Noah and Bobby were in dead earnest."

"Then you got nothing at all out of the séance," said Tony, with obvious disappointment. "You might as well have stayed home."

"Don't say that, Tony. Don't say that!" His friend's eyes twinkled. "I'll admit that I didn't get much— but I didn't come away empty-handed. I've got the ghost's visiting card."

"The— the what?"

"I'll show it to you." He opened his coat, and with the greatest care produced a sheet torn from a loose-leaf memorandum book. He handled it gingerly by the edges. "Look at it, Tony, but don't touch it."

Tony looked— and saw only a blank piece of paper. Gravely his friend turned it over. Both sides were blank.

Tony blinked: "I don't see anything."

"Well, on a ghost's visiting card what would you expect to see?"

Tony glanced sharply at his friend. "Bill, you're joking!"

"Never more serious," Parmelee affirmed. "When the spirit started touching our faces with his fingers, I thought it wouldn't do any harm to have a permanent record. I tore this sheet of paper out of my diary, and I held it on my forehead in the dark."

"What's the big idea?"

"Not a big idea at all," Parmelee deprecated, "just a thought that may be useful to us later on. The spirit touched this sheet of paper with his fingers— don't you see?— and left his finger prints on it. They can be made visible in a dozen ways. That's all."

MANY times in the past Parmelee had surprised his friend with his astuteness, with his ability to make the simplest means serve his purpose. But never before had Tony veered from discouraged apathy to jubilant admiration so suddenly. As the possibilities flashed into his mind he halted in the middle of his stride, with eyes popping and mouth open, and literally shouted his approbation.

"By George!" he cried. "What a pippin of an idea! What a peacherino of an idea!"

"I thought you'd like it," said Parmelee diffidently. He folded the paper carefully, and restored it to his pocket.

"Like it?' chortled Tony. "Why, there's no word in the language strong enough to tell you what I think about it! How it simplifies everything!"

"Doesn't it?"

"Instead of just telling Noah that he's being imposed upon, you can prove it to the hilt! You can show him the medium's finger prints, and then you can show him these!"

Parmelee glanced at his friend quizzically. '"'Yes, that's one possibility," he admitted.

"Instead of saying that some unknown played the part of the ghost, you can identify the man who did it!"

"Yes, that's another possibility."

"You can take your finger prints to the police, and the chances are that fyou'll find out his complete record from them!"

"It's barely possible that he belongs to that class of the population whose finger prints are filed away by the Federal authorities."

"What's the difference?" exulted Tony. "What does it matter whether he's served time in State's prison or in a Federal jail? Either way, you've got him. He may be clever, but he's met his match." They had reached the entrance of the building which housed Tony's apartment. "Coming up?" he invited.

"Not now."

"The finger prints will keep you busy?"

"Exactly."

Tony nodded. What would follow now would be a matter of routine, and not particularly interesting. Yet the afternoon's events had brought up one question which he desired greatly to have answered.

"Before you go," he said, "explain to me how the spirit knew my name. When he called me 'Mr. Claghorn,' you could have knocked me down with a feather."

"You gave your overcoat to the servant."

"What about it?"

Without a word Parmelee plunged his hand into the inner breast pocket, and turned the lining inside out. "Do you see? Your name is written on the label."

Tony whistled.

"There are three or four letters in your pocket, too," Parmelee added. "They're addressed to you. The adress corroborates the label."

"I see! I see!" Then an idea struck him, "If the label in my coat identified me, why didn't the label in yours identify you?"

"You go to a fashionable tailor. He writes your name on his label. I buy my clothes ready-made. My name isn't in them at all."

"But he called you 'Mr. Hudson.' "

"I expected him to," Parmelee admitted. He handed Tony an addressed envelope. "Before we started for the medium's rooms, I sat down and wrote this letter to myself. You'll notice it's addressed to Hudson. I was careless enough to leave it in my pocket."

Tony smiled his appreciation. Then another thought assailed him, Carefully he removed his hat, and examined the initial punched through the lining. In a voice which sputtered his excitement, he announced his discovery. For once it appeared very much as if he were about to trip up Parmelee.

"The servant looked at my hat, didn't he?"

"Certainly."

"He saw the initial 'C' in it. That checked with the name and the letters I had left in my overcoat pocket. That right?"

"Quite right."

"Now," and Tony's voice rose triumphantly, ''when he looked at your hat, why didn't he see the initial 'P' in it? I've seen it there myself a dozen times. Why didn't that conflict with the letter addressed to 'Mr. Hudson?' Why didn't that give it all away?"

Parmelee gazed at his friend with open admiration. ''How you think of everything, Tony!" He removed his hat, and glanced at the lining. "As you say, the initial 'P' instead of 'H' would have given me away."

"And didn't?"

"And didn't. As you see, this hat isn't mine. Absent-mindedly I left my own hat at Bobby's apartment. This is one I borrowed."

"From whom?"

Parmelee smiled radiantly. "From Higgins," said he.

9: Handcuffed

MERSEREAU gazed about the room.

His face was as placid, as dignified, as striking as ever. His large, powerfully muscled hands were folded; his expressive lips were motionless; his china-blue eyes, under their bushy brows, were focused on the distance. He knew that the crisis was near. He knew that his plans would meet with decisive victory or with equally decisive defeat, and that soon. Yet the mask which for so many years had concealed his feelings from the world that had battered and tossed him about was impenetrable, inscrutable, unfathomable.

He glanced at his visitors. If their barely suppressed excitement communicated itself to him, not a muscle of his impassive countenance indicated it. He said: "I am ready to begin."

A thrill— a tingle— an indefinable something that stretched tautened nerves still tauter— quivered through the little group of men in the room. They joined hands in a circle. They swallowed nervously. They saw the lights go out. They sniffed the familiar incense. They heard the familiar phonograph grinding out the familiar hymn. They saw the dark close in upon them, and at least three hearts out of four began to beat high.

Higgins, perhaps, had the best reason to be agitated. He had waited for Parmelee at the street entrance. He had buttonholed him upon his arrival. He had drawn him to one side, and he had hissed in a tragic whisper:

"He's signed the deed!"

Parmelee smiled. "Yes, I expected that."

The nephew gazed at him incredulously. "Did you hear what I said? I said that he's signed the deed!"

"Well, what of it?"

"I argued with him all I dared. I argued with him on the way home in his taxi. I argued with him last night— until he told me he wanted to go to sleep. I had breakfast with him this morning, and I argued with him again, but that didn't stop him from going straight to his lawyers. His mind was made up, and I couldn't budge him. The deed's drawn up. He's signed it. He's got it in his pocket this minute, and he says he's going to put it into the spirit's hand himself."

IT is to be seen, from the above, that Robert Eugene Higgins was not without his worries. He detailed them to Parmelee, and when the latter failed to share his indignation, he began to grow angry.

"You don't seem to realize how serious this is!" he fumed. "Serious to me!"

"Oh, yes," said Parmelee.

"The deed is signed and sealed, I tell you! It has only to be delivered to make it a gift."

Parmelee smiled. "Will it comfort you if I say that in spite of that the land will never go to anybody who isn't entitled to it?"

"I want the land myself— all of it."

"Yes, I understood that from the beginning."

The nephew glanced at him with illconcealed hostility. When arguing with Noah, he had been compelled to repress himself; but there was no reason why he should not say what he pleased now. Noah was his uncle, with valuable property to bestow; Parmelee was merely a temporary employee, who seemed, moreover, to grudge him the deference that was his due.

"You know," Higgins remarked politely, "you've been in town three or four days, and I can't see that you've accomplished a damn thing."

Parmelee's self-control was impregnable. If he disliked the man as heartily as one human being can dislike another, there was nothing in his perfectly level voice to indicate the fact. "What did you expect of me?" he inquired dispassionately.

Higgins pushed his face within an inch of the countryman's. "What did I expect?" he echoed venomously. "I'll tell you what I expected! With your reputation, with the lies that your friends have told me about you, with their record of the things you've done— which I don't believe— I expected nothing short of a miracle!"

"A miracle?" Parmelee smiled imperturbably. "If you wanted that, Mr. Higgins, you sent for the wrong man. You should have sent for a medium— a good one— and you should have asked him to resurrect a spirit."

With that parting thrust, he turned his back on the nephew—who debated, for an instant or two, whether or not to strike him, and decided not to—and turned toward the stairs.

It was then that a car pulled up at the curb, and Tony leaped out. "Bill!" he cried. "Oh, Bill!"

Parmelee turned to him with relief— but it was only momentary. Tony, waiting at home, while his friend ran down the trail, had all but died of curiosity. He had parted from him two days before, anticipating developments of no particular consequence. An hour later he had received a brief telephonic message that Parmelee had started for Washington.

Tony had marked time for the whole of the following day. He had tried to console himself by reflecting that he was probably not missing much. His imagination, however, was too active to let him have any solid comfort in that thought. Parmelee would not have embarked on such a trip without good rea son. It was obvious; it was transparent. The man he was hunting was big game— bigger game than he had at first suspected. No petty malefactor, this unknown who impersonated the spirit, but a supercriminal whose history was recorded in the capital of the nation, and whose misdeeds had probably included every crime forbidden in the Decalogue. Now Tony had never met a murderer, and like every respectable citizen, he yearned to be on the trail of one. Parmelee was having that pleasure; Tony was being cheated out of it. He writhed at the thought.

IN the morning of the next day, he opened his mail anxiously. Surely there would be word from his friend. There was none, and Tony's vexation increased. There was to be a séance that afternoon. He could not very well go alone, and he did not wish to miss it. Then, when he had almost given up hope, a telegram

arrived, bidding him meet Parmelee at the medium's, and Tony wasted no time in complying with directions.

He knew enough to ask embarrassing questions— and not enough to make them unnecessary— and Parmelee had the very best of reasons for not wishing to answer.

He admitted that he had identified the finger prints.

"So the man has a record?" Tony gloated.

"He has a record."

"A long one?"

"Plenty long enough."

"Well, what do you think of that?" crowed Tony. A hundred questions leaped to his tongue, but Parmelee, foreseeing what would happen, was already halfway up the stairs. 'Wait for me!" tried Tony, "wait for me!" He followed, trembling with excitement.

Noah Ames, too, was distinctly nervous. He arrived barely on time. He waved aside his nephew's proffered arm, and ascended the stairs unassisted. In his clawlike hand he clutched a large envelope, and he was careful to keep Higgins at a distance from it. When he seated himself in the circle, it was Tony whom he selected to sit nearest the precious document.

Noah Ames saw the darkness close in; he saw the faces which surrounded him melt gently into the blackness; he strained his feeble eyes in an endeavor to pierce it. In spite of the fact that his life had stretched over some sixtyodd years, the events of the past few weeks had drawn upon his emotions more heavily than had the many decades that had gone before.

The phonograph droned on; the sweetish smoke of the burning incense poured into the room. Mersereau sat in his chair counting the ticks of the clock.

He trod on a button. For an instant a light flashed upon the faces of his visitors. It showed him what he wanted to see, that they had not moved.

He groaned; he shifted his position. He said: "I think the spirits will be with us soon." Then, patiently, he counted ticks until five minutes had elapsed.

He sensed the impatience of his callers, but he was playing for Noah alone. What the others thought or felt did not matter greatly.

He flashed the light a second time. It showed him that the circle was still intact. He proceeded with his prearranged plan; he allowed a table, weirdly illuminated by an orange-colored light, to rise into the air, to execute a complete somersault, to descend noiselessly to the spot upon which it had stood. His assistant had begged him to devise new manifestations worthy of the occasion; with Omar's help, Mersereau had done his best.

He flashed the light a third time. Noah was impressed: there was no gainsaying that. Mersereau groaned and murmured:

"The spirits are here."

Noah did not waste an instant. "Are you there, Dan'l?" he quavered. "Are you there?"

Came two loud raps.

"Let me hear your voice, Dan'l," begged the old man.

A pause, then from the dark boomed the deep response: "Father!"

"That's your voice, Dan'l, I'd know it in a thousand! That's your voice! Come here, Dan'l, come here. Stretch out your hand! There's something I want to put in it."

Tony could feel the old man raise the hand which held the deed as the familiar blast of cold air hissed into the room. He heard the phonograph end "Rock of Ages" for the hundredth time— and promptly start it over again. He felt Noah's body relax as the deed was plucked out of his fingers, and then, in the dark, he heard a sharp, metallic snap, felt a body plunge across his, and found himself abruptly in the center of a grappling, battling, struggling mass.

The light flashed on and off, to show a tangle of writhing figures and flailing arms, and to reveal Noah, knocked out by an accidental blow, measuring his length on the floor.

A police whistle shrilled. A thunderous clamor broke out at the door. Axes and crowbars smashed its panels, letting light into the room. There was a rending of splintered wood, and two men crashed through what was left of the door, and into the mélée.

A bony fist caromed on Tony's ribs. He struck back, and noted with pleasure that he had caught Higgins squarely in the mouth. Then he disentangled himself from the group— and nearly collapsed in astonishment when a glance showed him Parmelee, with handcuffs on his wrist, engaged in what appeared to be a battle royal with most of the other men.in the room.

Tony's brain whirled. That Parmelee, whom he trusted, whose abilities he worshiped, whose integrity he would have vouched for, should be thus ignominiously captured was monstrous. Then his friend's voice came through the tumult.

"There's really no use fighting," it gasped, "I can't let you go without the key."

Tony gulped. There was something vastly relieving in those few words. Then the lights blazed on, pitiless, revealing, and he discovered that while one of the cuffs was indeed on his friend's wrist, the other cuff was securely clamped upon the wrist of a young man whom he had never seen before.

THE fight stopped suddenly. The combatants stumbled up from the floor. They counted noses.

Noah Ames, still senseless, lay where he had fallen. Mersereau, dignified, sphinx-like as ever, sat motionless in the chair which he had never left. Even though a trip in a patrol wagon might be in prospect, his mask of a face was inscrutable.

Parmelee, somewhat the worse for wear, was chained to a prepossessing young fellow, considerably the worse for wear, whose free arm was clutched by Higgins, very much indeed the worse for wear. Judging by the marks, at least every other blow delivered in the battle had landed somewhere upon the elegant nephew.

Besides these, there were the two men who had burst into the room, two men whose shoes, whose hats, whose general appearance proclaimed that they were detectives.

With a few choice words, Robert Eugene Higgins took command. He wiped his cut mouth, ejected two teeth which he needed no longer, and examined an ear which had been loosened in the struggle. Then he nodded condescendingly to his temporary employee,

"Much obliged, Parmelee," he remarked. "That was a good idea of yours, snapping handcuffs on him in the dark."

Parmelee grinned. "It was the only way I could make sure he'd stay here."

"He stayed all right!" exulted the nephew. "He's going to stay quite a while."

Parmelee extracted a key from his vest pocket and fitted it to the handcuffs. "We won't need these any more," he said.

"No." The nephew seemed to be in entire agreement. Then he beckoned masterfully to the detectives. "Here's your man. Take him."

Parmelee pricked up his ears. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"These men are officers of the law." Higgins explained, somewhat superfluously. "I had an idea we'd need them. I had them wait at the door until I whistled."

Parmelee gasped. "But you don't need them now, do you?"

"Why not?" Higgins turned to the detectives. "I want this man taken into custody."

The prepossessing young man uttered his first word. Tony recognized his deep, sonorous voice. "You want me arrested? On what charge?"

"On the charge of attempting to swindle my uncle. On the charge of impersonating the spirit of Daniel Ames. You did that, didn't you? You won't attempt to deny it."

The ex-ghost grinned. "Bobby, I cannot tell a lie."

Higgins disregarded the impertinence. "Take him away." he commanded magisterially.

The young man wheeled upon him. "Bobby," he said, and somehow Tony found his repetition of the name, in the same mocking tones as before, irresistibly ludicrous, "Bobby, don't you know me?"

"No," Higgins declared.

"You don't recognize me?"

"No."

"You've never seen me before?"

"No— and I don't want to see you again."

The young man turned to Parmelee. "How about it, Bill?' he inquired.

"Bill!" Tony could not conceal his surprise. But his friend did not appear to be startled.

Instead, Parmelee turned to the waiting detectives. "If you know what's best for you, you won't make any arrest. If you do, you'll have a suit for false arrest on your hands." He smiled happily and unfolded two sheets of paper. "Here is a set of finger prints this man made two days ago. Here is a photostat of another set on file in the records of the marine corps in Washington. Look at them. Compare them. Loop for loop, line for line, whorl for whorl, they're the same!"

He paused and deliberately grinned at Robert Eugene Higgins, who, with mouth open, was gazing at him with unutterable dismay. Parmelee turned back to the detectives. "Gentlemen, take my advice, and don't arrest this man for impersonating Daniel Ames. Somebody else might do that, but he— he can't! He *is* Daniel Ames!"

The young man stretched out his hand, and seized Parmelee's. "Thanks, Bill," he said.

Then, from the other side of the room, came a hoarse croak as Noah tottered to his feet. "Dan'l!" he cried. "Dan'l! Dan'l! Dan'l!"

Parmelee made a gesture which included Mersereau— Higgins— Tony— the detectives— every one except the father and the son. "Come," he said, "Let's leave them together."

10: A New Start.

TWO CARS of the three twenty train for Brewster, Pawling, Wassaic, West Woods, and points north, contained what might have been described as a family party. In the club car, Parmelee, Claghorn and Mersereau, the last two smoking huge and prosperous-looking cigars, gazed at each other, gazed out of the windows, gazed at each other again, and smiled. In the Pullman adjoining,

Daniel Ames and the future Mrs, Daniel Ames— Dorothy Mersereau, for the time being— held hands shamelessly and talked very little indeed. Across the aisle from them, Noah Ames, with lean legs crossed, and his chin sunk on his breast, twiddled his thumbs energetically in a clockwise direction, and having done that for a while, twiddled them quite as energetically in a counter-clockwise direction.

From the family party only one person was missing— the devoted nephew. Strange to say, his absence was neither mentioned nor regretted. Robert Eugene Higgins had been invited not to come along, and he had accepted the invitation.

In the club car, Tony Claghorn, Tony the irrepressible, was engaged in his usual occupation of deciding which question, out of the thousand that sprang to his lips, he should propound first of all. And lest Tony, running true to form, should spring a dozen questions upon us at one and the same moment, we turn back the calendar ten years, and we ring up our curtain on the Ames homestead in Wassaic.

The Ames family consisted of two persons, a father and a son, and they were rarely on good terms with one another for more than ten consecutive minutes. Sometimes a family is so divided because of some great and vital difference of opinion; that, however, was not the case with Noah and Daniel Ames. On all questions of major import the two were in agreement; it was an unending warfare on the subject of trifles that made both unhappy.

Noah was opinionated, argumentative, quick-tempered, set on having his own way. Daniel, being his son, had inherited the stubbornness of his father. Second generations are sometimes improvements, and Daniel, a level-headed, straight-thinking young fellow, was usually right, and knew it; but the father, clinging to the belief that age and wisdom went hand in hand could not bring himself to admit that the boy who had learned his letters at his knee had become a man, with a man's judgment, a man's knowledge, and a man's pride.

Daniel had his ideas upon farming, modern ideas, acquired from textbooks and from government publications. Noah believed only what his forefathers had handed down to him by word of mouth, and was convinced that nothing had been added to the sum total of knowledge since 1880, or thereabouts. Daniel was an innovator, friendly to new theories, and ready to try them out. Noah was a conservative, and proud of it. What was— was right.

Now two men may differ upon the details of practical farming and still remain the best of friends. Noah, however, considered his son presumptuous for venturing to have an opinion of his own and, having control of the finances, retaliated by paying him smaller wages than he paid his common laborers. Thus his own father had treated him, feeling that Noah should be satisfied with

anything. Thus, in turn, Noah treated his son, thereby both economizing and making him feel the weight of parental discipline. It did not make for a kindly feeling.

Patriotism covers a multitude of motives. Daniel, in all probability, loved his country as much as the next man, but he might not have volunteered so promptly when war was declared if he and his father had been on better terms. He found the inflexible discipline of the marines a relief after the tyranny to which he had been accustomed at home. It was severe, but it was just. It brooked no argument, but it was right. It was modern; it was up to date; it was reasonable; it was scientific. For the first time in his life Daniel found himself treated as a man, and he enjoyed it. He rose rapidly to noncommissioned rank.

When he was sent across, he made new discoveries. He was in a position of some little authority .His father might have lookea upon him as a child; other men did not: His superiors trusted him; his inferiors looked up to him. They obeyed his orders. They respected him, because he had earned their respect. They were quick to recognize his mentality.

It was very pleasant for Daniel. His horizon had enlarged. He was standing on his own bottom, and making a success of it. The apron strings that had harassed him so long were severed. He awakened to a new sense of confidence in his own powers, of independence, of freedom. He saw action, and acquitted himself well. Overnight he had become a man.

He was a little dazed, at first, when, in an enemy prison, he read the news of his own demise. In the marines many surprising things had happened to him; this was the most surprising of all. He granted that whoever had been responsible for the report had had good reasons for his conclusions. When a shell explodes in the midst of a group of a dozen men, it is highly improbable that any one of them will escape. And when the sole survivor of the holocaust had been captured and removed by a raiding party, it is quite impossible for him to inform his friends that he is still in the land of the living.

BY joining the marines, Daniel had at a blow achieved a degree of freedom hitherto unknown to him; by adding his name to the list of those who had been killed in action, he had achieved a still greater degree of freedom. He was a living dead man, without obligations, without responsibilities, without masters and superiors, at liberty to do exactly as he pleased. He wondered what his former neighbors would be saying; he would have. been surprised to learn how deeply his cantankerous father mourned him. But it came to him clearly that here was an unparalleled opportunity to break with his old life, and to live as

he wished. It did not take him long to decide in favor of the experiment. Its flavor of novelty appeated to him.

Had he returned to his own country as Daniel Ames, son of Noah Ames, force of habit would have compelled him to take the first train to his home town, to rise at dawn the following morning, and to resume his place at the wheel of the tractor which he had purchased against his father's wishes. Returning as a veteran reported dead, he found neither friends nor relatives at the pier to welcome him. Other men in similar positions envied their more fortunate comrades. Daniel envied nobody in the world, for he was at length his own master.

Through an employment agency, he found clerical work in New York. He did not care for it particularly, but the abilities which had served in one direction were equally valuable in another, and he might have retained his position indefinitely had he wished to. He did not. Brought up in the open, happiest when the sun beamed down upon him, deeply interested in everything having to do with the miracle which transformed seeds into living, growing plants, he found the close confinement which his work imposed upon him most irritating. The long walks that he took morning and evening only emphasized the sedentary character of his labors during most of the day.

At the expiration of a year, he was summoned to the vice president's sanctum, and was informed that he was to be promoted. No longer would he work in the large outer office with the other employees. He would have a cubbyhole of his own, and he would have push buttons to summon bookkeepers and stenographers to him. He would have a larger salary, and easier hours. Daniel, however, made a mental comparison between the large office which he had found so cramping, and the smaller quarters which were to be his reward, and he resigned on the spot.

The vice president had turned to him in amazement. "But look here," he had stammered, "look here—"

Daniel had interrupted. "I'm going to try farming," he said.

"But we're promoting you!" protested the vice president.

"I'm promoting myself," said Daniel.

He found work of the kind that he wished without difficulty. He discovered that Nature had not changed appreciably; that, despite the war, soil was still fertile, and grass still green. But the drive that had been in him in the old days when he had tilled the Ames farm was lacking when he worked for a random employer. It was one thing to labor in the fields from which his own ancestors had removed the stones, in the earth which successive generations of Ameses had broken and enriched, among the hills which had seen the lives and deaths of his forefathers, and it was a much different thing to perform the same work

for some stranger, who, in the course of events, would pass his possessions on to another stranger. It was disheartening, for money alone could not reward him. It was not like the days of his boyhood, when, in the pride of his inheritance, he had longed for the ability to write at the end of each furrow: "Daniel Ames plowed it." Thus painter and sculptor signed their work; thus Daniel would have done, too.

HE wandered hither and thither. When, in the course of his peregrinations, he saw that the Ames farm was deserted, his heart ached. He would have given anything— had he possessed anything— for the right to work it. He feared, however, to disclose himself to his father. Noah might not receive him kindly. Even if he did, it would be but a matter of minutes before the two. as so often before, would be on bad terms. Daniel would detail his ideas; Noah would object to them from beginning to end, partly because they were novel, and partly because they were Daniel's; there would be war in an instant.

He resolved, if possible, to buy the land he coveted and, being young and hot-headed, saw no reason why he should not earn enough to do so. He returned to New York, and to the concern which had first employed him. After six months in the cubby-hole which he had once scorned, he had cooled off sufficiently to figure out that his maximum savings, even with interest compounded annually, would not reach the required total for some thirty years. It was a long time to wait— and when, one day, he saw Noah crossing the street on the arm of Robert Eugene Higgins, the cousin whom he had always detested, it promised to be longer than ever,

Long before the purchase price, which Daniel had ascertained, could be amassed, Noah would be gathered to his fathers. The farm would become Robert's property, and would pass into alien hands. The thought was revolting, but Daniel knew that if he revealed himself now he would have Robert's opposition, as well as his father's intractability, to contend with. Robert, looking out for himself, could be depended upon to poison Noah's mind against him.

If Daniel's make-up had held the slightest tinge of the mercenary, it would have struck him that his father was a rich man, that the farm was only one of his possessions, which included mortgages on most of the neighboring farms. It would have occurred to him hat Noah, even if he could not get along with his son, would never cast him off altogether, and would, at the very least, draw upon his ample resources to provide for him. In his boots, Robert would have calculated thus; Daniel did not.

Not knowing what to do, he did nothing. It was then that he became interested in one of his fellow employees, fell into the habit of spending his

evenings with her and, before he knew it, became engaged to marry her. Through her, he met her father— a medium named Mersereau, who did not hesitate to show his future son-in-law the tricks of his trade. The compressed-air tank which provided a blast of cold air, the adroit lighting, the electrical contrivances by means of which raps might be made to come from any part of the room— all these Mersereau proudly displayed to Daniel Ames.

Daniel saw. Daniel meditated. Daniel evolved a most remarkable idea.

11: Paid in Full.

"TO put it in his own words," said Mersereau, who, assisted by Parmelee, had contributed the major part of the foregoing narrative, "the boy felt that his father would do for Daniel dead what he would never do for Daniel living. That's what he said to me."

"Dan knew the old man, didn't he?" Parmelee chuckled.

Mersereau nodded. " 'Father will do anything for the spirit of his son,' Daniel used to repeat. 'He won't do a thing for his son in the flesh.' "

"So you resurrected the spirit?" Tony said.

"The happiness of my daughter was at stake," said the medium, with the dignity that never deserted him. "I placed my professional services at Daniel's disposal."

Tony's eyes twinkled maliciously.

"You didn't care how close you sailed to the law?"

Mersereau squared his shoulders. "I helped Daniel get what was rightfully his; that was no crime. For a son to inherit the lands of his ancestors— that is just; that is right; that is as it should be. I wish the deed could have been made out in Daniel's name. That was impossible. To ask such a thing of Noah Ames would have meant to give our hand away. We did what we could." He turned and faced his inquisitor. "We committed no crime, Mr, Claghorn; we violated no law. But if it had been a crime, I should not have hesitated. I should have gone through with it for the sake of my daughter."

"Bravo!" said Parmelee.

"When the young man came to me, and said, 'I am Daniel Ames— Daniel Ames who was reported killed in France,' I believed him."

"Did he have any proof?" Tory asked.

"The best proof in the world."

"And what was that?"

Again Mersereau's eyes blazed. "My daughter loved him! I asked nothing more than that. That proved anything he wanted to prove— with me. The man whom my daughter loved would not lie to her father. I allowed him to guide

me. I did whatever he asked me to do. I followed him blindly because I had unlimited faith in him. I have had no reason to regret it."

Tony smiled. "Sometimes the heart is a better guide than the head, eh, Mr. Mersereau?"

"Not sometimes, Mr. Claghorn— always!— always!" Mersereau's voice was earnest, sincere, convincing. He was a believer reciting his creed. It had led him safely through tempestuous years. It had brought him finally to a haven. He was surer of its eternal truth now than ever. "Always, Mr. Claghorn," he repeated, "always!"

Parmelee broke in with a question.

"Having made your plans, how did you get Noah Ames to come to you?"

Mersereau smiled. "Daniel did that."

"How?"

"He dictated a note. I wrote it on a plain sheet of paper. It said: 'If you would like to learn something to your advantage, come to see me next Saturday afternoon.' "

"The word 'advantage' brought him."

The medium nodded. "It brought him as far as my entrance. The sign, "Mersereau— Medium,' stumped him for a minute. He didn't know what to make of it. But he came upstairs anyhow."

"Trust the old man!" Parmelee chuckled.

"I sat him down in a chair; I turned out the lights; and then, before he could object, I told him that the spirits had a message for him. The rest you know."

Parmelee nodded. He gazed out of the window thoughtfully. "I've known Dan Ames ever since we were boys, but at the beginning I didn't guess who was playing the part of the ghost. You might think that I would have recognized his voice right off. I didn't. I hadn't heard it in years. More than that, I thought the poor fellow was dead. Why, if his voice had sounded familiar, it would have given me the creeps— and the face up near the ceiling didn't prove anything, because there was so much phosphorescent paint on it that it was unrecognizable. No, it was neither the voice nor the face that put me on the right trail."

"What did?" inquired Mersereau.

