PAST MASTERS

Rolf Boldrewood
Mark Hellinger
P. C. Wren
Wilkie Collins
A. T Quiller-Couch
J. Allan Dunn
"Saki"
Irvin S. Cobb
William Harrison Ainsworth

and more

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

14 Oct 2024

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1: Caulfield's Crime

A. Perrin

Alice Robinson Perrin, 1867-1934
Belgravia Christmas Annual, 1892

A "jheel" *is large tract of marsh.*

CAULFIELD was the worse-tempered fellow I ever met, or even heard of, which is saying a good deal.

He was sulky and vindictive, as well as passionately violent; and yet he was a great friend of mine. People in Koorwallah said it didn't speak well for me, and made remarks about "birds of a feather," with much appreciation of their own discernment.

I suppose, now I come to think of it, that it perhaps may have looked odd for a young civilian like myself, newly landed in India, to be seen so constantly with a man who was senior major in his regiment, and getting on for twenty years older than I was.

Everyone wondered openly what we could find in common to make us such friends; they were sure we could not think alike on any one subject, and it afforded them food for a little uncharitable gossip, which is always a god-send in a second-class up-country station in the North-West Provinces.

No one in Koorwallah knew Caulfield well. Everybody seemed half afraid of him except myself, and there was no denying that he certainly was not the kind of man whose rooms one could walk into without asking, and say "Hullo!" pick up a book or a paper, wander round, looking at the photographs of his sisters, or other fellows' sisters, and then go out again. Not one of the subalterns in his regiment ever spoke to him voluntarily, none of the ladies liked him, they said he was so rude and disagreeable, and never accepted their invitations, and they were sure he had a history, which was very probable and not unusual.

As a matter of fact, he had only lately exchanged into the —th Foot from a cavalry regiment, nobody knew why, nor did he volunteer any information, which deepened the air of mystery surrounding him.

As for myself, I had struck up a friendship with him almost immediately after my arrival in the station. His bungalow was next to mine. They were both ordinary little thatched and whitewashed bachelor's houses, with narrow strips of verandah in front, where a servant was generally to be seen, either washing up plates and throwing the dirty water into the drive, or cleaning the lamps and anointing the floor with kerosene oil.

We each had an untidy square of compound, divided from the others by a dusty aloe hedge, in the roots of which lurked pinknosed little mongooses, with their numerous and ever-increasing families.

There was very little work for me to do during the first two months while I was getting used to the language and the people, and I had ample time for sauntering over to Caulfield's bungalow to examine, with intense interest, his enormous collection of skins and horns and other sporting trophies, which were enough to make any youngster who knew how to handle a gun turn green with envy.

He would sit quietly smoking in his chair, and watch me wander round, touching all his favourite treasures, and listening to my voluble chatter with irritating stolidity. He never asked me to come, or pressed me to stay, and yet, in some inexplicable manner, I felt that my visits were not unwelcome to him, except on one or two memorable occasions, when I found him in his worst mood, and he turned me out with a promptitude which caused me to show my face at his door somewhat cautiously the next time I invaded his privacy.

He certainly could not have been called an agreeable companion, and, looking back over the stretch of years which divides those young days of mine from the present, I often wonder what strange fascination drew me so persistently to seek his company. He attracted and interested me, I had a craving to be thought well of by him. I told him petty details concerning my home and family, I read him my people's letters, I confided to him that there was "a girl at home," and I cannot remember receiving anything in the way of encouragement to continue, save an occasional grunt of acquiescence, and sometimes contempt.

He never asked me questions or told me anything about himself, and yet there was a quiet strength in his manner which gave one a secure feeling that whatever confidence was thrust upon him, it would not be betrayed, however ungraciously he might choose to receive it.

Caulfield never went to church. He generally spent his Sundays out shooting, always going off by himself, and returning with a magnificent bag. He had never been known to invite anyone to accompany him, for he was madly jealous on the subject of sport, and nothing made him more angry than to hear of another fellow having shot anything that might be called game. He seemed to look upon each *jheel*, and every patch of hunting-ground, in the neighbourhood of Koorwallah as his own particular property.

So it may be understood that I was fully alive to the honour conferred on me, when he unexpectedly asked me to go out with him for a three days' shoot.

"I know of a string of *jheels*," he said, "about thirty miles from here, where the duck and snipe ought to swarm. I saw the spot and marked it down, when 1 was out black-buck shooting, last week. I've made all arrangements for going out Saturday morning. You can come, too, if you like."

Needless to say, I jumped at this offer. Caulfield had the reputation of being the best shot in the N. W. P. He knew instinctively where game was likely to be found. Good sport was almost a certainty in his company, and, as far as I knew, I was the only fellow he had ever voluntarily invited to go with him.

I boasted about it in the club that evening, and was mercilessly squashed by two or three men who would have given their ears to know the whereabouts of the string of *jheels*, but who jealously warned me to be careful that Caulfield wasn't after big game, and that he did not begin the expedition by shooting me.

"He'd as soon shoot a man, as anything else," said our doctor, looking over his shoulder to make sure that Caulfield was not in the room. "I never met such a nasty, bad-tempered chap. I believe he's mad!" And the doctor went on with his billiards, feeling that this speech had wiped off a few old scores he had treasured up against Caulfield for sundry disagreeables which had passed between them. I left all the arrangements of our expedition to Caulfield. He requested me not to interfere when I began suggesting various things I considered might be useful; and after giving me to understand that I was to be his guest for the three days in question, he despatched a couple of carts on the Friday with a tent wherein we were to eat and sleep, various provisions and cooking utensils, a pair of camp beds, and some servants, my bedding and bearer being my only contributions to the arrangements.

We rode out the thirty miles on Saturday morning, each having sent a fresh pony on half way, and by this means did the distance in about three hours and a half. Our tent was pitched in the midst of a patch of what is called dak jungle, clusters of stuntedlooking trees with thick, dry bark, and flat shapeless leaves that clattered noisily against each other when stirred by the wind.

It was not a cheerful spot. The soil was principally "*usar*," that is to say largely mixed with bitter salt which works its way to the surface, and prevents anything but the coarsest of vegetation growing in it. The ground was low and marshy, and the stillness of the air was only broken now and then by the discordant cries of the large *jheel* birds as they waded majestically in the patches of water in search of their breakfast of small fish.

Caulfield was a different man out there to what he had been in the station. He talked and laughed and acted showman with the most intense satisfaction. He led me away from amongst the stunted trees, and showed me a great sheet of water in the distance, broken in places by little bushy islands and dark patches of reeds, and a mud-coloured native village on the top of a mound overlooking the water at the extreme left. It was still early, as we had started before six o'clock, and the sun had barely cleared away the thick heavy mist,

which was still rising here and there, and rapidly dispersing as the heat increased.

"Isn't it a lovely spot!" said Caulfield, laughing. "Beyond that village the snipe ought to rise from the rice fields in thousands. There's another *jheel* away to the right of this, and another joining that. We shan't be able to shoot it all in three days, worse luck, and besides it's too big really for only two guns. Come in to breakfast, we mustn't lose time."

An hour later, and we had started. Our guns over our shoulders and a couple of servants behind us carrying the cartridge bags and our luncheon. We were both in good spirits. We felt we had the certainty of an excellent day's shooting in prospect.

But, alas! Luck was against us. The birds were unaccountably wild and few and far between. Some one had been there before us was Caulfield's verdict, delivered with disappointed rage, and after tramping and wading all day, we returned weary and crestfallen with only six teal and a mallard between us.

It was undoubtedly very provoking, but Caulfield seemed to take the matter much more to heart than there was any occasion to do. He was filled with hatred of the "scoundrels," who had discovered his pet place and played havoc among the birds, and after dinner sat cursing his luck and the culprits who had spoilt our sport until we were both too sleepy to keep awake any longer, and after our long day of exercise in the open air we neither of us moved in our beds till we were called the next morning.

We had breakfast, and started off, taking a different direction to the previous day, but with no better luck. On and on, and round and round we tramped, with only an occasional shot here and there, scarcely worth mentioning.

At last, about three o'clock in the afternoon, we sat wearily down to eat our luncheon. I was ravenously hungry, and greedily devoured my share of the provisions, but Caulfield hardly ate a mouthful; he sat moodily examining his gun, and taking long pulls now and then at his flask of whiskey.

We were seated on the roots of a huge tamarind tree, close to the village I had noticed on our arrival the morning before. We had been a very long round and had kept the yellow mud walls, on the top of the little mound, in sight as a land-mark. The village was a mile or so from our camp, but there was still a good deal of ground to be shot over between the two.

The place seemed but poorly inhabited, and had a dreary, deserted look about it. Two very old women were sitting watching us with dim, weary eyes, leaning their bent backs against the crumbling mud wall, and a few naked children were playing near them, while one or two bigger boys were driving a herd of lean, bony cattle down towards the water.

Presently another figure came slowly in sight, and advanced towards us. It was a fakir, or holy man, as was evident by the tawny masses of wool which were plaited in amongst his own black locks, and allowed to hang down on either side of his thin, sharp face, the ashes which covered his almost naked body, and the hollow gourd for alms which he held in one hand. His face was long and dog-like, and his pointed yellow teeth glistened in the sun as he demanded money in a dismal, monotonous kind of chant.

Caulfield flung a pebble at him and told him roughly to be off.

The fakir fixed his wild, restless eyes on him for one moment with a look of bitter animosity, and then walked away, disappearing behind a clump of tall feathery grass. I felt in my pocket. I had no coins, or I should certainly have given the poor wretch whatever I might have had about me.

"Did you notice that brute's face?" said Caulfield as we rose, preparatory to starting off again. "If there's any truth in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, he must have been a pariah dog in his former state. He was exactly like one!"

"A jackal more likely," I said carelessly. "It was the face of a wild beast."

Then we walked on again, skirting round the village, and plunging into the damp, soft rice fields. We put up a wisp of snipe which we followed till we had shot them nearly all, and then presently, to our joy, we heard a rush of wings overhead, and a lot of duck went down into a corner of the *jheel* ahead of us.

"We've got them," whispered Caulfield, in excitement, and we cautiously crept on till the birds were in sight, floating lazily on the still, cold water, pluming their feathers, and calling to one another in their fancied security.

"Now," said Caulfield, crouching down behind the rushes. "Fire into the brown!"

We both raised our guns, and as our fingers were actually on the trigger, there was a mighty splash in the middle of the ducks, and rising with a whir-r-r, they were out of shot in a second.

Caulfield swore. So did I.

And then we both turned to see what had caused the splash. A little way behind us stood the fakir we had seen at luncheon-time. In one hand he was still holding the fragments of the clod of earth he had thrown into the water to warn the ducks of our approach.

Caulfield shook his fist at the man, and abused him freely in Hindustani, but without moving a muscle of his face he turned slowly and disappeared into the jungle.

Words would not describe Caulfield's rage and disappointment.

"They were pintail, nearly all of 'em," he said, "and the first, decent chance we've had to-day. To think of that beastly fakir spoiling it all! What a devilish thing to do!"

"They hate anything being killed, you know," I remarked consolingly, "and I expect there was some spite in it too, because you threw a stone at him."

"Bosh!" said Caulfield. "Come along, we must make haste, it'll be dark soon. I should like to try a place over by those palms before we knock off, but we may as well let the servants go back now, they've had a hard day. Have you got some cartridges in your pocket?"

"Yes, plenty," I answered, and after despatching the two men back to the camp with what little game we had got, we turned to the right and walked in silence till we saw more water glistening between the rough stems of the palms, and in it, to our surprise and delight, a multitude of duck and teal.

With our guns in our hands, we quietly crept towards the water, holding our breath, and fearing that the slightest noise might awake the ducks' suspicions.

The sun had begun to sink in a red ball, and there was a hush over the land as the air became heavy with damp, and the mist stole over the cold still waters of the *jheel*. Overhead came the first faint cackle of the wild geese, returning home for the night. Caulfield raised his gun first. He was taking a very steady aim into the middle of the fluttering brown mass of feathers.

Splash! Whir-r-r! A cloud of wings rose in front of us, and wheeled bodily to the right, and the air resounded with the cries of the startled birds. Someone had thrown a heavy stone in amongst them just as Caulfield had been going to fire.

He turned round very deliberately and looked behind him. Following the direction of his eyes, I saw the long, lanky figure of the fakir, his yellow, jagged teeth and white eye-balls glistening in the pink glow of the setting sun, and a look of fiendish triumph and exultation on his face.

Then there was a loud report, and the next thing I saw was a quivering body on the ground, and wild, terrified eyes staring wide open at me in the agony of death.

Caulfield had shot the fakir.

I shudder when I recall what followed.

The man had been shot through the heart, and died almost immediately, without a sound, save one long, harrowing sigh. Caulfield stood looking down at what he had done, while I knelt by the body trying hopelessly to persuade myself that life was not extinct. He seemed half-dazed, and it was fully ten minutes before I was able to make him realize what had happened, and the necessity for prompt action.

"You know what it means," he said, touching the body with his foot, "killing a native is no joke in these days. I should come out of it badly. You were witness that I deliberately shot that poor devil. What do you intend doing?"

He spoke in a hard, defiant voice, but there was anxiety written on every line of his features.

"Of course I'll stick by you," I said, after a moment's silence, "nobody need ever know about— about *this* but ourselves, but we shall have to get rid of it."

I gazed at the body with horror. The face, which was becoming rigid, looked more like that of an animal than ever. Caulfield shivered, and glanced uneasily round him.

"Look here," I said, with an effort, "we can't do anything this minute. We'd better hide it in that grass, and come back after dinner. We must get a spade or something of the kind."

"Very well," said Caulfield, humbly. All his old masterful manner had disappeared, and he obeyed me like a child.

Then, when we had performed the repugnant task, and the body had been thrust into the thick grass and covered with clods of hard, dry soil, we walked back to our camp in silence.

I looked at Caulfield as we entered the lighted tent, and could not but feel compassion for him.

His diabolical temper had led him to commit this atrocious deed, and very bitter was the reaction.

He was white and shaking, and looked ten years older than when we had started out that morning.

I gave him some whiskey, and we both sat down and pretended to eat our dinner. We waited for half-an-hour afterwards, to prevent the servants noticing anything peculiar in our manner, and then I sent my bearer outside to see if the moon had risen.

"Yes, sahib," he answered, coming back, "it is as light as day."

During the few seconds of his absence, I had hastily filled the deep pocket of my overcoat with a stout hunting-knife, which I had packed amongst my traps in case we should get any buck shooting, and also a small kitchen chopper left lying on the floor by the bearer after hammering a stiff joint of my camp bed together. I dared not ask the servants for any kind of implement with which to dig.

We left the tent carelessly, as if we were going for a stroll, and found that it was, as the bearer had reported, "as light as day." People who have never been out of England cannot readily imagine the brilliancy of Eastern moonlight. It is almost possible to read by it.

We walked slowly at first, but rapidly quickened our pace as we left the tent behind us, and we both breathed hard as we neared the spot we were making for. Caulfield stopped once or twice, and I half thought he meant to turn back and leave me to do the ghastly business alone. But he came on by my side and never spoke a word until we were close to the tall, coarse grass which hid the fakir's body. Then he suddenly clutched my arm.

"God in Heaven!" he whispered, pointing forwards, "what is that?"

I thought he had gone out of his mind, and it was with difficulty that I refrained from shouting aloud.

The next moment I distinctly saw something moving exactly over the spot where we had concealed the body.

I am not what is called a coward, but I must confess that I burst out into a cold perspiration.

There was a rustling in the grass, accompanied by a scraping sound, and Caulfield and I stepped forwards in desperation. I parted the grass with my hands and looked down. There, lying on the fakir's body was a large jackal, grinning and snarling at having been disturbed over his hideous meal.

"Drive it away," whispered Caulfield hoarsely.