"The ghost's talkativeness!" Parmelee grinned. "There was never an Ames who wasn't a great talker. It's a legend up round where they come from. Noah Ames would talk by the hour, just to hear himself talk. He loved the sound of his voice. Every man of his generation in Wassaic will tell you that. Dan took after him. Even as a boy, Dan had a wonderful flow of language. Higgins has the family failing. He's an Ames on his mother's side. Listen to him two minutes, and you'll know it.

"To be frank, I wasn't thinking about the talkativeness of the Ames family when I walked into your parlor. I had expected to find Well, the usual thing. I've seen a good deal of mediums and their ways. I was comparing you with other mediums in the beginning; I was listening to Bobby and Noah, and I was enjoying myself. Then a thought came to me like a flash of lightning. and I found myself laughing in the dark. I was saying to myself: 'If that spirit isn't related to Noah Ames, then, by George, he ought to be!' He was doing what I would have expected of an Ames. He was a spirit, but that couldn't silence him. He was supposed to stick to spirit rappings—"

"I advised him to do that," Mersereau interrupted.

"Of course! Of course! But he didn't— not Daniel! He'd rap once in a while, just to show you that he hadn't forgotten, but most of the time he spoke right out in meeting!"

He paused. "At that very first séance— the first that I attended— I found myself doing some quick thinking. I'm not a skeptic. I'll believe if I'm shown, but I want to be shown that there's no natural explanation before I accept a supernatural one. Other things being equal, I'll believe what's easiest to believe. Well. I found it easier to believe that Dan wasn't dead than to helieve that his ghost was talking to me."

"Why couldn't some other man have been playing the ghost?" Tony interjected.

"He would have been a professional, Tony, and a professional wouldu't have talked so much. It was an aimatcur that we were dealing with— an amateur with such highly special qualifications that Mr. Mersereau was willing to stake everything on him. And what amateur could have been better qualified to act Dan's ghost than Dan himself?

"I secured his finger prints. The marine corps identified them for me. At their headquarters in Washington, they were surprised to hear that Dan was alive. They were interested. There's a decoration coming to: him, by the way. But the thing that mattered most just then was that I knew who the ghost was, I could guess at his motives, and I could act as I wanted to."

Tony frowned. "Act as Higgins wanted you to," he corrected.

"What do you mean?"

"Knowing what you did; why did you interfere? Daniel Ames. was your friend. Why did you handcuff him, and show him up?"

Parmeleé smiled. "I didn't do that on account of Higgins."

"Higgins thanked you for it."

"He's withdrawn his thanks since then. No, Tony, I did what I did on account of Dan! I could have let him get what he wanted by trickery. I didn't. But I didn't prevent him from getting it fairly! He had the deed in his hand

when the fight started, you remember. He held on to it through the scrimmage. But when we left him alone with his father, he offered it back to him!

"Now I didn't tell him to do that, mind you. I didn't say a word. It was just the boy's natural decency coming through, as I knew it would if I gave it a chance!"

"What happened ?"

"The old man said, 'Dan'l— Dan'l— that's mighty square of you!'— and he handed it right back to him! Now the boy can walk onto that farm without being ashamed of himself— and he's going to thank me for it some day before he is much older."

"In the. meantime, Mr. Parmelee," said Mersereau, "I do."

Parmelee inclined his head. Then he smiled reminiscently...

"Noah gave him the deed— and five minutes later they were deep in a good, old-fashioned scrap. Dan has ideas of his own on how to run a farm. So has Noah. They agree that the Ames farm is a pretty fine farm, but they don't agree on another blamed thing! Before they opened that door and let us in, they'd had no less than two fights and three reconciliations. Lord knows how many they've had since! But in spite of that, something tells me that Noah is going to visit his son— and his daughter— frequently."

THE train lurched around a curve. Parmelee glanced at his watch. "We'll be there in an hour."

Mersereau raised his leonine head,

"I feel tired, gentlemen," he said. "This has been a very hard week for me. If you don't mind, I think I shall go to sleep." He made sure that a large rectangular parcel at his side was safe before he closed his eyes.

"It's my old sign," he explained. "I have sold out my business, but I want some memento of my former profession. 'Mersereau— Medium.' If it goes nowhere else, it goes on the door of my room. Who knows? I may have use for it again some day."

Parmelee grinned. "If Dan's going to help, you ought to change the lettering."

"Make it read, 'Mersereau & Ames.' "

"No. Make it read, 'At the Sign of the Talkative Ghost.' "

Mersereau laughed. "He did talk a lot, didn't he? But I think he'll have less to say after he's married." That conclusion seemed to please him. He nodded. Then he folded his hands and closed his eyes.

It was left for Tony to make the final comment. "On the whole," he summed up, lowering his voice so as not to disturb the medium, "I'd call it an unsatisfactory adventure."

"Why so?" inquired his friend.

"A trip to New York— a trip to Washington— nearly a week's time— and Higgins didn't pay you your fee."

Parmelee chuckled. "Didn't he, though?" he murmured.

"Did he?"

"Little Lord Fauntleroy got mixed up in that battle I had with Dan— and I'm very much afraid he got the worst of it. It was accidental, of course, but nearly every blow I struck landed on Bobby. By a remarkable coincidence, the same thing happened with Dan; he told me so. Higgins may not have paid, Tony, but that didn't stop me from writing my receipt on his face."

Tony nodded vigorously. "That's some satisfaction," he admitted.

"It's a great satisfaction,' Parmelee corrected.

"And that's all?"

"Not quite." With due ceremony Parmelee opened a twist of paper, and exhibited what a dentist would have described as an upper incisor. "It used to belong to Higgins. I kept it for a souvenir."

Tony guffawed. Then he interrupted himself. "But look here," he cackled, "didn't Higgins lose two teeth?"

"He did."

"Well?"

Parmelee replaced the twist of paper in his pocket. "One was all I could get," he said. "Dan wouldn't give up the other."

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7: The Red Feather

Alice C. Tomholt

1887-1949

Weekly Times (Vic.), 9 March 1918

GAYNOR KNOCKED his pipe against the rusty grate in my diggings with an awkward left hand. He was still in uniform, but was waiting for the discharge necessary now— because of an empty right sleeve.

"What's become of Madge Fenton?" he asked suddenly, "that red-headed little artist hussy who distributed white feathers so indiscriminately at the beginning of the war."

I planted my feet well up on the mantelpiece. It was good to nave the old, chap home again, since a mad old heart had prevented my going with him.

"She still lives in the building— top floor," I replied. "But she doesn't do so much portrait painting these days; has evidently lost her knack of it... Nobody seems to know what on earth has come over the girl this past year. She used to be such a sprightly, fiery bit o' goods; and now she's about as lively and interesting as a sick sparrow, with her eyes always looking as if they're having a sly glimpse of hell."

Gaynor grinned grimly.

"Don't wonder at that," he returned dryly. "If the old postal machine went all right and let her receive a certain missive posted to her about eleven months ago, memory ought to force a bit of hell into her mind occasionally."

The sudden fire at the back of his usually quiet eyes made me curious.

"Rather a cryptic speech," I remarked, feeling my way as cautiously, as the occasion seemed to warrant. "What's it mean? Do you happen to know just what it was that changed her from an ordinary life-loving girl into a kind of walking nightmare?"

Her rammed the tobacco into his pipe, with fierce fingers.

"Yes!" he snapped harshly. "It was most likely one of her own confounded feathers that I heIped to return to her.... It was from Bobby Neilson. You remember him? — that weedy little writer chap who was always collapsing into some kind of nervous breakdown in the next building.... It was sheer suicide, his going out there. He hadn't the pluck to kill an animal, much less a man, even in self-defence. He'd had a severe shock with fire or something when he was only a bit of a kid, and that, along with several illnesses, had made him permanently white-livered, poor devil! Even the sight of blood turned his stomach all to glory. And he saw it often enough over there."

"Why the devil did he go, then?" I demanded without patience. "A chap of that kind would be scarcely worth his uniform, I should think, so far as really helping in the great war game was concerned."

Gaynor's big mouth set grimly.

"It was one of that Fenton girl's cursed white feathers that sent him. Happening to be one of the many fellows favored by one, he was sensitive fool enough to take it to heart, and managed to wriggle— God only knows how!— through the medical exam

"He was drafted eventually into my company; and got on fairly all right at Gallipoli, because there was only shooting to be done in his time; and if his blind shots happened to pot an enemy chap, he never knew it. But, when blood-lust raged in the other fellows' eyes during our company's first bayonet charge in France, he crumpled, because his sensitive, skinny white fingers had been fashioned to wield a pen in the creating of fantastic stuff o' dreams, and not to master the art attached to the using of a gleaming blade rammed round the mouth of a greedy rifle, to kill men.

"I kept as near to him as possible in the maddening melee (had always liked the poor little devil somehow, and, God, I'll never forget his face, with its great eyes agonised with the dread that cursed him— the suicidal dread that made it absolutely impossible for him to kill a fellow creature.

"He proved a pitifully easy mark for the bloody bayonet of the fiendishly grinning Hun who spat out some foul word as he fell. But it was the last word the hound spoke on this earth: my own bayonet point got him in the throat Just before a nasty gash in my left thigh made me tumble in a heap not far from Bobby Neilson."

I envied Gaynor at that moment for the reminiscent battle-glow that made his eyes afire.

"It was a great charge, that," he continued. "Our fellows won hand over fist; and as they advanced Bobby and I were left behind with the other poor devils who could not take a share in the last lap of the approaching victory. It was blowing a hurricane, and bitterly cold. I managed to wriggle closer to Neilson across the snow. He was lying with his dreamer's face, pointed-chin, white and dreadful, turned up helplessly to the gray of the sky, his great-coat opened to the chill wind, one blue hand fumbling weakly with the fastening of the left pocket of the tunic. I asked him what he wanted out of it, and had to stoop very low to hear the gasping words. It was a feather, he managed to make me understand between the last struggling breaths— the white feather that Madge Fenton had sent to him. It was in his pocket, addressed to her. He wanted me to send it back, so that she could pass it on to some other blamed coward and make him do his useless bit."

"And—?" I ventured presently, when Gaynor had mastered the fierce throbbing in his throat.

"I searched his pocket," he said slowly. "Wallet, handkerchief— everything, was sodden-warm. The feather I found in an envelope addressed plainly to Madge Fenton, care of these buildings. Both paper and feather were red— all red. When I got out of hospital in England I put them with Bobby's message, in a larger envelope, and sent them on..."

There was a silence then, except for a stray coal that dropped from the grate.

"Perhaps you can understand now, why she looks like a walking nightmare?" said Gaynor presently.

But I could not speak. I was thinking of Madge Fenton's eyes as I had seen them when standing aside for her on the stairs that morning, and of— the red feather.

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8: Lighting Strikes Twice

Ethel Lina White

1876-1944

The Glacier County Chief, Montana, 11 & 18 Nov 1938

Ethel Lina White

E-text produced by Roy Glashan's Library, www.freeread.com.au

THE temperature was so high in the city that someone tried to fry an egg on the pavement. The baked air was stagnant and reeked of petrol. The traffic shrieked in competition with the din of a pneumatic road drill. Yet Hermione Heath, the young film actress, drew a breath of rapture as she gazed at the squalid street.

She had just left the Old Bailey where she had been on trial tor murder.

"No," she protested, as her agent beckoned to a waiting taxi. "I want to walk. I want to feel free."

"And you want to escape the cameras, don't you?" he asked. "Directly the pressmen find out we've fooled them, they'll be swarming back through this alley."

Hermione— it was not her real name, but she had grown used to being called by it— leaped instantly into the cab.

"This seems all queer and wrong somehow," she said in a troubled voice, as her agent drew down the blinds. "You've always tried to get me publicity."

"Not this kind of publicity, my dear."

"You mean—?"

As he did not reply, she nerved herself to ask another question.

"Will this affect my career?"

"I'll tell you that later," he replied. "There's a clause in your contract which covers this— kind of thing. That will let them out, if they want to get rid of you."

"Why should they? I've been proved Innocent."

"Yes, you've been very lucky."

"Lucky?" Her voice broke. "I wouldn't wish my worst enemy my luck. But I mustn't talk about it. I must forget."

In spite of her determination, as she sat back in her corner, with closed eyes, her mind was flooded by unhappy memories. She had been a victim of the most damning circumstantial evidence that fate could contrive against an innocent person. Thoughtless words and unfortunate incidents had dovetailed together to lend ominous significance to her discovery of the body of the murdered financier.

She had gone gaily to his West End flat, expecting to find a cocktail party. Instead, she found her host lying on the floor, shot through the heart.

The shock was so severe that she was instantly panic-stricken, when she incriminated herself with every possible indiscretion. After she had left her blood-stained fingerprints to testify against her and further advertised her identity by dropping some personal property, she ran away. Later, she was numbed to a state of mental collapse when her memory could not function properly... She had endured weeks of torturing suspense. She had lost all hope. She had gone through hell.

Today, she was free. And now— in the first flush of liberty— she faced a new threat, the ruin of her career.

Although she was only a starlet, she was rising steadily in her profession. It absorbed her to the exclusion of other interests, so that she could not contemplate life apart from the studio.

"If I'm going to be thrown out," she said, "they might as well hang me and call it a day."

"Keep your chin up," advised her agent.

Luckily, there was no further call on her fortitude. When they reached the offices of the film company, the personage who controlled Hermione's destiny received her with a smile and extended hands.

"This is splendid to see you again." he said. "Now don't begin to cry. I want to discuss your new picture."

After this promising beginning, he broke the news that, although she could not play lead, he might use her in a minor part, but her chance would come later, if she justified his confidence.

"Best to lot some of the mud settle." he said. "We must consider the susceptibilities of the public. That chap was such a stinking character."

Although the counsel for the defense had demonstrated the slight nature of Hermione's acquaintance with the murdered financier, she knew that it was impolitic to protest. She was forced to eat crow, while the chief laid down the law.

"In future, no wild parties, no car-offenses, no more shady friends. We may have to sell you again to the public. Remember, even the smell of a second scandal would finish you. And now. what about taking a real holiday out of the public lens?"

"Switzerland is quiet in the summer." suggested the agent.

"Fix it... Goodby, my dear."

Although she was dismissed, Hermione lingered to ask a question.

"You do believe I'm innocent?"

"Of course... only don't do it again."

His words rang in her cars, making her unduly sensitive to the congratulations of her friends.

The next afternoon, when she boarded the Continental express at Victoria, she felt acutely self-conscious because her departure was so purposely Inconspicuous.

THE first week slipped quickly and happily away. After her long ordeal, she was grateful merely to be alive amid such beauty and peace. No one recognized her or asked for her autograph. Most of the guests at her hotel were drifters— stopping for only a night or two.

Wearing shorts and dark sun glasses, she spent her time alone— either climbing sleep, wooded heights to reach an "*Aussicht*," or mooning beside the jade-green river. Presently, the solitude which had been so healing to her shattered nerves, began to lose its benefit. With restored bodily health, her mind began to work again.

"Don't do it again."

The sentence rang in her ears as she went over and over the wretched business of her trial, until the injustice of her position seared her sense of rectitude. It seemed to her that, even on this holiday, she was still being penalized for a crime she had not committed.

It was as though she had been struck by lightning— unexpected, unmerited, unexplained.

"Why should it have happened to me?" she asked herself. "I've done nothing to deserve this."

She had grown so used to regard herself as invisible, that it came as a surprise when she realized that one person had guessed her identity. Their first meeting took place on a mountain railway. At first, she barely noticed the red-haired young man. with bare knobby Scotch knees, who sat on the opposite scat of her carriage.

She was gazing at the range of great snow mountains glittering against a deep blue sky, when the young man spoke to her.

"Aren't you Hermione Heath?"

She hesitated, as she did not wish to be pestered by a fan, but before she could reply, the young man went on.

"I was furious with you over your trial. You mucked up everything as though you were working in with the cops to give them a case in the bag. Surely you know the elementary rules on finding a corpse?"

"No." gasped Hermione. "W-what are they?"

"First, touch nothing. Second, ring the police. Haven't you read any detective thrillers?"

"No."

"Then may heaven have mercy on your soul. You almost deserve all you got. I write them. And what's the good of me trying to educate the public when you deliberately work for a conviction?"

His abuse was incense to Hermione and exhilarated her more than the challenge of the snow mountains. Here, at least, was someone who recognized her for what she really was, a blundering fool, but innocent.

Hermione answered his questions with real relief. In spite of his blunt words, his hazel eyes held sympathy and understanding.

"What's your real name?"

"Amy Barker."

"Hermione wins with me. My name is Andrew Mackintosh. It ought to register— but it won't. I'm staying at your hotel, although you've not noticed me."

"I've noticed no one. I've kept thinking of—"

"I know. You kept thinking of poor little Hermione Heath. You've got to forget the little fool... Don't you hate your face?"

"Should I?" Her voice was startled. "What's wrong with it?"

"Definitely nothing. But I know I should get dead sick of mine splashed all over the screen."

"I don't. I'm clear on that point anyway. Film-acting Is under my skin and it's also my big gamble. I spent my last shilling in dramatic training. It's mighty important for me to cash in on it."

"I understand. In fact, this holiday must put you together again. But it won't, unless you forget everything... Suppose we stick around together?"

During a week of perfect weather which followed their first meeting, they spent most of their time in the open air. With the object of giving her no time to think, Andrew ruthlessly took the pampered starlet for stiff mountain scrambles. He made her eat plain picnic lunches, perched on a boulder beside some boiling glacier-fed river.

"You get to know a person better in one day spent in the country than if you met her in drawing rooms for a year," he explained.

His exact word was "matey"— but he looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

He did not let her relax until his last afternoon, when they made a tour of the lake in the little steamer.

Hermione watched the shores with the sensation of being in a happy dream. There were fantastic houses and gardens where late crimson roses shed their petals and strangely remote people drank tea in the dense shade of chestnuts.

Châteaux with pointed towers and flights of stone steps leading down to deep peacock-blue water; cream-and-coral villas, spun about with delicately wrought-iron verandas and flights of filigree stairs which spiralled from balcony to balcony.

Presently the residences were spaced at longer distances as they reached a desolate area of reeds and bushes, where the river flowed swiftly into the lake. Near its outlet stood a small, white-shuttered villa, apparently encircled by a thick girdle of closely-clipped shrubs, which overhung the water.

"It's like a house built of toy bricks," exclaimed Hermione. "And the green stuff is like artificial moss. It fascinates me. I can't imagine anyone living there."

"I expect it's a weekend residence," exclaimed Andrew. "Most of these places arc shut."

On the second-class deck two women were also talking of the villa.

"That belongs to a rich business man," one informed her companion in rapid French. "He manufactures chocolate. Or it might be watches. That's his 'nid d'amour.' Always a lady. He is very attractive, you understand."

Although she could not hear, at that moment. Hermione suddenly shivered, as though a brain wave had touched her dormant memory of the murdered London financier.

"Don't look like that," said Andrew sharply.

"I can't help it," she confessed. "I'm afraid of the past. But I am more afraid of the future. That terrible thing happened to me in one second— just by opening a door. It can happen again."

"It can't. By the law of averages, it is impossible. Lightning never strikes the same place twice."

"That's not true. I remember reading about a woman who had just won a prize in a sweep and the account said that she had also held a winning ticket in the previous draw. When you consider the millions of tickets, that seems impossible. But it happened... Andrew, why did this happen to me?"

"Perhaps to test you." he replied. "If we had only soft pleasant experiences, we should degenerate to spiritual slugs. These tough breaks develop initiative, resource, courage."

"But all I did was to crash. I'm ashamed. I'm so used to being directed—told to do this or that... Oh, Andrew. I'm going to miss you."

That evening she went with him to the station. While they waited for the train, she looked so unhappy, that he tried to cheer her.

"I shall be at Victoria to meet you soon. We're not going to let this drop are we?"

"I shall count the days."

"Good." His face grew suddenly grave. "Hermione. I've been thinking about what you said this afternoon. I want you to promise me that if you are ever in a fix, like the last, you will fade away at once. Scram— disappear into the blue and leave no traces behind."

"I promise. But, of course, it won't happen again."

"No. You got me rattled by suggesting it. You see, you couldn't risk a second show-up."

"No. I should be finished in films."

"Much worse than that. A repetition of the first affair might be regarded as proof of homicidal mania. I'm frightening you, but you frightened me first. So remember this. You've brains inside your head, not pulp. Use them— and don't crash again."

SHE missed him even more than she feared. It was difficult to force enthusiasm for the beauty which surrounded her now that the human element was lacking. The mountains were beginning to assume the aspect of prison walls, when her holiday came to a premature end. The circumstances were exhilarating, for London came on the hotel telephone just as she was finishing her coffee on the veranda. "London" proved to be her agent, who told her that production was to begin immediately on the picture which had been shelved owing to her trial. The choice of lead lay between another promising young actress and herself.

"I must be frank." he warned her. "Clara's their best bet. No scandal about her. But give them all you've got and they're bound to admit it's your part. Come by tonight's express as you won't have to change. I'll meet you at Victoria and take you out to the studio for the test. Don't let me down, or it will be a walkover for Clara."

When he rang off, Hermione felt dizzy with excitement. She rushed about, making arrangements for her departure, but there was little to do. After every

detail had been discussed, there stretched before her most of the morning and all the afternoon.

"I've got to walk, or I shall blow up," she thought.

She decided to take the steamer to the town at the end of the lake and then walk on to the first village, where she would await its arrival on its homeward trip.

When she reached the little medieval town, she loitered over her lunch, but, in her Impatience, the hands of her watch seemed to crawl. It was a relief to set off along the lake-promenade, lined with small chestnut trees, beginning to brown. She walked quickly and got to the village, to find the quay deserted. The steamer was not due for some time, so she began to explore.

It interested her to see the backs of the houses, or rather, their entrances. Many were impressive, with glass corridors or covered courtyards leading to the front door. Their gardens, too, were beautiful, with vivid emerald grass and brilliant flowers.

While she was admiring a border of dahlias in the garden of a villa, named "Mon Asile" an Alsatian dog watched her through the green-and-gilt railings. Having decided that she had no design on the family security, he butted the gate open with his head and made it plain to her that she might take him for a walk.

"No, my lad," she told him, shaking her head. "You're pedigree, by the look of you. I'm taking no chances. Some one might think I was enticing you away."

As he continued to plead, she weakly compromised by throwing her stick for him to retrieve. Apparently he could not get too much of this game, which lasted for several hectic minutes, but he behaved like a gentleman when, at last, she took her property from him and ordered him not to follow.

Leaving him sitting obediently inside his own garden, she swung along the deserted shore road. On one side was a 12-foot wall, topped with the trees of an estate— on the other, the sheet of sunlit water. Her objective was the river, which was boiling out in a greenish-white stream over the sapphire lake.

Presently she reached the unreal little villa, encircled with shrubs, which had impressed her with such a sense of artifice.

"It's either hollow inside and stuffed with shavings," she told herself, "or it's a block of solid plaster. No, I'm wrong. They've got a telephone there—and it's ringing like mad. Why doesn't someone answer it?"

The sound of the bell continued to whir in her ears as she picked her way down a path between willows and rank undergrowth, in order to reach the river. Soon, however, the track came to an end amid a stretch of reedy-swamp, with gaps of water, so that she was forced to turn back.

To her surprise, the telephone bell was still ringing when she came again to the white villa. It was obvious that no one was in the house and she marveled at the patience, or laxity, of the exchange. She lingered to gaze at the shuttered windows, when, suddenly, she heard the piteous wail of an animal.

"Oh. dear," she cried in dismay. "They've left a cat locked in and it's only Monday today. It'll be there for days... What on earth can I do? I can't break in. It's against the law."

Although the unanswered telephone stressed the fact that the villa was deserted, she rang the bell and knocked loudly upon the door. No one came, but she did not expect admission. Only the cat scented rescue, for its mewing sounded closer, while she could hear it scratching the panels.

It was against every humanitarian scruple to leave an animal to starve to death, yet the position seemed hopeless to Hermione. A glance at her watch told her that she had time, but little to spare.

At that moment to add to her worry, a further complication ensued. She felt a tug at her stick and turned to see the Alsatian dog waiting expectantly in the road. He had trailed her from "Mon Asile." and now— with insane optimism— had chosen this moment to ask her for another game.

"You keep out of this," she said, surrendering her stick to keep him quiet. "Oh, I wish I could get in."

IN desperation and without the faintest hope of forcing an entry, she turned the handle of the door. To her intense surprise it was neither bolted nor locked. While she was pushing it open, a small gray-and-white cat shot through the aperture and dashed into the road, evidently bound for his home in the village.

Hermione remained on the step gazing before her. Instead of a darkened interior, she saw a gleaming black-and-white marble hall, with glossy buttercup walls and yellow rugs. The light streamed in through the door of the salon, which was Just beyond. Only a section of it was visible, revealing the telephone on the floor.

She was compelled by strong curiosity to peep in at the salon. She reminded herself that not a soul was near. Closing the front door to keep the dog out she approached the salon.

It was full of sunshine, while the walls and ceiling were mottled with dancing water reflections from the lake. The unshuttered windows were hung with ice-blue satin curtains, patterned with white roses— the gilt Empire furniture was covered with royal blue-and-white striped brocade. Everything was gay and brilliant— with the exception of a man's body, lying outstretched on the carpet.

She stared at it with a feeling of terrible familiarity. This seemed a colored and almost cheerful version of her recent grim experience. A sunny room. Instead of the dark stuffy flat— a debonair corpse. In place of the other horror with his gross body and distorted face.

The dead man was slim and elegant with silver hair and black eye-brows. He wore a tussore suit with a brown silk shirt and socks. A tangerine carnation was in his buttonhole and a monocle had fallen from his eye. There were signs of a struggle, but on his mouth was the ghost of a smile— protesting and surprised— as though his visitor had gone rather too far beyond the limit of good taste.

Hermione stared— petrified by the sight of blood oozing from a wound in his heart. At that moment, her dominant sensation was incredulity, although— in itself—the happening was not altogether improbable. Any dissolute person, who plays also with souls, may run the risk of violent death, while it follows logically, that some one must discover his body. The amazing element centered In the fact that she—Hermione Heath—should be the victim of an extraordinary and almost impossible coincidence.

Lightning had struck the same place twice.

As she realized it, she felt about to be overwhelmed by an avalanche of terror which would sweep away her wits, as in the first catastrophe. But even while she trembled on the brink of panic, she remembered Andrew.

He had warned her that she must not risk a second scandal and he had told her what she must do. She must touch nothing and go away immediately.

Merely to think of him strengthened her with the knowledge of invisible comradeship. She lost the sense of being overwhelmed by Fate's betrayal as she regained mastery over her nerves. Checking an impulse to stop the maddening ringing of the telephone, she hurried from the room.

JUST as she reached the vestibule, she heard a ring, followed by a double knock upon the front door. The desperation of the crisis cleared her brain, so that she guessed what had happened. The bell had been ringing for some time and the exchange operator, when she realized that something was out of order, had rung up the police station.

The man who had been sent to investigate the mystery must not find her in the house. She glanced at the closed windows of the salon and decided that the official might enter while she was trying to open one of them. The white marble staircase was nearer, so she sped noiselessly over the thick black carpet up to the shuttered gloom of the landing.

Trembling violently, she waited for him to make the discovery... Then suddenly the shrilling of the bell was cut off as the official talked to the police station.

She strained her ears to listen. Fortunately, he did not speak in a patois, so that she was able to understand the drift of his statement.

"Herr Silbermann shot in his summer residence. The disorder indicates murder. Come at once to watch the house from the outside, so that no one can leave it. The miscreant may be hiding. No, I cannot search yet, lest some one should slip out, while I am upstairs. Here, I can guard the front door as well as the body. Stop anyone you meet on the road who is running, or hurrying, or agitated, or who is at all suspicious."

Hermione bit her lip and clenched her hands. She was caught in a trap. But there might be a way out. There must be one. She thought she remembered a spidery iron stair which spiralled from the top veranda down to the garden. If she could descend unseen, she might hide in the shrubbery until the relief police reached the villa— and then choose the psychological moment to make a dash for the quay.

Holding herself in dread lest a board should creak, she opened a door. Her heart sank at the darkness within. If the upper story were still closed, it would be difficult to unshutter a window without betraying her presence by a noise. But she had to go on. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she groped her way safely through a bathroom to the principal bedroom.

To her joy, the windows were open, so that it, too, swam with sunshine and water reflections. Drawing aside an orchid-pink satin curtain, she stole cautiously out.

In that moment of exposure, she felt certain that someone must see her from the lake. It was possible, too, that the spiral stairs were visible from a corner of the salon, where the policeman guarded the body. But although she knew that she was incriminating herself more deeply with every action, she crept down the steps and reached the ground.

WITHOUT giving herself time to falter, she dived underneath the nearest shrub. If she could crawl under its shelter to the left of the villa, she could reach the road without having to pass the open front door.

At first, however, the task seemed impossible. It was difficult to make any progress through the dense mass of interlacing twigs. She was stifled by heat and lack of air and almost choked by layers of dust and rubbish. To test her endurance still further was the additional fear of making any sound.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, she dragged herself through the hedge until she reached a shrub behind which she could crouch while she waited. It was then

she glanced at her watch and realized that she could catch the steamer only by making a sprint.

It was the last boat back to the town where she was staying. If she lost it, she would also lose the express back to England and her chance of making a test for the new picture. Any attempt to hire a car in the village would attract attention to her presence as a stranger when the least publicity would be fatal. No one had seen her come— and no one must see her go, except in impeccable circumstances.

Even as the thoughts were whirling through her mind, she noticed that the dog was nosing among the bushes, as though he were on her trail. He was bound to find her, then he would give away the secret of her hiding place.

But his presence made no difference now except to precipitate the crisis. Circumstances forced her out into the open to make a dash for the steamer. On her way she was bound to be stopped and questioned by the police. The passport, which— in accordance with the regulations of her regional ticket— she carried always with her, would be examined and her identity revealed.

Unless she could think of some, expedient whereby she could run without attracting attention, it was indeed the end of Hermione Heath.

In that moment she knew that she was being tested. Her whole future depended on her own initiative and brains. No one could direct her now.

Andrew's phrase, "a spiritual slug," stung her memory as she wrestled with the psychological aspect of the situation.

Just as the dog leaped toward her in joyful welcome, the inspiration came.

"The dog. If I saw a man running in the street, I should turn and stare. But I should take no notice of a man running with a dog."

LEAPING over the low parapet of the garden, she snatched up her stick where the Alsatian had dropped it and held it out in invitation to him to follow. She had two bits of luck, she was still wearing shorts with a sleeveless jersey— and the road curved just beyond the villa, so that any one around the bend could not see the point where she began her run.

Shouting encouragement to the delighted dog, she raced at top speed, while snatches of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" floated through her mind. "Shot and Shell."

Two men, wearing dark caped uniforms and peaked caps, cycled toward her. "Boldly they rode." She was passing them. They did not stop her, but they might be following her. She dared not turn her head to find out, but dashed on. "Into the jaws of death."

Another policeman— this time, on foot— came around the next corner. He looked keenly at her and she heard him stop, as though to look after her. "Into the gates of hell ... On ... On ..."

She had run herself nearly to the point of collapse. Her heart was leaping— her lungs felt punctured— when suddenly she saw below her the quay and the little steamer. The gangway was on the point of being hauled away, but she dashed across It just in time.

The paddles churned the water and the boat steamed away. Hot and panting, Hermione stood on deck and watched the shore glide past her. The Alsatian was trotting back to "Mon Asile" and his dinner. Under the trees, people drank afternoon tea.

A sense of deep relief enfolded. She knew that she was safe. It was as though she had presence of a day in the near future, when she was to read in her paper a Continental item which stated that the police had arrested the murderer of the late Herr Silbermann.

Even then, in the villa of the deceased, the policeman was questioning his colleagues.

"You met no one on the road?"

"No one," was the reply. "Only the priest on his bicycle and a kennel-maid exercising a hound."

9: The Point of View

Stanley G. Weinbaum

1902-1935

Wonder Stories, Jan/Feb 1936

Stanlet Grauman Weinbaum

"I AM too modest!" snapped the great Haskel van Manderpootz, pacing irritably about the limited area of his private laboratory, glaring at me the while. "That is the trouble. I undervalue my own achievements, and thereby permit petty imitators like Corveille to influence the committee and win the Morell prize."

"But," I said soothingly, "you've won the Morell physics award half a dozen times, professor. They can't very well give it to you every year."

"Why not, since it is plain that I deserve it?" bristled the professor. "Understand, Dixon, that I do not regret my modesty, even though it permits conceited fools like Corveille, who have infinitely less reason than I for concert, to win awards that mean nothing save prizes for successful bragging. Bah! To grant an award for research along such obvious lines that I neglected to mention them, thinking that even a Morell judge would appreciate their obviousness! Research on the psychon, eh! Who discovered the psychon? Who but van Manderpootz?"

"Wasn't that what you got last year's award for?" I asked consolingly. "And after all, isn't this modesty, this lack of jealousy on your part, a symbol of greatness of character?"

"True— true!" said the great van Manderpootz, mollified. "Had such an affront been committed against a lesser man than myself, he would doubtless have entered a bitter complaint against the judges. But not I. Anyway, I know from experience that it wouldn't do any good. And besides, despite his

greatness, van Manderpootz is as modest and shrinking as a violet." At this point he paused, and his broad red face tried to look violet-like.

I suppressed a smile. I knew the eccentric genius of old from the days when I had been Dixon Wells, undergraduate student of engineering, and had taken a course in Newer Physics (that is, in Relativity) under the famous professor. For some unguessable reason, he had taken a fancy to me, and as a result, I had been involved in several of his experiments since graduation. There was the affair of the subjunctivisor, for instance, and also that of the idealizator; in the first of these episodes I had suffered the indignity of falling in love with a girl two weeks after she was apparently dead, and in the second, the equal or greater indignity of falling in love with a girl who didn't exist, never had existed, and never would exist— in other words, with an ideal. Perhaps I'm a little susceptible to feminine charms, or rather, perhaps I used to be, for since the disaster of the idealizator, I have grimly relegated such follies to the past, much to the disgust of various 'vision entertainers, singers, dancers, and the like.

So of late I had been spending my days very seriously trying wholeheartedly to get to the office on time just once, so that I could refer to it next time my father accused me of never getting anywhere on time. I hadn't succeeded yet, but fortunately the N. J. Wells Corporation was wealthy enough to survive even without the full-time services of Dixon Wells, or should I say even with them? Anyway, I'm sure my father preferred to have me late in the morning after an evening with van Manderpootz than after one with Tips Alva or Whimsy White, or one of the numerous others of the ladies of the 'vision screen. Even in the twenty-first century he retained a lot of old-fashioned ideas.

Van Manderpootz had ceased to remember that he was as modest and shrinking as a violet.

"It has just occurred to me," he announced impressively, "that years have character much as humans have. This year, 2015, will be remembered in history as a very stupid year, in which the Morell prize was given to a nincompoop. Last year, on the other hand, was a very intelligent year, a jewel in the crown of civilization. Not only was the Morell prize given to van Manderpootz, but I announced my discrete field theory in that year, and the University unveiled Gogli's statue of me as well." He sighed. "Yes, a very intelligent year! What do you think?"

"It depends on how you look at it," I responded glumly. "I didn't enjoy it so much, what with Joanna Caldwell and Denise d'Agrion, and your infernal experiments. It's all in the point of view."

The professor snorted. "Infernal experiments, eh! Point of view! Of course it's all in the point of view. Even Einstein's simple little synthesis was enough to prove that. If the whole world could adopt an intelligent and admirable point of view— that of van Manderpootz, for instance— all troubles would be over. If it were possible—" He paused, and an expression of amazed wonder spread over his ruddy face.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Matter? I am astonished! The astounding depths of genius awe me. I am overwhelmed with admiration at the incalculable mysteries of a great mind."

"I don't get the drift."

"Dixon," he said impressively, "you have been privileged to look upon an example of the workings of a genius. More than that, you have planted the seed from which perhaps shall grow the towering tree of thought. Incredible as it seems, you, Dixon Wells, have given van Manderpootz an idea! It is thus that genius seizes upon the small, the unimportant, the negligible, and turns it to its own grand purposes. I stand awe-struck!"

"But what—?"

"Wait," said van Manderpootz, still in rapt admiration of the majesty of his own mind. "When the tree bears fruit, you shall see it. Until then, be satisfied that you have played a part in its planting."

IT WAS PERHAPS a month before I saw van Manderpootz again, but one bright spring evening his broad, rubicund face looked out of the phone-screen at me.

"It's ready," he announced impressively.

"What is?"

The professor looked pained at the thought that I could have forgotten. "The tree has borne fruit," he explained. "If you wish to drop over to my quarters, we'll proceed to the laboratory and try it out. I do not set a time, so that it will be utterly impossible for you to be late."

I ignored that last dig, but had a time been set, I would doubtless have been even later than usual, for it was with some misgivings that I induced myself to go at all. I still remembered the unpleasantness of my last two experiences with the inventions of van Manderpootz. However, at last we were seated in the small laboratory, while out in the larger one the professor's technical assistant, Carter, puttered over some device, and in the far corner his secretary, the plain and unattractive Miss Fitch, transcribed lecture notes, for van Manderpootz abhorred the thought that his golden utterances might be lost to posterity. On the table between the professor and myself lay a curious

device, something that looked like a cross between a pair of nose- glasses and a miner's lamp.

"There it is," said van Manderpootz proudly. "There lies my attitudinizor, which may well become an epoch-making device."

"How? What does it do?"

"I will explain. The germ of the idea traces back to that remark of yours about everything depending on the point of view. A very obvious statement, of course, but genius seizes on the obvious and draws from it the obscure. Thus the thoughts of even the simplest mind can suggest to the man of genius his sublime conceptions, as is evident from the fact that I got this idea from you."

"What idea?"

"Be patient. There is much you must understand first. You must realize just bow true is the statement that everything depends on the point of view. Einstein proved that motion, space, and time depend on the particular point of view of the observer, or as he expressed it, on the scale of reference used. I go farther than that, infinitely farther. I propound the theory that the observer is the point of view. I go even beyond that, I maintain that the world itself is merely the point of view!"

"Hub?"

"Look here," proceeded van Manderpootz. "It is obvious that the world I see is entirely different from the one in which you live. It is equally obvious that a strictly religious man occupies a different world than that of a materialist. The fortunate man lives in a happy world; the unfortunate man sees a world of misery. One man is happy with little, another is miserable with much. Each sees the world from his own point of view, which is the same as saying that each lives in his own world. Therefore there are as many worlds as there are points of view.

"But," I objected, "that theory is to disregard reality. Out of all the different points of view, there must be one that is right, and all the rest are wrong."

"One would think so," agreed the professor. "One would think that between the point of view of you, for instance, as contrasted with that of, say van Manderpootz, there would be small doubt as to which was correct. However, early in the twentieth century, Heisenberg enunciated his Principle of Uncertainty, which proved beyond argument that a completely accurate scientific picture of the world is quite impossible, that the law of cause and effect is merely a phase of the law of chance, that no infallible predictions can ever be made, and that what science used to call natural laws arc really only descriptions of the way in which the human mind perceives nature. In other words, the character of the world depends entirely on the mind observing it, or, to return to my earlier statement— the point of view."

"But no one can ever really understand another person's point of view," I said. "It isn't fair to undermine the whole basis of science because you can't be sure that the color we both call red wouldn't look green to you if you could see it through my eyes."

"Ah!" said van Manderpootz triumphantly. "So we come now to my attitudinizor. Suppose that it were possible for me to see through your eyes, or you through mine. Do you see what a boon such an ability would be to humanity? Not only from the standpoint of science, but also because it would obviate all troubles due to misunderstandings. And even more." Shaking his finger, the professor recited oracularly, " *'Oh, wad some pow'r the giftie gie us To see oursel's as ithers see us*.' Van Manderpootz is that power, Dixon. Through my attitudinizor, one may at last adopt the viewpoint of another. The poet's plaint of more than two centuries ago is answered at last."

"How the devil do you see through somebody else's eyes?"

"Very simply. You will recall the idealizator. Now it is obvious that when I peered over your shoulder and perceived in the mirror your conception of the ideal woman, I was, to a certain extent, adopting your point of view. In that case the psychons given off by your mind were converted into quanta of visible light, which could be seen. In the case of my attitudinizor, the process is exactly reversed. One flashes the beam of this light on the subject whose point of view is desired; the visible light is reflected back with a certain accompaniment of psychons, which are here intensified to a degree which will permit them to be, so to speak, appreciated?"

"Psychons?"

"Have you already forgotten my discovery of the unit particle of thought? Must I explain again how the cosmons, chronons, spations, psychons, and all other particles are interchangeable? And that," he continued abstractedly, "leads to certain interesting speculations. Suppose I were to convert, say, a ton of material protons and electrons into spations—that is, convert matter into space. I calculate that a ton of matter will produce approximately a cubic mile of space. Now the question is, where would we put it, since all the space we have is already occupied by space? Or if I manufactured an hour or two of time? It is obvious that we have no time to fit in an extra couple of hours, since all our time is already accounted for. Doubtless it will take a certain amount of thought for even van Manderpootz to solve these problems, but at the moment I am curious to watch the workings of the attitudinizor. Suppose you put it on, Dixon."

"I? Haven't *you* tried it out yet?"

"Of course not. In the first place, what has van Manderpootz to gain by studying the viewpoints of other people? The object of the device is to permit

people to study nobler viewpoints than their own. And in the second place, I have asked myself whether it is fair to the world for van Manderpootz to be the first to try out a new and possibly untrustworthy device, and I reply, 'No!'"

"But I should try it out, eh? Well, every time I try out any of your inventions I find myself in some kind of trouble. I'd be a fool to go around looking for more difficulty, wouldn't I?"

"I assure you that my viewpoint will be much less apt to get you into trouble than your own," said van Manderpootz with dignity. "There will be no question of your becoming involved in some impossible love affair as long as you stick to that."

Nevertheless, despite the assurance of the great scientist, I was more than a little reluctant to don the device. Yet I was curious, as well; it seemed a fascinating prospect to be able to look at the world through other eyes, as fascinating as visiting a new world—" which it was, according to the professor. So after a few moments of hesitation, I picked up the instrument, slipped it over my head so that the eyeglasses were in the proper position, and looked inquiringly at van Manderpootz.

"You must turn it on," he said, reaching over and clicking a switch on the frame. "Now flash the light to my face. That's the way; just center the circle of light on my face. And now what do you see?"

I didn't answer; what I saw was, for the moment, quite indescribable. I was completely dazed and bewildered, and it was only when some involuntary movement of my head at last flashed the light from the professor's face to the table top that a measure of sanity returned, which proves at least that tables do not possess any point of view.

"O-o-o-h!" I gasped.

Van Manderpootz beamed. "Of course you are overwhelmed. One could hardly expect to adopt the view of van Manderpootz without some difficulties of adjustment. A second time will be easier."

I reached up and switched off the light. "A second time will not only be easier, but also impossible," I said crossly. "I'm not going to experience another dizzy spell like that for anybody."

"But of course you will, Dixon. I am certain that the dizziness will be negligible on the second trial. Naturally the unexpected heights affected yon, much as if you were to come without warning to the brink of a colossal precipice. But this time you will be prepared, and the effect will be much less."

Well, it was. After a few moments I was able to give my full attention to the phenomena of the attitudinizor, and queer phenomena they were, too. I scarcely know how to describe the sensation of looking at the world through

the filter of another's mind. It is almost an indescribable experience, but so, in the ultimate analysis, is any other experience.

What I saw first was a kaleidoscopic array of colors and shapes, but the amazing, astounding, inconceivable thing about the scene was that there was no single color I could recognize! The eyes of van Manderpootz, or perhaps his brain, interpreted color in a fashion utterly alien to the way in which my own functioned, and the resultant spectrum was so bizarre that there is simply no way of describing any single tint in words. To say, as I did to the professor, that his conception of red looked to me like a shade between purple and green conveys absolutely no meaning, and the only way a third person could appreciate the meaning would be to examine my point of view through an attitudinizor while I was examining that of van Manderpootz. Thus he could apprehend my conception of van Manderpootz's reaction to the color red.

And shapes! It took me several minutes to identify the weird, angular, twisted, distorted appearance in the center of the room as the plain laboratory table. Even the mountainies know about him, eh?"

But by far the strangest part of his point of view had nothing to do with the outlook upon the physical world, but with the more fundamental elements —" with his attitudes. Most of his thoughts, on that first occasion, were beyond me, because I had not yet learned to interpret the personal symbolism in which he thought. But I did understand his attitudes. There was Carter, for instance, toiling away out in the large laboratory; I saw at once what a plodding, unintelligent drudge he seemed to van Manderpootz. And there was Miss Fitch; I confess that she had always seemed unattractive to me, but my impression of her was Venus herself beside that of the professor! She hardly seemed human to him and I am sure that he never thought of her as a woman, but merely as a piece of convenient but unimportant laboratory equipment.

At this point I caught a glimpse of myself through the eyes of van Manderpootz. Ouch! Perhaps I'm not a genius, but I'm dead certain that I'm not the grinning ape I appeared to be in his eyes. And perhaps I'm not exactly the handsomest man in the world either, but if I thought I looked like that—! And then, to cap the climax, I apprehended van Manderpootz's conception of himself!

"That's enough!" I yelled. "I won't stay around here just to be insulted. I'm through!"

I tore the attitudinizor from my head and tossed it to the table, feeling suddenly a little foolish at the sight of the grin on the face of the professor.

"That is hardly the spirit which has led science to its great achievements, Dixon," he observed amiably. "Suppose you describe the nature of the insults,

and if possible, something about the workings of the attitudinizor as well. After all, that is what you were supposed to be observing."

I flushed, grumbled a little, and complied. Van Manderpootz listened with great interest to my description of the difference in our physical worlds, especially the variations in our perceptions of form and color.

"What a field for an artist!" he ejaculated at last. "Unfortunately, it is a field that must remain forever untapped, because even though an artist examined a thousand viewpoints and learned innumerable new colors, his pigments would continue to impress his audience with the same old colors each of them had always known." He sighed thoughtfully, and then proceeded. "However, the device is apparently quite safe to use. I shall therefore try it briefly, bringing to the investigation a calm, scientific mind which refuses to be troubled by the trifles that seem to bother you."

He donned the attitudinizor, and I must confess that he stood the shock of the first trial somewhat better than I did. After a surprised "Oof!" he settled down to a complacent analysis of my point of view, while I sat somewhat self-consciously under his calm appraisal. Calm, that is, for about three minutes.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet, tearing the device from a face whose normal ruddiness had deepened to a choleric angry color. "Get out!" he roared. "So *that's* the way van Manderpootz looks to you! Moron! Idiot! Imbecile! Get out!"

IT WAS A week or ten days later that I happened to be passing the University on my way from somewhere to somewhere else, and I fell to wondering whether the professor had yet forgiven me. There was a light in the window of his laboratory over in the Physics Building, so I dropped in, making my way past the desk where Carter labored, and the corner where Miss Fitch sat in dull primness at her endless task of transcribing lecture notes.

Van Manderpootz greeted me cordially enough, but with a curious assumption of melancholy in his manner. "Ali, Dixon," he began, "I am glad to see you. Since our last meeting, I have learned much of the stupidity of the world, and it appears to me now that you are actually one of the more intelligent contemporary minds."

This from van Manderpootz! "Why— thank you," I said.

"It is true. For some days I have sat at the window overlooking the street there, and have observed the viewpoints of the passersby. Would you believe—" his voice lowered— "would you believe that only seven and four-tenths percent are even aware of the existence of van Manderpootz? And doubtless many of the few that are, come from among the students in the

neighborhood. I knew that the average level of intelligence was low, but it had not occurred to me that it was as low as that."

"After all," I said consolingly, "you must remember that the achievements of van Manderpootz are such as to attract the attention of the intelligent few rather than of the many."

"A very silly paradox!" he snapped. "On the basis of that theory, since the higher one goes in the scale of intelligence, the fewer individuals one finds, the greatest achievement of all is one that nobody has heard of. By that test you would be greater than van Manderpootz, an obvious *reductio ad absurdum*."

He glared his reproof that I should even have thought of the point, then something in the outer laboratory caught his ever-observant eye.

"Carter!" he roared. "Is that a synobasical interphasometer in the positronic flow? Fool! What sort of measurements do you expect to make when your measuring instrument itself is part of the experiment? Take it out and start over!"

He rushed away toward the unfortunate technician. I settled idly back in my chair and stared about the small laboratory, whose walls had seen so many marvels. The latest, the attitudinizor, lay carelessly on the table, dropped there by the professor after his analysis of the mass viewpoint of the pedestrians in the street below.

I picked up the device and fell to examining its construction. Of course this was utterly beyond me, for no ordinary engineer can hope to grasp the intricacies of a van Manderpootz concept. So, after a puzzled but admiring survey of its infinitely delicate wires and grids and lenses, I made the obvious move. I put it on.

My first thought was the street, but since the evening was well along, the walk below the window was deserted. Back in my chair again, I sat musing idly when a faint sound that was not the rumbling of the professor's voice attracted my attention. I identified it shortly as the buzzing of a heavy fly, butting its head stupidly against the pane of glass that separated the small laboratory from the large room beyond. I wondered casually what the viewpoint of a fly was like, and ended by flashing the light on the creature.

For some moments I saw nothing other than I had been seeing right along from my own personal point of view, because, as van Manderpootz explained later, the psychons from the miserable brain of a fly are too few to produce any but the vaguest of impressions. But gradually I became aware of a picture, a queer and indescribable scene.

Flies are color-blind. That was my first impression, for the world was a dull panorama of grays and whites and blacks. Flies are extremely nearsighted; when I had finally identified the scene as the interior of the familiar room, I

discovered that it seemed enormous to the insect, whose vision did not extend more than six feet, though it did take in almost a complete sphere, so that the creature could see practically in all directions at once. But perhaps the most astonishing thing, though I did not think of it until later, was that the compound eye of the insect, did not convey to it the impression of a vast number of separate pictures, such as the eye produces when a microphotograph is taken through it. The fly sees one picture just as we do; in the same way as our brain rights the upside-down image cast on our retina, the fly's brain reduces the compound image to one. And beyond these impressions were a wild hodgepodge of smell-sensations, and a strange desire to burst through the invisible glass barrier into the brighter light beyond. But I had no time to analyze these sensations, for suddenly there was a flash of something infinitely clearer than the dim cerebrations of a fly.

For half a minute or longer I was unable to guess what that momentary flash had been. I knew that I had seen something incredibly lovely, that I had tapped a viewpoint that looked upon something whose very presence caused ecstasy, but whose viewpoint it was, or what that flicker of beauty had been, were questions beyond my ability to answer.

I slipped off the attitudinizor and sat staring perplexedly at the buzzing fly on the pane of glass. Out in the other room van Manderpootz continued his harangue to the repentant Carter, and off in a corner invisible from my position I could bear the rustle of papers as Miss Fitch transcribed endless notes. I puzzled vainly over the problem of what had happened, and then the solution dawned on me.

The fly must have buzzed between me and one of the occupants of the outer laboratory. I had been following its flight with the faintly visible beam of the attitudinizor's light, and that beam must have flickered momentarily on the head of one of the three beyond the glass. But which? Van Manderpootz himself? It must have been either the professor or Carter, since the secretary was quite beyond range of the light.

It seemed improbable that the cold and brilliant mind of van Manderpootz could be the agency of the sort of emotional ecstasy I had sensed. It must therefore, have been the head of the mild and inoffensive little Carter that the beam had tapped. With a feeling of curiosity I slipped the device back on my own head and sent the beam sweeping dimly into the larger room.

It did not at the time occur to me that such a procedure was quite as discreditable as eavesdropping, or even more dishonorable, if you come right down to it, because it meant the theft of far more personal information than one could ever convey by the spoken word. But all I considered at the moment was my own curiosity; I wanted to learn what sort of viewpoint could produce

that strange, instantaneous flash of beauty. If the proceeding was unethical — well, Heaven knows I was punished for it.

So I turned the attitudinizor on Carter. At the moment, be was listening respectfully to van Manderpootz, and I sensed clearly his respect for the great man, a respect that had in it a distinct element of fear. I could bear Carter's impression of the booming voice of the professor, sounding somewhat like the modulated thunder of a god, which was not far from the little man's actual opinion of his master. I perceived Carter's opinion of himself, and his self-picture was an even more mouselike portrayal than my own impression of him. When, for an instant, he glanced my way, I sensed his impression of me, and while I'm sure that Dixon Wells is not the imbecile he appears to van Manderpootz, I'm equally sure that he's not the debonair man of the world be seemed to Carter. All in all, Carter's point of view seemed that of a timid, inoffensive, retiring, servile little man, and I wondered all the more what could have caused that vanished flash of beauty in a mind like his.

There was no trace of it now. His attention was completely taken up by the voice of van Manderpootz, who had passed from a personal appraisal of Carter's stupidity to a general lecture on the fallacies of the unified field theory as presented by his rivals Corveille and Shrimski. Carter was listening with an almost worshipful regard, and I could feel his surges of indignation against the villains who dared to disagree with the authority of van Manderpootz.

I sat there intent on the strange double vision of the attitudinizor, which was in some respects like a Horsten psychomat— that is, one is able to see both through his own eyes and through the eyes of his subject. Thus I could see van Manderpootz and Carter quite clearly, but at the same time I could see or sense what Carter saw and sensed. Thus I perceived suddenly through my own eyes that the professor had ceased talking to Carter, and had turned at the approach of somebody as yet invisible to me, while at the same time, through Carter's eyes, I saw that vision of ecstasy which had flashed for a moment in his mind. I saw— description is utterly impossible, but I saw a woman who, except possibly for the woman of the idealizator screen, was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

I say description is impossible. That is the literal truth for her coloring, her expression, her figure, as seen through Carter's eyes, were completely unlike anything expressible by words, was fascinated, I could do nothing but watch, and I felt a wild surge of jealousy as I caught the adoration in the attitude of the humble Carter. She was glorious, magnificent, indescribable. It was with an effort that I untangled myself from the web o fascination enough to catch Carter's thought of her name. "Lisa," he was thinking. "Lisa."

What she said to van Manderpootz was in tones too low for me to hear, and apparently too low for Carter's ears as well else I should have heard her words through the attitudinizor.

But both of us heard van Manderpootz's bellow in answer.

"I don't care bow the dictionary pronounces the word!" he roared. "The way van Manderpootz pronounces a word is right!"

The glorious Lisa turned silently and vanished. For a few moments I watched her through Carter's eyes, but as she neared the laboratory door, he turned his attention again to van Manderpootz, and she was lost to my view.

And as I saw the professor close his dissertation and approach me, I slipped the attitudinizor from my head and forced myself to a measure of calm.

"Who is she?" I demanded. "I've got to meet her!"

He looked blankly at me. "Who's who?"

"Lisa! Who's Lisa?"

There was not a flicker in the cool blue eves of van Manderpootz. "I don't know any Lisa," be said indifferently.

"But you were just talking to her! Right out there!"

Van Manderpootz stared curiously at me; then little by little a shrewd suspicion seemed to dawn in his broad, intelligent features. "Hah!" he said. "Have you, by any chance, been using the attitudinizor?"

I nodded, chill apprehension gripping me.

"And is it also true that you chose to investigate the viewpoint of Carter out there?" At my nod, be stepped to the door that joined the two rooms, and closed it. When he faced me again, it was with features working into lines of amusement that suddenly found utterance in booming laughter. "Haw!" he roared. "Do you know who beautiful Lisa is? She's Fitch!"

"Fitch? You're mad! She's glorious, and Fitch is plain and scrawny and ugly. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"You ask an embarrassing question," chuckled the professor. "Listen to me, Dixon. The woman you saw was my secretary, Miss Fitch seen through the eyes of Carter. Don't you understand? The idiot Carter's in love with her!"

I SUPPOSE I walked the upper levels half the night, oblivious alike of the narrow strip of stars that showed between the towering walls of twenty-first century New York, and the intermittent war of traffic from the freight levels. Certainly this was the worst predicament of all those into which the fiendish contraptions of the great van Manderpootz had thrust me.

In love with a point of view! In love with a woman who had no existence apart from the beglamoured eyes of Carter. It wasn't Lisa Fitch I loved; indeed, I rather hated her angular ugliness. What I had fallen in love with was the way

she looked to Carter, for there is nothing in the world quite as beautiful as a lover's conception of his sweetheart.

This predicament was far worse than my former ones. When I had fallen in love with a girl already dead, I could console myself with the thought of what might have been. When I had fallen in love with my own ideal— well, at least she was mine, even if I couldn't have her. But to fall in love with another man's conception! The only way that conception could even continue to exist was for Carter to remain in love with Lisa Fitch, which rather effectually left me outside the picture altogether. She was absolutely unattainable to me, for Heaven knows I didn't want the real Lisa Fitch— "real" meaning, of course, the one who was real to me. I suppose in the end Carter's Lisa Fitch was as real as the skinny scarecrow my eyes saw.

She was unattainable— or was she? Suddenly an echo of a long- forgotten psychology course recurred to me. Attitudes are habits. Viewpoints are attitudes. Therefore viewpoints are habits. And habits can be learned!

There was the solution! All I had to do was to learn, or to acquire by practice, the viewpoint of Carter. What I had to do was literally to put myself in his place, to look at things in his way, to see his viewpoint. For once I learned to do that, I could see in Lisa Fitch the very things he saw, and the vision would become reality to me as well as to him.

I planned carefully. I did not care to face the sarcasm of the great van Manderpootz; therefore I would work in secret. I would visit his laboratory at such times as he had classes or lectures, and I would use the attitudinizor to study the view point of Carter, and to, as it were, practice that viewpoint. Thus I would have the means at hand of testing my progress, for all I had to do was glance at Miss Fitch without the attitudinizor. As soon as I began to perceive in her what Carter saw, I would know that success was imminent.

Those next two weeks were a strange interval of time. I haunted the laboratory of van Manderpootz at odd hours, having learned from the University office what periods he devoted to his courses. When one day I found the attitudinizor missing, I prevailed on Carter to show me where it was kept, and he, influenced doubtless by my friendship for the man he practically worshipped, indicated the place without question. But later I suspect that he began to doubt his wisdom in this, for I know he thought it very strange for me to sit for long periods staring at him; I caught all sorts of puzzled questions in his mind, though as I have said, these were hard for me to decipher until I began to learn Carter's personal system of symbolism by which he thought. But at least one man was pleased—my father, who took my absences from the office and neglect of business as signs of good health and spirits, and congratulated me warmly on the improvement.

But the experiment was beginning to work, I found myself sympathizing with Carter's viewpoint, and little by little the mad world in which he lived was becoming as logical as my own. I learned to recognize colors through his eyes; I learned to understand form and shape; most fundamental of all, I learned his values, his attitudes, his tastes. And these last were a little inconvenient at times, for on the several occasions when I supplemented my daily calls with visits to van Manderpootz in the evening, I found some difficulty in separating my own respectful regard for the great man from Carter's unreasoning worship, with the result that I was on the verge of blurting out the whole thing to him several times. And perhaps it was a guilty conscience, but I kept thinking that the shrewd blue eyes of the professor rested on me with a curiously suspicious expression all evening.