But the brute refused to move. Silently it sat there showing its yellow teeth, and reminded me horribly of the wretched man that lay dead beneath its feet. I turned sick and faint.

Then Caulfield shouted at it, and shook the grass, and lifted one of the clods of soil to throw at it.

The jackal rose slowly, and began to slink away. It passed close enough for us both to notice that it was an unusually large animal for its kind, and moreover had lost one of its ears. Its coat was plentifully besprinkled with grey, and was rough and mangy.

For more than an hour we worked as if our lives depended on it, using the chopper and my hunting-knife, and being helped by a rift in the ground where the soil had been softened by water running from the *jheel*, and at last we stood up and stamped down the earth which now covered all traces of Caulfield's crime, with the sweat pouring off our faces.

We had filled the grave with large stones which were lying about on the ground, remnants of some ancient Buddhist temple, long ago forgotten and deserted, so we felt secure that it could not easily be disturbed by animals.

The next morning we returned to Koorwallah, and the secret between Caulfield and myself drew us closer together than before. I suppose what I had seen him do ought to have repulsed and alienated me from him, but the night of that terrible burial we had sat up, one on each side of our little camp table,

until daylight crept across the *jheels*, and Caulfield had told me the story of his life.

It cannot be written down here, but there was the burden of a cruel sorrow in it that explained much to me in his behaviour which I had never understood before. I passionately pitied the lonely, unloved man, who had brought much of his misery on himself, both now and in the past, through his own ungovernable anger.

He shut himself up more than ever after this, and entirely gave up his shooting trips, which before had been the pleasure of his life, and the only person he ever spoke to, unofficially, was myself.

He took to coming into my bungalow in the evening and sometimes in the middle of the night, and would walk restlessly up and down my rooms, or sit in an easy chair with his face buried in his hands. At times I feared his mind was going, and I dreaded the effect upon him of the long hot-weather days and nights that were, creeping gradually nearer.

The end of April came, with its plague of insects and scorching wind. The hours grew long and heavy with the heat, and the dust storms howled and swirled over the baking little station, bringing perhaps a few tantalizing drops of rain, or more often leaving the air hotter than ever and thick with copper-coloured dust.

I grew more and more anxious about Caulfield, especially when he came over to me one night when it was too hot to sleep, and asked me if he might stay in my bungalow till the morning.

"I know I may seem an ass," he said, "but I can't stay by myself. I get all sorts of beastly ideas."

I thought he meant that he was tempted to take his own life, and began to try and cheer him up, telling him scraps of gossip, and encouraging him to talk, when a sound outside made us both start. It was only the weird, plaintive cry of a jackal, but Caulfield sprang to his feet shaking all over.

"There it is!" he exlaimed hoarsely, "it's followed me over here. Jack," he continued, turning his haggard, sleepless eyes on me, "every night for the last week that brute has come and howled round my house. You know what I mean. It's the one we saw that night."

He was terribly excited, and, I could see, almost off his head.

"Nonsense, my dear chap," I said, pushing him back into the chair, "you've got fever. Jackals come round my house and howl all night, and all day too. That's nothing."

"Look here, Jack," said Caulfield, very calmly, "I've no more fever than you have, and if you think I'm delirious you're mistaken." Then he lowered his voice, "I looked out one night and saw it, and I tell you it had only one ear!"

In spite of my own common sense, and the certainty that Caulfield was not himself, my blood ran cold, and, after I had succeeded in quieting him and getting him to sleep on my bed, I lay on the sofa going over every detail of that fearful night in the jungle again and again, try as I would to chase it from my thoughts.

Once or twice after this Caulfield came to me and repeated the same tale. He swore he was being haunted by the jackal we had driven away from the fakir's body, and took it into his head that the soul of the man he had murdered had entered into the animal, and was trying to obtain vengeance in that form.

Then he suddenly stopped coming near me, and when I went to see him he would hardly speak, and seemed to take no pleasure in my visits as formerly.

I thought perhaps he was offended because I had always laughed at his hallucinations, and treated them as, what they undoubtedly must have been, mere fancies.

I urged him to see a doctor or take leave, but he angrily refused to do either, and declared I should very soon drive him mad altogether if I bothered him much more.

After this I left him alone for a couple of days, and on the third night, when my conscience was pricking me for having neglected him, and I was preparing to go over to his bungalow, his bearer came rushing in with a face of terror and distress, and begged me to come at once. He had already sent a man off for the doctor, as he feared his master was very ill.

I arrived at Caulfield's bungalow just as the doctor, who lived only across the road, appeared, and together we entered the queer museum of a house, literally lined with horns and skins and curiosities. Caulfield was lying unconscious on his bed.

"He had a kind of fit, sahib," said the trembling bearer, and proceeded to explain how his master had behaved.

The doctor bent over the bed. "Do you happen to know if he's been bitten by a dog, or anything lately?" he said, looking up at me.

"Not to my knowledge," I answered, but the faint wail of a jackal out across the plain struck a superstitious chill to my heart.

For twenty-four hours we stayed with him, watching the terrible struggles we were powerless to avert, and which lasted until the end came, and brought a merciful peace to the poor, harassed mind and body. He was never able to speak after the first paroxysm, which had occurred before we arrived, so we could not learn from him whether he had ever been bitten or not, neither could the doctor discover any kind of scar on his body which might have been

made by the teeth of an animal, and yet there was no doubt that Caulfield's death was due to hydrophobia.

As we stood in the next room after all was over, drinking the dead man's whiskey and soda (which we badly needed), we questioned the bearer again and again, but he could tell us little or nothing. His master did not keep dogs, and he did not know of his ever having been bitten by one, but there had been a mad jackal about the place nearly three weeks before, though he did not think his master had known of it.

"It couldn't have been that," said the doctor, "or we should have heard about it."

"No," I answered mechanically, "it couldn't have been that."

It was nearly three weeks ago that Caulfield had ceased to come near me and had taken such a strange dislike to my going to his house. I began to think I must be going off my head too, for nobody but a lunatic could for a moment have seriously entertained such a notion as crossed my brain at that moment. I went into the bedroom to take a last look at poor Caulfield's thin, white face, with its ghastly, hunted expression, and to give a farewell pressure to his cold, heavy hand before I left him, for the doctor had urged me to go home, saying that there was now nothing more that I could do to help him. I picked up a lantern after this, and stepped out into the dark verandah.

As I did so, something came silently round the corner of the house, and stood in my path.

I raised my lantern, and caught a glimpse of a mass of grey fur, two fiery yellow eyes, and glistening teeth. I saw that it was only a stray jackal, and struck at it with my stick, but instead of running away, it passed silently by me and entered Caulfield's room. The light fell on the animal's head as it entered the open door— one of its ears was missing. In a frenzy I rushed back into the house, calling loudly for the doctor and the servants.

"I saw a jackal come in here!" I exclaimed excitedly, searching round Caulfield's room. "It must be in this room— I saw it go in this very minute. Hunt it out at once!"

Every nook and corner was examined, but there was no jackal, nor even a trace of one.

"Go home to bed, my boy," said the doctor, looking at me kindly. "This business has shaken your nerves. Keep quiet for a bit. Your imagination's beginning to play you tricks. Good-night."

"Good-night," I answered, wearily, and I went slowly back to my bungalow, trying to persuade myself that he was right.

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2: The Gold Wolf

W.A. Fraser

William Alexander Fraser (1859— 1933)

The Popular Magazine, 20 May 1919

ALL day long Bulldog Carney had found, where the trail was soft, the odd imprint of that goblined inturned hoof. All day in the saddle, riding a trail that winds in and out among rocks, and trees, and cliffs monotonously similar, the hush of the everlasting hills holding in subjection man's soul, the towering giants of embattled rocks thrusting up towards God's dome pigmying to nothingness that rat, a man, produces a comatose condition of mind; man becomes a child, incapable of little beyond the recognition of trivial things; the erratic swoop of a bird, the sudden roar of a cataract, the dirge-like sigh of wind through the harp of a giant pine.

And so, curiously, Bulldog's fancy had toyed aimlessly with the history of the cayuse that owned that inturned left forefoot. Always where the hoof's imprint lay was the flat track of a miner's boot, the hob nails denting the black earth with stolid persistency. But the owner of the miner's boot seemed of little moment; it was the abnormal hoof that, by a strange perversity, haunted Carney.

The man was probably a placer miner coming down out of the Eagle Hills, leading a pack pony that carried his duffel and, perhaps, a small fortune in gold. Of course, like Carney, he was heading for steel, for the town of Bucking Horse.

Toward evening, as Carney rode down a winding trail that led to the ford of Singing Water, rounding an abrupt turn the mouth of a huge cave yawned in the side of a cliff away to his left. Something of life had melted into its dark shadow that had the semblance of a man; or it might have been a bear or a wolf. Lower down in the valley that was called the Valley of the Grizzley's Bridge, his buckskin shied, and with a snort of fear left the trail and elliptically came back to it twenty yards beyond.

In the centre of the ellipse, on the trail, stood a gaunt form, a huge dog-wolf. He was a sinister figure, his snarling lips curled back from strong yellow fangs, his wide powerful head low hung, and the black bristles on his back erect in challenge.

The whole thing was weird, uncanny; a single wolf to stand his ground in daylight was unusual.

Instinctively Bulldog reined in the buckskin, and half turning in the saddle, with something of a shudder, searched the ground at the wolf's feet dreading to find something. But there was nothing.

The dog-wolf, with a snarling twist of his head, sprang into the bushes just as Carney dropped a hand to his gun; his quick eye had seen the movement.

Carney had meant to camp just beyond the ford of Singing Water, but the usually placid buckskin was fretful, nervous.

A haunting something was in the air; Carney, himself, felt it. The sudden apparition of the wolf could not account for this mental unrest, either in man or beast, for they were both inured to the trail, and a wolf meant little beyond a skulking beast that a pistol shot would drive away.

High above the rider towered Old Squaw Mountain. It was like a battered feudal castle, on its upper reaches turret and tower and bastion catching vagrant shafts of gold and green, as, beyond, in the far west, a flaming sun slid down behind the Selkirks. Where he rode in the twisted valley a chill had struck the air, suggesting vaults, dungeons; the giant ferns hung heavy like the plumes of knights drooping with the death dew. A reaching stretch of salmon bushes studded with myriad berries that gleamed like topaz jewels hedged on both sides the purling, frothing stream that still held the green tint of its glacier birth.

Many times in his opium running Carney had swung along this wild trail almost unconscious of the way, his mind travelling far afield; now back to the old days of club life; to the years of army routine; to the bright and happy scenes where rich-gowned women and cultured men laughed and bantered with him. At times it was the newer rough life of the West; the ever-present warfare of man against man; the yesterday where he had won, or the to-morrow where he might cast a losing hazard— where the dice might turn groggily from a six-spotted side to a deuce, and the thrower take a fall.

But to-night, as he rode, something of depression, of a narrow environment, of an evil one, was astride the withers of his horse; the mountains seemed to close in and oppress him. The buckskin, too, swung his heavy lop ears irritably back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes one ear was pricked forward as though its owner searched the beyond, the now glooming valley that, at a little distance, was but a blur, the other ear held backward as though it would drink in the sounds of pursuit.

Pursuit! that was the very thing; instinctively the rider turned in his saddle, one hand on the horn, and held his piercing gray eyes on the back trail, searching for the embodiment of this phantasy. The unrest had developed that far into conception, something evil hovered on his trail, man or beast. But he saw nothing but the swaying kaleidoscope of tumbling forest shadows; rocks that, half gloomed, took fantastic forms; bushes that swayed with the rolling gait of a grizzly.

The buckskin had quickened his pace as if, tired though he was, he would go on beyond that valley of fear before they camped.

Where the trail skirted the brink of a cliff that had a drop of fifty feet, Carney felt the horse tremble, and saw him hug the inner wall; and, when they had rounded the point, the buckskin, with a snort of relief, clamped the snaffle in his teeth and broke into a canter.

"I wonder— by Jove!" and Bulldog, pulling the buckskin to a stand, slipped from his back, and searched the black-loamed trail.

"I believe you're right, Pat," he said, addressing the buckskin; "something happened back there."

He walked for a dozen paces ahead of the horse, his keen gray eyes on the earth. He stopped and rubbed his chin, thinking— thinking aloud.

"There are tracks, Patsy boy— moccasins; but we've lost our gunboat-footed friend. What do you make of that, Patsy— gone over the cliff? But that damn wolf's pugs are here; he's travelled up and down. By gad! two of them!"

Then, in silence, Carney moved along the way, searching and pondering; cast into a curious, superstitious mood that he could not shake off. The inturned hoof-print had vanished, so the owner of the big feet that carried hob-nailed boots did not ride.

Each time that Carney stopped to bend down in study of the trail the buckskin pushed at him fretfully with his soft muzzle and rattled the snaffle against his bridle teeth.

At last Carney stroked the animal's head reassuringly, saying: "You're quite right, pal— it's none of our business. Besides, we're a pair of old grannies imagining things."

But as he lifted to the saddle, Bulldog, like the horse, felt a compelling inclination to go beyond the Valley of the Grizzley's Bridge to camp for the night.

Even as they climbed to a higher level of flat land, from back on the trail that was now lost in the deepening gloom, came the howl of a wolf; and then, from somewhere beyond floated the answering call of the dog-wolf's mate— a whimpering, hungry note in her weird wail.

"Bleat, damn you!" Carney cursed softly; "if you bother us I'll sit by with a gun and watch Patsy boy kick you to death."

As if some genii of the hills had taken up and sent on silent waves his challenge, there came filtering through the pines and birch a snarling yelp.

"By gad!" and Carney cocked his ear, pulling the horse to a stand.

Then in the heavy silence of the wooded hills he pushed on again muttering, "There's something wrong about that wolf howl— it's different."

Where a big pine had showered the earth with cones till the covering was soft, and deep, and springy, and odorous like a perfumed mattress of velvet, he hesitated; but the buckskin, in the finer animal reasoning, pleaded with little impatient steps and shakes of the head that they push on.

Carney yielded, saying softly: "Go on, kiddie boy; peace of mind is good dope for a sleep."

So it was ten o'clock when the two travellers, Carney and Pat, camped in an open, where the moon, like a silver mirror, bathed the earth in reassuring light. Here the buckskin had come to a halt, filled his lungs with the perfumed air in deep draughts, and turning his head half round had waited for his partner to dismount.

It was curious this man of steel nerve and flawless courage feeling at all the guidance of unknown threatenings, unexplainable disquietude. He did not even build a fire; but choosing a place where the grass was rich he spread his blanket beside the horse's picket pin.

Bulldog's life had provided him with different sleeping moods; it was a curious subconscious matter of mental adjustment before he slipped away from the land of knowing. Sometimes he could sleep like a tired laborer, heavily, unresponsive to the noise of turmoil; at other times, when deep sleep might cost him his life, his senses hovered so close to consciousness that a dried leaf scurrying before the wind would call him to alert action. So now he lay on his blanket, sometimes over the border of spirit land, and sometimes conscious of the buckskin's pull at the crisp grass. Once he came wide awake, with no movement but the lifting of his eyelids. He had heard nothing; and now the gray eyes, searching the moonlit plain, saw nothing. Yet within was a full consciousness that there was something— not close, but hovering there beyond.

The buckskin also knew. He had been lying down, but with a snort of discontent his forequarters went up and he canted to his feet with a spring of wariness. Perhaps it was the wolves.

But after a little Carney knew it was not the wolves; they, cunning devils, would have circled beyond his vision, and the buckskin, with his delicate scent, would have swung his head the full circle of the compass; but he stood facing down the back trail; the thing was there, watching.

After that Carney slept again, lighter if possible, thankful that he had yielded to the wisdom of the horse and sought the open.