THE THING was approaching its culmination. Now and then, when I looked at the angular ugliness of Miss Fitch, I began to catch glimpses of the same miraculous beauty that Carter found in her— glimpses only, but harbingers of success. Each day I arrived at the laboratory with increasing eagerness, for each day brought me nearer to the achievement I sought. That is, my eagerness increased until one day I arrived to find neither Carter nor Miss Fitch present, but van Manderpootz, who should have been delivering a lecture on indeterminism, very much in evidence.

"Uh—" hello," I said weakly.

"Ump!" he responded, glaring at me. "So Carter was right, I see. Dixon, the abysmal stupidity of the human race continually astounds me with new evidence of its astronomical depths, but I believe this escapade of yours plumbs the uttermost regions of imbecility."

"M-my escapade?"

"Do you think you can escape the piercing eye of van Manderpootz? As soon as Carter told me you had been here in my absence, my mind leaped nimbly to the truth. But Carter's information was not even necessary, for half an eye was enough to detect the change in your attitude on these last few evening visits. So you've been trying to adopt Carter's viewpoint, eh? No doubt with the idea of ultimately depriving him of the charming Miss Fitch!"

"W-why—"

"Listen to me, Dixon. We will disregard the ethics of the thing and look at it from a purely rational viewpoint, if a rational viewpoint is possible to anybody but van Manderpootz. Don't you realize that in order to attain Carter's attitude toward Fitch, you would have to adopt his entire viewpoint? Not," he added tersely, "that I think his point of view is greatly inferior to yours, but I happen to prefer the viewpoint of a donkey to that of a mouse. Your particular brand

of stupidity is more agreeable to me than Carter's timid, weak, and subservient nature, and some day you will thank me for this. Was his impression of Fitch worth the sacrifice of your own personality?"

"I— I don't know."

"Well, whether it was or not, van Manderpootz has decided the matter in the wisest way. For it's too late now, Dixon. I have given them both a month's leave and sent them away— on a honeymoon. They left this morning."

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10: The Seed of the Toc-Toc Birds

Francis Flagg

1898-1946

Astounding Stories, Jan 1932

George Henry Weiss ("Francis Flagg")

TALBOT had been working that day, far up in the Catalinas, looking over some mining prospects for his company, and was returning to the Mountain View Hotel in Oracle when, from the mouth of an abandoned shaft some distance back of that town, he saw a strange object emerge.

"Hello," he said to Manuel, his young Mexican assistant, "what the devil can that be?"

Manuel crossed himself swiftly.

"Dios!" he exclaimed, "but it is a queer bird, señor."

Queer, it certainly was, and of a species Talbot had never before laid eyes on. The bird stood on the crumbling rim of the mining shaft and regarded him with golden eyes. Its body was as large as that of a buzzard, and its head had a flat, reptilian look, unpleasant to see. Nor was that the only odd thing. The feathers glittered metallically, like blued copper, and a streak of glistening silver outlined both wings.

Marveling greatly, and deciding that the bird must be some rare kind escaped from a zoo, or a stray from tropical lands much further south, Talbot advanced cautiously, but the bird viewed his approach with unconcern. Ten feet from it he stopped uneasily. The strange fowl's intent look, its utter immobility, somewhat disconcerted him.

"Look out, señor," warned Manuel.

Involuntarily, Talbot stepped back. If he had possessed a rifle he would have shot the bird, but neither Manuel nor himself was armed. Suddenly— he had looked away for a moment— the bird was gone. Clutching a short miner's pick-ax, and a little ashamed of his momentary timidity, he strode to the edge

of the abandoned shaft and peered down. There was nothing to see; only rotting joists of wood, crumbling earth for a few feet, and then darkness.

HE pondered for a moment. This was the old Wiley claim. He knew it well. The shaft went down for over two hundred feet, and there were several lateral workings, one of which tunneled back into the hills for a considerable distance. The mine had been a bonanza back in the days when Oracle boomed, but the last ore had been taken out in 1905, and for twenty-seven years it had lain deserted. Manuel came up beside him and leaned over.

"What is that?" he questioned.

Talbot heard it himself, a faint rumbling sound, like the rhythmic throb of machinery. Mystified, he gazed blankly at Manuel. Of course it was impossible. What could functioning machinery be doing at the bottom of an abandoned hole in the ground? And where there were no signs of human activity to account for the phenomenon? A more forsaken looking place it would be hard to imagine. Not that the surrounding country wasn't ruggedly beautiful and grand; the hills were covered with live-oak, yucca grass, chulla, manzanita, and starred with the white blossoms of wild thistle. But this locality was remote from human habitation, and lonely.

Could it be, Talbot wondered, the strange bird making that noise? Or perhaps some animal? The noise sounded like nothing any creature, furred or feathered, could make, but, of course, that must be the explanation. However, it would be dark within the hour, with Oracle still two miles distant, so he turned reluctantly away, Manuel thwacking the burros from the grazing they had found. But that was not to be the end of the odd experience. Just before the trail swung over the next rise, Talbot glanced back. There, perching on the rim of the abandoned mining shaft, were not one but two of the strange birds. As if cognizant of his backward glance, they napped their gleaming, metallic wings, although they did not rise, and gave voice to what could only be their natural harsh cries, measured and, somehow, sinister.

"Toc-toc, toc-toc."

Talbot went to bed determined to investigate the old Wiley claim the next day, but in the morning an urgent telegram called him and Manuel to Phoenix, and so the matter was necessarily postponed. Moreover, on mature reflection, he decided that there was nothing much to investigate. The days went by, the matter slipped his mind, and he had almost forgotten the incident.

IT was an Indian who first brought news of the jungle to Oracle. His name was John Redpath and he wasn't the average person's idea of an Indian at all. He wore store clothes and a wide-brimmed hat, and spoke English with the

colloquial ease of one whose native language it was. It was ten o'clock in the morning, the hour when people gathered at the local store and post-office to gossip and get their mail, when he came driving into town in his Ford, his terrified wife and three children crowded into the back seat.

"What's the matter, John?" asked Silby, the constable.

"Matter?" said Redpath. "I'll tell you what's the matter."

He held the attention of the crowd which now began flocking around him. "You know me, Silby; I'm not easily frightened; but what's happened at my place has me scared stiff."

He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"When we went to bed last night, everything looked as usual; but this morning...."

He paused.

"Something over night had grown up in my pasture. Don't ask me what it is. The whole hillside was filled with it. I went to the pasture to milk my goats— that's some distance from the house and over a rise; you know how rugged my land is— and there was the stuff, acres of it, twenty, thirty feet tall, like— like nothing I had ever seen before. And Silby"— his voice was suddenly low— "I could see it growing."

AT this remarkable statement, everyone in sound of his voice gaped with astonishment. Had it been any other Indian they would have said he was drunk— but not John Redpath. He didn't drink.

"Growing?" echoed Silby stupidly.

"Yes. The damn stuff was growing. But it wasn't that which stampeded me out of there. It was the globe."

"The globe!" said Silby, more mystified than ever.

"It was floating over the growing stuff, like a black balloon. Just over my place the balloon began to sift down a shower of pebbles. Like beans, they were; seeds, rather; for when they hit the ground they started to sprout."

"Sprout?" The constable was capable of nothing more than an echo.

"I'm telling you the truth," continued Redpath. "Incredibly fast. I had barely time to crank up the car and get out of there. I never would have done it if the strange growth hadn't left the way clear from the garage to the road. Silby, I had the devil of a time getting the wife and kids out of the house. When I looked back after going a quarter of a mile the house had disappeared under a tangled mass."

There was no time for anyone to question John Redpath further. Even as he finished speaking a large automobile dashed up and out tumbled a well-dressed and portly red-faced stranger.

"What the devil's the matter with the road above here? Funniest thing I ever saw. The road to Mount Lemmon's blocked. My family," he said inconsequentially, "is at Mount Lemmon for the summer and I want to get through to them."

Blocked! The crowd stared at him wonderingly. John Redpath threw in his clutch. "So long," he said. "I've a brother in Tucson, and I'm going to his place until this blows over."

As he left Oracle, John Redpath noticed several dark globes drifting down on it from the hills.

THE first inkling the outside world had of the terrible tragedy that was happening at Oracle came over the phone to Tucson while John Redpath was still en route to that city.

"Hello, hello! Is this the police station? Silby speaking. Silby, town constable at Oracle. For God's sake, send us help! We're being attacked. Yes, attacked from the air. By strange aircraft, round globes, discharging— oh, I don't know what it is; only it grows when it hits the earth. Yes, grows. Oracle is hemmed in. And there are the birds— b-i-r-d-s, birds—"

There was a stifled cry, the voice suddenly ceased, and the wire went dead.

"My God!" said the chief of police of Tucson, "somebody's raving." He lost no time in communicating with the sheriff's office and sending out his men. They soon returned, white-faced and shaken.

"Chief," said the officer in charge of the party, "you know where the road to Oracle switches off the main highway? Well, it's impassable, covered with stuff a hundred feet high."

The chief stared. "Are you crazy?"

"No. Listen. It's the queerest growth you ever saw. Not like vegetation at all. More like twisted metal...."

BUT now the city began to seethe with excitement. Farmers and their families flocked in from the Seep Springs district, and from Jayhnes, telling weird tales of drifting globes and encroaching jungle. The Southern Pacific announced that traffic northward was disrupted. Extras appeared on the streets with shrieking headlines. Everything was in confusion.

A flyer from the local airport flew over Oracle and announced on his return that he could see no signs of the town, that its immediate vicinity was buried under an incredibly tall and tangled mass of vegetation. "From the air it looks like giant stalks of spaghetti, twisted, fantastic," was his description. He went on to say that he noticed quite a few drifting globes and large birds with black, glistening wings, but these offered no hindrance to his flight.

Now the wires hummed with the startling news. All the world was informed of the tragedy. The great cities of the nation stood aghast. An aroused Washington dispatched orders for the aerial forces of the country to proceed to Arizona without delay. The governor of Arizona mobilized the state militia. All border patrol officers proceeded to the area affected. And yet in the face of what was happening they were powerless to do a thing.

At two o'clock of the day following the wiping out of Oracle, the first black globes approached Tucson. They floated down from the north, skirting the granite ridges and foothills of the Catalinas, and were met with a withering hail of lead from anti-aircraft guns, and burst, scattering wide their contents. When some three hours later the first squadron of the air fleet came to earth on the landing field a few miles south of the city, the northern environs of Tucson, all the area the other side of Speedway, and running east and west as far as the eye could see, was a monstrous jungle a hundred or more feet tall— and still growing.

TERRIFIED residents fled before the uncanny invasion. People congested the streets. Thousands fled from the city in automobiles, and thousands of others thronged the railroad station and bus-line offices seeking for transportation. Rumors ran from lip to lip that Russia was attacking the United States with a newly invented and deadly method of warfare; that it wasn't Russia but Japan, China, England, Germany, a coalition of European and Asiatic powers.

Frantically, the city officials wired railroad companies to send in emergency trains. The mayor appealed to the citizens to be quiet and orderly, not to give way to panic, that everything was being done to insure their safety. Hastily deputized bodies of men were set to patrolling streets and guarding property. Later, martial law was established. The south side of Speedway rapidly assumed the appearance of an armed camp. At the landing field Flight Commander Burns refueled his ships and interviewed the flyer who had flown over Oracle. That worthy shook his head.

"You're going out to fight, Commander," he said, "but God knows what. So far we have been unable to detect any human agency back of those globes. They just drift in, irrespective of how the wind is blowing. So far our only defense has been to shoot them down, but that does little good; it only helps to broadcast their seed. Then, too, the globes shot down have never been examined. Why? Because where they hit a jungle springs up. Sometimes they burst of their own accord. One or two of them got by us in the darkness last night, despite our searchlights, and overwhelmed a company of National Guards."

The flight commander was puzzled.

"Look here," he said, "those globes don't just materialize out of thin air. There must be a base from which they operate. Undoubtedly an enemy is lurking in those mountains." He got up decisively. "If it is humanly possible to locate and destroy that enemy, we shall do it."

FLYING in perfect formation, the bombing squadron clove the air. Looking down, the observers could see the gigantic and mysterious jungle which covered many square miles of country. Like sinuous coils of spaghetti, it looked, and also curiously like vast up-pointed girders of steel and iron. The rays of the late afternoon sun glinted on this jungle and threw back spears of intense light. Over the iron ridges of the Catalinas the fleet swept at an elevation of several thousand feet. Westward, numerous huge globes could be seen drifting south. The commander signaled a half dozen of his ships to pursue and shoot them down.

In the mountains themselves, there was surprisingly little of the uncanny vegetation. Mile after mile of billowing hills were quartered, but without anything of a suspicious nature being noted. Here and there the observers saw signs of life. Men and women waved at them from isolated homesteads and shacks. At Mount Lemmon the summer colonists appeared unharmed, but in such rugged country it was impossible to think of landing. Oracle, and for a dozen miles around its vicinity, was deserted.

Though the commander searched the landscape thoroughly with his glasses, he could detect the headquarters of no enemies; and yet the existence of the drifting globes would seem to presuppose a sizable base from which they operated. Mystified, he nevertheless subjected the Oracle area to a thorough bombing, and it was while engaged in doing so that he and his men observed a startling phenomenon.

HIGH in the heavens, seemingly out of nothing, the mysterious globes grew. The aviators stared, rubbed their eyes in amazement, doubted the truth of what they saw. Their commander recollected his own words, "Those globes don't just materialize out of thin air." But that actually seemed to be what they were doing. Out of empty space they leaped, appearing first as black spots, and in a moment swelling to their huge proportions.

One pilot made the mistake of ramming a globe, which burst, and he hurtled to earth in a shower of seed, seed which seemed to root and grow and cover his craft with a mass of foliage even as it fell. Horrified, ammunition and explosives exhausted, the amazed commander ordered his ships back to Tucson. What he had to tell caused a sensation.

"No," he said, finishing his report to the high military official who had arrived with federal forces, "I saw nothing— aside from the globes— that could possibly account for the attack. Nothing."

But none the less the attack went on. Though hundreds of planes scoured the sky, though great guns bellowed day and night and thousands of soldiers, state and federal, were under arms, still the incredible globes continued to advance, still more and more of the countryside came under the sway of the nightmarish jungle. And this losing battle was not waged without loss of human life. Sometimes bodies of artillery were cut off by globes getting beyond their lines in the darkness and hemming them in. Then they had literally to hack their way out or perish; and hundreds of them perished. One company sergeant told of a thrilling race with three globes.

"It was a close thing," he said, scratching his head, "and only a third of us made it."

FEAR gripped the hearts of the most courageous of men. It was terrifying and nerve-racking to face such an unhuman foe— weird, drifting globes and invading jungles whose very source was shrouded in mystery. Against this enemy no weapons seemed to prevail. All the paraphernalia of modern warfare was proving useless. And looking at each other with white faces— not alone in Arizona, but in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles— men asked themselves these questions, and the newspapers posed them:

"What if this thing can't be stopped?"

"What if it keeps on and on and invades every city and state?"

"It is only starting now, but what will it be like a month from now, a year?"

The whole nation awoke to a realization of its danger. The Administration at Washington solemnly addressed itself to the capitals of the world.

"If some power, jealous of the greatness of America, has perfected a new and barbarous weapon of warfare, and without due warning and declaration of hostilities has launched it against us, not only do we denounce such uncivilized procedure, but demand that such a power speak out and reveal to us and the world who our enemy is."

But the powers of the world, as one, united in disclaiming any hand in the monstrous attack being made on the United States. As for that attack, it proceeded inexorably. On the fourth day Tucson was evacuated. Then Winkleman awoke one morning to find that the drifting globes had reached the river. The town was abandoned. California mobilized citizen forces in cooperation with Nevada. The great physicist Miller was said to be frantically at work on a chemical designed to destroy the gigantic growths, specimens of which had been sent him. Such was the condition of affairs when, at

Washington, Milton Baxter, the young student, told his incredible story to a still more incredulous Senate.

THE Senate had been sitting in anxious session for five days, and was little inclined to give ear to the stories of cranks. Fortunately for the world, young Baxter came of an influential family and had taken the precaution of having himself introduced by two prominent financiers, who demanded that he be heard.

"Gentlemen," he said earnestly, "contrary to current opinion, America is not being assailed by a foreign power. No! Listen to me a moment and I shall tell you what is attacking America."

He paused and held the assemblage with compelling eyes.

"But first let me explain how I know what I am going to tell you. I was in London when I read of what is occurring in Arizona. Before the wire went dead on him, didn't the unfortunate constable of Oracle say something about birds?"

The senators were silent. "Yes," said a press correspondent at length. "If I remember correctly, he said, 'And there are the birds— b-i-r-d-s, birds.' "

"Well," exclaimed Senator Huffy, "the man was pretty well excited and his words may have been misunderstood. What the devil have birds to do with those globes and jungles?"

"More than you think," replied Baxter. "Listen!" He fixed their attention with uplifted hand. "The thing I have to reveal is of such paramount importance that I must not be interrupted. You must bear with me while I go back some months and even years in time to make myself understood.

"You all remember the mysterious disappearance of Professor Reubens. Yes, I see that you do. It caused a sensation. He was the foremost scientist in the country— it would not be exaggerating too much to say in the world. His name was not as well known among the masses as that of Miller and Dean; in fact, outside of an exclusive circle it wasn't known at all, but ask any scientist about Reubens. He was a tall, dour man of sixty, with Scotch blood in his veins, and was content to teach a class in a college because of the leisure it afforded him for his own research work. That was at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

"The faculty of the college was proud to have him on its staff and provided him with a wooden building back of the campus, for a private laboratory and workshop. I understand that the Rockefeller Institute contributed funds towards Professor Reubens' experiments, but I am not certain.

“AT any rate he had a wonderfully well equipped place. I was a pupil at the University and attended his class in physics. A strong friendship grew up

between us. How can I explain that friendship? I was not a particularly brilliant student, but he had few friends and perhaps my boyish admiration pleased him. I think, too, that he was lonely, heart-hungry for affection. His wife was dead, and his own boy.... But I won't go into that.

"Suffice it to say that I believe he bestowed on me some of the affection he had felt for his dead son. Indeed I am sure he did. Be that as it may, I often visited him in his laboratory and watched, fascinated, as he pored over some of his intricate apparatus. In a vague way, I knew that he was seeking to delve more deeply into the atom.

" 'Before Leeuwenhoek invented the microscope,' the Professor once said, 'who ever dreamed of the life in a drop of water? What is needed now is a super-microscope to view the atom.'

"The idea thrilled me.

" 'Do you believe, sir, that an instrument will ever be invented that will do that?'

" 'Yes. Why not? I am working on some such device myself. Of course the whole thing has to be radically different. The present, method of deducing the atom by indirection is very unsatisfactory. We can know nothing for certain until direct observation is possible. The atomic theory that likens the atom to our solar system, with planets revolving round a central nucleus, is very interesting. But I shall never be content, for one, until I can see such an atomic system in operation.'

"Now I had every admiration for the capacity and genius of my teacher, but I couldn't forebear exclaiming:

" 'Is that possible?'

" 'Of course it's possible,' he cried irritably. 'Do you think I should be pursuing my experiments if I didn't think it possible? Only numbskulls think anything impossible!'

"I FELT rather hurt at his retort and a certain coolness sprang up between us. The summer holidays came and I went away without bidding him good-by. But returning for the new semester, my first act was to hurry to the laboratory. He greeted me as if there had never been any difference between us.

" 'Come,' he cried; 'you must see what I have accomplished. It is marvelous, marvelous.'

"In his workshop stood a mechanism perhaps three feet square and four feet high. It was made of polished steel and looked not unlike an Edison music box.

" 'You are the first I have shown it to,' he said excitedly. 'Here, look into this.'

"Stooping over the top of the box I peered into the eye-piece indicated. It was so fashioned that it fitted the contour of the face snugly.

" 'Now hold steady,' warned the Professor. 'This machine makes quite a noise, but it won't harm you at all.'

"I sensed that he was fingering and arranging dials and levers on the side of the contrivance. Suddenly an engine in the box began to throb with a steady rhythm. This gradually increased in tempo until the vibration of it shook the room.

" 'Don't move,' shouted the Professor.

"At first I could see nothing. Everything was intensely dark. Then the darkness began to clarify. Or rather I should say it seemed as if the darkness increased to such a pitch that it became— oh, I can't describe it! But of a sudden I had the sensation of looking into the utter bleakness and desolation of interstellar space. Coldness, emptiness— that was the feeling. And in this coldness and emptiness flamed a distant sun, around which twelve darker bodies the size of peas revolved. They revolved in various ellipses. And far off— millions of light years away (the thought came to me involuntarily at the time)— I could glimpse infinitesimal specks of light, a myriad of them. With a cry I jerked back my head.

" 'That,' shouted the Professor in my ear, 'was an atomic universe.'

"IT never entered my head to doubt him. The realness, the vividness, the overwhelming loneliness and vastness of the sight I had seen— yes, and the suggestion of cosmic grandeur and aloofness that was conveyed— banished any other feeling but that of belief.

" 'Inside that box,' said Professor Reubens quietly, 'and directly underneath the special crystal-ray medium I have perfected, is a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head. But viewed through the magnifying medium of the crystal-ray that insignificant piece of matter becomes as vast and as empty as all space, and in that space you saw— an atomic system.'

"An atomic system! Imagine my emotions. The tremendousness of the assertion took away my breath. I could only seize the Professor's hand and hold to it tightly.

" 'Softly, my boy, softly,' he said, smiling at my emotion. 'What you have seen is but the least part of the invention. There is more to it than that.'

" 'More?'

" 'Yes. Did you think I would be content with merely viewing at a distance? No. Consider that revolving round a central nucleus similar to our sun are twelve planets, any one of which may be inhabited by intelligent creatures.'

"I stared at him dumbly.

" 'You mean— '

" 'Why not? Size is only relative. Besides in this case I can demonstrate. Please look again.'

"Not without trepidation, I did as he bade. Once more I saw the black emptiness of atomic space, saw the blazing nucleus with its whirling satellites. Above the roaring noise of the machine came Professor Reubens' voice. 'I am now intensifying the magnifying medium and focusing it on one of the planets you see. The magnifying crystal-ray is mounted on a revolving device which follows this particular planet in its orbit. Now... now....'

"I GAZED, enthralled. Only one atomic planet— the size of a pea and seemingly motionless in space— now lay in my field of vision. And this planet began to grow, to expand, until beneath my staring eyes it looked like the full moon in all its glory.

" 'I am gradually increasing the magnifying power of the crystal-ray,' came the voice of the Professor.

"The huge mass of the planet filled the sub-atomic sky. My hands gripped the rim of the box with excitement. On its surface began to form continents, seas. Good God! was all this really materializing from a speck of matter under the lens of a super-microscope? I was looking down from an immense height upon an ever clarifying panorama. Mountains began to unfold, plains, and suddenly beneath me appeared a mighty city. I was too far away to see it distinctly, but it was no city such as we have on earth. And yet it was magnificent; it was like gazing at a strange civilization.

"Dimly I could see great machines laboring and sending forth glowing streamers of light. Strange buildings rose. It was all bizarre, bewildering, unbelievably weird. What creatures dwelt in this place? I strained my eyes, strove to press forward, and in that very moment the things at which I gazed seemed to rise swiftly to meet my descending head. The illusion was that of plunging earthward at breakneck speed. With a stifled cry, I recoiled, rubbed my blinking eyes, and found myself staring stupidly into the face of Professor Reubens. He shut off the machine and regarded me thoughtfully.

" 'In that atomic universe, on a planet swinging round a sub-atomic sun, the all of which lies somewhere in a speck of our matter, intelligent creatures dwell and have created a great machine civilization. And Baxter,' he leaned forward and fixed me with eyes that gleamed from under heavy brows, 'not only has my super-atomic-microscope revealed somewhat of that world and its marvels to human vision, but it has opened up another, a more wonderful possibility.'

“HE did not tell me what this wonderful possibility was, and a few minutes later I left the laboratory, intending to return after a late class. But a telegram from Phoenix was at my rooms, calling me home. My father was seriously ill. It was June before he recovered his health. Consequently I had to forego college until the next season.

" 'Old Reubens is going dotty,' said one of my classmates to me. Rather disturbed, I sought him out. I saw that there were dark circles of sleeplessness under his eyes and that his face had grown thinner. Somewhat diffidently I questioned him about his experiments. He answered slowly:

"'You will recollect my telling you that the super-atomic-microscope had opened up another wonderful possibility?'

"I nodded, sharply curious now.

" 'Look.'

"He led the way into his workshop. The super-atomic-microscope, I noticed, had been altered almost out of recognition. It is hopeless for me to attempt describing those changes, but midway along one side of its length projected a flat surface like a desk, with a large funnel-shaped device resting on it. The big end of this funnel pointed towards a square screen set against the wall, a curious screen superimposed on what appeared to be a background of frosted glass.

" 'This,' said the Professor, laying one hand on the funnel and indicating the screen with the other, 'is part of the arrangement with which I have established communication with the world in the atom.

" 'No,' he said, rightly interpreting my exclamation, 'I am not crazy. For months I have been exchanging messages with the inhabitants of that world. You know the wave and corpuscular theories of light? Both are correct, but in a higher synthesis— But I won't go into that. Suffice it to say that I broke through the seemingly insuperable barrier hemming in the atomic world and made myself known. But I see that you still doubt my assertion. Very well, I will give you a demonstration. Keep your eyes on the screen— so—'

“ADJUSTING what seemed a radio headpiece to my ears, he seated himself at a complicated control-board. Motors purred, lights flashed, every filament of the screen became alive with strange fires. The frosted glass melted into an infinity of rose-colored distance. Far off, in the exact center of this rosy distance appeared a black spot. Despite the headpiece, I could hear the Professor talking to himself, manipulating dials and levers. The black spot grew, it advanced, it took on form and substance; and then I stared, I gasped, for suddenly I was gazing into a vast laboratory, but depicted on a miniature scale.

"But it wasn't this laboratory which riveted my attention. No. It was the unexpected creature that perched in the midst of it and seemed to look into my face with unwinking eyes of gold set in a flat reptilian head. This creature moved; its feathers gleamed metallically; I saw its bill open and shut. Distinctly through the ear-phones came a harsh sound, a sound I can only describe by the words toc-toc, toc-toc. Then, just as the picture had appeared, it faded, the lights went out, the purring of the motors ceased.

" 'Yes,' said the Professor, stepping to my side and removing the headpiece, 'the inhabitants of the sub-atomic planet are birds.'

"I could only stare at him dumbly.

" 'I see that astounds you. You are thinking that they lack hands and other characteristics of the genus homo. But perhaps certain faculties of manipulation take their place. At any rate those birds are intelligent beings; in some respects, further advanced in science than are we ourselves. Perhaps it would be more exact to say that their scientific investigations and achievements have been along slightly different lines. If such messages I sent them had come to our world from another planet or dimension, how readily they might have been misconstrued, ridiculed or ignored.' The Professor shrugged his shoulders. 'But the beings in this sub-atomic world interpreted my communications without difficulty.

“IN no time we were conversing with one another through means of a simplified code. I was soon given to understand that their scientists and philosophers had long recognized the fact that their universe was but an atom in an immeasurably greater dimension of existence; yes, and had long been trying to establish contact with it.' The Professor's voice fell. 'And not that alone: they were eager to cooperate with me in perfecting a method of passing from their world to ours!

" 'Yes,' he cried, 'much of what I have accomplished has been under their advice and guidance; and they on their part have labored; until now'— his eyes suddenly blazed into my fascinated face— 'until now, after months of intensive work and experiment, success is nigh, and any day may see the door opened and one of them come through!'

"Gentlemen!" cried Milton Baxter, "what more is there to say? I staggered from Professor Reubens' laboratory that afternoon, my head in a whirl. That was on a Monday.

" 'Come back Thursday,' he said.

"But as you know, Professor Reubens disappeared on a Wednesday night before; and stranger still, his machines disappeared with him. In his laboratory were signs of a struggle, and bloodstains were found. The police suspected me

of a guilty knowledge of his whereabouts, in short of having made away with my friend. When I told somewhat of the experiments he had been engaged in, spoke of the missing inventions, they thought I was lying. Horrified at the suspicion leveled at myself, I finally left Tucson and went abroad. Months passed; and during all those months I pondered the mystery of the Professor's fate, and the fate of his machines. But my fevered brain could offer no solution until I read of what was happening in Arizona; then, then...."

Milton Baxter leaned forward, his voice broke.

"Then," he cried, "then I understood! Professor Reubens had succeeded in his last experiment. He had opened the door to earth for the bird intelligences from the atom and they had come through and slain him and spirited away his machines and established them in a secret place!

"God help us," cried Milton Baxter, "there can be but one conclusion to draw. They are waging war against us with their own hideous methods of warfare; they have set out to conquer earth!"

SUCH was the amazing story Milton Baxter told the Senate, but that body placed little credence in it. In times of stress and disaster cranks and men of vivid imaginations and little mental stability inevitably spring up. But the Washington correspondents wired the story to their papers and the Associated Press broadcast it to the four winds.

Talbot had just returned to Phoenix from New Mexico. He had been out of touch with civilization and newspapers and it was with a feeling of stunned amazement that he learned of the evacuation of Tucson and Winkleman and the wiping out of Oracle. Reading Milton Baxter's incredible story he leapt to his feet with an oath. Toc-toc! Why, that was the sound the strange birds had uttered in the hills back of Oracle. And there was the noise of machinery coming from the old shaft.

Full of excitement he lost no time in seeking an interview with the military commander whose headquarters were located in Phoenix and related to him what Manuel and himself had witnessed and heard that day at the abandoned mine. Manuel corroborated his tale. The commander was more than troubled and doubtful.

"God knows we cannot afford to pass up an opportunity of wiping out the enemy. If you will indicate on a map where the old shaft is we will bomb it from the air."

But Talbot shook his head.

"Your planes would have a tough job hitting a spot as small as that from the air. Besides, a direct hit might only close up the shaft and not destroy the workings underground. If the enemy be the creatures Milton Baxter says they

are, what is to prevent them from digging their way out and resuming the attack?"

"Then we will land troops in there somehow and overwhelm them with— "

Talbot interrupted. "Pardon me, General, but the enemy would have no difficulty in spotting such a maneuver. What chance would your soldiers have against a shower of jungle seed? You would only be sending them to destruction. No, the only way is for someone familiar with those old underground diggings to enter them, locate the birds and the machines and blow them up."

"But who—"

"Myself. Listen. This is the plan. About five years ago my company mined for copper and other ores about a half mile above the Wiley claim. I was in charge of operations. That is how I know the ground so well. One of our northern leads broke through into a tunnel of the abandoned mine. When copper prices were shot to hell in the depression of 1930 we quit taking out ore; but when I went through the place eighteen months ago it was still possible to crawl from one mine to another. Of course earth and rock may have fallen since then, but I don't believe the way is yet blocked. If I were dropped in that vicinity at night with another man and the necessary tools and explosives...."

The general thought swiftly.

"An auto-gyroscope could land you all right. There's one here now. But what about the second man to accompany you?"

Manuel said quickly, "I'm going with the boss."

"You, Manuel," Talbot said roughly. "Don't be a fool. If anything should happen to me— well, I've lived my life; but you're only a kid."

Manuel's face set stubbornly. "An experienced mining man you need, is it not? In case there should be difficulties. And I am experienced. Besides, señores," he said simply, "my wife and child are somewhere in those mountains ... above Oracle...."

Talbot gripped his hand in quick sympathy. "All right, Manuel; come if you like."

A MOONLESS sky hung above them as they swung over the dark and jungle-engulfed deserted city of Tucson, a sky blazing with the clarity of desert stars, and to the south and west shot through with the beams of great searchlights. Flying at a lofty altitude to avoid contact with drifting globes or betrayal of their coming with no lights showing aboard their craft save those carefully screened and focused on the instrument board, it was hard to realize

that the fate of America, perhaps of the world, hung on the efforts of two puny individuals.

Everything seemed unreal, ghost-like, and suddenly the strangeness of it all came over Talbot and he felt afraid. The noiseless engine made scarcely a sound; the distant rumble of gunfire sounded like low and muttering thunder. They had come by way of Tucson so as to pick up a ten-gallon tube of concentrated explosive gas at the military camp in the Tucson mountains.

"This gas," the general had assured them, "has been secretly developed by the chemical branch of the War Department and is more powerful than TNT or nitro-glycerin. It is odorless, harmless to breathe and exploded by a wireless-radio device."

He had showed them how to manipulate the radio device, and explained that in the metal tube was a tiny chamber from which gas could not escape, and a receiving-detonating cap. "If you can introduce the tube into the underground galleries where you suspect the enemy's headquarters to be, allow the contents to escape for ten minutes, and a mile distant you can blow the mine and all in it to destruction. And you needn't be afraid of anything escaping alive," he had added grimly.

TALBOT thought of his words as the dark and silent world slid by. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Eleven-fifteen. The moon rose at eleven-twenty-four. He studied the map. High over Mount Lemmon the craft soared. He touched the army pilot's arm. "All right," he said, "throttle her down." Their speed decreased. "Lower."

Swiftly they sank, until the dark bulk of hills and trees lay blackly beneath; so near as to seem within the touch of a hand. Though he strained his ears, no alien sound came wafting upward. "Keep circling here," he directed the pilot. "The moon'll be up in a minute and then we can be sure of where we are." The pilot nodded. He was a phlegmatic young man. Not once during the trip had he uttered a word.

The east glowed as if with red fire. Many a time before had Talbot watched the moon rise, but never under stranger circumstances. Now the night was illuminated with mellow glory. "Hit the nail on the head," he whispered. "Do you see that spot over there? To the left, yes. Can you land us there?"

Without a word the pilot swung for the clearance. It was a close thing, requiring delicate maneuvering, and only an auto-gyroscope could have made it without crashing. Hurriedly Manuel and Talbot unloaded their gear.

"All right," said Talbot to the pilot. "No need to wait for us. If we are successful, we'll send out the wireless signal agreed on, and if we aren't...." He

shrugged his shoulders. "But tell the General to be sure and allow us the time stipulated on before undertaking another attack."

STANDING there on the bleak hillside, watching the auto-gyroscope run ahead for a few yards and then take the air, Talbot experienced a feeling of desolation. Now he and Manuel were alone, cut off from their own kind by barriers of impregnable jungle. And yet on that lonely hillside there were no signs of an enemy. For a moment he wondered if he weren't asleep, dreaming; if he wouldn't soon awake to find that all this was nothing but a nightmare.

But Manuel gathering up the tools aroused him from such thoughts. Not without difficulty were the necessary things conveyed to the abandoned mine back of the old Wiley claim. Their course lay along the bottom of a dry creek, over a ridge, and so to the shaft half-way down the side of a hill. A second trip had to be made to bring the gas tube.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Manuel stood at the foot of the four-hundred-foot hole and signaled up that the air was good. Talbot lowered the tools to him, and the gas container, and lastly went down himself. As already stated, Talbot had explored the underground workings of the mine not eighteen months before. Picking out the main tunnel and keeping a close watch for rattlers with electric torches, the two men went cautiously ahead. In places earth had fallen and had to be cleared away, but the formation for the most part was a soft rock and shale. They went slowly, for fear of starting slides.

At a spot taking an abrupt turn— and it was here that the newer tunnel had broken through into the older gallery of the Wiley claim— Manuel caught swiftly at Talbot's arm. "What is that?" To straining ears came the unmistakable throb of machinery. They snapped off their torches and crouched in Stygian darkness. Not a ray of light was to be seen. Talbot knew that in following the ore stratum, the Wiley gallery took several twists. Laboriously he and Manuel advanced with the gas tube. It was stiflingly close. He counted the turns, one, two, three. Now the roar of machinery was a steady reverberation that shook the tunnel. He whispered to Manuel:

"Go back and wait for me at the mouth of the shaft. Only one of us must risk taking the gas tube any nearer the enemy. Here, take my watch. It is now two-forty-five. If I don't rejoin you by four o'clock touch off the explosive."

Manuel started to protest. "Do as I say," commanded Talbot. "The fate of the world is at stake. Give me an hour; but no longer— remember!"

LEFT alone in the clammy darkness Talbot wiped the sweat from his face. Grabbing one end of the rope sling in which the tube was fastened, he pulled it

ahead. There was a certain amount of unavoidable noise; rock rattled, earth fell; but he reasoned shrewdly enough that the roar of the machinery would drown this. Beyond a crevice created by a cave-in he saw an intense light play weirdly. He squirmed through the crevice and pulled the tube after him.

His mind reconstructed the mine ahead. He recollected that when the lead of this mine had petered out, the owners had begun to sink the shaft deeper into the earth before abandoning the mine. This meant that the foot of the shaft, with the addition of an encroaching twenty feet of the southern gallery, was deeper by some several yards than the floor of the tunnel in which he stood. Here was the logical place to set the gas tube, nose pointed ahead.

With trembling fingers he loosened the screwed-in nose of the tube with a wrench. A slight hiss told of the deadly gas's escape. It would inevitably flow towards the shaft, drawn by the slight suction of machinery, following the easiest direction of expansion. Now Talbot's work was done, and if he had immediately retreated all would have been well, but the weird light fascinated him. Here he was, one man in the bowels of earth pitting his strength, his ingenuity against something incredible, unbelievable. Beings from an atomic universe, from a world buried within the atom; beings attacking his own earth with uncanny methods of destruction. Oh, it was impossible, absurd, but he must look at them, he must see.

Scarcely daring to breathe, he squirmed, he crawled, and suddenly he saw. He was looking down into an underground crypt flooded with brilliant light. That crypt had been altered out of all recognition, its greater expanse of roof supported with massive pillars, the light screened away from the shaft. But it was not all this which riveted his staring eyes. No— it was the machines; strange, twisted things, glowing, pulsing, and— in the light of his knowledge— menacing and sinister.

TALBOT gasped. Almost at once he observed the birds, twelve of them, two standing in front of what appeared to be a great square of polished crystal, wearing metal caps and goggles, heads cocked forward intently. The others also perched in front of odd machines like graven images. That was the uncanny thing about the birds: they appeared to be doing nothing. Only the occasional jerk of a head, the filming of a hard golden eye, gave them a semblance of life. But, none the less, there could be no mistaking the fact that they were the guiding, the directing geniuses back of all the pulsing, throbbing mechanisms.

Half mesmerized by the sight, forgetful of time and place, Talbot leaned forward in awe. There was a great funnel, a shallow cabinet, and out of the cabinet poured an intense reddish beam, and out of the beam....

It was a minute before he understood, and then comprehension came to him. Those dark spots shooting from the cabinet, no larger than peas, were the mysterious drifting globes whose scattered seed was fast covering miles of Arizonian soil with impenetrable jungle. From a universe in a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head, from a sub-atomic world, the weapons of an alien intelligence were ruthlessly being hurled against man, to conquer, to destroy him.

And now it was made plain to him why the drifting globes had seemed to materialize out of thin air. Being infinitesimally small parts of an atom, these globes were released from the cabinet and soon assumed the size of peas; they were guided across the crypt, up the old Wiley shaft, and high in the air, somewhere in space, enlarged to immense proportions. How? Talbot could not guess. By some manipulation of science and machinery beyond that of earth.

Engrossed, he moved an inch forward, craned his head, and in that moment it happened. Beneath his weight a section of earth and rock crumbled, cracked, slid forward, and he plunged headlong to the floor below, striking his skull with stunning force!

HE came to himself, staring up into the dour-looking face of a tall man. He recollected pitching forward among the birds and the machines. But the birds and the machines had disappeared and he was lying in an odd room without windows but lit with a soft radiance. Bewildered, he sat up.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The man's beard looked straggly, untrimmed.

"My name," he said, "is Reubens— Professor Reubens."

Professor Reubens! Talbot gasped. "Not the scientist who disappeared?"

"Yes— as you've disappeared."

"What!"

"Through the machine."

It was a moment before Talbot understood. "You mean...."

"That you are a prisoner in a sub-atomic world."

Talbot now realized with startling clearness what had happened to him. When he had fallen into the crypt the weird birds had directly placed him in the cabinet and transported him to their own world. In other words, he and Reubens and everything he saw about him were infinitely small creatures in an atom-world. He and the Professor were trapped! And when Manuel blew up the only means of return....

"How long have I been here?" Talbot asked hoarsely.

"Five minutes at the most."

Then, at the shortest, the way to earth would exist twenty minutes longer. Twenty minutes.... Incoherently he told Reubens of what had happened in Arizona since his disappearance, of his own misadventure.

"Aye," said the Professor, "I knew as much. Nor do these inhuman birds intend stopping with the use of seed globes. More devilish weapons than that they plan using against earth. Oh, they are fiends, fiends! Already have they wiped out civilization and intelligent life on other planets in this sub-atomic system and introduced their own."

HE stopped, shuddering. "Nor is it to be wondered at that no birds were seen after the first attack on Oracle," he went on. "They do not fight in person, as do we ourselves, but through proxy, directing machines from centers of control. In powers of destruction, they are immeasurably ahead of man. Thank God you discovered their headquarters in the deserted mine and have spread the gas for its destruction. But the rage of the birds at such a defeat will be terrible. They will undoubtedly torture me in an effort to make me reveal the basis of my invention so that they can resume the attack on earth. So we must escape."

"But how— where?"

"I have thought that out. It is one chance in a thousand. Undoubtedly we will be killed. But that is better than being tortured or living in this world. Look."

He held up a pearl-handled pen-knife. "The birds are smart, all right, but they don't quite understand clothes, wearing none themselves. They found your revolver, but overlooked this."

"Of what good is it?"

"To cut our way out of this cell."

Talbot laughed incredulously. The walls of the room were smooth, and hard to the touch. "They're as solid as concrete," he said.

"But cut like cheese under a steel blade. I found that out. Watch."

To Talbot's amazement the point of the penknife sank into the wall and in a moment a section of it was gouged out. The professor said tensely, "I've been months in this place, been taken back and forth, and know the lay of the land. This room is in a great building that houses the laboratory from which the attack against earth is being launched. Would you believe it, only the great scientist who picked up my messages and helped me perfect my invention, and a few of his assistants, are concerned in that attack, and they will be congregated at the machines. Follow me, and whatever I command, do it promptly."

THE Professor had been working feverishly as he spoke, and now he and Talbot crawled through the hole he had made in the wall and found themselves in a long gloomy corridor. "Quick," Reubens whispered.

They darted down the passageway. Talbot had only time to see that the gleaming sides of the corridor were beveled and etched with strange designs, before they came to its end and where a curious device like a huge five-pointed star was revolving noiselessly, half sunk in a great hole in the floor. Without hesitation the Professor stepped onto one of the flat-tipped star-points as it came level with where they stood and Talbot did the same. Up, turned the star-point, to a dizzy height, and over, but the tip swung on ball-bearings, maintaining its passengers in a perpendicular position, and from its highest point of elevation descended to another floor far below, where they disembarked.

The huge revolving star-wheel was nothing but an ingenious movable staircase. But the Professor gave Talbot no time to marvel, nor did the latter try to linger. The corridor below was wider, more richly beveled and carved, and the statue of an heroic bird stood perched in the center of it. The lighting was soft and mellow, but Talbot could perceive no windows or globes. Suddenly from an open doorway hopped a bird. There was no chance to avoid it. Its wings were spread and from its parted bill came a harsh cry, "Toc-toc, toc-toc!"

KNIFE in one hand, the Professor hurled himself forward and caught the bird in the grip of the other. Instantly from the doorway sprang a monstrous mechanism on stilts, flexible tentacles of metal reaching out and wrapping themselves around the Professor. Talbot leaped to the Professor's assistance. The mechanism fought like a live thing. In vain he strove to wrench the tentacles free of the Professor. One of them lashed out and took him by the thighs in a crushing grasp. But the Professor had the bird by the throat. Both of his hands were free. Back, he forced its head, back. The mechanism seemed to falter in the attack, as if bewildered. Across the exposed throat the Professor drew the gleaming blade. Flesh, tendons and arteries gave, blood spurted, and in the same moment the tentacles fell away from Talbot and the Professor and withdrew with a dull clang. The Professor released the bird and it dropped to the floor.

"It is the birds' mentality that directs those mechanisms," said the Professor, pointing to the now harmless machine.

Apparently the brief but terrific battle had passed unnoticed, no alarm being given. Now the corridor twisted. The two men came to where a deep well was sunk in the floor. To one side a star-wheel revolved smoothly. Out of

the depths came the steady throb of machinery. Cautiously peering over the edge, Talbot saw a sight he would never forget.

HE did not need the Professor's whispered words to tell him that here was the source of the deadly attack being waged against earth. Motionless birds perched in front of bizarre machines; lights waxed and waned; a cannon-like device, or funnel, shot a column of light into a screen, and through the column of light moved a steady procession of round objects the size of plums.

"The drifting globes being shot through to earth," whispered the Professor, "and our only hope. Listen, the birds are intent on their machines, their backs to the star-wheel. We will descend, throw ourselves into the column of light, seize hold of a globe, and...."

He did not need to finish. Talbot understood in a flash. They would be dragged to their own world by the weapons hurled at it.

"Of course that column of light may kill us," went on the Professor tensely. "Or we may be blown up on the other side. Your Mexican friend hasn't touched off that explosive gas yet, because— But we've not a moment to lose. Follow me."

The tip of the star-wheel went up, over, descended. The blood was roaring in Talbot's ears. "Now!" hissed the Professor. "Now!" Together they rushed forward. Talbot's foot slipped. The heart leaped into his throat. He never remembered reaching the column of light; but suddenly he was in it, blinded, dazed. His clutching hands closed on something small and hard.

The laboratory was a pinwheel going round and round. Through a sea of darkness he floated. A distant glow grew, expanded, became the crypt in the old Wiley mine. A moment he glimpsed the gleaming pillars, the pulsing machines, the startled birds, and then— Oh, it was incredible, impossible, but the dark, crumbling walls of the old shaft were around him; the globe in his hand no larger than a pea was lifting him towards life and safety.

He wanted to shout, to sing, but even as the pale stars fell athwart his upturned face, even as the cool mountain air smote his fevered brow, the dark earth erupted beneath his feet, a whirlwind of smoke and wind beat and buffeted him, and, in the midst of an overwhelming noise, consciousness was blotted out!

It was bright daylight when Talbot regained his senses. Propped against a great rock the Professor regarded him whimsically. Reubens looked badly bruised and battered; one arm hung loosely at his side. Talbot's head ached and he knew that a leg was broken.

"Yes," said the Professor, "we got through just in time— a few seconds before the explosive gas was touched off. Thank God, my invention has been destroyed. The world is safe."

Yes, the world was safe. Talbot sank back with a sigh of relief. Overhead a white plane was dipping toward earth.

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11: No Escape from Destiny

Arthur Leo Zagat

1896–1949

Startling Stories, May 1948

Arthur Leo Zagat

1: New Projector

THE room was like a tomb. There were only the gray walls, the gray floor and ceiling.

There was only the rasp of my irate breathing as I stood with my back against the locked door, waiting for something unguessable to happen.

The melodramatic mystery with which Malvin Parker surrounds his demonstration of each new invention has irritated me ever since the fall midnight in 1952. This was when he locked the door of the cubbyhole we shared at Tech U., produced what seemed to be an ordinary dinner plate somewhat dirtier than the hundreds we washed every day in the Commons' steamy kitchen and with no other tool but his fingernails, stripped a thin film from it to display it clean and sparkling as if it had just come from the tubs.

That was the first piece ever made of the laminated tableware that has emancipated the world's housewives from the postprandial sink. On that plate, and a hundred-odd other products of Parker's fecund brain, were founded the vast Loring Enterprises and my own not inconsiderable fortune. The best piece of business I've ever done was to sign him up, that very night, to the contract by which I engaged to support him and his dependents for fife in exchange for a blanket assignment of all his past and future patents.

Best for Dr. Malvin Parker as well as for me. Were it not for Billingsley Loring's genius at industrial promotion, Parker would be just another crackpot inventor wearing out chairs in one office anteroom after another.

Yes, for well over a quarter-century I've found it profitable to humor his whims and so when he challenged me to make it impossible for anyone to

enter this room in his laboratory-dwelling, I proceeded to do so without asking the questions I knew he'd refuse to answer.

There were no windows, of course, and the ventilating outlets were screened with fine wire mesh welded in place. I had my men strip the chamber to its structural plasticrete and spray all its surfaces with transparent Loring Instant-Dry Quikenam. The single door was fitted with another of Parker's devices, a phonolock which I myself set to a keyword I confided to no one. It opened inward, moreover, so that with my back planted against it, no one could enter without pushing me aside.

In the harsh glare of the cold-light strip edging the ceiling, the uniform grayness robbed the room of shape and dimension. It was an illimitable, terrifying vastness. It closed in on me so tightly I could not move, could scarcely breathe. If only there were some detail; even only a shadow for my eyes to seize upon. If only there were some sound—

There was sound, a sourceless drone barely audible. There was a shadow; the shadow of a shadow so tenuous I could not make out if it was right on top of me, on the opposite wall or in between.

Malvin Parker stood in the center of the room! He couldn't possibly have gotten in here. He was here, undeniably, his great grizzled head hunched forward on the habitually bowed shoulders of his bearlike hulk, a triumphant smile flickering in the deep-sunk dark pools of his eyes. He— The answer came to me. "Oh, no, Mal Parker. You can't fool with a tri-dimensional video image of yourself."

"I suppose not," his projected voice sighed but on his pictured face that smile of his deepened. "I wouldn't try."

The apparition stepped forward, grabbed my forearm with gnarled and very tangible fingers.

"Does that feel like a video image?"

"Urggh!" I jerked loose, butted him with my shoulder, so hard that despite his greater height and weight he staggered side-ward. My throat clamped as I goggled at a brown flurry of lab coat, at a leg and foot—

The rest of Malvin Parker had vanished!

He at once reappeared, looking a little scared.

"You shouldn't have done that, Billiken." That nickname, underlying my shortness and rotundity, was like it slap in my face and he knew it. "You might have electrocuted me."

"Electrocuted! With what? There's nothing but empty space here."

"Right, Billiken. But there are plenty of bare high voltage leads where I am."

"Where are you?" I gagged. He had appeared in a room it was utterly impossible to enter, he'd proved to me that he was indubitably here, now he told me he was somewhere else. "Where the devil are you?"

"In my electronics laboratory, a floor above you. What you're gaping at is—well, you might call it a material image."

"I might," I flung back, hoarsely. "But I don't know why. It sounds like gobbledygook to me."

He chuckled again, enjoying my discomfiture. "Look, Billiken. You're familiar with the principles of tele—" He broke off, looked to the right at something I could not see, or at someone! For he was saying, "Just a moment, dear. I'm talking with Bill Loring," and I knew who it was. Only two persons could have brought that tender affection to his seamed countenance. One of them, his wife Neva, died eight years ago.

"I don't see why not," he responded to a voice I could not hear, and turned back to me. "That irreverent daughter of mine suggests that we continue our discussion over drinks in her sitting room. What do you say?"

I said it was a good idea, and meant it whole-souledly. I wanted desperately to get out of this blasted room where I talked with a man who insisted he wasn't there.

"Very well." He nodded. "We'll meet you there."

He disappeared again. For good.

The room was just as it had been when I locked myself into it, the ventilator screens unbroken, the paint film unmarred. Unless I'd been hypnotized by the droning sound, which had now cut off. The door that swung open as I spoke the keyword was opening for the first time since I'd closed myself in here alone.

But my biceps still ached from the grip of Malvin Parker's fingers, digging in.

Better than he could suspect, I knew the way to the jewelcase-like boudoir Neva designed to set off her fragile, almost ethereal beauty. My breath caught in a sudden poignant twinge of recollection as Sherry Parker smiled at me from the chair where she presided over a gleaming Autobar. She was her mother at twenty all over again; the same cameo features, the same glowing, amber hair, the same golden skin.

"Uncle Billiken!" she exclaimed. "You're an old meanie staying away from me for months."

"Now, now, my dear," I chuckled indulgently. "You haven't missed me an iota. Not," I cocked, an eyebrow at the two youths who hovered over her, "with so much pleasanter companions than an old codger like me."

"Oh these!" She pouted prettily. "These are just Dad's assistants. Robin Adlair." The burly, fair-haired chap to whom she gestured grinned down at me. "And Bart Murtry."

"This is an honor, Mr. Loring." Murtry was only slightly taller than myself, narrow-faced, his hair black as Sheol, his black eyes sultry. "You've been my inspiration ever since I read Lorne Randall's *Colossus of Commerce* as a kid. That's a great book, sir, about a great man."

"Yes, the book's a good job." It ought to be. I'd paid Randall plenty to write it. "Nice to have you with the organization, Mr. Murtry." I turned back to Sherry. "May I have a Martini, my dear? No bitters."

Sherry smiled and nodded at me.

"And no olive. I haven't forgotten, Uncle Billiken." Somehow I didn't mind her calling me that, perhaps because it reminded me how Neva and I used to laugh, in this very room, over what her baby tongue made of Billingsley. "By the way, Dad asked me to tell you that he'll be right in. He stopped to make some notes."

Her slim fingers twirled dials atop the sculptured silver chest that sat on a low table before her and it started to whirr softly.

"You know, Mr. Loring," Murtry said. "That Autobar epitomizes for me the difference between you and Dr. Parker. He invented the mechanism that concocts any beverage you set the dials to and delivers it in precisely the right glass at precisely the right temperature, but what did he have when he was through? An ugly and expensive contrivance whose sale would have been limited to a few hotels and restaurants.

"It took you to have casings designed for it that blend with any decor and engineering techniques that brought its cost within the budget of the average family. And then you had your advertising and public relations staff put on a campaign that made it something without which no home could be considered well-appointed. You transformed the demand for it from a few thousands to millions."

"That's right, my boy. That's the story."

"But not all of it, Bart," the blond Adlair drawled, his high-cheekboned, blunt-jawed face naive to my quick glance. "Billingsley Loring didn't take any risk in exploiting the demand he created. What he did, as he always does with new and untried products, was to turn over the Autobar patent to a corporation set up for the purpose and which, while he still held control, contracted with Loring Enterprises to manufacture the contraption on a cost-plus basis and to sell it as sole agent. If it had been a failure the loss would have been the Autobar Company's stockholders'. Since it succeeded, the major portion of the profits go to Loring Enterprises. To Billingsley Loring."

"What's wrong with that?" Murtry demanded.

"Did I say anything was wrong with it?" Adlair spread big hands almost as acid-stained as Parker's, blue eyes innocent. "I merely mentioned it because Lorne Randall left it out of the chapter in his book from which you cribbed what you've just said."

"Cribbed!" White spots pitted the wing-tips of the other youth's nostrils. "Why you rat!"

"Bart!" Sherry exclaimed, a warning note in her voice. And then, "It's time for the Comedy Players, Bart. Turn them on for me, like a good boy. Please."

2: Industrial Giant

NOW there, I thought, as he went across the room, is a young man who might be more useful to me than puttering his time away in a laboratory. He thumbed a switch. On the wall an oblong brightened, took on depth and perspective. The scene was a moonlit garden filled with soft music from an unseen orchestra.

Quarter lifesize but otherwise convincingly real-seeming, a girl in a diaphanous evening dress strolled into it, a tuxedoed youth close behind. I didn't hear what they were saying because Malvin Parker entered just then and came toward me.

"About time you showed up," I growled. "Do you think I've got nothing to do but stand around waiting for you?"

"Sorry." He didn't sound it. "I was delayed. Thank you." He took the filled wineglass Adlair had brought to him. "Port, eh? Just what I need." The blond chap handed me my cocktail. "Robin," Parker said, "is my good right hand, Billiken."

"So I rather imagined." Seeing the two together, I realized how much alike they were. Not physically, except for their height, but in another, more significant way. I didn't like this Adlair. "What about the monkey business you pulled in that room, Mal? How did you get in and out of it?"

"I told you that I wasn't in it, except in somewhat the same sense Lilli Denton and Storm Rand," he gestured to the screen, "are in this one."

"Oh, come now. Those images look and sound real enough but if I went over there and tried to touch them, I'd feel only the wall. Back there I not only heard and saw you. I felt you."

Parker's taunting smile was back in his eyes. "No, Billiken. You did not feel me. Look. The images you see on that video screen are complexes of colored light produced, in the apparatus behind it. They are so modulated by impulses broadcast from a studio a thousand miles away, as to affect your retina in the

same way it would be by light reflected directly from the persons and objects depicted. What you hear is sound produced in that same apparatus and similarly modulated to affect your ears in the same way as sounds produced in that studio."

"Thanks for the lecture on video," I snapped. "But what's it got to do with the subject?"

"The principle is the same."

"The devil it is. Light is energy. The electromagnetic force actuating the loudspeaker is energy. You can modulate energy by energy transmitted from a remote source so as to give me the illusion of seeing and hearing objects located at that source. You can't give me the illusion of feeling something I don't actually touch."

Parker's grizzled eyebrows arched quizzically.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't feel energy." Adlair, I noticed, had gone back to the girl. They were laughing together at some banter from the screen and Murtry, beside me, watched them with smoldering eyes. "I can feel only something material and you can't create matter, much less modulate it from a distance to seem what it is not."

"No? Remember the mole you used to have on your cheek, Billiken?"

I remembered it. I remembered how it had bothered Neva. "What about it?"

"You had it removed by what's called knifeless surgery. Nothing material touched your flesh: High-frequency waves, pure energy, sliced away a bit of your bodily tissue as efficiently as the most material of steel scalpels could have. Is there any reason energy in some such form might not affect other bits of tissue in ways similar to that in which they are affected by matter?"

I couldn't think of any. I had to admit so, grudgingly.

"Now," Parker smiled, "when you say you 'feel' an object, you really mean that certain specialized bits of your bodily tissue, the nerve endings in your skin, are affected in ways your brain learned in early infancy to mean that they are in contact with matter having certain physical properties; hardness, form, texture, temperature which sum up to a certain mental concept—the object in question. If those same nerve endings are affected in precisely the same way by, say, some form of energy, would that not mean to your brain that they are in contact with that same object?"

"Well, probably."

"And if at the same time you seemed to see and hear that object the illusion would be complete, would it not? The illusion, for instance, that I was actually, physically present in a room I could not possibly enter."

So the apparition with which I'd wrestled had been as unreal, as insubstantial as the boy and girl locked in closed embrace on the video screen across the room.

"From apparatus on the other side of the wall," Parker explained, "which was permeable to the range of frequencies I used, I projected a tri-dimensional video image of myself plus a complex of energies that affected your sensory-nerve endings as the surfaces of my body and its clothing would have. Your own brain did the rest."

"It certainly did. I could have sworn— Hold it," I interrupted myself. "How could I throw an— an illusion around?" I'd recalled how I'd flung him from me, how all of him but his leg had vanished. "How could I almost electrocute an image?"