Half a dozen times there was this gentle transition from the sleep that was hardly a sleep, to a full acute wakening. And then the paling sky told that night was slipping off to the western ranges, and that beyond the Rockies, to the east, day was sleepily travelling in from the plains.

The horse was again feeding; and Carney, shaking oh the lethargy of his broken sleep, gathered some dried stunted bushes, and, building a little fire, made a pot of tea; confiding to the buckskin as he mounted that he considered himself no end of a superstitious ass to have bothered over a nothing.

Not far from where Carney had camped the trail he followed turned to the left to sweep around a mountain, and here it joined, for a time, the trail running from Fort Steel west toward the Kootenay. The sun, topping the Rockies, had lifted from the earth the graying shadows, and now Carney saw, as he thought, the hoof-prints of the day before.

There was a feeling of relief with this discovery. There had been a morbid disquiet in his mind; a mental conviction that something had happened that intoed cayuse and his huge-footed owner. Now all the weird fancies of the night had been just a vagary of mind. Where the trail was earthed, holding clear impressions, he dismounted, and walked ahead of the buckskin, reading the lettered clay. Here and there was imprinted a moccasined foot; once there was the impression of boots; but they were not the huge imprints of hob-nailed soles. They showed that a man had dismounted, and then mounted again; and the cayuse had not an inturned left forefoot; also the toe wall of one hind foot was badly broken. His stride was longer, too; he did not walk with the short step of a pack pony.

The indefinable depression took possession of Bulldog again; he tried to shake it off— it was childish. The huge-footed one perhaps was a prospector, and had wandered up into some one of the gulches looking for gold. That was objecting Reason formulating an hypothesis.

Then presently Carney discovered the confusing element of the same cayuse tracks heading the other way, as if the man on horseback had travelled both up and down the trail.

Where the Bucking Horse trail left the Kootenay trail after circling the mountain, Carney saw that the hoof prints continued toward Kootenay. And there were a myriad of tracks; many mounted men had swung from the Bucking Horse trail to the Kootenay path; they had gone and returned, for the hoof prints that toed toward Bucking Horse lay on top.

This also was strange; men did not ride out from the sleepy old town in a troop like cavalry. There was but one explanation, the explanation of the West— those mounted men had ridden after some body— had trailed somebody who was wanted quick. This crescendo to his associated train of thought obliterated mentally the goblin-footed cayuse, the huge hob-nailed boot, the something at the cliff, the hovering oppression of the night— everything.

Carney closed his mind to the torturing riddle and rode, sometimes humming an Irish ballad of Mangin's.

It was late afternoon when he rode into Bucking Horse; and Bucking Horse was in a ferment.

Seth Long's hotel, the Gold Nugget, was the cauldron in which the waters of unrest seethed.

A lynching was in a state of almost completion, with Jeanette Holt's brother, Harry, elected to play the leading part of the lynched. Through the deference paid to his well-known activity when hostile events were afoot, Carney was cordially drawn into the maelstrom of ugly-tempered men.

Jeanette's brother may be said to have suffered from a preponderance of opinion against him, for only Jeanette, and with less energy, Seth Long, were on his side. All Bucking Horse, angry Bucking Horse, was for stringing him up tout de suite. The times were propitious for this entertainment, for Sergeant Black, of the Mounted Police, was over at Fort Steel, or somewhere else on patrol, and the law was in the keeping of the mob.

Ostensibly Carney ranged himself on the side of law and order. That is what he meant when, leaning carelessly against the Nugget bar, one hand on his hip, chummily close to the butt of his six-gun, he said:

"This town had got a pretty good name, as towns go in the mountains, and my idea of a man that's too handy at the lynch game is that he's a pretty poor sport."

"How's that, Bulldog?" Kootenay Jim snapped.

"He's a poor sport," Carney drawled, "because he's got a hundred to one the best of it— first, last, and always; he isn't in any danger when he starts, because it's a hundred men to one poor devil, who, generally, isn't armed, and he knows that at the finish his mates will perjure themselves to save their own necks. I've seen one or two lynch mobs and they were generally egged on by men who were yellow."

Carney's gray eyes looked out over the room full of angry men with a quiet thoughtful steadiness that forced home the conviction that he was wording a logic he would demonstrate. No other man in that room could have stood up against that plank bar and declared himself without being called quick.

"You hear fust what this rat done, Bulldog, then we'll hear what you've got to say," Kootenay growled.

"That's well spoken, Kootenay," Bulldog answered. "I'm fresh in off the trail, and perhaps I'm quieter than the rest of you, but first, being fresh in off the trail, there's a little custom to be observed."

With a sweep of his hand Carney waved a salute to a line of bottles behind the bar.

Jeanette, standing in the open door that led from the bar to the dining-room, gripping the door till her nails sank into the pine, felt hot tears gush into her eyes. How wise, how cool, this brave Bulldog that she loved so well. She had had no chance to plead with him for help. He had just come into that murder-crazed throng, and the words had been hurled at him from a dozen mouths that her brother Harry— Harry the waster, the no-good, the gambler— had been found to be the man who had murdered returning miners on the trail for their gold, and that they were going to string him up.

And now there he stood, her god of a man, Bulldog Carney, ranged on her side, calm, and brave. It was the first glint of hope since they had brought her brother in, bound to the back of a cayuse. She had pushed her way amongst the men, but they were like wolves; she had pleaded and begged for delay, but the evidence was so overwhelming; absolutely hopeless it had appeared. But now something whispered "Hope".

It was curious the quieting effect that single drink at the bar had; the magnetism of Carney seemed to envelop the men, to make them reasonable. Ordinarily they were reasonable men. Bulldog knew this, and he played the card of reason.

For the two or three gun men— Kootenay Jim, John of Slocan, and Denver Ike— Carney had his own terrible personality and his six-gun; he could deal with those three toughs if necessary.

"Now tell me, boys, what started this hellery," Carney asked when they had drunk.

The story was fired at him; if a voice hesitated, another took up the narrative.

Miners returning from the gold field up in the Eagle Hills had mysteriously disappeared, never turning up at Bucking Horse. A man would have left the Eagle Hills, and somebody drifting in from the same place later on, would ask for him at Bucking Horse— nobody had seen him.

Then one after another two skeletons had been found on the trail; the bodies had been devoured by wolves.

"And wolves don't eat gold— not what you'd notice, as a steady chuck," Kootenay Jim yelped.

"Men wolves do," Carney thrust back, and his gray eyes said plainly, "That's your food, Jim."

"Meanin' what by that, pard?" Kootenay snarled, his face evil in a threat.

"Just what the words convey— you sort them out, Kootenay."

But Miner Graham interposed. "We got kinder leery about this wolf game, Carney, 'cause they ain't bothered nobody else 'cept men packin' in their winnin's from the Eagle Hills; and four days ago Caribou Dave— here he is

sittin' right here— he arrives packin' Fourteen-foot Johnson— that is, all that's left of Fourteen-foot."

"Johnson was my pal," Caribou Dave interrupted, a quaver in his voice, "and he leaves the Eagle Nest two days ahead of me, packin' a big clean-up of gold on a cayuse. He was goin' to mooch aroun' Buckin' Horse till I creeps-in afoot, then we was goin' out. We been together a good many years, ol' Fourteen foot and me."

Something seemed to break in Caribou's voice and Graham added: "Dave finds his mate at the foot of a cliff."

Carney started; and instinctively Kootenay's hand dropped to his gun, thinking something was going to happen.

"I dunno just what makes me look there for Fourteen-foot, Bulldog," Caribou Dave explained. "I was comin' along the trail seein' the marks of 'em damn big feet of hisn, and they looked good to me— I guess I was gettin' kinder homesick for him; when I'd camp I'd go out and paw 'em tracks; 'twas kinder like shakin' hands. We been together a good many years, buckin' the mountains and the plains, and sometimes havin' a bit of fun. I'm comin' along, as I says, and I sees a kinder scrimmage like, as if his old tan-colored cayuse had got gay, or took the blind staggers, or somethin'; there was a lot of tracks. But I give up thinkin' it out, 'cause I knowed if the damn cayuse had jack-rabbited any, Fourteen-foot'd pick him and his load up and carry him. Then I see some wolf tracks— clang near as big as a steer's they was— and I figger Fourteen-foot's had a set-to with a couple of 'em timber coyotes and lammed hell's delight out of 'em, 'cause he could've done it. Then I'm follerin' the cayuse's trail agen, pickin' it up here and there, and all at onct it jumps me that the big feet is missin'. Sure I natural figger Johnson's got mussed up a bit with the wolves and is ridin'; but there's the clang wolf tracks agent And some moccasin feet has been passierin' along, too. Then the hoss tracks cuts out just same's if he'd spread his wings and gone up in the air— they just ain't."

"Then Caribou gets a hunch and goes back and peeks over the cliff," Miner Graham added, for old David had stopped speaking to bite viciously at a black plug of tobacco to hide his feelings.

"I dunno what made me do it," Caribou interrupted; "it was just same's Fourteen-foot's callin' me. There ain't nobody can make me believe that if two men paddles together twenty years, had their little fights, and show-downs, and still sticks, that one of 'em is going to cut clean out just 'cause he goes over the Big Divide— 'tain't natural. I tell you, boys, Fourteen-foot's callin' me— that's what he is, when I goes back."

Then Graham had to take up the narrative, for Caribou, heading straight for the bar, pointed dumbly at a black bottle.

"Yes, Carney," Graham said, "Caribou packs into Buckin' Horse on his back what was left of Fourteen-foot, and there wasn't no gold and no sign of the cayuse. Then we swarms out, a few of us, and picks up cayuse tracks most partic'lar where the Eagle Hills trail hits the trail for Kootenay. And when we overhaul the cayuse that's layin' down 'em tracks it's Fourteen-foot's hawse, and a-ridin' him is Harry Holt."

"And he's got the gold you was talkie' 'bout wolves eatin', Bulldog," Kootenay Jim said with a sneer. "He was hangin' 'round here busted, cleaned to the bone, and there he's a-ridin' Fourteen-foot's cayuse, with lots of gold."

"That's the whole case then, is it, boys?" Carney asked quietly.

"Ain't it enough?" Kootenay Jim snarled.

"No, it isn't. You were tried for murder once yourself, Kootenay, and you got off, though everybody knew it was the dead man's money in your pocket. You got off because nobody saw you kill the man, and the circumstantial evidence gave you the benefit of the doubt."

"I ain't bein' tried for this, Bulldog. Your bringin' up old scores might get you in wrong."

"You're not being tried, Kootenay, but another man is, and I say he's got to have a fair chance. You bring him here, boys, and let me hear his story; that's only fair, men amongst men. Because I give you fair warning, boys, if this lynching goes through, and you're in wrong, I'm going to denounce you; not one of you will get away— not one!"

"We'll bring him, Bulldog," Graham said; "what you say is only fair, but swing he will."

Jeanette's brother had been locked in the pen in the log police barracks. He was brought into the Gold Nugget, and his defence was what might be called powerfully weak. It was simply a statement that he had bought the cayuse from an Indian on the trail outside Bucking Horse. He refused to say where he had got the gold, simply declaring that he had killed nobody, had never seen Fourteen-foot Johnson, and knew nothing about the murder.

Something in the earnestness of the man convinced Carney that he was innocent. However, that was, so far as Carney's action was concerned, a minor matter; it was Jeanette's brother, and he was going to save him from being lynched if he had to fight the roomful of men— there was no doubt about that in his mind.

"I can't say, boys," Carney began, "that you can be blamed for thinking you've got the right man."

"That's what we figgered," Graham declared.

"But you've not gone far enough in sifting the evidence if you sure don't want to lynch an innocent man. The only evidence you have is that you caught Harry on Johnson's cayuse. How do you know it's Johnsons cayuse?"

"Caribou says it is," Graham answered.

"And Harry says it was an Indian's cayuse," Carney affirmed.

"He most natural just ordinar'ly lies about it," Kootenay ventured viciously.

"Where's the cayuse?" Carney asked. "There ain't no thinkin' 'bout it," Caribou an

"Out in the stable," two or three voices answered.

"I want to see him. Mind, boys, I'm working for you as much as for that poor devil you want to string up, because if you get the wrong man I'm going to denounce you, that's as sure as God made little apples."

His quiet earnestness was compelling. All the fierce heat of passion had gone from the men; there still remained the grim determination that, convinced they were right, nothing but the death of some of them would check. But somehow they felt that the logic of conviction would swing even Carney to their side.

So, without even a word from a leader, they all thronged out to the stable yard; the cayuse was brought forth, and, at Bulldog's request, led up and down the yard, his hoofs leaving an imprint in the bare clay at every step. It was the footprints alone that interested Carney. He studied them intently, a horrible dread in his heart as he searched for that goblined hoof that inturned. But the two forefeet left saucer-like imprints, that, though they were both slightly intoed, as is the way of a cayuse, neither was like the curious goblined track that had so fastened on his fancy out in the Valley of the Grizzley's Bridge.

And also there was the broken toe wall of the hind foot that he had seen on the newer trail.

He turned to Caribou Dave, asking, "What makes you think this is Johnson's pack horse?"

"There ain't no thinkin' 'bout it," Caribou answered with asperity. "When I see my boots I don't think they're mine, I just most natur'ly figger they are and pull em on. I'd know that dun-colored rat if I see him in a wild herd."

"And yet," Carney objected in an even tone, "this isn't the cayuse that Johnson toted out his duffel from the Eagle Hills on."

A cackle issued from Kootenay Jim's long, scraggy neck:

"That settles it, boys; Bulldog passes the buck and the game's over. Caribou is just an ord'nary liar, 'cordin' to Judge Carney."

"Caribou is perfectly honest in his belief," Carney declared. "There isn't more than half a dozen colors for horses, and there are a good many thousand horses in this territory, so a great many of them are the same color. And the

general structure of different cayuses is as similar as so many wheel-barrows. That brand on his shoulder may be a C, or a new moon, or a flapjack."

He turned to Caribou: "What brand had Fourteen-foot's cayuse?"

"I don't know," the old chap answered surlily, "but it was there same place it's restin' now— it ain't shifted none since you fingered it."

"That won't do, boys," Carney said; "if Caribou can't swear to a horse's brand, how can he swear to the beast?"

"And if Fourteen-foot'd come back and stand up here and swear it was his hawse, that wouldn't do either, would it, Bulldog?" And Kootenay cackled.

"Johnson wouldn't say so— he'd know better. His cayuse had a club foot, an inturned left forefoot. I picked it up, here and there, for miles back on the trail, sometimes fair on top of Johnson's big boot track, and sometimes Johnson's were on top when he travelled behind."

The men stared; and Graham asked: "What do you say to that, Caribou? Did you ever map out Fourteen-foot's cayuse— what his travellers was like?"

"I never looked at his feet— there wasn't no reason to; I was minin'."

"There's another little test we can make," Carney suggested. "Have you got any of Johnson's belongings— a coat?"

"We got his coat," Graham answered; "it was pretty bad wrecked with the wolves, and we kinder fixed the remains up decent in a suit of store clothes."

At Carney's request the coat was brought, a rough Mackinaw, and from one of the men present he got a miner's magnifying glass, saying, as he examined the coat:

"This ought, naturally, to be pretty well filled with hairs from that cayuse of Johnson's; and while two horses may look alike, there's generally a difference in the hair."

Carney's surmise proved correct; dozens of short hairs were imbedded in the coat, principally in the sleeves. Then hair was plucked from many different parts of the cayuse's body, and the two lots were viewed through the glass. They were different. The hair on the cayuse standing in the yard was coarser, redder, longer, for its Indian owner had let it run like a wild goat; and Fourteen-foot had given his cayuse considerable attention. There were also some white hairs in the coat warp, and on this cayuse there was not a single white hair to be seen.

When questioned Caribou would not emphatically declare that there had not been a star or a white stripe in the forehead of Johnson's horse.

These things caused one or two of the men to waver, for if it were not Johnson's cayuse, if Caribou were mistaken, there was no direct evidence to connect Harry Holt with the murder.

Kootenay Jim objected that the examination of the hair was nothing; that Carney, like a clever lawyer, was trying to get the murderer off on a technicality. As to the club foot they had only Carney's guess, whereas Caribou had never seen any club foot on Johnson's horse.

"We can prove that part of it," Graham said; "we can go back on the trail and see what Bulldog seen."

Half a dozen men approved this, saying: "We'll put off the hangin' and go back."

But Carney objected.

When he did so Kootenay Jim and John from Slocan raised a howl of derision, Kootenay saying: "When we calls his bluff he throws his hand in the discard. There ain't no club foot anywheres; it's just a game to gain time to give this coyote, Holt, a chance to make a get-away. We're bein' buffaloed— we're wastin' time. We gets a murderer on a murdered man's hawse, with the gold in his pockets, and Bulldog Carney puts some hawse hairs under a glass, hands out a pipe dream bout some ghost tracks back on the trail, and reaches out to grab the pot. Hell! you'd think we was a damn lot of tenderfeet."

This harangue had an effect on the angry men, but seemingly none whatever upon Bulldog, for he said quietly:

"I don't want a troop of men to go back on the trail just now, because I'm going out myself to bring the murderer in. I can get him alone, for if he does see me he won't think that I'm after him, simply that I'm trailing. But if a party goes they'll never see him. He's a clever devil, and will make his get-away. All I want on this evidence is that you hold Holt till I get back. I'll bring the foreleg of that cayuse with a club foot, for there's no doubt the murderer made sure that the wolves got him too."

They had worked back into the hotel by now, and, inside, Kootenay Jim and his two cronies had each taken a big drink of whisky, whispering together as they drank.

As Carney and Graham entered, Kootenay's shrill voice was saying:

"We're bein' flim-flammed— played for a lot of kids. There ain't been a damn thing 'cept lookin' at some hawse hairs through a glass. Men has been murdered on the trail, and who done it— somebody. Caribou's mate was murdered, and we find his gold on a man that was stony broke here, was bummin' on the town, spongin' on Seth Long; he hadn't two bits. And 'cause his sister stands well with Bulldog he palms this three-card trick with hawse hairs, and we got to let the murderer go."

"You lie, Kootenay!" The words had come from Jeanette. "My brother wouldn't tell you where he got the gold— he'd let you hang him first; but I will tell. I took it out of Seth's safe and gave it to him to get out of the country,

because I knew that you and those two other hounds, Slocan and Denver, would murder him some night because he knocked you down for insulting me."

"That's a lie!" Kootenay screamed; "you and Bulldog 're runnin' mates and you've put this up."

There was a cry of warning from Slocan, and Kootenay whirled, drawing his gun. As he did so him arm dropped and his gun clattered to the floor, for Carney's bullet had splintered its butt, incidentally clipping away a finger. And the same weapon in Carney's hand was covering Slocan and Denver as they stood side by side, their backs to the bar.

No one spoke; almost absolute stillness hung in the air for five seconds. Half the men in the room had drawn, but no one pulled a trigger— no one spoke.

It was Carney who broke the silence:

"Jeanette, bind that hound's hand up; and you, Seth, send for the doctor— I guess he's too much of a man to be in this gang."

A wave of relief swept over the room; men coughed or spat as the tension slipped, dropping their guns back into holsters.

Kootenay Jim, cowed by the damaged hand, holding it in his left, followed Jeanette out of the room.

As the girl disappeared Harry Holt, who had stood between the two men, his wrists bound behind his back, said:

"My sister told a lie to shield me. I stole the gold myself from Seth's safe. I wanted to get out of this hell hole 'cause I knew I'd got to kill Kootenay or he'd get me. That's why I didn't tell before where the gold come from."

"Here, Seth," Carney called as Long came back into the room, "you missed any gold— what do you know about Holt's story that he got the gold from your safe?"

"I ain't looked— I don't keep no close track of what's in that iron box; I jus' keep the key, and a couple of bags might get lifted and I wouldn't know. If Jeanette took a bag or two to stake her brother, I guess she's got a right to, 'cause we're pardners in all I got."

"I took the key when Seth was sleeping," Harry declared. "Jeanette didn't know I was going to take it."

"But your sister claims she took it, so how'd she say that if it isn't a frame-up?" Graham asked.

"I told her just as I was pullin' out, so she wouldn't let Seth get in wrong by blamin' her or somebody else."

"Don't you see, boys," Carney interposed, "if you'd swung off this man, and all this was proved afterwards, you'd be in wrong? You didn't find on Harry a tenth of the gold Fourteen-foot likely had."

"That skunk hid it," Caribou declared; "he just kept enough to get out with."

Poor old Caribou was thirsting for revenge; in his narrowed hate he would have been satisfied if the party had pulled a perfect stranger off a passing train and lynched him; it would have been a quid pro quo. He felt that he was being cheated by the superior cleverness of Bulldog Carney. He had seen miners beaten out of their just gold claims by professional sharks; the fine reasoning, the microscopic evidence of the hairs, the intoed hoof, all these things were beyond him. He was honest in his conviction that the cayuse was Johnson's, and feared that the man who had killed his friend would slip through their fingers.

"It's just like this, boys," he said, "me and Fourteen-foot was together so long that if he was away somewhere I'd know he was comin' back a day afore he hit camp— I'd feel it, same's I turned back on the trail there and found him all chawed up by the wolves. There wasn't no reason to look over that cliff only ol' Fourteen-foot a-callin' me. And now he's a-tellin' me inside that that skunk there murdered him when he wasn't lookin'. And if you chaps ain't got the sand to push this to a finish I'll get the man that killed Fourteen-foot; he won't never get away. If you boys is just a pack of coyotes that howls good and plenty till somebody calls 'em, and is goin' to slink away with your tails between your legs for fear you'll be rounded up for the lynchin', you can turn this murderer loose right now— you don't need to worry what'll happen to him. I'll be too danged lonesome without Fourteen-foot to figger what's comin' to me. Turn him loose— take the hobbles off him. You fellers go home and pull your blankets over your heads so's you won't see no ghosts."

Carney's sharp gray eyes watched the old fanatic's every move; he let him talk till he had exhausted himself with his passionate words; then he said:

"Caribou, you're some man. You'd go through a whole tribe of Indians for a chum. You believe you're right, and that's just what I'm trying to do in this, find out who is right— we don't want to wrong anybody. You can come back on the trail with me, and I'll show you the club-footed tracks; I'll let you help me get the right man."

The old chap turned his humpy shoulders, and looked at Carney out of bleary, weasel eyes set beneath shaggy brows; then he shrilled:

"I'll see you in hell fuss; I've heerd o' you, Bulldog; I've heerd you had a wolverine skinned seven ways of the jack for tricks, and by the rings on a Big Horn I believe it. You know that while I'm here that jack rabbit ain't goin' to get

away— and he ain't; you can bet your soul on that, Bulldog. We'd go out on the trail and we'd find that Wie-sah-ke-chack, the Indian's devil, had stole 'em pipe-dream, club-footed tracks, and when we come back the man that killed my chum, old Fourteen-foot, would be down somewhere where a smart-Aleck lawyer 'd get him off."

It took an hour of cool reasoning on the part of Carney to extract from that roomful of men a promise that they would give Holt three days of respite, Carney giving his word that he would not send out any information to the police but would devote the time to bringing in the murderer.

Kootenay Jim had had his wound dressed. He was in an ugly mood over the shooting, but the saner members of the lynching party felt that he had brought the quarrel on himself; that he had turned so viciously on Jeanette, whom they all liked, caused the men to feel that he had got pretty much his just deserts. He had drawn his gun first, and when a man does that he's got to take the consequences. He was a gambler, and a gambler generally had to abide by the gambling chance in gun play as well as by the fall of a card.

But Carney had work to do, and he was just brave enough to not be foolhardy. He knew that the three toughs would waylay him in the dark without compunction. They were now thirsting not only for young Holt's life, but his. So, saying openly that he would start in the morning, when it was dark he slipped through the back entrance of the hotel to the stable, and led his buckskin out through a corral and by a back way to the tunnel entrance of the abandoned Little Widow mine. Here he left the horse and returned to the hotel, set up the drinks, and loafed about for a time, generally giving the three desperadoes the impression that he was camped for the night in the Gold Nugget, though Graham, in whom he had confided, knew different.

Presently he slipped away, and Jeanette, who had got the key from Seth, unlocked the door that led down to the long communicating drift, at the other end of which was the opening to the Little Widow mine.

Jeanette closed the door and followed Carney down the stairway. At the foot of the stairs he turned, saying: "You shouldn't do this."

"Why, Bulldog?"

"Well, you saw why this afternoon. Kootenay Jim has got an arm in a sling because he can't understand. Men as a rule don't understand much about women, so a woman has always got to wear armor."

"But we understand, Bulldog; and Seth does."

"Yes, girl, we understand; but Seth can only understand the evident. You clamber up the stairs quick."

"My God! Bulldog, see what you're doing for me now. You never would stand for Harry yourself."

"If he'd been my brother I should, just as you have, girl."

"That's it, Bulldog, you're doing all this, standing there holding up a mob of angry men, because he's my brother."

"You called the turn, Jeanette."

"And all I can do, all I can say is, thank you. Is that all?"

"That's all, girl. It's more than enough."

He put a strong hand on her arm, almost shook her, saying with an earnestness that the playful tone hardly masked:

"When you've got a true friend let him do all the friending— then you'll hold him; the minute you try to rearrange his life you start backing the losing card. Now, good-bye, girl; I've got work to do. I'll bring in that wolf of the trail; I've got him marked down in a cave— I'll get him. You tell that pin-headed brother of yours to stand pat. And if Kootenay starts any deviltry go straight to Graham. Good-bye."

Cool fingers touched the girl on the forehead then she stood alone watching the figure slipping down the gloomed passage of the drift, lighted candle in hand.

Carney led his buckskin from the mine tunnel climbed the hillside to a back trail, and mounting rode silently at a walk till the yellow blobs of light that was Bucking Horse lay behind him. Then at a little hunch of his heels the horse broke into a shuffling trot.

It was near midnight when he camped; both he and the buckskin had eaten robustly back at the Gold Nugget Hotel, and Carney, making the horse lie down by tapping him gently on the shins with his quirt, rolled himself in his blanket and slept close beside the buckskin— they were like two men in a huge bed.

All next day he rode, stopping twice to let the buckskin feed, and eating a dry meal himself, building no fire. He had a conviction that the murderer of the gold hunters made the Valley of the Grizzley's Bridge his stalking ground. And if the devil who stalked these returning miners was still there he felt certain that he would get him.

There had been nothing to rouse the murderer's suspicion that these men were known to have been murdered.

A sort of fatality hangs over a man who once starts in on a crime of that sort; he becomes like a man who handles dynamite— careless, possessed of a sense of security, of fatalism. Carney had found all desperadoes that way, each murder had made them more sure of themselves, it generally had been so easy.

Caribou Dave had probably passed without being seen by the murderer; indeed he had passed that point early in the morning, probably while the ghoul of the trail slept; the murderer would reason that if there was any suspicion in

Bucking Horse that miners had been made away with, a posse would have come riding over the back trail, and the murderer would have ample knowledge of their approach.

To a depraved mind, such as his, there was a terrible fascination in this killing of men, and capturing their gold; he would keep at It like a gambler who has struck a big winning streak; he would pile up gold, probably in the cave Carney had seen the mouth of, even if it were more than he could take away. It was the curse of the lust of gold, and, once started, the devilish murder lust.

Carney had an advantage. He was looking for a man in a certain locality, and the man, not knowing of his approach, not dreading it, would be watching the trail in the other direction for victims. Even if he had met him full on the trail Carney would have passed the time of day and ridden on, as if going up into the Eagle Hills. And no doubt the murderer would let him pass without action. It was only returning miners he was interested in. Yes, Carney had an advantage, and if the man were still there he would get him.

His plan was to ride the buckskin to within a short distance of where the murders had been committed, which was evidently in the neighborhood of the cliff at the bottom of which Fourteen-foot Johnson had been found, and go forward on foot until he had thoroughly reconnoitered the ground. He felt that he would catch sight of the murderer somewhere between that point and the cave, for he was convinced that the cave was the home of this trail devil.

The uncanny event of the wolves was not so simple. The curious tone of the wolf's howl had suggested a wild dog— that is, a creature that was half dog, half wolf; either whelped that way in the forests, or a train dog that had escaped. Even a fanciful weird thought entered Carney's mind that the murderer might be on terms of dominion over this half-wild pair; they might know him well enough to leave him alone, and yet devour his victims. This was conjecture, rather far-fetched, but still not impossible. An Indian's train dogs would obey their master, but pull down a white man quick enough if he were helpless.

However, the man was the thing.

The sun was dipping behind the jagged fringe of mountain tops to the west when Carney slipped down into the Valley of the Grizzley's Bridge, and, fording the stream, rode on to within a hundred and fifty yards of the spot where his buckskin had shied from the trail two days before.

Dismounting, he took off his coat and draping it over the horse's neck said: "Now you're anchored, Patsy— stand steady."

Then he unbuckled the snaffle bit and rein from the bridle and wound the rein about his waist. Carney knew that the horse, not hampered by a dangling rein to catch in his legs or be seized by a man, would protect himself. No man

but Carney could saddle the buckskin or mount him unless he was roped or thrown; and his hind feet were as deft as the fists of a boxer.

Then he moved steadily along the trail, finding here and there the imprint of moccasined feet that had passed over the trail since he had. There were the fresh pugs of two wolves, the dog-wolf's paws enormous.

Carney's idea was to examine closely the trail that ran by the cliff to where his horse had shied from the path in the hope of finding perhaps the evidences of struggle, patches of blood soaked into the brown earth, and then pass on to where he could command a view of the cave mouth. If the murderer had his habitat there he would be almost certain to show himself at that hour, either returning from up the trail where he might have been on the lookout for approaching victims, or to issue from the cave for water or firewood for his evening meal. Just what he should do Carney had not quite determined. First he would stalk the man in hopes of finding out something that was conclusive.

If the murderer were hiding in the cave the gold would almost certainly be there.

That was the order of events, so to speak, when Carney, hand on gun, and eyes fixed ahead on the trail, came to the spot where the wolf had stood at bay. The trail took a twist, a projecting rock bellied it into a little turn, and a fallen birch lay across it, half smothered in a lake of leaves and brush.

As Carney stepped over the birch there was a crashing clamp of iron, and the powerful jaws of a bear trap closed on his leg with such numbing force that he almost went out. His brain swirled; there were roaring noises in his head, an excruciating grind on his leg.

His senses steadying, his first cogent thought was that the bone was smashed; but a limb of the birch, caught in the jaws, squelched to splinters, had saved the bone; this and his breeches and heavy socks in the legs of his strong riding boots.

As if the snapping steel had carried down the valley, the evening stillness was rent by the yelping howl of a wolf beyond where the cave hung on the hillside. There was something demoniac in this, suggesting to the half-dazed man that the wolf stood as sentry.

The utter helplessness of his position came to him with full force; he could no more open the jaws of that double-springed trap than he could crash the door of a safe. And a glance showed him that the trap was fastened by a chain at either end to stout-growing trees. It was a man-trap; if it had been for a bear it would be fastened to a piece of loose log.

The fiendish deviltry of the man who had set it was evident. The whole vile scheme flashed upon Carney; it was set where the trail narrowed before it wound down to the gorge, and the man caught in it could be killed by a club, or

left to be devoured by the wolves. A pistol might protect him for a little short time against the wolves, but that even could be easily wheedled out of a man caught by the murderer coming with a pretense of helping him.

Suddenly a voice fell on Carney's ear:

"Throw your gun out on the trail in front of you! I've got you covered, Bulldog, and you haven't got a chance on earth."