"Not you, Billiken. It was your image that came within an ace of throwing me against a live busbar in my lab above you. Your see, I had a transmitter scanning you too so that I could watch your reactions." His eye-corners crinkled with puckish amusement. "You should have seen the expression on your face when I suddenly appeared to you."

"It must have been very funny." The Martini I sipped was acrid. Sherry must have put in the bitters after all. "That's a neat gadget you've trumped up, Mal." I made myself sound admiring. "One of the neatest you've ever produced." And then I let him have it. "But what good is it?"

He stared at me as if I'd spoken in some unintelligible language. "What good?"

"Precisely. What are its commercial possibilities? How can I make a profit out of it?"

"Why, I don't know," Parker stammered, his eyes satisfactorily miserable. "I— Well, it was a challenging problem and I worked it out."

"On my time and at my expense. So suppose you get busy now and work out something this cute trick of yours can do that people will pay money for. Some practical use it can be put to that isn't already being served by conventional video."

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at his daughter and on his seamed countenance was the almost pleading expression that used to be there when he'd look at his wife as I dressed him down. Neva would laugh a little and then tell him that even if he didn't owe it to me to be practical, he did to her. Sherry's velvet-red lips parted but before she could speak, Bart Murtry forestalled her.

"May I make a suggestion, Mr. Loring?"

"Of course, my boy. The Loring organization's all one big, happy family. Nothing pleases me more than if one of my— er— children, so to speak, comes up with a good, workable idea."

Robin Adlair had decided to take an interest, was coming toward us. "What you said just now," Murtry continued, "reminded me that video is not a perfect advertising medium. It can only tell its audience about a product and show them what it looks like. With this new invention you can permit people actually to handle things— woman's hats, for instance." The black eyes were glowing. "Let the average woman try a becoming hat on and she won't be able to resist buying it. The same for dresses. And as for men— they could actually shave with the razor blade you want to sell them, write with a new kind of fountain pen, even try out the controls of a helicopter or roadcar. The possibilities are limitless."

"Very good, my boy. Excellent. I can see our prospectus now. The Loring— er— Teleseler puts your product into the nation's homes!"

"Bunk."

I wheeled to Adlair, from whom the interruption had come. "You insolent young whippersnapper! How dare you call anything I say bunk?"

"Because that's what it is," he drawled, grinning at me. "You can't put anyone's product into even one home till you've got a receiver there. Who's going to fill a room with apparatus just so they can try on hats or shave with razors that disappear the instant they turn off the current?"

"Fill a room, nothing," Murtry snapped, glaring at the blond fellow as if he very cheerfully could wring his neck. "It can be engineered down to convenient size."

"Maybe, Bart. Maybe it can, but you still can't engineer out the extra tubes and coils and condensers that always will run up its cost to double that of a video which will give its owner exactly as much information and entertainment. You—"

"That's it!" Mal Parker's exclamation cut Adlair short. "That's the moneymaking angle you're looking for, Billiken. Entertainment."

This was something new, Parker offering an idea for making money. "Go ahead, Mal," I encouraged him, silkily. It would be ridiculous, of course, and I'd have another chance to slap him down. "Tell us about it. What sort of entertainment video can't present as well?"

"A sort these youngsters, wouldn't know anything about because tri-dimensional video killed it before they were old enough to be entertained by anything except a rattle. Look, Billiken. Has any show video has brought to you ever given you anywhere near the kick we used to get sitting in the balcony of the old Bijou Theater? Wasn't there something we got not from the

performers but from the audience? Didn't sharing our emotions with a thousand others physically present heighten our own emotions?"

"Mass hysteria," I grunted. "Crowd psychology— crowd!" I caught up the word. "Those old shows certainly did pull in the crowds and they paid. They paid plenty, but the huge wages offered actors and actresses by the video companies made it impossible— Hold on!" The nape of my neck puckered with the chill prickles of inspiration. "This thing of yours— there's no limit to the number of material images it can recreate from one prototype, is there?"

"No, Billiken. Nor to the distance from the original."

"And to all intents and purposes they're exactly the same as living persons. The scenery too. We'd need to build only one set." My mind was working at fever heat now. "We could have a single company acting in, say New York, and it would appear simultaneously in—"

"Any number of cities, towns and villages," Parker caught fire from me, "wherever you had theaters with identical stages!"

"Precisely. So that the cost of the original production can be divided by any desired number of theaters into which your device can put it. The possibilities for profit are enormous." I pulled in breath. "You see, Mal, what a practical man can do with one of your scientific toys."

"Wonderful," Murtry exclaimed, but Adlair simply looked confused, as did Sherry. Her father, however was for once properly impressed. "I never cease being amazed at the way your mind works, Billiken. You honestly think that you— I mean I suppose that by tomorrow morning you'll have your bright young men selling stock in the—"

"Loring Multidram Corporation," I named it in one of those flashes of inspiration Lorne Randall calls the mark of my peculiar genius. "No. Not quite as quickly as all that. We've got to put on a public demonstration first, in the ten key cities where my best suck— er— where the outstanding investors in my promotions reside."

I was pacing the floor now as my mind raced, planning the operation. "Mal. Prepare blueprints and specifications for the patent lawyers and another set for the engineering department so that they can start producing the pilot sets. You'll supervise that. Murtry," I turned to the swarthy youth. "I want you to take charge of erecting the theaters and installing the apparatus as the sets come out of the workshop. I'll have the office give you a list of the cities. Sherry, my dear. How would you like to select the first play we present, hire the director and performers and so on?"

Her eyes were topazes lit from within. "I'd love it."

"The job's yours, then." She'd get a tremendous kick out of it and it didn't make much difference how good the play was or how well acted, the novelty

would put it over. "I'll have my regular staff take care of the publicity." That I couldn't trust to amateurs. "I think that covers everything."

"How about Robin?" Sherry asked. "You haven't given him anything to do."

"No, I haven't." I looked at the fellow, standing spraddle-legged in the center of the room and thought of a way to wipe that lazy but somehow insolent grin from his face. "I'll tell you what you can do, Adlair. You can assist your friend Murtry. Under his orders, of course."

3: Death From a Shadow

CERTAIN disturbing business developments engrossed all my attention and I completely forgot about the Multidram project until my secretary reminded me that the demonstration was only a week off. I learned then that one change had been made in the original plan. Sherry Parker had employed a number of players under contract to rival video networks with studios located at different points in the United States, two in England and one in Paris.

Since this made it impossible to assemble the cast at any one place, it had been decided to install transmitters as well as receivers in all ten theaters. In this way some performers could speak their lines in New York, others in Los Angeles, London and so on, but the net effect still would be the same as though all were playing on a single stage.

The scenery was erected in Los Angeles, would be reproduced in material image on the other stages. The originals of the smaller properties, books, maps, and the like, would be placed at the location of the characters who initially handled them.

It was Bart Murtry who'd worked out this solution to the difficulty. He'd further justified my estimate of his ability by building the ten theaters in exact replica, auditoriums as well as stages, thus effecting a considerable saving in architects' fees and the cost of fabrication.

Instead of a sophisticated, modern piece written for video, Sherry had preserved the archaic flavor of the presentation by reviving a mid-twentieth century war play replete with the swashbuckling heroics, air raid alarms, gunfire and other bellicose trappings of that bygone era. All this gave me an idea. "See here, Foster," I told my secretary, "We'll reserve seats and issue tickets to the people we're inviting to the premiere."

"An excellent idea, sir." He hesitated, tugged at the sandy mustache he was cultivating with sparse success. "Er— what are tickets, Mr. Loring?"

I laughed, for the first time in weeks. "Tickets, Foster, are— Oh, look here." I riffled the sheets he'd laid on my desk, found the plan of the auditoriums.

"Suppose we mark these rows of seats A, B, C and so on, starting at the front, and number the chairs in each row, like this."

It wasn't till I sketched an old-fashioned theatre ticket, with its coded stub, that the principle finally penetrated. "Now I understand, sir. It's like place-cards at a formal banquet, a system of assigning the more desirable locations to guests you want particularly to honor."

"Precisely." There was no need to explain that it also was a way of establishing a price scale based more on the snob-value of location than the ease of hearing and seeing. "That's why I shall myself decide who is to sit where. Let me have those lists of invites."

"Here they are, sir." He handed them to me. "But I'm afraid you won't have time to do that just now, Mr. Loring. Mr. Hanscom's waiting to see you."

"Mr. who?"

"Maxwell Hanscom of the United Nations Securities Control Board. You gave him an eleven o'clock appointment."

"Oh, yes. I remember now." I didn't have to remember. I'd been anticipating Hanscom's visit all morning, and not with pleasure. "About this Multidram demonstration, Foster. Inform Murtry I'll want to inspect the entire installation and attend a dress rehearsal." My fingers drummed the arm of my chair. "All right. Send Mr. Hanscom in."

The door to my office is thirty feet from my desk. By the time the gray little man had crossed that space, I knew that here was a government official I might be able to deceive for a little while but could not buy.

NEW ORLEANS, Manchester, Rio de Janeiro and the rest of the ten cities selected for the première Multridram performance of Escape from Destiny saw something that Spring day they'd not seen for a generation. Crowds. There was, it seemed, some strange, atavistic contagion in the notion of people actually gathering together to watch and listen to anything. The thousands who milled about the identical structures Murtry had erected could observe the proceedings sitting comfortably in their homes far better than being jostled and trampled here, but here they were.

As sweating police cleared a path for me to the entrance of the New York Bijou— so Malvin Parker had named the theaters in obeisance to our student rendezvous— I knew Billingsley Loring was on the brink of his greatest success, or at the end of his career.

Sherry was in Los Angeles, where the majority of the company were physically present, her father in Chicago supervising the master switchboard. Bart Murtry had taken off a couple of hours ago for London, to oversee the pick-up for the two British Isles stages and Paris and Moscow.

Just where Robin Adlair was I did not know. My last-minute decision anent the seating arrangements had necessitated a rush job of training ushers which Murtry had turned over to him. All the past week he'd been darting about the world in the Loring Skyfleet's speediest stratojetter and we'd completely lost track of him.

From what I saw here in New York, I had to admit that he'd done a good job. Quaintly clad in long-trousered, button-studded blue uniforms such as I hadn't seen for decades, the teen-age youngsters were well rehearsed. Not so the gathering audience. In spite of the careful letters of explanation that had accompanied each ticket, many were lamentably confused as to what was expected of them. One couple in their thirties, as a matter of fact, had to be forcibly removed from the front row seats to which they insisted they were entitled by the rule of first come, first served.

I'd given strict instructions that every spectator was to occupy the location his ticket called for and the Loring organization is schooled to obey instructions to the letter.

The turmoil finally subsided. I went down the central aisle to the seat I had reserved for myself. A cherub-faced lad rushed up to me, checked my stub. "A-1. Thank you, sir." He saluted and rushed busily off again. This first row of chairs was separated only by a brass rail from a six foot deep, empty trench that ran clear across the auditorium's floor. Beyond this rose the curving face of the raised stage and from this in turn, high and graceful, the shimmering golden folds of a vast curtain emblazoned with huge, floral-wreathed L's.

The sourceless illumination that filled the auditorium began to dim: A hush of tense expectancy gripped the audience. There was an instant of complete, velvety darkness, then a glitter and flash of chromium and polished wood exploded in front of and below me; musical instruments catching sudden light concentrated in the pit and splintering it into a myriad coruscations. In the blackness behind me, a thousand throats gasped. The dress-suited musicians swept bows across strings. A single handclap spatted as some oldster recalled the ways of his youth, then another, a third.

The sounds rippled, spread, merged into a torrent of applause.

The clapping died away. The orchestra's triumphal strains waned till only a single violin sang softly. An aureate glow spread over the great curtain and it was rising, slowly at first, then more swiftly.

The stage it revealed was vacant! Bare floorboards stretched back to a blank wall of gray plasticrete. Something had gone wrong.

No. The stage was transformed into a room ugly with the flowered design of its papered walls, shut in by the black cloth awkwardly tacked over windows. Clumsy wooden furniture cluttered it, a table was covered by a white

cloth and set as for a meal not yet served. In the left-hand sidewall— the stage's left— was a closed door, a wooden door complete with ceramic doorknob. Another, similar door to the right rear was open a bare inch. Holding it so and peering through the crack was a woman's taut, listening figure.

Slumped in a chair by the table, head propped in elbow-propped hands and every line eloquent of a fatigue that rendered him incapable of the fear that gripped the woman, was a young man in clothing torn, filthy with mud.

The applause rose again in a great, cresting wave that washed over me.

Underlying the surf of pounding palms was another, rhythmic sound the world has not heard for decades, the ominous thud of marching feet dulled by distance. Nearing it beat down the applause, seemed just outside the black-swathed windows.

A voice suddenly barked an unintelligible order. Silence. A sense of apprehension flowed from the woman at the door, a feeling of fear that could not possibly have been transmitted to that audience by a video image. The unseen voice spoke again, gutturally, and the feet thudded again, dispersing.

"They've tracked you to the village," the woman whispered. "They're searching the houses along the street." She pushed the door shut soundlessly, turned from it.

Hand to throat she moved across the floor toward the unmoving man at the table, eyes big with terror in a white and haggard face. In Neva's face! Neva— No, not Neva of course but her daughter Sherry— whispered. "They'll be here in a moment. Come. I'll hide you."

Why was Sherry playing the part for which Lilli Denton had rehearsed? I was out of my seat. Crouching low to avoid being silhouetted against the lighted stag I made for its left-hand corner.

"I'm not hiding." The voice above me was hoarse with weariness and defeat. "I'm going out there to give myself up. You people have suffered enough—" It faded, as I went through the little door and found myself a place crowded with the glowing bulbs, of coils and condenser's and serpentining leads of the Multidram apparatus.

The air was prickly with the tension of high potential, an incautious movement here might mean instant and terrible death. Explaining the setup last week, Bart Murtry had warned me not to brush against this lead, this switch. I was tight-strung, the palms sweating, by the time I reached the wings and looked through what to the audience seemed to be a papered wall, a closed door, out into the black dark of the auditorium.

I could make out clearly only the first row of rapt faces, the gap made by the aisle and the seat I'd left unoccupied. Directly in front of me the man was

on his feet now, Sherry beside him, their backs to me as, frozen in consternation, they watched the other door thud shut behind a bull-necked individual who snatched an automatic from the belt-holster of his green uniform.

His lips stretched in a humorless, sinister smile. "As I thought." Vindictive lights crawled in his skin-pouched eyes. "I knew only you and your blackguard husband would dare give this pig a refuge. That is why I sent my men to search the other houses and came here alone."

The woman gathered herself, forced out words. "You mean that your silence can be purchased, Captain Markin. With what? We have nothing left with which to bribe you."

"Except yourself, my dear Elsa— not forced but willing. You are a fever in my veins and—"

Markin cut off as the door here before me flew open and a gaunt man stepped through into the scene, a revolver clutched in his lifting hand.

"Franz!" Elsa exclaimed but the shots crashed in a single report. The captain turned. Franz folded, clutching his chest.

A scream shrilled from the audience, a shout husky with terror. Ushers were running down the aisle to where a man had jumped up and was pointing with shaking hand at the seat in which I should be sitting.

I stood on a stage abruptly bare again. The figures that had occupied it had vanished. Robin Adlair stepped out of the other wing, stared out into the auditorium at the front row seat, the bright plush of whose back was gashed by the bullet that had ploughed into it and, had I been sitting there, would have smashed into my chest instead.

4: Nine-Fold Killing

OTHERS were not as fortunate as I. In Chicago, in London, in Rio de Janeiro, in each of the theaters where a fascinated audience had watched the premiere performance of a Multidrama, a bullet had ploughed into the occupant of seat A-1. A single shot, fired from a single stage had slain nine men in nine separate cities scattered over half the world.

"One of the strange features of this case," Rand Pardeen said later, "is that our examination of the guns used in the play disclosed that only blanks were fired from them." Burly, rock-jawed and steel-eyed, the Chief Inspector of UN's World Police had requested me to assemble in his office all of us who were primarily responsible for the Multidram; Malvin and Sherry Parker, Bart Murtry, Robin Adlair. "No molecules of lead were found in the barrel of the

one fired in Los Angeles by the actor who played Franz, or of that which the character of Captain Markin shot off in London."

"How about the bullets?" Sherry asked. None of us looked particularly chipper but she seemed especially worn, probably from the strain of stepping into the role of Elsa when Lilli Denton was taken suddenly ill the very morning of the performance. "I—" she smiled wanly. "I have a secret vice, inspector. I once found a collection of ancient detective books Dad made when he was a boy and I've read them all. According to them, the police always extract the murder bullet from the corpse and examine it to find out from what gun it came."

Pardeen appeared grimly amused. "Quite right, Miss Parker. We should have done exactly that except for another odd circumstance. The surgeons who performed the autopsies on the bodies of the nine murdered men found no bullet in any of them."

The stir this announcement evoked gave me a chance to glance again at the gray little man who sat inconspicuously in a corner, nursing a brief case. Why was Maxwell Hanscom here? Why should the UN Securities Control Board be represented at the investigation of a crime?

"Your people must have slipped up somehow, Mr. Pardeen," Mal Parker was saying. "Nine of the slugs obviously were material images which were dissipated the instant I pulled the master switch in Chicago, shutting down the network, but there must have been a real prototype that continued to exist. You should have found it."

"We did," Pardeen replied. "We found it, not buried in the chest of any of the dead men, but in the upholstery of the seat Mr. Loring would have occupied had he not so opportunely decided to go backstage."

My fingers closed on my chair's arms so tightly the edges dug into flesh. "The actual shot was fired in New York, then. It was meant for me. I was the one the murderer was after."

"So it would seem, Mr. Loring. The killer knew where you would be seated. He knew there was a moment in the play when the sound of his shot would be covered by shots on the stage. Apparently he did not know his missile would be reproduced so that it would kill nine others, and that seems to eliminate all of you who are familiar with the mechanics of this thing."

"I disagree, Inspector." Pardeen's gray eyes moved to Murtry, who went on, "It eliminates none of us."

Pardeen stared at Murtry with somber interest. "You suggest that the slayer didn't care how many others died as long as his shot reached his intended victim?"

"I do not. I mean that as far as any of us knew, no one but Mr. Loring would be reached by a shot fired at him from the New York stage. The Multidram receiver and transmitter fields were supposed to end sharply at the outer edge of the orchestra pits. If that had been the case, only the actual bullet would have passed beyond the vertical plane of the brass rail that edged the pit."

"Very good, Bart," Robin Adlair drawled. "A very sound point— and an excellent red herring."

"Red herring!" Murtry pushed up out of his chair, black eyes blazing. "What in blazes are you getting at?"

"Whatever you want to make of it," the blond chap grinned, but his implication was clear. A clever killer well might try to avert suspicion from himself by disputing a theory that seemed to exculpate him from suspicion. "I'm curious about one thing, though. What makes you so sure the shot came from the stage?"

The other's lips pulled back from his teeth in what he might have meant for a smile but was more like a snarl. "That's obvious to anyone but a moron, or someone who'd like to have us think it was fired from somewhere else. Coming from anywhere in the auditorium it could not have struck the back of the seat." The smoldering antagonism founded in their rivalry for Sherry was no longer covert but had flared into an open feud.

"It seems to me, Mr. Robin Adlair," Murtry purred, "that you've more reason to draw herrings across the trail than I."

I could read Pardeen's mind as he glanced from one to the other. "Keep up the squabble, boys," he was thinking, "and maybe one of you will drop the clue I'm looking for."

"I seem to recall," Murtry continued, "that when the lights went on you were standing there on the New York stage."

"Right." The blonde giant grinned. "I figured on getting to the New York Bijou in time to check the set, but the crowd outside held me up and I got inside the entrance, which is on the right of the house, just as the lights were dimming. I thought I could still make it but was caught on the right of the stage by the curtain going up, couldn't cross without exposing myself."

"You were delayed, all right," Murtry snapped back at him. "You reached the wings just as the actors were about to fire their blanks and you had to get off your own shot so fast that you didn't notice Mr. Loring wasn't where he was supposed to be."

He'd slipped the noose around Adlair's neck as neatly as I could have.

"No, Robin," Sherry moaned. "No. You couldn't!"

"Yes, kitten, I could." The fellow seemed oddly unperturbed. "Our Bart has built up a swell case against me. Hasn't he, Inspector?" He transferred his lazy

grin to Pardeen. "Almost as good a case as you had when you were about to arrest me. And it suffers from the same defect."

"I'm afraid it does," the law officer agreed. "You see, Mr. Murtry, the weapon whose rifling the murder bullet matches was found some ten minutes after the shot was fired and while Mr. Adlair still was in the custody of the New York police, on the stage of the Chicago theater."

That really was a crusher. Eyes met widening eyes in puzzlement, breaths sighed in an almost eerie hush which was broken by Adlair's chuckle. "Maybe you can figure that one out, Bart."

"Maybe I can." Murtry wasn't beaten yet. "In fact, I know that answer. What you did was to cache your gun in Chicago, within the area the receiver there would scan. When the Multidram was switched on, it was reproduced at the same spot on all the stage. You picked up its material image in New York, loaded it with a real cartridge which in turn was recreated in the other nine theaters and fired it."

"Doctor Parker turned off the current and presto!— no gun on you, nothing to connect you with the gun in Chicago. Except—"

It was he who grinned now, triumphantly.

"Except, Inspector Pardeen, that the flashback of powder gases from the real cartridge will have left their mark on the skin of his right hand."

"Good boy!" The inspector jumped up. "That does it. We'll apply the wax test, right here and now." He strode to the door, jerked it open. "Jenkins," he called. "Ashkinazy. I've got a little job for you."

There was a muttered conference at the door, a wait, then two uniformed men came in carrying a tray with some simple apparatus on it. As, still smiling but a little uneasily, Robin Adlair submitted to their ministrations the man from the U.N. spoke for the first time.

"You know, Inspector Pardeen, there's something about this that still bothers me."

"What's that?"

"Why the Multidram field was enlarged to include Mr. Loring's seat. There doesn't seem to have been any reason for that."

Pardeen looked at Murtry but I answered for him. "Does there have to be a reason, Mr. Hanscom? I imagine it was a slight, if unfortunate misadjustment of the control apparatus in Chicago. After all, Mr. Parker was undoubtedly a little excited over the first public test of his new invention and— well, he isn't as young as he used to be."

"Meaning that I'm superannuated, Billiken?" Mal Parker demanded, bristling. "Why don't you pension me off, if that's the case?"

"Perhaps I will, Mal," I couldn't resist responding. "Remind me to consider it after your protege has been properly taken care of."

"Pardon me, Mr. Loring," Hanscom intervened. "I don't want to seem persistent but I can't help wondering if the misadjustment need necessarily have been made at the central controls in Chicago."

"Now look here, Hanscom," I flared. "What right have you—"

"Just a minute, Billiken," Mal Parker interrupted me. "Since that concerns me directly, I'd like to clear it up. The answer to your question, Mr. Hanscom, is that all ten Multidram transceivers were electronically interlocked so as to avoid the possibility of overlapping or other faulty registry. A change in the adjustment of any one would affect them all. Look. I'll draw you a diagram that will make it clear. May I have a paper and pencil, Inspector?"

Pardeen started to fish in his pocket, turned to the slender, sharp-featured officer who approached him.

"Well, Ashkinazy, what have you got?"

Mask-faced, the chap held out a crinkling film of wax.

"Look for yourself, sir." It showed the roughnesses of Adlair's skin, and nothing else. "That guy didn't shoot off any gun in the last twenty-four hours, not with either hand."

There was a small, hawking sound in Bart Murtry's throat, from Sherry Parker a glad cry as she flew to the blond giant.

"I knew it, Robin. I knew you didn't do it."

"So did I, honey," he grinned as he caught her and held her. "But someone did. I wonder if it wasn't the one who tried to fasten it on me." His broad face was abruptly grim. "I suggest, Inspector, that you submit Bart Murtry to this same test."

"Why Murtry?" Maxwell Hanscom asked. "We have absolute proof that he was in London at the time of the murders." He seemed suddenly to have taken over command of the proceedings and the frightening thing was that Pardeen let him. "Why not Billingsley Loring?"

"That's absurd!" I flared. "Are you intimating that I tried to murder myself, Mr. Hanscom?"

He turned those penetrating cold gray eyes on me;

"No, Mr. Loring. I'm simply recalling that like Mr. Adlair, you were on the stage of the New York theater in position to fire the real bullet in the imaged gun. In position also, as Mr. Adlair was not, to have made the slight change in the transceiver's setting that resulted in the death of the nine men to whom you'd sent tickets to seat A-one. The same nine men who brought against you the charges I've been investigating of fraudulent operation of corporations

whose stock they bought from you, and without whose evidence the charges must be dropped."

Inspector Pardeen was coming toward me and his uniformed aides were closing in on me from either side but I saw only Neva's shocked eyes, Neva's color-drained, cameo features.

"No," Neva's daughter whispered. "No, Uncle Billiken. You couldn't have."

But I had. It was the only way I could have saved the great commercial empire I'd slaved for years to build. What were the lives of nine money-grubbers against that?

12: The Demon of Tlaxpam

Otis Adelbert Kline

1891-1946

Weird Tales, Jan 1929

Otis Adelbert Kline

"A TABLE for wan, *señor*? I 'ave ver' ex'lent place where the *señor* can see those dance girl do—"

"No."

Standing just within the doorway of Mexican Joe's notorious cafe, Bart Leslie scarcely noticed the diminutive head waiter, bowing solicitously before him. Leisurely, yet with piercing intentness, his eyes swept the smoke-clouded room, hovering for a moment at each table. The contortions of a dancing girl in flaming costume, slender hands on lissom hips, mantilla flying, tiny feet keeping time with the throbbing music of a brown-skinned orchestra, drew only a cursory glance from him.

"Per'aps the *señor* likes company. Yes? A table for two in a quiet corner, an' I send you wan ver' beautiful—"

"No! Where's Mexican Joe?"

"Ees talk weeth some friend upstair. You weesh—?"

"Tell him Bart Leslie wants to see him, *muy pronto*, *Sabe*?"

"*Si, señor*. *Gracias, señor*."

Deftly catching the silver dollar which Leslie had flipped to him, he sped away among the tables and hastily climbed the stairway which led to a gallery over the orchestra platform and thence to the gaming-rooms above.

Leslie rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and waited. Presently he took a tightly wadded slip of yellow paper from his vest pocket, unfolded it, an scanned the contents. It was a Western Union telegram, and the date was the day previous:

MR. BART LESLIE BONITA

DO ME THE HONOR TO DINE WITH ME AT MEXICAN JOE'S TOMORROW EVENING AT EIGHT. I HAVE AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION.

HERNANDEZ

Leslie folded and pocketed the missive once more, then glanced at his watch. It showed five minutes past eight. Time and place were correct, but where was Hernandez? And which Hernandez? He had known two— one a vaquero formerly employed on the Bar-X Ranch, the other an excaptain of the Gila Men, a dread order of bandits, counterfeiters, kidnapers and murderers which he had helped to wipe out some time before.

His meditations were interrupted by the obsequious approach of the head waiter, followed by a short, wizened Mexican whose forehead was creased by a livid scar, and whom he instantly recognized as Mexican Joe.

The latter was effusive in his greeting.

"Ah, *Señor* Leslie, I am delight! I am honor, to 'ave the great Two Gun Bart, the great Devil-Fighter, weeth us! Don Arturo ees wait for you een wan private alcove. Myself, I weel show you the way."

Considering that this same wily Mexican had once tried to drug him for a few paltry dollars, Leslie imagined that he was anything but delighted by his presence.

"All right, Joe, lead on," he said tersely. Then, loosening his two sixshooters in their holsters, both as a precaution and as a hint that he was prepared for treachery, Leslie followed the cafe proprietor between the tables and behind the orchestra platform to where a double row of curtained alcoves served as private dining-rooms for the more fastidious or secretive of the resort's patrons.

Pausing before one of these, he gently called:

"Don Arturo."

"*Si*?"

"*Señor* Leslie ees arrive."

"*Bueno*!"

The curtains parted and a tall, handsome Mexican, resplendent in purple velvet liberally trimmed with silver braid and adorned with buttons of the same metal, appeared in the opening and held out a slim hand, on one finger of which a dazzling ruby sparkled.

"*Buenas noches*, Señor Leslie," he greeted.

"May God give the same to you, *Señor Capitan*," replied Leslie, instantly recognizing Hernandez as a former officer of the dreaded Gilas.

After the handshake they entered the booth and were seated at opposite sides of the narrow table.

"No longer am I a *capitan*, *amigo*," said Hernandez, taking a frost-covered cocktail-shaker from the table and rattling its contents. "Only plain Don Arturo Hernandez, a civilian in the employ of my government."

"A decided improvement, I should say," replied Leslie, "and judging from that go-to-hell outfit you're wearing, you 're making it pay."

Hernandez smiled.

"Ees not so bad," he replied, removing the top from the shaker. "I 'ave concoct wan dreenk which I 'ope you weel like. Those Manhattan an' Bronchitis cocktails I don' care for, an' I know you don' drink those tequila an' mescal, so I meex a dreenk where we meet on common ground."

He filled Leslie's glass, then his own.

"To unending friendship, *amigo*," he proposed.

Leslie bowed and drank the toast.

"A corking good Bacardi cocktail, if I'm a judge," he said. "Common ground is right! If your communication is as pleasing as your cocktail, we'll get along."

"It ees from my government," replied Hernandez, producing a large sealed envelope from liis pocket, "an' it may be explain ' quite briefly, though the details are here."