Now Carney could make out a pistol, a man's head, and a crooked arm projecting from beside a tree twenty yards along the trail.

"Throw out the gun, and I'll parley with your" the voice added.

Carney recognized the voice as that of Jack the Wolf, and he knew that the offered parley was only a blind, a trick to get his gun away so that he would be a quick victim for the wolves; that would save a shooting. Sometimes an imbedded bullet told the absolute tale of murder.

"There's nothing doing in that line, Jack the Wolf," Carney answered; "you can shoot and be damned to you! I'd rather die that way than be torn to pieces by the wolves."

Jack the Wolf seemed to debate this matter behind the tree; then he said: "It's your own fault if you get into my bear trap, Bulldog; I ain't invited you in. I've been watchin' you for the last hour, and I've been a-wonderin' just what your little game was. Me and you ain't good 'nough friends for me to step up there to help you out, and you got a gun on you. You throw it out and I'll parley. If you'll agree to certain things, I'll spring that trap, and you can ride away, 'cause I guess you'll keep your word. I don't want to kill nobody, I don't."

The argument was specious. If Carney had not known Jack the Wolf as absolutely bloodthirsty, he might have taken a chance and thrown the gun.

"You know perfectly well, Jack the Wolf, that if you came to help me out, and I shot you, I'd be committing suicide, so you're lying."

"You mean you won't give up the gun?"

"No."

"Well, keep it, damn you! Them wolves knows a thing or two. One of 'em knows pretty near as much about guns as you do. They'll just sit off there in the dark and laugh at you till you drop; then you'll never wake up. You think it over, Bulldog, I'm ——"

The speaker's voice was drowned by the howl of the wolf a short distance down the valley.

"D'you hear him, Bulldog?" Jack queried when the howls had died down. "They get your number on the wind and they're sayin' you're their meat. You think over my proposition while I go down and gather in your buckskin; he looks good to me for a get-away. You let me know when I come back what

you'll do, 'cause 'em wolves is in a hurry— they're hungry; and I guess your leg ain't none too comf'table."

Then there was silence, and Carney knew that Jack the Wolf was circling through the bush to where his horse stood, keeping out of range as he travelled.

Carney knew that the buckskin would put up a fight; his instinct would tell him that Jack the Wolf was evil. The howling wolf would also have raised the horse's mettle; but he himself was in the awkward position of being a loser, whether man or horse won.

From where he was trapped the buckskin was in view. Carney saw his head go up, the lop ears throw forward in rigid listening, and he could see, beyond, off to the right, the skulking form of Jack slipping from tree to tree so as to keep the buckskin between him and Carney.

Now the horse turned his arched neck and snorted. Carney whipped out his gun, a double purpose in his mind. If Jack the Wolf offered a fair mark he would try a shot, though at a hundred and fifty yards it would be a chance; and he must harbor his cartridges for the wolves; the second purpose was that the shot would rouse the buckskin with a knowledge that there was a battle on.

Jack the Wolf came to the trail beyond the horse and was now slowly approaching, speaking in coaxing terms. The horse, warily alert, was shaking his head; then he pawed at the earth like an angry bull.

Ten yards from the horse Jack stood still, his eye noticing that the bridle rein and bit were missing. Carney saw him uncoil from his waist an ordinary packing rope; it was not a lariat, being short. With this in a hand held behind his back, Jack, with short steps, moved slowly toward the buckskin, trying to soothe the wary animal with soft speech.

Ten feet from the horse he stood again, and Carney knew what that meant— a little quick dash in to twist the rope about the horse's head, or seize him by the nostrils. Also the buckskin knew. He turned his rump to the man, threw back his ears, and lashed out with his hind feet as a warning to the horse thief. The coat had slipped from his neck to the ground.

Jack the Wolf tried circling tactics, trying to gentle the horse into a sense of security with soothing words. Once, thinking he had a chance, he sprang for the horse's head, only to escape those lightning heels by the narrowest margin; at that instant Carney fired, but his bullet missed, and Jack, startled, stood back, planning sulkily.

Carney saw him thread out his rope with the noose end in his right hand, and circle again. Then the hand with a half-circle sent the loop swishing through the air, and at the first cast it went over the buckskin's head.

Carney had been waiting for this. He whistled shrilly the signal that always brought the buckskin to his side.

Jack had started to work his way up the rope, hand over hand, but at the well-known signal the horse whirled, the rope slipped through Jack's sweaty hands, a loop of it caught his leg, and he was thrown. The buckskin, strung to a high nervous tension, answered his master's signal at a gallop, and the rope, fastened to Jack's waist, dragged him as though he hung from a runaway horse with a foot in the stirrup. His body struck rocks, trees, roots; it jiggered about on the rough earth like a cork, for the noose had slipped back to the buckskin's shoulders.

Just as the horse reached Carney, Jack the Wolf's two legs straddled a slim tree and the body wedged there. Carney snapped his fingers, but as the horse stepped forward the rope tightened, the body was fast.

"Damned if I want to tear the cuss to pieces, Patsy," he said, drawing forth his pocket knife. He just managed by reaching out with his long arm, to cut the rope, and the horse thrust his velvet muzzle against his master's cheek, as if he would say, "Now, old pal, we're all right— don't worry."

Bulldog understood the reassurance and, patting the broad wise forehead, answered: "We can play the wolves together, Pat— I'm glad you're here. It's a hundred to one on us yet." Then a half-smothered oath startled the horse, for, at a twist, a shoot of agony raced along the vibrant nerves to Carney's brain.

In the subsidence of strife Carney was cognizant of the night shadows that had crept along the valley; it would soon be dark. Perhaps he could build a little fire; it would keep the wolves at bay, for in the darkness they would come; it would give him a circle of light, and a target when the light fell on their snarling faces.

Bending gingerly down he found in the big bed of leaves a network of dead branches that Jack the Wolf had cunningly placed there to hold the leaves. There was within reach on the dead birch some of its silver parchment-like bark. With his cowboy hat he brushed the leaves away from about his limbs, then taking off his belt he lowered himself gingerly to his free knee and built a little mound of sticks and bark against the birch log. Then he put his hand in a pocket for matches— every pocket; he had not one match; they were in his coat lying down somewhere on the trail. He looked longingly at the body lying wedged against the tree; Jack would have matches, for no man travelled the wilds without the means to a fire. But matches in New York were about as accessible as any that might be in the dead man's pockets.

Philosophic thought with one leg in a bear trap is practically impossible, and Carney's arraignment of tantalizing Fate was inelegant. As if Fate resented this, Fate, or something, cast into the trapped man's mind a magical

inspiration— a vital grievance. His mind, acute because of his dilemna and pain, must have wandered far ahead of his cognizance, for a sane plan of escape lay evident. If he had a fire he could heat the steel springs of that trap. The leaves of the spring were thin, depending upon that elusive quality, the steel's temper, for strength. If he could heat the steel, even to a dull red, the temper would leave it as a spirit forsakes a body, and the spring would bend like cardboard.

"And I haven't got a damn match," Carney wailed. Then he looked at the body. "But you've got them ——"

He grasped the buckskin's headpiece and drew him forward a pace; then he unslung his picket line and made a throw for Jack the Wolf's head. If he could yank the body around, the wedged legs would clear.

Throwing a lariat at a man lying groggily flat, with one of the thrower's legs in a bear trap, was a new one on Carney— It was some test.

Once he muttered grimly, from between set teeth: "If my leg holds out I'll get him yet, Patsy."

Then he threw the lariat again, only to drag the noose hopelessly off the head that seemed glued to the ground, the dim light blurring form and earth into a shadow from which thrust, indistinctly, the pale face that carried a crimson mark from forehead to chin.

He had made a dozen casts, all futile, the noose sometimes catching slightly at the shaggy head, even causing it to roll weirdly, as if the man were not dead but dodging the rope. As Carney slid the noose from his hand to float gracefully out toward the body his eye caught the dim form of the dog-wolf, just beyond, his slobbering jaws parted, giving him the grinning aspect of a laughing hyena. Carney snatched the rope and dropped his hand to his gun, but the wolf was quicker than the man— he was gone. A curious thing had happened, though, for that erratic twist of the rope had spiraled the noose beneath Jack the Wolf's chin, and gently, vibratingly tightening the slip, Carney found it hold. Then, hand over hand, he hauled the body to the birch log, and, without ceremony, searched it for matches. He found them, wrapped in an oilskin in a pocket of Jack's shirt. He noticed, casually, that Jack's gun had been torn from its belt during the owner's rough voyage.

The finding of the matches was like an anesthetic to the agony of the clamp on his leg. He chuckled, saying, "Patsy, it's a million to one on us; they can't beat us, old pard."

He transferred his faggots and birch bark to the loops of the springs, one pile at either end of the trap, and touched a match to them.

The acrid smoke almost stilled him; sparks burnt his hands, and his wrists, and his face; the jaws of the trap commenced to catch the heat as it travelled

along the conducting steel, and he was threatened with the fact that he might burn his leg off. With his knife he dug up the black moist earth beneath the leaves, and dribbled it on to the heating jaws.

Carney was so intent on his manifold duties that he had practically forgotten Jack the Wolf; but as he turned his face from an inspection of a spring that was reddening, he saw a pair of black vicious eyes watching him, and a hand reaching for his gun belt that lay across the birch log.

The hands of both men grasped the belt at the same moment, and a terrible struggle ensued. Carney was handicapped by the trap, which seemed to bite into his leg as if it were one of the wolves fighting Jack's battle; and Jack the Wolf showed, by his vain efforts to rise, that his legs had been made almost useless in that drag by the horse.

Carney had in one hand a stout stick with which he had been adjusting his fire, and he brought this down on the other's wrist, almost shattering the bone. With a cry of pain Jack the Wolf released his grasp of the belt, and Carney, pulling the gun, covered him, saying:

"Hoped you were dead, Jack the Murderer! Now turn face down on this log, with your hands behind your back, till I hobble you."

"I can spring that trap with a lever and let you out," Jack offered.

"Don't need you— I'm going to see you hanged and don't want to be under any obligation to you, murderer; turn over quick or I'll kill you now— my leg is on fire."

Jack the Wolf knew that a man with a bear trap on his leg and a gun in his hand was not a man to trifle with, so he obeyed.

When Jack's wrists were tied with the picket line, Carney took a loop about the prisoner's legs; then he turned to his fires.

The struggle had turned the steel springs from the fires; but in the twisting one of them had been bent so that its ring had slipped down from the jaws. Now Carney heaped both fires under the other spring and soon it was so hot that, when balancing his weight on the leg in the trap, he placed his other foot on it and shifted his weight, the strip of steel went down like paper. He was free.

At first Carney could not bear his weight on the mangled leg; it felt as if it had been asleep for ages; the blood rushing through the released veins pricked like a tatooing needle. He took off his boot and massaged the limb, Jack eyeing this proceeding sardonically. The two wolves hovered beyond the firelight, snuffling and yapping.

When he could hobble on the injured limb Carney put the bit and bridle rein back on the buckskin, and turning to Jack, unwound the picket line from his legs, saying, "Get up and lead the way to that cave!"

"I can't walk, Bulldog," Jack protested; my leg's half broke."

"Take your choice— get on your legs, or I'll tie you up and leave you for the wolves," Carney snapped.

Jack the Wolf knew his Bulldog Carney well. As he rose groggily to his feet, Carney lifted to the saddle, holding the loose end of the picket line that was fastened to Jack's wrists, and said:

"Go on in front; if you try any tricks I'll put a bullet through you— this sore leg's got me peeved."

At the cave Carney found, as he expected, several little canvas bags of gold, and other odds and ends such as a murderer too often, and also foolishly, will garner from his victims. But he also found something he had not expected to find— the cayuse that had belonged to Fourteen-foot Johnson, for Jack the Wolf had preserved the cayuse to pack out his wealth.

Next morning, no chance of action having come to Jack the Wolf through the night, for he had lain tied up, like a turkey that is to be roasted, he started on the pilgrimage to Bucking Horse, astride Fourteen-foot Johnson's cayuse, with both feet tied beneath that sombre animal's belly. Carney landed him and the gold in that astonished berg.

And in the fullness of time something very serious happened to the enterprising man of the bear trap.

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3: The Spectre Bride

William Harrison Ainsworth

1805-1882

Arliss's Pocket Magazine, 1822 (as "The Baron's Bride")

THE CASTLE of Hernswolf, at the close of the year 1655, was the resort of fashion and gaiety. The baron of that name was the most powerful nobleman in Germany, and equally celebrated for the patriotic achievements of his sons, and the beauty of his only daughter. The estate of Hernswolf, which was situated in the centre of the Black Forest, had been given to one of his ancestors by the gratitude of the nation, and descended with other hereditary possessions to the family of the present owner. It was a castellated, gothic mansion, built according to the fashion of the times, in the grandest style of architecture, and consisted principally of dark winding corridors, and vaulted tapestry rooms, magnificent indeed in their size, but ill-suited to private comfort, from the very circumstance of their dreary magnitude. A dark grove of pine and mountain ash encompassed the castle on every side, and threw an aspect of gloom around the scene, which was seldom enlivened by the cheering sunshine of heaven.

THE CASTLE BELLS rung out a merry peal at the approach of a winter twilight, and the warder was stationed with his retinue on the battlements, to announce the arrival of the company who were invited to share the amusements that reigned within the walls. The Lady Clotilda, the baron's only daughter, had but just attained her seventeenth year, and a brilliant assembly was invited to celebrate the birthday. The large vaulted apartments were thrown open for the reception of the numerous guests, and the gaieties of the evening had scarcely commenced when the clock from the dungeon tower was heard to strike with unusual solemnity, and on the instant a tall stranger, arrayed in a deep suit of black, made his appearance in the ballroom. He bowed courteously on every side, but was received by all with the strictest reserve. No one knew who he was or whence he came, but it was evident from his appearance, that he was a nobleman of the first rank, and though his introduction was accepted with distrust, he was treated by all with respect. He addressed himself particularly to the daughter of the baron, and was so intelligent in his remarks, so lively in his sallies, and so fascinating in his address, that he quickly interested the feelings of his young and sensitive auditor. In fine, after some hesitation on the part of the host, who, with the rest of the company, was unable to approach the stranger with indifference, he was requested to remain a few days at the castle, an invitation which was cheerfully accepted.

The dead of the night drew on, and when all had retired to rest, the dull heavy bell was heard swinging to and fro in the grey tower, though there was scarcely a breath to move the forest trees. Many of the guests, when they met the next morning at the breakfast table, averred that there had been sounds as of the most heavenly music, while all persisted in affirming that they had heard awful noises, proceeding, as it seemed, from the apartment which the stranger at that time occupied. He soon, however, made his appearance at the breakfast circle, and when the circumstances of the preceding night were alluded to, a dark smile of unutterable meaning played round his saturnine features, and then relapsed into an expression of the deepest melancholy. He addressed his conversation principally to Clotilda, and when he talked of the different climes he had visited, of the sunny regions of Italy, where the very air breathes the fragrance of flowers, and the summer breeze sighs over a land of sweets; when he spoke to her of those delicious countries, where the smile of the day sinks into the softer beauty of the night, and the loveliness of heaven is never for an instant obscured, he drew tears of regret from the bosom of his fair auditor, and for the first time she regretted that she was yet at home

Days rolled on, and every moment increased the fervour of the inexpressible sentiments with which the stranger had inspired her. He never discoursed of love, but he looked it in his language, in his manner, in the insinuating tones of his voice, and in the slumbering softness of his smile, and when he found that he had succeeded in inspiring her with favourable sentiments, a sneer of the most diabolical meaning spoke for an instant, and died again on his dark featured countenance. When he met her in the company of her parents, he was at once respectful and submissive, and it was only when alone with her, in her ramble through the dark recesses of the forest, that he assumed the guise of the more impassioned admirer.

As he was sitting one evening with the baron in the wainscotted apartment of the library, the conversation happened to turn upon supernatural agency. The stranger remained reserved and mysterious during the discussion, but when the baron in a jocular manner denied the existence of spirits, and satirically mocked their appearance, his eyes glowed with unearthly lustre, and his form seemed to dilate to more than its natural dimensions. When the conversation had ceased, a fearful pause of a few seconds and a chorus of celestial harmony was heard pealing through the dark forest glade. All were entranced with delight, but the stranger was disturbed and gloomy; he looked at his noble host with compassion, and something like a tear swam in his dark eye. After the lapse of a few seconds, the music died gently in the distance, and all was hushed as before. The baron soon after quitted the apartment, and was followed almost immediately by the stranger. He had not long been

absent, when an awful noise, as of a person in the agonies of death, was heard, and the Baron was discovered stretched dead along the corridors. His countenance was convulsed with pain, and the grip of a human hand was visible on his blackened throat. The alarm was instantly given, the castle searched in every direction, but the stranger was seen no more. The body of the baron, in the meantime, was quietly committed to the earth, and the remembrance of the dreadful transaction, recalled but as a thing that once was.

AFTER THE DEPARTURE of the stranger, who had indeed fascinated her very senses, the spirits of the gentle Clotilda evidently declined. She loved to walk early and late in the walks that he had once frequented, to recall his last words; to dwell on his sweet smile; and wander to the spot where she had once discoursed with him of love. She avoided all society, and never seemed to be happy but when left alone in the solitude of her chamber. It was then that she gave vent to her affliction in tears; and the love that the pride of maiden modesty concealed in public, burst forth in the hours of privacy. So beauteous, yet so resigned was the fair mourner, that she seemed already an angel freed from the trammels of the world, and prepared to take her flight to heaven.

As she was one summer evening rambling to the sequestered spot that had been selected as her favourite residence, a slow step advanced towards her. She turned round, and to her infinite surprise discovered the stranger. He stepped gaily to her side, and commenced an animated conversation.

"You left me," exclaimed the delighted girl; "and I thought all happiness was fled from me for ever; but you return, and shall we not again be happy?"

"Happy," replied the stranger, with a scornful burst of derision, "Can I ever be happy again— can there;— but excuse the agitation, my love, and impute it to the pleasure I experience at our meeting. Oh! I have many things to tell you; aye! And many kind words to receive; is it not so, sweet one? Come, tell me truly, have you been happy in my absence? No! I see in that sunken eye, in that pallid cheek, that the poor wanderer has at least gained some slight interest in the heart of his beloved. I have roamed to other climes, I have seen other nations; I have met with other females, beautiful and accomplished, but I have met with but one angel, and she is here before me. Accept this simple offering of my affection, dearest," continued the stranger, plucking a heath-rose from its stem; "it is beautiful as the wild flowers that deck thy hair, and sweet as is the love I bear thee."

"It is sweet, indeed," replied Clotilda, "but its sweetness must wither ere night closes around. It is beautiful, but its beauty is short-lived, as the love evinced by man. Let not this, then, be the type of thy attachment; bring me the

delicate evergreen, the sweet flower that blossoms throughout the year, and I will say, as I wreathe it in my hair, 'The violets have bloomed and died— the roses have flourished and decayed; but the evergreen is still young, and so is the love of heart!'— you will not— cannot desert me. I live but in you; you are my hopes, my thoughts, my existence itself: and if I lose you, I lose my all— I was but a solitary wild flower in the wilderness of nature, until you transplanted me to a more genial soil; and can you now break the fond heart you first taught to glow with passion?"

"Speak not thus," returned the stranger, "it rends my very soul to hear you; leave me— forget me— avoid me for ever— or your eternal ruin must ensue. I am a thing abandoned of God and man— and did you but see the scared heart that scarcely beats within this moving mass of deformity, you would flee me, as you would an adder in your path. Here is my heart, love, feel how cold it is; there is no pulse that betrays its emotion; for all is chilled and dead as the friends I once knew."

"You are unhappy, love, and your poor Clotilda shall stay to succour you. Think not I can abandon you in your misfortunes. No! I will wander with thee through the wide world, and be thy servant, thy slave, if thou wilt have it so. I will shield thee from the night winds, that they blow not too roughly on thy unprotected head. I will defend thee from the tempest that howls around; and though the cold world may devote thy name to scorn— though friends may fall off, and associates wither in the grave, there shall be one fond heart who shall love thee better in thy misfortune, and cherish thee, bless thee still."

She ceased, and her blue eyes swam in tears, as she turned it glistening with affection towards the stranger. He averted his head from her gaze, and a scornful sneer of the darkest, the deadliest malice passed over his fine countenance. In an instant, the expression subsided; his fixed glassy eye resumed its unearthly chillness, and he turned once again to his companion.

"It is the hour of sunset," he exclaimed; "the soft, the beauteous hour, when the hearts of lovers are happy, and nature smiles in unison with their feelings; but to me it will smile no longer— ere the morrow dawns I shall very far, from the house of my beloved; from the scenes where my heart is enshrined, as in a sepulchre. But must I leave thee, dearest flower of the wilderness, to be the sport of a whirlwind, the prey of the mountain blast?"

"No, we will not part," replied the impassioned girl; "where thou goest, will I go; thy home shall be my home; and thy God shall be my God."

"Swear it, swear it," resumed the stranger, wildly grasping her by the hand; "swear to the fearful oath I shall dictate."

He then desired her to kneel, and holding his right hand in a menacing attitude towards heaven, and throwing back his dark raven locks, exclaimed in

a strain of bitter imprecation with the ghastly smile of an incarnate fiend, "May the curses of an offended God," he cried, "haunt thee, cling to thee for ever in the tempest and in the calm, in the day and in the night, in sickness and in sorrow, in life and in death, shouldst thou swerve from the promise thou hast here made to be mine. May the dark spirits of the damned howl in thine ears the accursed chorus of fiends— may the air rack thy bosom with the quenchless flames of hell! May thy soul be as the lazar-house of corruption, where the ghost of departed pleasure sits enshrined, as in a grave: where the hundred-headed worm never dies where the fire is never extinguished. May a spirit of evil lord it over thy brow, and proclaim, as thou passest by, *This is the abandoned of God and man*; may fearful spectres haunt thee in the night season; may thy dearest friends drop day by day into the grave, and curse thee with their dying breath: may all that is most horrible in human nature, more solemn than language can frame, or lips can utter, may this, and more than this, be thy eternal portion, shouldst thou violate the oath that thou has taken."

He ceased— hardly knowing what she did, the terrified girl acceded to the awful adjuration, and promised eternal fidelity to him who was henceforth to be her lord. "Spirits of the damned, I thank thee for thine assistance," shouted the stranger; "I have wooed my fair bride bravely. She is mine— mine for ever.— Aye, body and soul both mine; mine in life, and mine in death. What in tears, my sweet one, ere yet the honeymoon is past? Why! indeed thou hast cause for weeping: but when next we meet we shall meet to sign the nuptial bond."

He then imprinted a cold salute on the cheek of his young bride, and softening down the unutterable horrors of his countenance, requested her to meet him at eight o"clock on the ensuing evening in the chapel adjoining to the castle of Hernswolf. She turned round to him with a burning sigh, as if to implore protection from himself, but the stranger was gone.

On entering the castle, she was observed to be impressed with deepest melancholy. Her relations vainly endeavoured to ascertain the cause of her uneasiness; but the tremendous oath she had sworn completely paralysed her faculties, and she was fearful of betraying herself by even the slightest intonation of her voice, or the least variable expression of her countenance. When the evening was concluded, the family retired to rest; but Clotilda, who was unable to take repose, from the restlessness of her disposition, requested to remain alone in the library that adjoined her apartment.

All was now deep midnight; every domestic had long since retired to rest, and the only sound that could be distinguished was the sullen howl of the ban-dog as he bayed, the waning moon Clotilda remained in the library in an

attitude of deep meditation. The lamp that burnt on the table, where she sat, was dying away, and the lower end of the apartment was already more than half obscured. The clock from the northern angle of the castle tolled out the hour of twelve, and the sound echoed dismally in the solemn stillness of the night. Sudden the oaken door at the farther end of the room was gently lifted on its latch, and a bloodless figure, apparelled in the habiliments of the grave, advanced slowly up the apartment. No sound heralded its approach, as it moved with noiseless steps to the table where the lady was stationed. She did not at first perceive it, till she felt a death-cold hand fast grasped in her own, and heard a solemn voice whisper in her ear, "Clotilda." She looked up, a dark figure was standing beside her; she endeavoured to scream, but her voice was unequal to the exertion; her eye was fixed, as if by magic, on the form which, slowly removed the garb that concealed its countenance, and disclosed the livid eyes and skeleton shape of her father. It seemed to gaze on her with pity, an regret, and mournfully exclaimed— "Clotilda, the dresses and the servants are ready, the church bell has tolled, and the priest is at the altar, but where is the affianced bride? There is room for her in the grave, and tomorrow shall she be with me."

"Tomorrow?" faltered out the distracted girl; "the spirits of hell shall have registered it, and tomorrow must the bond be cancelled." The figure ceased— slowly retired, and was soon lost in the obscurity of distance.

THE MORNING— evening— arrived; and already as the hall clock struck eight, Clotilda was on her road to the chapel. It was a dark, gloomy night, thick masses of dun clouds sailed across the firmament, and the roar of the winter wind echoed awfully through the forest trees. She reached the appointed place; a figure was in waiting for her— it advanced— and discovered the features of the stranger.

"Why! this is well, my bride," he exclaimed, with a sneer; "and well will I repay thy fondness. Follow me." They proceeded together in silence through the winding avenues of the chapel, until they reached the adjoining cemetery. Here they paused for an instant; and the stranger, in a softened tone, said, "But one hour more, and the struggle will be over. And yet this heart of incarnate malice can feel, when it devotes so young, so pure a spirit to the grave. But it must— it must be," he proceeded, as the memory of her past love rushed on her mind; "for the fiend whom I obey has so willed it. Poor girl, I am leading thee indeed to our nuptials; but the priest will be death, thy parents the mouldering skeletons that rot in heaps around; and the witnesses to our union, the lazy worms that revel on the carious bones of the dead. Come, my young bride, the priest is impatient for his victim."

As they proceeded, a dim blue light moved swiftly before them, and displayed at the extremity of the churchyard the portals of a vault. It was open, and they entered it in silence. The hollow wind came rushing through the gloomy abode of the dead; and on every side were piled the mouldering remnants of coffins, which dropped piece by piece upon the damp mud. Every step they took was on a dead body; and the bleached bones rattled horribly beneath their feet. In the centre of the vault rose a heap of unburied skeletons, whereon was seated, a figure too awful even for the darkest imagination to conceive. As they approached it, the hollow vault rung with a hellish peal of laughter; and every mouldering corpse seemed endued with unholy life. The stranger paused, and as he grasped his victim in his hand, one sigh burst from his heart— one tear glistened in his eye. It was but for an instant; the figure frowned awfully at his vacillation, and waved his gaunt hand.

The stranger advanced; he made certain mystic circles in the air, uttered unearthly words, and paused in excess of terror. On a sudden he raised his voice and wildly exclaimed— "Spouse of the spirit of darkness, a few moments are yet thine; that thou may"st know to whom thou hast consigned thyself. I am the undying spirit of the wretch who curst his Saviour on the cross. He looked at me in the closing hour of his existence, and that look hath not yet passed away, for I am curst above all on earth. I am eternally condemned to hell and I must cater for my master"s taste till the world is parched as is a scroll, and the heavens and the earth have passed away. I am he of whom thou may'st have read, and of whose feats thou may'st have heard. A million souls has my master condemned me to ensnare, and then my penance is accomplished, and I may know the repose of the grave. Thou art the thousandth soul that I have damned. I saw thee in thine hour of purity, and I marked thee at once for my home. Thy father did I murder for his temerity, and permitted to warn thee of thy fate; and myself have I beguiled for thy simplicity. Ha! the spell works bravely, and thou shall soon see, my sweet one, to whom thou hast linked thine undying fortunes, for as long as the seasons shall move on their course of nature— as long as the lightning shall flash, and the thunders roll, thy penance shall be eternal. Look below! and see to what thou art destined."

She looked, the vault split in a thousand different directions; the earth yawned asunder; and the roar of mighty waters was heard. A living ocean of molten fire glowed in the abyss beneath her, and blending with the shrieks of the damned, and the triumphant shouts of the fiends, rendered horror more horrible than imagination. Ten millions of souls were writhing in the fiery flames, and as the boiling billows dashed them against the blackened rocks of

adamant, they cursed with the blasphemies of despair; and each curse echoed in thunder cross the wave. The stranger rushed towards his victim. For an instant he held her over the burning vista, looked fondly in her face and wept as he were a child. This was but the impulse of a moment; again he grasped her in his arms, dashed her from him with fury; and as her last parting glance was cast in kindness on his face, shouted aloud, "not mine is the crime, but the religion that thou professest; for is it not said that there is a fire of eternity prepared for the souls of the wicked; and hast not thou incurred its torments?" She, poor girl, heard not, heeded not the shouts of the blasphemer. Her delicate form bounded from rock to rock, over billow, and over foam; as she fell, the ocean lashed itself as it were in triumph to receive her soul, and as she sunk deep in the burning pit, ten thousand voices reverberated from the bottomless abyss, "Spirit of evil! here indeed is an eternity of torments prepared for thee; for here the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

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4: The Kidnapped "General"

Stacy Aumonier

1877-1928

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JIM PARKER and I climbed a stile, walked a hundred yards along a sandy road, and came out on to a glorious common. The common was dotted with clumps of furze, gorse bushes, and beeches. Here and there a sandy pit broke the normal level of the landscape.

The origin of these weekly rambles of ours had been a mutual antipathy to golf. Paying the usual physical penalties of men who lead sedentary lives, we had each been advised by different doctors "to take up golf." Now golf may be an excellent game—

I'm not going to argue about it. We did experiment, and lost an enormous number of balls in an incredibly short space of time, but the insistent admonition: "Ah, old man, what you ought to do is to play golf," got on our nerves. We met in solemn conclave, and vowed that we would not be bullied into playing golf. Eventually we decided to absorb the benefits of golf without undergoing the nervous strain of chasing that absurd little white ball.

We rambled far afield. On this occasion we were just over the border in Buckinghamshire. Jim Parker sighed.

"I wonder they haven't turned this into one of their beastly golf courses," he said.

"Touch wood," I answered. "We're not across it yet." But no, there was no golf course on this nameless common. It was a delightful and deserted spot. We walked across it for half a mile, when we came to a kind of dingle formed by the opening into a long, narrow sand-pit. We were just passing it when Jim remarked:

"There's a queer habitation for you!"

I looked in the direction his stick was pointing, and beheld lialf-way up the dingle an odd-looking shanty in red and white.

"Um," I answered. "Let's go and have a look at it."

We entered the dingle and approached the rustic dwelling. At first it appeared to be a double-storeyed cabin painted rather gaily, with pots of flowers hanging from a balcony. On closer inspection the truth became apparent. On the lower part of the dwelling, dim but quite perceptible, was the word "General." It was an old converted "General" motor-bus! The owner had certainly been rather clever about it. The wheels had either been removed or were buried in the sand. The lower part remained practically intact, except for a surrounding wooden platform. The upper part had been roofed in with timber, and a balcony built out, supported by wooden posts. The woodwork

was painted white; there were chintz curtains at the windows, and flowers in profusion in pots and tubs. A gay little dwelling. It was, I suppose, deplorably bad manners for Jim Parker and me to stand there and laugh. But there was something about the association of the "General" with this obscure and picturesque retreat that was irresistible. We were still laughing when a man came out on to the lower platform and regarded us. He was a tall, strongly-built man, with a neat, pointed brown beard, close-cropped hair turning grey, cold blue eyes, and the skin of a man who lives in the open. He bowed to us gravely, and said:

"Good morning, gentlemen."