A waiter entered with the first course of the Mexican dinner accompanied by the usual plate of steaming tortillas. When he had departed Hernandez continued:

"My government was ver' mooch impress' by the way you clean out those Gila," he said, "an' such word has come to the capital of your prowess an' exploit along the border that they 'ave send me to request your co-operation in a matter weeth which they are unable to cope."

"Before you go any farther," said Leslie, "I may as well tell you that I am still in the United States Secret Service, and all my time and efforts belong to my government."

"That ees all arrange', *amigo*, in advance. My government 'as already approach and receive permission from yours to use your service eef we can make the satisfactory arrangement weeth you. It ees for you alone to say, now."

"I see. You believe in preparedness. Well, what's the racket?"

"It ees wan ver' dangerous beezness. Near a town call ' Tlaxpam many people die now, for two years— ver' sudden, ver' horrible death. They walk or ride along trail. All sudden, zeep! The head, she ees gone! Cut-off, sleeck like wan whistle! Horse come to town weeth headless body or weethout rider many time. Travelers find bloody corpse along the road weethout head. Others say they 'ave seen Satanas heemself lurking een the bushes. Wan peon heard a horrible laugh joost after a man was beheaded.

"Government send men to investigate. Zeep! They sometimes lose the head, too. They send the Rurales. Some Rurales also lose the head, but of thees murderer they can not find even wan track. Ees damn' bad beezness, I tal you."

"Sounds like a fairy-story to me."

"Maybe, but if you find thees fairy for my government they weel gladly pay you twenty thousand pesos and all expenses."

"Well. That sounds substantial enough. Let me see the papers. "

Hernandez broke the seal of the envelope and handed him two documents. One was permission from the American officials for Leslie to spend sixty days in Mexico whenever he should elect to go. The other was from the Mexican government, commending his past unofficial services in ridding them of the Gilas, and offering him the reward mentioned by Hernandez. All expenses were to be paid regardless of whether or not he succeeded.

The Mexican watched him narrowly as he read and folded the last document.

"Ees all satisfy, *amigo*?" he asked.

"All Jake," Leslie replied.

"You weel go?"

"Of course."

"*Cáspita*! I tol' my government you're not afraid of those devil heemself. Put heem there!"

Silently the two men shook hands across the table.

ii

"SON of wan gun! You tromp my ten-spot weeth a queen, eh? How you like that, an' that, an' that? Pay me."

"High, low, Jack. That's plenty." Bart Leslie fished in his pocket for a moment, then brought forth a handful of change, part of which he tossed on the table before Hernandez. Then he looked out the window of the private car furnished by the Mexican government to facilitate their journey to Tlaxpam.

"Ought to be there soon, hadn't we?" he asked.

"Five minute more, maybe. Wan more hand?"

"No thanks. Have to be getting my things together."

Walking unsteadily to his sleeping compartment, for the car lurched violently at every step, he closed and strapped his bag and handed it to the porter. Hernandez followed after gathering up the cards, and together they made their way to the platform.

"So this is Tlaxpam!"

Leslie looked out over a small group of sun-baked adobe buildings, then clutched the rail as the train halted with a jerk. He observed that the streets were deserted and remembered that it was the lazy hour of the siesta. Even the dogs slept.

"Eees the end of wan journey— the beginning of another. Follow me, *amigo*."

Hernandez stepped down from the platform and led the way around the comer of the station, the porter following with their bags. Here a driver slept peacefully behind the wheel of an ancient and badly battered touring-car.

Hernandez shook him awake.

"*Alerta, hombre*!" he roared. "*Mil demonios*! Did I hire you to sleep for me?"

The man awoke, then took their bags from the grinning porter.

"Pardon, Don Arturo. I did not hear the train arrive."

"You sleep like an ox. Be off, then. You have your orders. "

After considerable persuasion with crank and primer, the engine started noisily, and they rattled off down a narrow, dusty street. Presently they stopped before one of the larger adobe houses, the door of which was opened by a dark-skinned mozo as soon as they had stepped down from the tonneau.

After a bath, and a meal served by the same dusky servant, Leslie and Hernandez entered the patio to enjoy their cigars, and found comparative coolness on a bench beneath the spreading branches of a huge pecan tree.

"And now, *señor*," inquired Hernandez, politely, "how soon will you be willing to start on thees dangerous beezness?"

"Start? I have already started. What I want to do is to continue, and the sooner the better."

The Mexican puffed reflectively for a moment.

"You Americans are so eempetuous. Maybe you 'ave not notice something, eh? I breeng you here during the hour of the siesta. I speak not your name, but call you only '*amigo*' een front of my *mozos*. For why? Thees fairy, as you call heem, may 'ave the spy any place. Een my very house! Eef he know you are here you are mark for death before you start. *Sabe*?"

"I see. You want me at least to get one chance at him before he bumps me off. But what makes you think he has spies?"

"Those other come. Zeep! They lose the head too damn' queek. I don' like. They come weeth beeg noise and brag muy mucho. You come weethout noise and maybe do something. When they come everybody know. When you come, only I know. Ees not bad idea, eh?"

"Excellent logic, I should say. In any event it would be taking needless chances to herald my coming and my errand. But how and when do I start after your friend ? 'Ogre' would perhaps be a better name."

"Tonight at midnight. Between now and that time you weel get all the rest and sleep you can. At 12 I weel 'ave a guide and horses to take you into the danger zone. Twelve picked men, armed to the teeth and carrying provisions and equipment, weel follow a half-mile behind you. They weel rush to your aid at the sound of a shot, and weel be subject to your command at all times. I 'ave arrange weeth a friend to quarter you een case you find it necessary to make camp. And now, *amigo*, weel you 'ave a leetle siesta before dinner."

Bart Leslie tossed his cigar butt into the shrubbery, stretched his powerful arms, and grinned.

"That's the best thing you've said today," he replied.

iii

FROM some near-by tower a bell tolled the hour of eleven.

Leslie, who had retired immediately after dinner, was aroused from a sound slumber. He pushed back the covers and sat up in bed, trying to think what it was that had awakened him. Then the sound was repeated— a gentle tapping at his door.

Whipping one of his guns from the holster that swung from the belt on the chair beside him, he rose and tiptoed to the door.

"*Que gente*?" he asked. "Who is it?"

"Open, *amigo*," came back the soft reply. "Ees Hernandez."

"Ahead of your schedule, aren't you?" asked Leslie as he swung the door back.

To his surprise, there was no one in sight. About to step out into the dark hallway, he suddenly changed his mind as the sound of subdued breathing came to him from the right. Instinctively he knew there was someone crouching beside the door.

The warning of Hernandez flashed through his mind. Death, he was positive, lurked there in the corner of the hall— the mysterious and horrible end that had overtaken his predecessors.

He must act, that was sure. But how? To shoot through the wall would be to arouse the household— perhaps the community— and if the wall were brick-lined the bullet might be ineffective. A heavy mahogany chair standing beside the door gave him an idea. He knew that a scant two feet separated the edge of the doorway and the comer of the hall, hence he could calculate, with reasonable precision, the position of his concealed enemy.

First tucking his gun beneath his pajama belt, he quietly picked up the heavy chair by the back. Then, turning it so the front of the seat was forward, he swung it aloft and brought it down with crushing force at the point where he calculated the man's head would be.

As the chair struck a solid object a grunt of surprise and pain came from the comer, a heavy body pitched downward across the doorway, and a large machete clattered to the tile floor.

Before Leslie could find the switch to turn on his own light another flashed on in the hallway. There followed the patter of feet and a muttered exclamation in Spanish.

"*Madre de Dios*! They have keel the American already!"

"You mistake, Carlos. It is only a peon."

Leslie lowered his gun as he saw Hernandez and another Mexican, both in their sleeping-garments and carrying revolvers, rushing toward him.

"What ees happen, *amigo*?" the former asked him.

Leslie leaned nonchalantly on the back of the chair and mechanically reached toward his breast pocket for his makings, then remembered he was still attired in his pajamas, and grinned.

"That hombre knocked on my door and I thought it was you, so I opened it. When I found he was hiding in the comer I figured he wasn't friendly, so I quieted him with this chair."

"Ees plenty quiet, I tal you," said Hernandez, bending over the prostrate man, who was barefooted and wore the simple white cotton jacket and pantaloons of the same material common to Mexicans of the poorest class. "I theenk maybe you 'ave keel heem. Let us see." He turned him over on his back and a livid bruise on his forehead showed where the heavy chair had struck. Hernandez fingered this for a moment, then placed his ear to the fellow's heart. "Ees alive," he announced, "an' stunned." Turning to his companion, he said in Spanish. "Bind and gag him, Carlos. Perhaps we can make him talk when he revives."

The man called Carlos threw the would-be assassin over his shoulder as if he had been a sack of grain, and carried him off down the hallway.

"May as well dress now," said Leslie. "We can't get much sleep before midnight."

Hernandez shrugged.

"Joost as well," he replied. "Meet me downstairs when you are ready."

Some time later Leslie, wearing full cowboy attire and two businesslike forty-fives, stepped into the spacious living-room. Finding it untenanted, he sat down on a divan and rolled a cigarette. A full twenty minutes elapsed before Hernandez entered.

"Ees no use," he said. "That damn' peon don't talk."

"Came to, did he?"

"*Si*, some time ago. We threaten weeth the hot iron— everytheeng. No use. Says he don't know about these head-stealers."

"What's his story?"

"Says he came only to rob the rich *Americano*. "

"But he carried a machete."

"To be sure. Eef you 'ad step through that door— zeep! We find you weethout the head. Those damn' fairy are wise already, I bat you. Per'aps you better not leave tonight, *amigo*."

"Fast little workers, aren't they? Crave action. Well, let's give 'em some. Keep that hombre here and get him to talk if you can, but meanwhile let me take the trail. I'm not going to be scared off by a sneaking peon with a machete."

"But, *señor*, it ees more dangerous than ever, now. A little later we might-"

"Nix on the *mañana* stuff. I'm going right now if you can get someone to guide me. Are your men afraid to go?"

Hernandez shruged.

"My men are brave," he replied, "but it ees sometimes best to meex brains weeth bravery. Go then, eef you are determine', but remember, *amigo*, I warned you." He clapped his hands and the man Carlos appeared in the doorway. "Send José," he ordered, "and saddle the horses. José Gonzaga," he explained to Leslie, "weel guide you. Ees three-quarter Indian, and speaks no English, so you weel 'ave to converse in the Spanish."

A moment later a tall, swarthy fellow entered. Although he wore the dress of a Mexican *vaquero*, his high cheekbones, hawk nose and dark skin bespoke a predominance of Aztec blood. He was beardless, and three livid scars, two on the right cheek and one on the forehead, added to the ferocity of his countenance. For armament he carried a knife and revolver, both stuck in his sash, a carbine slung across his back, and two well-filled cartridge belts.

"*Buenas noches, señores*," he greeted with a flash of dazzling white teeth.

When both had made the customary polite reply, Hernandez said:

"Señor Leslie is determined to depart tonight, despite the fact that our plans have been discovered. You will therefore start at once and I will send the men after you as agreed." He turned to Leslie and extended his hand. "*Adios, amigo*. May good fortune attend you."

Leslie shook the proffered hand.

"*Gracias, señor*," he replied. "I hope to play my cards better than I did on the train. Adios."

iv

JOSÉ led the way through the patio to the stables in the rear. Here Carlos held two rangy Mexican ponies, saddled and ready. To Leslie he handed a carbine like that carried by the guide, and a long sheath-knife.

Swinging the gun across his back and attaching the knife to his belt, Leslie mounted and rode forth, followed by José. The latter took the lead as they threaded the narrow streets, lighted only by the waning moon. Later, when they emerged into the open country, they rode side by side.

At first they crossed a waste of sand, gleaming a dull silver in the moonlight and dotted here and there with desert growths— giant cacti that reared their armlike branches heavenward as if in a constant appeal for water, scrawny twisted mesquite in scattered clumps, and the more lowly prickly pears, their barbed and segmented branches twined and interlaced like the tentacles of cuttle-fish.

Later their trail led through a group of rocky hills, and thence along the bank of a narrow, tree-bordered stream, enclosed by towering canyon walls. When they entered the canyon, José paused.

"It is here, señor," he announced, "that the land of the demons begins. On this spot, just three nights ago, a headless body was found."

"And no trace of the murderer was discovered?"

"None. A riderless horse, bloodsplattered and weary, wandered into Tlaxpam the next morning, and we knew what we would find, even before I started here with two companions. There was but one fresh trail— that of the horse that had borne the victim."

"Is the trail so little used?"

"Yes, *señor* , since the mysterious murders commenced. Formerly it was quite popular with those entering and leaving Tlaxpam from the north. Now it is shunned as a plague spot, although a detour of five miles is necessary to avoid this pass. Only strangers, travelers unacquainted with its bloody history, use it now. and these seldom live to boast of it. Many of these have been warned, have laughed at the warning, and have paid for their foolhardiness with their heads. A few who have escaped swear that they heard the whistling of the wings of Satan, who swooped down at them without warning, and whose frightful attack they avoided only by the utmost quickness and haste in riding away. Others claim to have heard his horrible, blood-curdling laugh, and still others to have seen him lurking in the undergrowth."

"There are many people with powerful imaginations," replied Leslie. "How long is this pass?"

"Nearly a mile. From now on we are in grave danger. Shall we proceed at once, or wait until daylight?"

"Let us go on."

Scarcely had these words passed the lips of the American than both men heard a noise in the pass ahead of them. Mingled with the distant clatter of horses' hoofs they heard someone singing or yelling— perhaps both— and the sounds were punctuated with the reports , of a gun.

"Some drunken fool," said José. "Ah! The sounds have stopped. Perhaps the demons have killed him."

The sounds of voice and gun had died, but the patter of hoofs was still audible. There sounded, however, another voice, high-pitched, cackling, as if in demoniac laughter.

"*Santo Dios*! The laugh of Satanas!" cried José.

"Pull over to that side of the road, quick!" ordered Leslie. " I 'll wait on this side."

They had not long to wait. The hoofbeats slowed down from a gallop to a singlefoot. A horse appeared, rounding a bend in the canyon wall, but the animal was without a rider.

"*Demonios*! It has happened!" exclaimed José, crossing himself devoutly. "Maria *Madre* preserve us!"

Leslie caught the bridle of the riderless horse and, producing his flashlight, examined the saddle and the back of the beast. Both were spattered with blood.

"The body will be lying near the point where the singing ceased," said José. "Of that I am certain."

Again came the thunder of hoofbeats, this time from behind them.

"Our men are coming," José said. "They heard the shots and think we need help."

"Here, take the reins and bring the men forward when they arrive," ordered Leslie. "I'm going to look for the body and the murderer."

He spurred his pony forward. A short distance beyond the first bend he saw a ghastly thing in the moonlight— a headless body lying by the roadside. Dismounting, he brought his flashlight into play. There were no tracks of human being or animal near the body, other than those made by himself, his horse, and the horse of the victim. He walked ahead for fifty feet, then discovered a revolver in the dust of the road. Five of the six chambers had been discharged. Pocketing this, he again made his way forward. A walk of a quarter of a mile revealed no tracks other than those made by the victim's horse, and he knew the tragedy had not occurred that far back. Puzzled, he mounted and rode back to where José and the twelve men sent by Hernandez

waited beside the body. The guide had dismounted and was standing beside the corpse.

"You found tracks of the murderer, *señor*?" he asked.

"Not a track."

"That was to be expected. I have found a paper on the body of this young fool, explaining why he rode through the pass. It seems he made a drunken wager with another young blood that he could come through unscathed. The paper is the other man's guarantee of the payment of a hundred pesos by this fellow's bank in case his headless body is found. What is to be done?"

"From what town did this man ride?"

"Rosario."

"Tie the body on the horse and let two of our men take it back to his relatives. Put the paper in the pocket where you found it."

When the two riders and the horse with its ghastly burden had been dispatched in accordance with his orders, Leslie posted his men by twos at intervals of a thousand feet along the canyon. Then, accompanied by José, he patrolled the road for the remainder of the night.

The first faint streaks of dawn found Leslie and his companion near the center of the danger zone. The former reined his horse to a halt as the odor of burning wood came to his nostrils.

"Someone is making camp near here," he said. "I smell smoke."

José smiled.

"It is only *Tio* Luis, the Anciano," he replied, "preparing his breakfast."

"Uncle Louis, the Old One? Who is he?"

"The Anciano is a very venerable hermit who braves the dangers of this pass to remain with the holy shrine of San Antonio, which he has attended since the death of good Father Salvador some years ago. Although he is but a lay brother, he is a most holy man, revered by all who know him, and a very good friend of *Señor* Hernandez. He has agreed to quarter our men if we find it necessary to remain."

"A shrine of St. Anthony here? But why has it not been moved?"

"Because it rests on a holy spot, venerated for more than two centuries. From a crevice in the hillside, just beside the niche containing the image of the saint, there flows a spring. This spring empties into a shallow pool where the sick have come to bathe for many generations and where countless miracles of healing have occurred. Whereas pilgrim often came alone in former years and at all hours, they now come only in the middle of the day and in considerable numbers for mutual protection on acount of the murderous fiends who surround this place. Did not *Señor* Hernandez mention the Anciano?"

"He only said quarters had been provided for the men. How do we reach this place?"

"We have only to ride up the ravine at your left, down which this small stream trickles. It is the overflow from the sacred pool."

v

LESLIE assembled his men and led them up the steep path in the winding ravine which had been pointed out by José. Presently he emerged on a small plot of more even ground and beheld the home of the Anciano. It was a small abode hut, built against the steep hillside. On the left of the hut was a niche containing a life-size image of St. Anthony, and just in front of the image was the pool described by his guide, which was fed by a spring that bubbled from the rock. From a battered and rusty stovepipe that protruded from the side of the hut, there issued the wood smoke which was being wafted down the ravine, and which had drawn Leslie's attention to the place.

At the right of the enclosure was a long, low shed, open on one side and built from wide, rough, unpainted boards. This was evidently intended to quarter the horses of pilgrims as well as the pilgrims themselves, for rings were fastened at frequent intervals along the back wall.

The men tethered their horses and busied themselves with opening packs, preparing breakfast, and pitching tents, while Leslie and José went up to the hut of the anchorite. It was evident that he had heard their arrival, for a bent figure, attired in a ragged robe of rusty brown and leaning on a staff, emerged from the doorway and hobbled foi'ward to meet them. As he drew near, Leslie saw a face that was seamed, wrinkled and emaciated above an unkempt gray beard.

The hermit paused before them and leaned on his staff.

"God bless you, my sons," he mumbled, with the peculiar sibilant enunciation that invariably denotes the paucity or absence of teeth. "You have come from my friend, *Señor* Hernandez, I presume. And you have passed the demons unscathed. *Deo gracias*."

"Unscathed thus far, Tio Luis," replied José. "This is *Señor* Leslie, the great Devil-Fighter, who has come to rid us of the demons that haunt this vicinity."

"*Bueno*! We have need of him, and our prayers for his safety and success will go with him on his dangerous mission. But come within and join me at breakfast if you can do with my humble fare."

They accompanied the aged hermit to the door of the hut, where he politely stood aside and bade them enter.

"All that you see is yours, my sons," he said as he followed them into the small front room. "Excuse me while I go into the kitchen to sec about breakfast."

He hobbled through a curtained doorway into the rear room, and Leslie heard him puttering about to the accompanying clatter of pans and crockery.

José unslung his carbine, stood it in a comer, and flung himself into one of the chairs beside the bare table that stood in the center of the room.

"*Huy*, but I am tired," he grunted. "It has been a strenuous night, *señor*."

Leslie politely agreed with him, disposed of his own carbine, and took a chair on the other side of the table. While he waited for the puttering anchorite he glanced around the room. The furnishings were meager enough to suit the taste of the most humble of lay brothers; a low cot covered by a frowsy blanket, four crude chairs, and the table at which they sat, its bare top stained with food and beverages. Beneath the single window there stood a small, crudely constructed pulpit on which lay a book, evidently a missal. Both pulpit and book were covered with much dust, evidence that they had known little if any use since the passing of Father Salvador. The plastered walls were cracked, grimy, and festooned with cobwebs.

Presently the Anciano limped through the curtained doorway. Again apologizing for the meanness of the fare, he set before them some boiled rice, a huge chunk of honeycomb, and hot chocolate.

After consulting with José and the anchorite, Leslie decided to post two guards at each end of the pass for the morning, do a little exploring on his own account, and permit the other men to rest, relieving the guards at noon.

Accordingly, he set out after breakfast, resolved to make a minute examination of the scene of the tragedy enacted the night before, hoping that the morning sunlight might reveal some clue overlooked in his search by flashlight.

Arriving at the place where the foolhardy rider had been beheaded, he dismounted and scanned every foot of the ground in the vicinity. The road, at that point, was less than ten feet in width. On one side the cliff rose almost perpendicularly to a heightof nearly twenty-five feet, and appeared unscalable. On the other, the stony ground sloped sharply to the water's edge. Some thirty feet from the point where the blood spots began, a clump of stunted willows had found foothold in the rocky bank. Leslie peered into these with a view to ascertaining whether or not they had been used for purposes of ambush, then uttered a cry of surprize at sight of a bloodstained object hanging among them. He drew it forth and recognized it instantly as the outer edge of a broad-brimmed sombrero. It appeared to have been cut from the hat by a very keen instrument, not in the form of a circle or oval, but more like an irregular

hexagon, no two lines being equal but all lines straight, or nearly so. He noticed, also, that it was creased at each point where two straight cuts joined. An examination of the bushes revealed the fact that they had not been used as a hiding place by a human being.

Puzzled, Leslie hung the bloodcaked relic over his saddle-horn, mounted, and rode back to camp.

His men, with the exception of one who had been left on guard by José, were sleeping beneath the tents, the walls of which had been raised to admit the breeze. The guard took charge of his horse and looked curiously at the bloody hat-brim which Leslie removed from the saddle-horn.

He started for the hut of the hermit, intending to show his find to that individual, then paused as the sudden clatter of hoofbeats came from behind him.

Turning, he beheld one of his men emerging from the ravine. The fellow dismounted and ran to where he was standing, fear and horror written on his bronzed features. So great was his agitation that, although his lips worked spasmodically, he was unable to speak.

"Well, what is it?" snapped Leslie. "Have you lost your voice?"

The man crossed himself and muttered beneath his breath.

"Maria *Madre* preserve us!" he gasped. "We are all doomed men."

"But how? Speak to the point."

"The demons! They kill in broad daylight now!"

"Where? Who?"

"We were standing guard at the north end of the pass, Miguel and I. They have beheaded Miguel!"

"What did they look like?"

"I did not see them, *señor*."

"What? Your comrade slain before your eyes and you could not see the murderers?"

"Not before my eyes, *señor*. I— that is—"

"You were sleeping, I suppose, on duty."

The fellow hung his head.

"We were very tired, Miguel and I, after the night's vigil. Things were so peaceful that we decided there could be no harm in our snatching a little sleep, one at a time. I stood guard for two hours while Miguel slept. Then he mounted guard, but it seemed I had scarcely closed my eyes before I heard him utter a choking cry. I caught up my carbine and leaped instantly to my feet. Before my eyes the headless body of my comrade slipped from his saddle, and at the same moment I heard the whir of wings above my head! Although I looked upward instantly, I saw nothing!"

"This whir of wings. Was it loud like the roar of an airplane?"

"No, *señor*. It had a much quieter tone, like the whistle of a large bird's pinions."

"What has happened, my sons?"

Wheeling, Leslie saw the Anciano, who had hobbled up unnoticed, behind him.

vi

LESLIE explained the situation to the hermit and showed him the hat brim he had found.

"Lend us the wisdom of your years, *Tio* Luis," he requested. "This is the most singular as well as the most hellish thing I have ever encountered. What do you make of it?"

The old man turned the gruesome relic in his bony hands, squinting at it with watery eyes.

"A man beheaded, the whir of wings— and this." He shook his head, handed the thing back to Leslie, and crossed himself. "I fear you are playing with fire that will destroy you, my sons. We have a saying: 'He must have iron fingers who would flay the devil.' "

"We also have a saying that is apt, *Tio* Luis," Leslie replied. " 'Give the devil rope enough and he'll hang himself.' " He turned to the guard. "Saddle my horse, Pedro, and arouse José. We'll see if the devil has left any more souvenirs."

Once more the anchorite shook his grizzled head.

" 'He was slain who had warning, not he who took it,' " he quoted. "You have my sympathy, my son— that and my prayers."

"The former is premature, but for the latter I thank you," replied Leslie. "Ready, Pedro?"

"*Si, señor*. José will be out in a moment. He is pulling on his boots."

José emerged from the tent as Leslie started toward the horses. Together, they mounted and rode down the ravine.

They covered the half-mile to the north end of the canyon at a brisk gallop. The body of the slain man lay sprawled in the middle of the road, and his patient horse stood near by, apparently not greatly frightened by the diabolical presence which had given Pedro so much alarm.

Dismounting, both men looked carefully for tracks of the slayer, but their search was as fruitless as before. Nor was there a cut hat-brim, such as Leslie had found on the scene of the last tragedy.

Compelled at last to give up their hopeless search, they tied the body of Miguel across his saddle and took it back to camp. Leslie directed that the corpse be rolled in an extra tent fly and sent to Tlaxpam with one of the men. Then lie detailed two guards for the north end of the pass and two to relieve those at the south end, warning them to take heed from the death of Miguel and do no sleeping on duty. These matters attended to, he instructed the camp guard to call him before sundown, and retired to his tent for a much-needed rest.

It seemed to Leslie that he had not slept more than fifteen miniates when he was aroused by a tug at his blanket. Opening his eyes, he saw José standing over him.

"The sun nears the horizon, *señor*," he said, "and the Anciano has bidden us to sup with him. Some pilgrims visited the shrine this afternoon and left gifts for the holy man. Among them were a pullet and a bottle of wine he desires to share with us."

"Pilgrims ? Who were they?"

"Only two peons with their wives. They came here on donkeys from a hacienda near Tlaxpam, and departed after they had bathed in the sacred pool and deposited their gifts."

"I see. Tell the Anciano we accept with gratitude. A pullet and a bottle of wine will be preferable to *tasajo* and *frijoles*. I'll be along in a few minutes."

José departed, and Leslie pulled on his boots. Then he buckled his two gun-belts about him and stepped out of the tent, intending to wash for dinner at the spring. His men were squatting or lying around their cooking-fires, preparing their evening meal.

As he rounded the last of the tents he saw a man disrobing beside the sacred pool. On closer approach he recognized Pedro.

"What's the matter? Sick?" he inquired.

"A bath in the pool at sunset is said to cure boils," replied the Mexican, stripping off his shirt. "I have two on my back, señor."

"At sunset? I didn't know the time made any difference."

"Oh, but it does, señor. The Anciano told me so himself."

Walking past the image of St. Anthony, Leslie laved his face and hands in the bubbling spring. Then, much refreshed, he started for the hermit's hut. The sun was sinking, and he heard the splashing of Pedro as the lad entered the pool.

Rounding the corner of the hut, Leslie came upon José seated on the doorstep smoking a husk cigarette. In the kitchen he heard the anchorite bustling about among his pots and pans. The table was set and graced by a wide, wicker-covered bottle with a long neck.

"How is your appetite, José?" he asked.

"Like that of a wolf, *señor*. And yours?"

"Like that of a pack of wolves. I'm accustomed to eating lunch, but I've been too busy today."

At the sound of their voices the hermit limped out from the kitchen.

"Come in, my sons," he said. "Be seated and sample this wine with me while the pullet reaches the right degree of tenderness."

They obeyed his invitation with alacrity.

"This is really an imposition, *Tio* Luis," said Leslie as the old man filled their glasses, "but I couldn't resist. I promise you a dozen pullets and a dozen bottles to replace these when I get back to Tlaxpam."

"I, also," cried José, eagerly reaching for his glass. "We are eternally indebted to you. I propose the health of our host, señor."

The hermit bowed, smiled, sipped his wine, and rose. "I must look to our food," he said.

"The two men sipped their wine and discussed the events of the day. Presently José emptied his glass and refilled it.

Then the anchorite entered again. In one hand he bore a large pot from which savory odors exuded. In the other he carried a deep plate over which a bowl had been inverted. Placing pot and plate on the table, he lifted the bowl.

"Chicken and chile!" cried José. "Food for a king."

"And tortillas!" exclaimed Leslie. "Did you bake them yourself?"

His words were followed by a shout from outside— then an excited babel of voices.

Leslie put down his glass and rushed out the door. He saw a man standing beside the sacred pool. The others, aroused from their places beside the campfires, were running toward their companion. He joined the rush to the pool and saw, in a moment, the cause of the commotion. A half-clothed, headless body with arms outstretched lay on the very rim of the pool.

"It is Pedro!" a man cried. "The demons have slain Pedro!"

"They will slay us all if we remain," said another. "I'm going back to Tlaxpam."

"And I."

"And I."

José came running.

"What has happened, *señor*?" he asked, his tongue a bit thickened by wine.

"We've lost another man." Leslie produced his flashlight and snapped it on. "See if you can quiet these sniveling cowards while I have a look ground."

WHILE José, rendered eloquent and perhaps more fearless by the wine he had consumed, sought to quiet the fears of his comrades, Leslie made a thorough examination of the body. He judged from its position that Pedro had been seated on the rim of the pool with his back to the image, dressing, when the crime occurred. The other men, occupied with their evening meal, would not have seen the attack because of the tents intervening between the cooking-fires and the pool.