We pulled ourselves together and responded. Then he added:

"I presume they have sent you from the inn to hear the story of the kidnapped General?"

It was the time of day when it was pleasant to hear that there was an inn in the offing, but we explained that we had come from the opposite direction, and that we were merely explorers, trying to escape from the tyranny of social custom. We had no intention of invading his privacy, but nevertheless the story of the kidnapped Generabpromised an entertaining diversion.

"Come and sit on this bench in the shade," said the sturdy individual. "I regret I have no liquid refreshment to offer you, other than water. My medical advisers—" He waved his hand in the direction of the dwelling as though the position explained itself. We all sat down and lighted our pipes.

"My name is McGregor," he said quite simply— "William McGregor, but the story of the kidnapped General circles round the character of one Ronny Skinner— Captain Ronald Skinner of the Royal Engineers. Skinner his name was, but the boys called him Grinner. He was that— essentially. He was a man who grinned through life. He grinned through triumph and through disaster. He grinned through battle and when things went wrong. He grinned even when he was bullied or betrayed. He was an irrepressible grinner. A stocky, merry, jolly chunk of a man who never had any luck, except that he always managed to escape with his life. His war record would probably bore you, it was like so many others. He was up to his neck in it the first week, temporarily attached to the R.F.A. as a motor-bike despatch rider. He was a wonderful chauffeur, and could drive any car. You may remember at that time they sent the despatch riders out in couples, one without lights carrying the despatches, the other lighted up as a decoy. Ronny was always the decoy. The war had only been on for five weeks when one night a shell blew his front wheel to pieces. He was captured by the Germans. He spent nine months in a concentration camp at Cassel. I believe he even grinned there. And then one day he and

another man escaped, and got across the border into Switzerland. He reported and went back into the line. Does this bore you?"

"Not at all— most interesting," Jim Parker and I both interjected.

"He was over a year in Belgium, and he grinned when they removed a piece of shrapnel from the fleshy part of his thigh. 'Dashed lucky it didn't hit the bone,' he said. He grinned when they sent him to Salonika, and kept him hanging about for nine months in a fever-stricken marsh, playing football and cracking lice in his shirt. He even grinned in Gallipoli when the flood came and carried all his kit away, and he was eaten up by savage flying things and poisonous growing things. He didn't grin much when he really got the fever because he was unconscious most of the time. But he grinned when he found himself in a clean bed at Imbros. 'Golly! this is fine!' he said, and he hurried up to get well. He wrote to his girl in England. Did I tell you there was a girl? She was a pretty girl, the daughter of a wealthy provision merchant living quite near here. They were not officially engaged. He had very little money, and he had only just started his career when the war came. The father would not sanction it, and there was no mother. I can't tell you what he wrote to her, or what she wrote to him. But when her letters came he used to grin contentedly, so one assumes the girl was staunch. They sent him off to Egypt after that for another sixteen months and then back to Blighty. Jemini! didn't he grin when he saw the old white cliffs again! But that wasn't for long, mind you. In another month he was in France again.

"The fellow went through everything, right up to the retreat in March, 1918, and then the turn of the tide in July. Except for that one wound in his thigh he was never touched. When the end came he was in the army of occupation on the Rhine, grinning at the Boche housewives, and helping them hang out their clothes to air. And then they demobbed him and sent him back to England. In the meantime his father, who was an architectural sculptor, was ruined by the war. The old man had gone bankrupt, and was living with a married sister, not much better off than himself. There was no one to help the boy.

"When the war started Ronny was nineteen. He was now nearly twenty-five, and he had had no training. He could do nothing except drive a car. London was flooded with unemployed ex-service men who could drive cars. He had to get a job anyway, and he went about grinning into all kinds of offices and warehouses. Nobody wanted him. The war was over, and the great need now was economy and retrenchment. The girl was still writing to him, and so he went on grinning and hoping. But the girl's father forbade him to enter the house. He had made a lot of money during the war, and he wasn't going to

have his daughter thrown away on a penniless, out-of-work loafer. His God, no, he wasn't.

"I don't know how Skinner eventually managed to get the job he did. Things must have been getting pretty desperate, but one day he blossomed out into a beautiful blue uniform with white piping and large black buttons. He was a driver on a London General motor-bus. And there he was sitting up in his box, grinning for all he was worth, responding to the clang of the bell, swerving through the traffic in a most skilful way. The company recognized that he was a good driver, and he was very popular in the yard among the other men. One day he received quite a promotion. There was a special motor-bus that used to leave South Hampstead at five minutes to nine in the morning and run express to the City— no stop. They charged a shilling per skull for the trip, and it was very popular amongst stockbrokers and City merchants. The 'bus was always full, and the men were allowed to smoke inside. There was an express return journey in the evening at five-thirty. To Ronny Skinner fell the great honour of driving this 'bus. The conductor was a man named Eyles, and they were great pals."

Mr. McGregor paused and looked at us, as though anxious to check the impression of his story on our faces. The impression apparently satisfied him, for he proceeded.

"I am now coming to the amazing crisis of this affair, which, although not kept secret, was never satisfactorily treated, or truthfully chronicled in the Press. It is not altogether surprising. Accounts varied, and when reported they usually appeared so incredible that cautious subeditors were afraid of their papers'being ridiculed. I was one of the few people who knew the truth, and even I never knew the whole truth. I have already told you that there was a woman in the case.

"Ronny Skinner drove that 'bus every day for just on four months. Every day there was almost identically the same crowd of men. They rushed up a few minutes before it started, with their newspapers and despatch-cases and pipes. They scrambled for the best seats, talked to each other or read their newspapers all the way down. They paid their shillings to the conductor but no one took the slightest notice of the driver. I don't think any of them would have recognized him. The 'bus always started to the minute and arrived to the minute. There was never a hitch or an accident of any sort. And yet one day during the first week of July Skinner received a week's notice. No reason was given. The notice merely stated that his services would not be required after the following Friday. The truth was that one of the directors of the company had written to the manager to say that a job had got to be found for a chauffeur who was in his employ, and whom he wanted to get rid of. This story

got round. When Ronny heard it, he grinned and said: 'Oh, well, I'll have to look out for something else. That's all!' He'd been through the war, you see...Now, one thing which affects this story is a letter he received a few days later. It will be better if I don't tell you about this till later on. All that week Ronny grinned, and grinned, and grinned. There never was such a grin. And one night after the last trip he took Eyles out, and they went down town and did themselves well. The morning of his last day was a glorious summer's day, just like this, gentlemen. The 'bus was there outside Finchley Road Station twenty minutes before its time, with Skinner and Eyles already aboard. The stockbrokers and City merchants began to assemble. It was a very full load, and not only was it full inside and out, but there were five standing up.

"Five minutes to nine— clang went the bell! Grrh! Grrh! went the starter. She was off. The stockbrokers started their usual early morning badinage, papers rustled, cigar smoke curled upwards. Everything was delightfully as usual. The 'bus went along at its usual pace past Swiss Cottage. A little farther on it took a turning to the right down-hill.

"How provoking!" said the manager of a chain of tea-shops. "I suppose the road is up.' Several of the others looked equally provoked, but no one was unduly alarmed. At the end of a few minutes, however, a curious sense of misgiving crept over the company. The 'bus had taken another turning to the right and was going back in the direction from which it had come!

"Exclamations were flying around. 'What's the matter?' 'Why is he doing this?' 'Here, ring the bell.' Eyles was appealed to, but he only looked bewildered. He rang the bell. No notice was taken of it. Some of them tapped on the glass, but all they could see was Skinner's face, grinning furiously.

"In five minutes' time they were nearly a mile out of their course, and making for somewhere west of Golder's Green. The stockbrokers and City merchants began to get seriously alarmed. It was not only that the bus was out of its course, but it was being driven recklessly. It hardly slackened pace to go round corners. When impeded it dashed along on the wrong side of the road; it lurched through the traffic regardless of consequences. At one corner a policeman held up his hand to stop it, but the bus swerved past him, and at the last second he succumbed to the popular slogan of 'Safety First' and leapt out of the way. After that the 'bus went off the beaten track. It raced along side-streets, and was already getting out into the country. Now, I want you to get firmly fixed in your mind's eye the picture of that company of gentlemen being whirled away from their lawful occasions. I could give you the details of several specific cases. There was for instance, the chief cashier of a banking establishment in Lombard Street. He had the keys of the strong-room on him. It meant that the bank could do no business until he turned up. There was a

barrister who had to defend a fraudulent company promoter at the Old Bailey at eleven o'clock. There was another man with six hundred and fifty pounds in cash in a bag. He had to pay off a ship's company down at Tilbury Docks at ten-thirty. The manager of the chain of tea-shops had to meet his directors at Cannon Street Hotel at ten, and render his annual report. There were innumerable board meeting appointments, business appointments, urgent affairs to be settled that morning, stocks to be disposed of, shares bought, certainties to be acted on, not even bookmakers to be overlooked, and here they all were rushing out into the country captive to the bow and spear (or shall we say wheel and lever?) of a madman!

"Englishmen as a rule have the reputation of taking this kind of adventure philosophically, but there was an element of outrage about this performance which infuriated them. Liberty of the subject indeed! It was the sudden realization of their utter helplessness which led to a condition of pandemonium. All they could do was to ring the bell furiously all the time, bang on the window, and yell out. 'Stop! Stop!' The men on top were no better off. They tried to get at the driver, but he is protected by a solid canopy. They could not even see him. They began to yell out to the passers-by, but the noise was so uproarious and confused, the passers-by merely thought it was some picnic or excursion party cheering, and they cheered back in response and waved their hats. The mad thing got right away into the country. Eyles was being bullied and badgered, but he merely continued to look bewildered and to mutter, 'I don't know what's the matter with the chap. I can't stop him.' Some of the passengers crowded the back-board with the idea of leaping off if the 'bus slackened its pace at all, but it never went slow enough for that. There was nothing to do but bawl, and yell, and argue. Jagged nerves led to internal dissensions. One man wanted to smash the window and knock the driver over the head, and when it was pointed out to him that such an action would almost inevitably lead to a wreck of the 'bus, or in any case to a very bad accident, he wanted to fight his opponents, and was only prevented from carrying out his project by being held down on the floor.

"The 'bus was scheduled to carry twenty-two passengers inside and twenty-four out. In addition to this were the five straphangers inside, making a total of fifty-one, of whom only three were women, one being the secretary to the editor of a financial paper, another a clerk in the Admiralty, and the third a lady with a summons to serve on a jury The three women were neither better nor worse than the forty-eight men. The behaviour of the whole crowd of them can only be described as deplorable.

"I do not propose to weary you gentlemen with a detailed chronicle of the journey. Once well out into the country the grin of Skinner became broader,

the venomous expression of the passengers more menacing. All their business and other appointments had gone by the wind They were collectively buoyed up by the anticipation of some sort of feral vengeance. They gave up hope of any immediate release and simply waited for the mad journey to end, as end it must. They rushed along the country roads, up and down hills, across commons, through little villages, scattering all before them. They ran over three fowls, a cat, and two geese. In one village the left mudguard struck the wheel of a milk-cart and hurled seventeen gallons of good milk into the roadway. These were the only tragedies of note. In other respects it was a perfectly successful and triumphant ride, reflecting the utmost credit on the man at the wheel. Nothing happened, I say, until they reached—this common. Coming round the bend where you gentlemen came, the car began gradually to slow up. When it reached the entrance to this dingle it was travelling at rather less than six miles an hour. Suddenly it turned, swerved to the left, raced up the dingle, and ran nose on into the sand with a pretty considerable bump. And there it stuck, and there it remains to this day."

Parker and I uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and Mr. McGregor paused and critically examined the stem of his pipe.

"And then?" I asked, breathlessly.

"Hats fell off, some of the men were jerked on to the floor, but no one was seriously hurt. When they realized that the tension was over, they scrambled off that 'bus like madmen. In a body they rushed round and bore down on the chauffeur. Then an unpleasant surprise awaited them. Skinner had already dismounted. He was standing clear of the car, with an insolent grin on his face. In either hand he held a six-chambered revolver. As the crowd approached, he called out: 'Stand back!'

"Now, a panic-stricken crowd is liable to do all kinds of unreasonable things, but there is something about the glitter of a shiny little revolver that will steady the most rampageous. The stockbrokers and City merchants, armed with walking-sticks, newspapers, and despatch-cases drew back and wavered. A white-whiskered City accountant with heavy gold chains hanging over his pendulous stomach bawled out: 'What the devil is the meaning of this outrage?' Skinner called out: 'Corporal Eyles, get all these men and women into line!' There was then another disconcerting discovery. Eyles appeared from the rear of the 'bus also carrying a six-chamber. He drew himself up and saluted Skinner. Skinner acknowledged the salute, and then, turning to the crowd, he said, 'There are fifty-one of you to two of us. With a little cohesion it would be possible for you to overcome us, but I assure you before that happened eighteen of you gentlemen would surely die. My friend, Corporal Eyles, who was with me during the first battle of the Marne, will now get you into line. I

will then address you from the top of the 'bus.' A more remarkable sight has surely never been seen on an English common. One of the women became hysterical and ran away, and she was allowed to go. The rest, under cover of Eyles' revolver, were drawn up in two lines of twenty-five. There they all stood, the oddest collection of sizes, and ages, and figures, in top-hats, and bowler hats, and Trilby hats, with newspapers tucked under their arms, holding bags and despatch-cases, and sticks and umbrellas. And the birds were singing overhead, just as they are to-day, gentlemen, and the bees were humming above the gorse. And there was Skinner, still in his driver's uniform, standing commandingly on the top of that ridiculous red 'bus. There was a clamour of angry protest from those fifty throats, not unmixed with jeering and even a little laughter. It became necessary for Skinner to flash one of the horrid little revolvers to obtain complete silence. When this desirable condition had been obtained, he spoke in a loud, ringing voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me relieve your minds at once of what I know is the dominant fear that possesses you. Eyles and I have not brought you here to rob you. You shall return with all your property intact. Our exploit is rather a spiritual than a material one. We are doing it for your good. If we had not kidnapped you in this way you would now all be grinding and grubbing away in the City, making money, losing it; planning to make it, planning to lose it; contributing nothing of any real importance to the human commonweal. And now here you are on a lovely common with all the day before you, and the sun above your heads. You do not see enough of Nature, you do not learn to live, you do not see facts as they are. You never give yourselves a chance. Your idea of visiting Nature is to motor down to some such place as this, and then create for yourselves a miniature arena of all the petty, fidgeting conditions of your City lives. You stoop over a little white ball. Isn't that the expression you use: 'Keep your eye on the ball?' I ask you, gentlemen, don't keep your eye on the ball, but keep your eye on the stars above you. Soften your hearts, and, when you travel, think of the people who drive you; when you labour and profit and play, think of the people who minister to your necessities. I have mentioned that there are fifty of you to two of us. Well, that represents roughly the percentage of the non-combatant element in the Great War. Have you already forgotten that there was a great war, gentlemen? Have you already forgotten Eyles and me? or will you forget us to-morrow? Go, then, all of you, wander the fields and commons, and look into your hearts. Go, and be damned to you! And without the slightest hesitation, he turned his revolver on to the crowd and fired point-blank into it!