Using the jutting rocks for feet and hands, he next climbed the steep hillside at the left of the image, circled the point over the niche, and descended on the right side, searching every inch of the way with his flashlight. As there were no tracks other than those he had made himself, he concluded that the attack had not come from above. It was useless to look for tracks on the hard-packed ground around the pool, and there seemed to be no other clues.

His men, he noticed, were gathered in a small group around the loquacious José, and he was about to snap off his flashlight and go to the guide's assistance when the white circle fell on something that gave him pause. It was a large drop of blood on the stone floor of the niche, and directly in front of the image. With a low cry of surprize he bent over to examine it, then leaped up and whirled about, gun in hand, at the sound of a footfall behind him. He returned the weapon to its holster with a nervous laugh as he saw the Anciano standing there, peering at him with his little watery eyes.

"Sorry, *Tio* Luis," he apologized, "but you gave me .a deuce of a start."

"Do not mention it, my son," replied the hermit. "I should have announced my coming at a time like this. So the demons have profaned the sacred pool! Now, indeed, will the wrath of God smite them. You have found a clue?"

"Only a drop of the blood on the floor of the niche. It has some significance, of course— but what ? How do you suppose this blood was dropped clear over here, a full ten feet from the body? And there are no blood-spots between, other than those around the body itself."

"It is as mysterious as all else that has happened. We have a saying: 'The devil lurks behind the cross,' and if this be true he would not hesitate to conceal himself in a shrine of St. Anthony."

"That explanation may suffice for you, but it does not satisfy me," replied Leslie. Then, noticing that some of his men were saddling their horses, he hurried to the assistance of José, whose alcoholic eloquence had apparently not been sufficient to deter them from their avowed purpose of returning to Tlaxpam.

"Get down, *hombre*!" he roared, addressing a man who had already mounted. The fellow hesitated, then did as he was bidden. He swung on the others. "What does this mean? Are you women in the uniforms of fighters?"

"We can not fight the devil," one man replied.

"We shall only lose our lives and accomplish nothing by remaining," said another. "Come with us, *señor*."

Leslie laughed.

"Go, then, cowards," he retorted. "Go back to Don Arturo and tell him you are afraid— that you are too white-livered to remain and avenge the death of your comrades. I'll stay and fight these murderers alone."

"Not alone, señor," said José. "I remain with you." He appealed again to the men. "The great Devil-Fighter stays," he said, "to deal death to those who have slain our comrades. Boon companions we have been for many years, we and those of us who have died for our cause. The Devil-Fighter, whom we have only known since yesterday— who has only known Pedro and Miguel a few hours— remains to avenge them. Is there one among us who can do less?"

"He is right," said the man who had just dismounted. "I remain."

"My duty is plain," said another. "I remain also."

"And I."

"And I."

"*Viva* Leslie! Hurrah for the great Devil-Fighter!"

Thus the mutiny was quelled and order restored.

In a trice, José had set them at variolas tasks, knowing full well that if their hands were occupied they would have less time for fearful speculations. The body of Pedro was wrapped and swung from the rafters of the shed. The watch-fires were replenished so that most of the camp was illuminated, and men were sent to relieve the guards at the ends of the canyon.

In order to hearten his men further, Leslie decided to ride down with the two who were to take the post nearest Tlaxpam. Nothing untoward occuring after an hour's vigil with these two, he enjoined them to be on their guard and rode away to see how the two at the other end of the canyon were getting along.

He had passed the camp and was rounding the next curve at a slow canter, wrapped in meditation as he pondered the terrible and amazing events of the last twenty-four hours, when with startling suddenness there came a sound resembling the whistle of huge pinions, directly above his head.

There was no time to think— yet he acted, by instinct rather than by reason. With catlike quickness he hurled himself sideways and hung, Indian fashion, supported by one stirrup and the neck of the pony. Something struck heavily on the saddle and he heard a sharp metallic click. Then the frightened

animal bounded forward so suddenly that he nearly lost his hold. Deft horseman that Leslie was, he managed to regain his seat before much ground had been covered, but nearly lost his balance in doing so, because when he reached for the saddle-horn he grasped only empty air.

Pulling the pony to a halt he dismounted, unslung his carbine, and waited for a new attack. Five minutes elapsed— ten— fifteen, yet he saw nothing save the rugged canyon bathed in the moonlight, and heard only the chirruping serenade of insects and the occasional call of a night bird.

Holding the carbine in his left hand, he felt the front of the saddle with his right. The horn, he discovered, had been sheared away smoothly and completely. Thus, he was certain, would his head have been sheared from his shoulders had he kept his seat a fraction of a second longer when that awful, death-dealing thing had hurtled down at him from a clear sky.

And the thing itself. What was it? Something conceived by man, he felt sure— for Leslie was not superstitious— yet designed with such diabolical cleverness as to kill Avith almost superhuman accuracy and leave no clue that would hint at its nature or *modus operandi*.

Convinced, at length, that he could not further his cause by remaining longer, Leslie removed his broad Stetson and fastened it to the saddlering with the chin-strap. Then he mounted with a better view of the air above his head and rode, carbine in hand, to where the two guards were posted. Finding that they had nothing to report, he left them with a warning to maintain the utmost vigilance, and rode slowly back toward the camp. While he rode, albeit he kept a weather eye for danger, he was thinking, and to such purpose that when he reached camp a new plan had completely formed in his mind. He greeted José with a disconcerting smile as that worthy came out to meet him.

viii

"THE señor is amused?" José answered the smile of Leslie with a flash of his white teeth. "Perhaps he has discovered something."

"Nothing new, José," Leslie replied. "Just thought of a new scheme to work on this so-called 'devil'. "

"And the scheme?"

"I'll show you in a minute. Go and ask Tio Luis if avc may tear three or four boards off his horse-shed."

"Tio Luis retired for the night shortly after you left. Should we disturb him for such a trifle?"

"No, let him sleep, but bring four boards into my tent, a *riata*, and a couple of good sharp machetes. Don't make any more noise than necessary, and say nothing about this to the others."

"*Si, señor*."

As soon as José departed to do his bidding, Leslie went behind the tents and pulled a huge armful of grass. With this he entered the rear of his own tent, deposited it on the floor, and lighted his lantern. Then he opened one of his saddle-bags and took therefrom a complete suit of cowboy attire.

José returned in a trice with the boards and the machetes.

"Noav bring me a saddle," Leslie ordered.

When José got back with the saddle he found the American industriously hewing one of the broad boards with a machete. The wood was partly softened by dry rot, though firm enough not to crumble, and was consequently easily shaped with the keen blade.

Leslie finished this board, which was about six feet in length, and handed it to José.

"Cut me another the same shape," he said.

José worked swiftly, but stole a curious glance at Leslie from time to time as the latter cut one of the remaining boards into four pieces, the other into two, and then proceeded to cut holes and notches in them.

The boards shaped, Leslie cut the *riata*, a piece at a time, and began lashing the boards together, using the notches and holes for the purpose. When José saAV a figure resembling the frame of a scarecrow beginning to take shape he grinned broadly.

"*Por Dios*!" he cried. "Do you expeet to fool the devil with so simple a thing?"

"Wait until it's finished," Leslie answered, drawing the trousers and boots over the frame and stuffing them with grass. "Bring a horse around behind my tent while I finish this work of art."

His own effigy completed to his satisfaction, Leslie clapped his Stetson over the head and lashed the thing to the saddle with wliat was left of the riata. Then he lifted the rear tentflap and passed it through to the waiting José. Together they placed the dummy on the back of the surprized and annoyed pony, and stood back to view their handiwork.

"*Viva*!" exclaimed José. "Your double sits the horse, *señor*."

"Now for the rest of my plan," said Leslie. "I want you to saddle another horse and lead this one, giving it about twenty feet of rope. Ride very slowly up and down the canyon until the attack occurs. If we may judge by our previous experience it is almost sure to come. The enemy will attack the rear man for two reasons. One is that an attack on the man in front could be seen and

perhaps frustrated by the man in the rear, and the other is that the thing looks like me in the moonlight and I have reason to believe my head would be preferred as a souvenir above all others in this company.

"While you are walking your horses on the trail below I'll follow at a distance of about a hundred yards on the cliff above. I have a pair of moccasins here that will eliminate any clatter I might make with boots and spurs, and will thus have a chance to view the attack from above while you look on from below. ' '

"*Cáspita*! Now we will get this devil, for sure."

"I hope so. Go and saddle up while I put on my moccasins. If we have any traitors in camp they will see us ride away together. If not, there will be no harm in temporarily deceiving them. I'll throw the end of the lead rope to you from behind the tent, when you're ready to start. Then I can hike over to the top of the cliff and wait for you."

As José, some moments later, rode down the arroyo apparently followed by the American, Leslie stood and viewed his handiwork with pardonable pride for a moment, then scurried up to the top of the cliff and waited for the guide to appear below him.

It was not long before what looked for all the world like two horsemen riding in single file emerged from the arroyo and started toward Tlaxpam at a leisurely pace. Following his preconceived plan, Leslie kept about three hundred feet behind them on the cliff top, his moceasined feet making no sound, his carbine held ready for action.

A full quarter of a mile had been covered when Leslie's quick eye caught the movement of a shadowy form near a clump, of brush at his right. It disappeared in the bushes almost instantly, and he paused, breathlessly awaiting its reappearance. The view had been so indistinct that he was not sure whether it had been a man or an animal.

After several minutes of waiting, he grew impatient and had just decided to explore the bushes where the apparition had dropped out of sight, when he saw it again, this time fully three hundred yards away and just on the brink of the cliff. It was undeniably a man, though grotesquely shaped, a man with what looked like a huge hump on his back. As he looked, he realized that the prowler was directly above the point where José and his own effigy would be, the guide having made considerable progress while he had been waiting for the reappearance of the figure.

Dismayed at this unforeseen circumstance that had caused him to lag so far behind the guide, Leslie rushed forward. As he did so, he was amazed to see the hump suddenly detach itself from the back of the man— no longer a

hump, but something about the size of a peck measure. It was raised aloft, then hurled downward over the side of the cliff. Leslie halted and brought his carbine to his shoulder, but at this moment his quarry suddenly dropped from sight.

Cursing his own slowness, he again hurried forward, stepped into an unseen crevice, and fell sprawling, cutting his hands painfully on the sharp stones. As if in mirth at his discomfiture there came to him the raucous echoes of hideous, demoniac laughter.

He scrambled to his feet, caught a glimpse of the humpbacked figure again, and fired. Simultaneously with the crack of his rifle the figure dropped out of sight. Again he ran forward, his rifle held in readiness, straining his eyes in all directions for another sight of his quarry. He had almost eome upon the spot where he judged the marauder had stood, when he caught the movement of something in the shrubbery, this time a full hundred feet back from the cliff. Again he fired and rushed forward, convinced that his bullet had found its mark. It seemed, however, that he was doomed to disappointment, for a thorough search of the shrubbery in and around the spot revealed nothing.

Returning to the brink of the cliff he took the precaution to call out before showing himself.

"José."

"*Que gente*?"

"I am Leslie. Do not shoot.''

"Very well, *señor*."

Looking over the cliff, Leslie saw that his effigy had been decapitated, even as he had expected. It was well, too, that he had had the forethought to call out, as José had dismounted and was standing behind his pony, his carbine pointing across the saddle.

"Did you see it, José?" he asked.

"No, *señor*, but I heard it. Praise God it struck as you expected."

"So I see," replied Leslie, regarding the headless effigy, "but unfortunately I wasn't on the job to strike as I expected. I may as well ride back to camp now and think up a new scheme. This one won't work again. I'll keep to the cliff above you in case of another attack."

"Very well, *señor*."

ix

BACK at camp, Leslie's men greeted him with a flood of questions, for they had heard the sound of his carbine. The appearance of José leading the horse which bore the headless effigy increased the amazement of the Mexicans, and

Leslie left the task of explaining to the guide while he sat down on his cot to smoke a cigarette and think out the situation. Hearing laughter from the men outside as José told of the ruse, he decided that the salutary effect on them had been worth the effort, even though he had not suceeded in his purpose.

His cigarette finished, he ground it into the dirt with his heel and paced back and forth in the tent. As he was preoccupied with his efforts to think out a new plan of campaign, it was some time before he noticed that it was growing lighter outside. He stepped out, and found that most of the men had rolled themselves in their blankets to rest after the night's vigil. Two stood guard, however, and José squatted beside a smoldering fire, heating a pot of chocolate.

He was about to join the latter beside the fire when he noticed smoke issuing from the stovepipe that protruded from the side of the Anciano's hut. Evidently the hermit was an early riser. Perhaps, thought Leslie, he could offer a suggestion for the next move in the campaign. At any rate, he should be told about the boards and the effigy.

Going to the hut, Leslie rapped smartly on the door. There was no response. He rapped again. Still no response. Puzzled, he swung it open and entered. Seeing no one, he walked into the kitchen. There was nobody in sight, and no sign of a fire in the stove. Yet he had, just a moment before, seen smoke issuing from the stovepipe.

Confronted with this paradoxical situation, he stepped forward and felt the pipe. It was quite warm— almost hot. He looked out the small window and saw that smoke was billowing from the pipe even more thickly than before. This led him to make an examination of the stove. One end, he now noticed, abutted against the adobe wall at the rear of the hut. He raised a lid, and a cloud of smoke whirled up into his face. Reaching inside the stove, he explored with his hand, and found that it was coming through a pipe which connected the end of the stove with the adobe wall.

If this told him anything, it was that someone had built a fire on the other side of the wall. But how had he got there? The hillside had been partly dug away when the hut was built. Evidently the digging had been deeper than appeared on tie surface. He made a quick examination of the rear wall. All appeared to be solid adobe with the exception of a row of shelves containing canned goods, cooking utensils, and other things, which occupied one side. These were of wood, apparently built against the adobe, yet they were his only hope. He pulled on the side nearest him, but it was apparently quite firm. Pushing brought the same result. Then he tried pulling the other side, and his heart gave a sudden jump as it gave and swung toward him. The shelving, he

now saw, was nailed to a heavy oaken door with concealed hinges, the front of which was plastered with adobe.

A dark passageway yawned before him. He drew a revolver, stepped in, and pulled the door shut after him.

Pausing for a moment to accustom his eyes to the semi-darkness, he noticed that what light there was came to him from around a curve in the passageway. It was of reddish hue, and flickered weirdly in the gloom. As he advanced he noticed that the floor slanted abruptly downward.

He rounded the curve in the passageway, his moccasined feet making no sound, then came to a sudden halt; for not ten feet ahead was a sight that made his flesh creep— a grinning human skull, hovering with no apparent support, in midair. The fleshless features seemed to quiver with some ghoulish emotion, the eyeless sockets to sparkle with malignant intensity.

Conquering his repugnance, Leslie again advanced, and discovered that the skull was hung on a thin, black, hence invisible, wire just at the entrance of a square room. The apparent motion of the bony features was caused by the flickering light of a fire that crackled in a fireplace cut into one wall, and over which a huge black cauldron bubbled.

Stepping past the skull, Leslie was confronted by a charnel array that rivaled, if it did not exactly resemble, the most ghastly comers of the Catacombs. He was surrounded by skulls, some dangling from the ceiling rafters on wires of various lengths, some grinning down at him from the wall where they were arranged in divers geometric patterns, and the rest piled in a grim funebral pyramid in the center of the floor.

Feeling sure there was someone near by, Leslie looked carefully about him. There were two entrances to the chamber, the one by which he had come, and another in the opposite side of the room. After investigating the second opening, which led into a dark runway, he walked to the fireplace, curious to know what was being cooked in the kettle.

Peering over, he saw a seething mass of liquid with a dark spot in the center. Then the dark spot moved— it was black hair— and the ghastly dead face of Pedro, turning with the movement of the water, looked up at him. Beneath it, another head was slowly turning toward him— the head of Miguel. He drew back, sickened and horrified, then paused, listening intently. Distinctly, he heard the sound of footsteps in the passageway he had not yet explored.

With catlike quickness, he bounded noiselessly into the passageway by which he had come, and trusting to the comparative darkness for concealment he waited a few feet from the opening.

Prepared as he was for strange sights, Leslie gasped in amazement at the weird figure that entered— a tall, gaunt being, attired from head to foot in tight-fitting scarlet, and wearing a Mephistophelian hood and mask. As the man advanced to the center of the room with the springy tread of an athlete, Leslie saw that he was well muscled, and would make no mean antagonist in a rough-and-tumble fight. In his right hand he held a coiled rope, one end of which extended over his shoulder. He turned and eased a burden to the floor— a queer-looking contrivance that was fastened to the other end of the rope. It was cubical in shape, each dimension being about twelve inches, and was apparently made of steel. Projecting from the bottom on each of two opposite sides were three stout bars about four inches in length. Between each middle bar and corresponding end bar was stretched a powerful steel spring. The rope was fastened to an iron ring riveted near the bottom.

The demoniac figure knelt on the floor beside the thing and fondled it as one might a faithful dog. Then there issued from behind the hideous mask a horrid peal of laughter that caused cold chills to run up and down the spine of the American, for it was the same sound he had twice heard before, and each time after a headless victim had been found on the road.

The maniac— for such he appeared to be— continued to stroke the thing that lay on the floor before him.

"You have done well, *degollador mio*," he said. "Heh, heh, heh, my little one, you have done famously. Never was there a headsman like you. I swear it. Three heads between two suns! Cáspita! If the harvest continues thus, our vow will soon be fulfilled. Had that cursed Gringo not evaded us with his clever tricks wo should have had four, but never mind, my pretty. I promise that you shall taste his cursed heretic blood ere another sun has set. Heh, heh, heh! We will fool this self-styled 'Devil-Fighter,' my little one. We will send him to try conclusions with Satanas and his imps. But we must rest ere that is done, so now to business."

So saying, he half raised one end of the contrivance and pressed his knee against it. Then he grasped the two middle projecting bars and pulled them toward him with some difficulty because of the resistance of the powerful springs. At the sound of a sharp click, he released his hold and the bars remained where he had left them, the springs now drawn taut the entire length of the sides. He took hold of the ring, and gave the whole thing a shake. A gory head rolled out upon the floor, and Leslie instantly recognized the face of another of his guards, probably caught napping in the early morning hours.

Seizing it by the hair, the maniac carried it to the kettle and dropped it into the boiling water. Then, drawing a heavy machete from his sash, he prodded within the kettle, apparently testing the tenderness of the others.

Leslie, feeling that the time for action w r as at hand, stepped softly into the room, his six-shooter ready for action. The killer stood with his back toward him, still prodding the grisly contents of the kettle, but, loathsome and deserving of death though he was, Leslie could not shoot him down in cold blood.

"Surrender or die," he shouted.

The maniac swung around, and with the same movement, hurled the heavy machete straight for the breast of the American.

x

LESLIE had no time to dodge the keen blade of the killer that was hurtling toward his heart. He could not possibly have moved his body fast enough. He could move his hands, however, with lightninglike rapidity, or he would never have lived to earn the title of "Two-Gun Bart." With a movement quicker than eye could follow, he parried the blade with the barrel of his six-shooter, then covered his enemy once more as the weapon clattered to the floor.

"Your last chance, hombre," he roared, bounding forward. "Do you surrender?"

"I yield, *señor*. You see I am unarmed. What would you?"

"First remove that mask, that I may see what servant of Satan hides behind his features."

"But, *señor*—"

"Remove it, I say!" He jammed his gun into the midriff of the killer.

"Let me go. I will pay you well— make you rich. The government offered you twenty thousand pesos. I will double it. I will—"

"Dog!" With a sweep of his free hand Leslie tore the mask away. As he did so, a long, tangled beard tumbled down over the scarlet breast and the little watery eyes of the Anciano looked into his! Then the straight back bent, the shoulders assumed a familiar droop, and the voice became a sibilant whine.

"Mercy, good *señor*, *en el nombre de Dios*! Would you slay a helpless old man?"

"A cold-blooded murderer deserves no pity."

"But I was justified. I swear it. Give me a chance to explain."

"You couldn't possibly be justified, but if you are anxious to talk I'll sten for a little while."

"Gracias, señor. Do you know who and what I really am?"

"I know you as Tio Luis, the Anciano, and recently, as Tio Luis, the murderer. Anything else could matter but little."

"Of that you shall judge. My name is not Luis at all, but Tomas Perez. Neither am I of common *mestizo* stock, as you no doubt suppose. Through no fault of my own there flows in my veins enough Spanish blood to lighten the color of my skin and give me this beard, yet my people were Yaquis, and I am one of them, heart and soul.

"No doubt you have heard or read the sad history of my people. If you have not, then picture a tribe, a nation, peace-loving, hard-working tillers of the soil, oppressed for hundreds of years by every form of outrageous tyranny known to man, yet bearing it all with meekness, striving to overcome evil with good. Such was the nation of the Yaquis.

"Not content with squeezing the last peso from my people by unjust taxation, the government presently began the confiscation of our lands. A few of our sturdier souls rebelled and were promptly massacred. Then came the order for wholesale deportation. My thrifty father had acquired a small but fertile farm in the rich Sonora Valley. With the help of mymother, brother, sister and self, he had been able to eke out a meager existence and meet the extortionate demands of the tax collectors. One day the Bur ales came with orders for the confiscation of our farm, and our deportation. We had done nothing wrong, yet we were Yaquis. That was enough for the government.

"A dashing young lieutenant was in command. My sister was pretty, and after he had ordered his men to drive us down the road like sheep, he bade her remain. I never saw her after that. With thousands of others of our race, we were transported to Yucatan, and there sold as slaves, mostly to the owners of the sisal hemp plantations. My mother died on the way— of grief, I think. My father succumbed, soon after our arrival, to the combination of hard work, cruel treatment and little food. Having the endurance of youth, my brother and I were able to keep body and soul together, though life was a constant horror. My chief consolation was derived from the good Padre who came to visit us, and who took quite an interest in me. It was in my talks with and observance of him that I gained a knowledge of priestly ways which has stood me in good stead since that time.

"But to go on. Although I have always been unusually quick-tempered, my brother had this trait to a more marked degree than I. Many times I have seep him fly into a frenzy over a mere trifle. Small wonder then, that he should, one day, let his hatred overmaster his judgment when the overseer struck him with a whip. He seized it and lashed his tormentor across the face, but his triumph was short— his end bloody— for the overseer decapitated him with his machete.

"For me this was the last straw. My sister had undoubtedly been ravished and murdered, my mother had died of grief, my father from cruelty, and now my little brother, the only one left for me to love, had been slain. All this I charged, and still charge, to the rapacity of the Mexican government.

"I was ordered to bury the body of my brother where it lay, unshriven, and mourned only by me. Over his grave, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I took a solemn oath that if ever I should be able to escape from that place alive I would take a thousand Mexican heads to pay the debt. I bided my time, and one day my opportunity came. When I left, I took with me the head of the overseer who had slain my brother.

"My first act on the open road was to rob a traveler of his mule, his pack, and his head. The pack, I found, contained a large store of cheap but gaudy jewelry which I hawked to advantage in the villages through which I passed. Whenever I saw the chance I would take a head, remove the flesh by boiling, and store the skull in my pack.

"Within a month my jewelry had all been sold and my money was exhausted. I obtained employment in the shop of a liorseshoer, and it was while there that I conceived and secretly manufactured my little degollador, as I call it. It is so designed that when it drops over a man's head, the impact with his shoulders releases the razor-sharp blade, usually severing his head from his body. If the blade strikes a vertebra and sticks, then a sharp pull on the rope completes the job. But to go on with the story.

"I chanced to come here, and found that the place was admirably suited to my purpose. I did not live in the hut at first, but camped on the hillside not far from here. I succeeding in collecting many skulls from travelers riding beneath the cliffs, and of course I left no traces. One day while wandering on the hillside I came upon an opening that excited my curiosity. Seeing that it penetrated quite deeply I made a number of torches with dried grass and explored it. It led me to a small chamber behind the image of St. Anthony, and I found, to my amazement, that the slab which formed the rear panel of the shrine was, in reality, a door, easily opened from the inside, and swinging on brass hinges which, though corroded, were still serviceable. The drop of blood which you found at the base of the shrine bears me out in this, as I used that door when obtaining Pedro's head while you and José waited at the table for your chicken and tortillas.

"Exploring further, I found this room and its connection with the rear of the hut. The two rooms and the tunnels had evidently been used at some forgotten time by the keepers of the shrine, as a place of refuge during Indian attacks.

"That evening I took the head of Father Salvador while he was exploring the hillside for herbs. The next day, when a company of pilgrims came— they had already grown fearful of the neighborhood and came in numbers— I told them I had discovered the body near my camp. They swore he had been murdered by the devil, such being the popular superstition regarding the other deaths because I never left tracks, and it was not difficult for me to persuade them and the authorities who came later that I would be a suitable guardian for the shrine.

"One day I noticed the advertisement of a costumer in a paper from Mexico City which had been wrapped around a bottle of tequila given me by a pilgrim. I took a train down there and purchased three costumes from him like the one I now wear, giving, of course, a false name and address. The costume fitted well with the popular superstition regarding the place, and I felt that it would afford me considerable protection in case I was seen. Is there anything else that puzzles you?"

Leslie considered a moment.

"Yes. There are several things. For one, how does it happen that you can throw that thing with such uncanny accuracy

"In the same way that a vaquero can throw a riata with equal accuracy. By practise. I practised for weeks before I attempted to use it at all as a substitute for the machete. You are one of the very few live targets I have ever missed." He took a skull from the pyramid and handed it to Leslie. "Here. Roll this across the floor as swiftly as you wish, and let me show you. ' '

Leslie waited for him to pick up the instrument of death and poise it aloft. Then he rolled the skull at the opposite wall. The Anciano hurled the thing with cat-like quickness, but it fell, not over the skull, but over the head of the American. With a cackle of diabolical glee, the hermit jerked the rope taut.

xi

LESLIE had holstered his revolver when he rolled the skull, hence both his hands were free. As the infernal machine descended over his head he instinctively put up both hands to throw it off, but this was prevented by the Aneiano's jerking the rope taut. The keen blade was beneath his chin, almost touching his throat, but the trigger bars had not yet touched his shoulders. Had they done so his death would have been instaneous. Still tugging at the rope, the hermit quickly shortened the distance between them. Then, grasping the ring with one hand, he dropped the rope and suddenly pressed down on the machine from the top with the other. The trigger bars struck Leslie's shoulders, but quick as the hermit had been, the American was again a shade quicker.

Shifting his own hold, he had grasped the two bars that moved the blade, using the pressure on the back of his neck to keep it from his throat. The springs were tremendously powerful and he had all he could do to keep the keen blade away, the Aneiano meanwhile keeping the thing pressed down on his head and jerking at the ring behind.

The struggle that ensued was the most fearful in Leslie's experience. The Anciano, he found, was a powerful athlete, notwithstanding his previous pretended feebleness. Twice his chin was cut to the bone by the razor-edged blade as the hermit jerked him about. The thing that galled him the most was the fact that he could not fight back. Although his six-shooters were belted about him he dared not let go with either hand to reach for a gun. His sole consolation was that his enemy was in like case so far as his hands were concerned, though a long way from being in such desperate peril.

Struggling intensely, bleeding profusely from the two cuts in his chin, Leslie soon found his strength ebbing at an alarming rate. He lashed out blindly with his feet and sometimes succeeded in kicking the enemy's shins, but the softness of the moccasins rendered this ineffective.

Knowing that the unequal struggle could not last much longer, Leslie at length resolved on a desperate plan. First relaxing, to make it appear that his strength was gone, he suddenly bent double and, at the same time, pushed upward with both hands. The hermit, taken completely by surprize, was first jerked forward, then catapulted over the head of the American. Although the movement jerked the machine from his head, Leslie received a severe cut on his forehead. The blood trickled down in his eyes, half blinding him, so that he could but dimly see the hermit lying on his back where he had fallen. Whipping out his knife, Leslie cut a piece from the *riata* and pounced on his prostrate foe, who appeared partly stunned from his fall. It was but the work of a moment to turn him over and bind his hands behind him. Another piece, cut from the same *riata*, served to secure his feet.

"There, damn you!" he snarled, rising unsteadily and wiping the blood from his eyes. "I guess you won't try any more tricks."

The hermit made no answer, but there came a sound that instantly put Leslie on his guard— the clatter of boots and the jingle of spurs in the passageway through which the Anciano had come. Instantly supicious, Leslie drew both sixs-hooters and crouched behind the pyramid of skulls, convinced that no one but an enemy could have come from that direction. He lowered both guns with a nervous laugh a moment later, as José stepped through the doorway. Behind him came a dapper *caballero* whom Leslie instantly recognized.

"Hernandez! " he cried in surprize. "How the devil did you get here?"

"Ees ver' simple, amigo," Hernandez replied, warmly shaking the proffered hand. "I get desperate an' use the hot iron on that damn' peon today. Then he's talk plenty. Ees tal me Tio Luis gave heem the order to get your head, promising heem many blessing een return. He's tal heem that he who cuts a heretic gets eight years' absolution.

"Right away, I smell the mouse, and ride out here weeth two men. José, I find cooking breakfast, an' he's tal me you're in the hut. I go there, but find no one, so return to José. He's say maybe you 'ave gone to look for the trail where you shoot at the devil last night. We go there and find trail ourselves. It leads to a hole in the hillside an' a passageway which we follow to this place. I see you 'ave those devil, all right, but where ees the Anciano? You must get heem also to win those twenty thousand pesos, for both are guilty."

"Fair enough," replied Leslie. "I call you. Take a look at this man's face."

Hernandez bent and turned the Anciano on his back, then straightened up with a cry of amazement.

"Tio Luis! Son of wan gun! You win, amigo."