"The panic that ensued is indescribable. The old man with the white whiskers leapt sideways, jumped, and fell into a gorse bush, shot through the

heart. No, that is not true, but that was the immediate impression. As a matter of fact he did fall into a gorse bush, but that was only because he caught his foot in a rut. With a wild yell the whole company fled helter-skelter out of the dingle and across the common, followed by shot after shot from three revolvers. None of them was to know that the three revolvers were only loaded with blank cartridges. Was there ever such a sight? Top-hats fell off and were not reclaimed, bags and sticks and newspapers were scattered hither and thither. Someone with experience yelled out: 'Scatter! Open out!'
They did scatter, they did open out. Younger men were racing like the wind. Fat old gentlemen were tumbling into sand-pits. The two women were screaming and holding on to the men. The common was dotted with black figures, ducking, doubling, and yelling. No one turned to look back at the assailants. No one saw the broad grin on Skinner's face."

Mr. McGregor again paused, and then he remarked casually:

"We've shifted the position of the old 'bus a little since those days, and removed the wheels."

"We?" said Parker faintly.

Mr. McGregor seemed hesitating how to shape the crisis of his story.

"I have mentioned the letter," he continued. "I cannot tell you the exact contents of the letter. You see, it was one of those sacred missives— a love-letter, and not written to me. But this I know. It came from the girl— this girl of Skinner's. Her father had died suddenly, and forgotten to make a will. The daughter inherited his fortune. I think there was something in it about a special licence, something about Paris, something about the Italian Lakes. It may seem ironic that a man of Skinner's character should accept money left by a war profiteer. On the other hand, it seemed not altogether unfair that this money should go back to a man who went through it all. I think the girl must have pointed it out to him in the letter. He grinned so happily."

"But what happened when the stockbrokers scattered?" I asked.

"Everything was so easy after that. A parcel of clothes—two suits—was produced from beneath the front seat of the bus. The two men went behind some bushes in the dingle and changed. You see, the reason why Skinner had come to this particular common was because the girl lived at that little Georgian house just beyond the pine trees over there. You can't see it from here, but it is less than ten minutes' walk away. Thither they both went."

"But we are still mystified, Mr. McGregor," said Parker, noticing that our informant seemed inclined to leave off. "How is it that the 'bus is still here? Why are you living here? What action did the passengers take? and the company? Did Skinner get away?"

McGregor sighed pleasantly.

"Ronny Skinner is not the kind of man to go back on a pal. It may simplify things to you, gentlemen, if I tell you that my name is not McGregor— it is Eyles! Skinner did not have the slightest difficulty in getting away. No one recognized in the handsome young man who arrived at Cathay House any resemblance to the driver of the General. They had not even got his photograph, you see, to put in *the Daily Mail*. No one had noticed him very much. That is the advantage of being a nonentity. There was a half-hearted law case between the passengers and the company, but, as I have said, the majority were only too anxious to escape the ridicule which the case brought upon them. As for the 'bus itself, lawyers argued about it for nearly a year. It was so damaged that the company was not overanxious to have it back. The local Commons Committee tried to make them. In the end it was found that Cathay House estate— that is to say, the girl— had certain rights over this particular dingle. The argument went on so long that the whole thing petered out. About a year later Skinner said to me: 'Eyles, old boy, here is a hundred pounds. You go and make that 'bus into a snug little retreat, and live there when you want a change.' And Skinner allows me two hundred a year to live on, for helping him in the exploit. And here I am!"

"You seem a very educated man for a corporal and a 'bus conductor," I remarked.

"My experience was almost identical to that of Skinner," said Eyles. "When the war broke out I was just leaving Charterhouse. I joined up as a private. When it was over I was twenty-four, with no training, and my people had all been ruined. There are lots of others, too, in our position."

Parker stood up and shook himself.

"Well, Mr. Eyles," he said, "I'm sure we are much obliged to you. It's a most amazing story, and it's delightful to know that it has a happy ending."

"Yes," answered Eyles. "It has a happy ending. I hope I haven't bored you. You'll find the inn a quarter of a mile past the cross roads."

We thanked him profusely and departed. The kidnapped General I It was a most amazing story. As we tramped along the road we discussed and dissected the details of it.

"There's one thing that strikes me as queer," said Parker. "He said he was leaving Charterhouse when the war broke out. Say he was eighteen. When the war was over he would be approximately twenty-three, so now he should be about twenty-seven. He looks much older."

"Yes," I answered, "he does, but that may be partly due to the fact of his hair going grey. A lot of men went prematurely grey during the war. He looks very wiry and fit."

"Do you believe it's possible that there wasn't a lot of talk about it in the newspapers?"

"There may have been some. But you know what it is— one often reads some fantastic story of that sort, and one simply does not believe it. It's like freak dinners and explorers' yams. One thinks, 'Yes, yes,' and then you turn to see who won the semi-finals at Wimbledon. It may be true. And then there is a lot in what he says about ridicule. The majority of people would rather be robbed than made to look ridiculous."

A LITTLE FARTHER on we came to the inn. It was a pleasant lime-washed building set back from the road, and called "The Harvester." A few carters and field labourers were drinking beer in the public bar. We entered and called for bread and cheese and beer. The landlord, a fat, melancholy-looking man in corduroy trousers and a slate-grey flannel shirt, insisted on our having our repast in a little room called a "coffee-room." He seemed friendly but not inclined to be very discursive. This may have been due to the fact that his pulmonary organs were obviously in need of repair. He wheezed, and gasped, and panted as he toddled hither and thither in the prosecution of his good offices. It was late and we were hungry, and is there anything in such circumstances so completely satisfying as bread and cheese and good brown ale? We munched in happy silence, both, I believe, still ruminating on the bearded man's strange story.

When we had finished, we called the landlord to settle our reckoning.

Having done so, and come to complete agreement with him that it was a fine day, one of us— I think it was Parker, said:

"That's a queer customer you have out there, living in the motor-'bus on the common."

The landlord blinked his eyes, wheezed through the contortions of his breathing apparatus:

"Mr. Ormeroyd?"

"No," one of us answered. "Mr. Eyles, the man in the shanty built on the remains of an old General motor-'bus."

The landlord's face twisted into a form that was probably the nearest thing it ever did in the way of a smile. When in control of his voice more more, he said:

"Eyles? Oh, so that's what he calls himself to-day, is it?"

At this surprising remark we both looked at each other questioningly. Before we had had time to frame any query, however, the landlord added:

"What story did he tell you about the 'bus to-day?"

As briefly as possible Parker recounted the story as told to us. When it was finished, we listened patiently to the landlord's lungs. At the end of a few minutes the bellows appeared to give out.

"Oh, so that's the story to-day, is it? A good one, too. He always tells a different story."

"What!" I exclaimed. "You mean to say the whole thing is made up?"

"I wouldn't go so far as that," said the landlord. "There is a story right enough, but it has never been told. I've heard tell that if the true story was ever told—"

He stopped and blinked at a small canary in a diminutive cage in front of the window.

We waited for the landlord's version, but it seemed never to be coming.

"Did you say that his real name is Ormeroyd?" I asked at length.

"So I've heard tell," answered our host. "They say he is a very clever fellow. He's a very nice fellow, anyway. I've nothing against him. They say he used to be a writer before the war. You know, story-book stuff, tales and so on— made quite a big name, I believe, and lots of money. Now all the stories he invents concern the old 'bus."

"But— why? What is the cause?"

"I believe there is a story that, if told, would leave the story you heard to-day not worth mentioning. D'you remember during the first weeks of the war they sent a whole lot of London motor-'buses out to help transport the troops? Well, Mr. Ormeroyd was a skilful shuvver, and he volunteered, and got the billet to drive one of these 'buses.

"I don't rightly know the details. He was only out there six weeks. There was some awful incident— I believe he was the only one of a company saved— he on his old battered 'bus. There was a score of them 'buses, men and drivers, and all blown to pieces. It was somewhere in Belgium. He got away back to the lines. But— well, it's kind of— what do you call it?— you know, got on his nerves, never thinks of anything else. He can still invent his stories, but they always concern the old 'bus. When they discharged him, I believe he went to one of these dumps and bought an old battered 'bus. He says it was his. It may be, for all we know. People up on the common there gave him permission to buildjhis shanty. He lives there, thinkin' and writin'. A clever fellow, they all say."

"But— hasn't he any friends? Can't they make it better for him?"

"Oh, yes, he's got plenty of friends. The people at the house, for instance— you know Cathay House— they look after him. There's a girl there. They say it is better for him to live as he does— a kind of rest-cure. He's getting better. They say he'll get all right in time. He's got money and his health is otherwise

middlin' good. He's a clever fellow. He'll get it all back, they say. His stories get better, you know. I've noticed it. That one about the stockbrokers! Oh, dear! He, he, he!"

"There is a girl, you say?" Parker almost whispered.

"A very nice girl, too, the daughter of Colonel Redding, who owns Cathay House. Why, yes. Oh, I do like that about the stockbrokers!"

The landlord was still chuckling as we took our departure.

WHEN WE were once more upon the road, I remarked:

"So this story, also, may have a happy ending, Jim."

"I hope so," answered Parker. "I liked that fellow. I liked the rude things he said about golf."

And borrowing a match from me, he lighted his pipe; and we continued our pilgrimage.

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5: Angels Unawares
Rolf Boldrewood

Thomas Alexander Browne (1826-1915)
The Australasian, 16 June 1888
In: *A Romance of Canvas Town and Other Stories* (1898)

THERE was more than the usual mild excitement in the quiet country town of Barradoo, when it became known that a couple of travelling Englishmen had taken up their quarters at the Woolpack Hotel, with the intention of remaining in the neighbourhood. Further particulars, obtained from Joe Drummond, bank clerk in the National, who lodged there, amounted to this:—

'The strangers were young,' he should say, 'not bad-looking, very swell in their ways, and stand-offish in manner.' Thus the young gentleman expressed it. 'One of them— Grandison,' he thought was his name, 'talked about wanting to see station life. The "Captain," so the other chap called him, was a smart-looking card. They played billiards A.1. Seemed to have money too, else old Bowstead would never turn the house upside down for them as he did. Always went about together. The Captain did most of the talking. The tall man took it out mostly in smoking.'

Such a conjectural basis was hardly equal to a letter of introduction from a friend or of credit from a financier, in the case of two utterly unknown persons. Still, in the country, agreeable strangers are scarce. Visitors of mark are always at a premium, and though Englishmen are wrong in thinking that people may do all sorts of unconventional things in Australian society, the canons of hospitality are construed leniently.

It was decided, therefore, in conclave or otherwise, that the strangers were to be called upon and invited out by the élite of Barradoo.

No time was lost. The police magistrate, and the bankers, the two doctors, the three lawyers, the clergyman, the civil engineer, a retired military officer— most of them family men— called formally, and gave general or special invitations. Besides all these social minnows, the Triton of the vicinity, the mammoth squatter, whose vast freeholds elbowed the little town on all sides, even he presented himself.

Mr. Blocksleigh happened to be at home, for a wonder, spending the winter in his ancestral halls, as Mrs. Butters, the overseer's wife, had been heard to call them. Being a trifle hard up for decent society, as he expressed it, the Barradoo people not being quite up to the mark in his opinion, soon after hearing this last intelligence, he ordered out the mail— phaeton, and rattled up to the door of the Woolpack, where he was received by Bowstead, and ushered into the presence of the illustrious strangers with all befitting reverence. They were at that moment in the billiard room.

'So glad to make their acquaintance; knew they must find it fearfully dull in Barradoo. Hardly a soul to speak to, of course. Since Lord Eustace and the Hon. Mr. Wander had left, Blocksleigh Hall had been infernally dull. Daily fit of the blues, give them his honour! Must take pity on him! Come next week and stay a month. Weather glorious just now.'

'Would be most happy,' made answer the Captain. 'Had a few engagements just now, but in about a week— say ten days— delighted to pay him a visit. His friend Grandstone wished, above all things, to see the life of the Australian bush.'

The gentleman alluded to, who had left off staring absently at Mr. Blocksleigh and was knocking about the billiard balls, turned round and murmured, 'Bush life— delighted— thing I came out on purpose to go in for.'

'As to that,' said the squatter, 'I'm not sure I can promise you much just now. Blocksleigh Hall is not exactly a— a station— not in the back-block line, you know. We don't call this "the bush," you know.'

'The da-vil!' exclaimed the tall Englishman, facing round and gazing through the window, from which, if the truth be told, some hundreds of miles of the unpicturesque ring-barked woodlands of the Lower Wammera were apparently visible. 'Then what the dooce do you call it?'

'We call it the country,' said Mr. Blocksleigh majestically. 'But,' and here he relapsed into his cheery society manner, which he reserved for the distinguished persons who occasionally quitted the Union Club to relax amid the fresh air and unstinted hospitality of Blocksleigh Hall, 'you come over and I'll put you up to that, and a few other Australian wrinkles.'

'Haw!' commenced Mr. Grandstone, when the Captain, with a marked air of decision, interrupted—

'You will see us to-morrow week. Thanks very much. Bowstead will send us over, and we shall be most willing to be your guests for a fortnight.'

On the appointed day, Mr. Bowstead, in person, had the gratification of driving his distinguished guests to the Hall, an experience to which he duly referred with honest pride before and after the event.

But, previous to this auspicious occurrence, their entrée to the best Barradoo society had been frankly availed of by the strangers. They had been dined by the police magistrate, and entertained at a 'small and early,' 'not quite a dance, you know— just a social evening,' at the house of the 'National' banker, who had three daughters. The lawyers had done their part: Mr. Rondell, a portly, loud-voiced bon vivant, with a small, quiet wife and two cheerful daughters; Mr. Ventnor, an elderly, slightly acidulated bachelor, famous for his whist parties, port wine, and conservative opinions. With the fewest exceptions, the stranger guests were the admired of all beholders— the

general theme and topic of approving converse. 'They were so good-looking, they dressed so well.' 'Their manners were so simple and unaffected.' 'Good form'; this from the men. 'So unlike anything you see out here. There's a stamp upon them which you can't mistake'; this from the young ladies. The only dissenting voices from the chorus of admiration which swelled and rippled around the objects of all this hero-worship, were Mrs. Towers of Sandy Creek, the mother of Charlie Towers, who had been previously held to be the favoured admirer of Miss Kate Bellenden; and old Miss M'Causland, a maiden lady of Scotch extraction, whose acute perceptions had probably not been dulled by much flattering attention.

'Dashed if I can see what there is to make such a howling about in these two English fellows,' said Charlie Towers to his chief chum and crony, Jack Ainslie, as they were starting for a day's fishing one Saturday morning; 'I don't say that the Captain, as they call him, isn't well up in things generally. I've nothing to say against him. The long chap is a fine upstanding fellow; he can play billiards and shoot no end. Very neat with the gloves, too, for all his haw-haw ways. But there are plenty of as good all-round men out here. Not over clever about books either, or says he isn't. One would think the women here had never seen a man before. Besides I can't get it out of my head that there's something crooked about them. Not above-board, I mean.'

'Letters of credit wrong,' laughed his friend. 'Big swindle. Miranda business, eh? We're a little hipped, Charlie, my boy.'

'Not at all— nothing of that kind. Besides, Carton of the 'Asia had a private line. He'll back them to any extent. No; I'm riled, I admit, at being dropped and so on. Still, I'm fair, I hope. It isn't that.'

'What then, old man?'

'Why, about this never taking anything to drink, teetotal business, etc. You've remarked that?'

'Haven't I? Wasn't I referred to them by Aunt Dorcas when she saw me taking a long beer one day? Said it would lead to excess. Didn't I notice that Mr. Grandstone and Captain Wilton never took anything? And they were men of fortune and position at home.'

'And what did you answer?'

'Said it was a bad sign. I was wild, you bet. Told her straight out that men with nothing to be ashamed of or afraid of took their liquor like gentlemen. So I say now.'

'Your aunt would be ropeable?'

'I believe you,' answered his companion. 'Blew me up sky high. Said I was going headlong to perdition, and had lost the power of recognising high

principle and self-denial when I saw them before my eyes. She had no patience with the young men of the present day.'

'Didn't one of them make a sort of explanation the first time they dined out?'

'Oh yes, neatly enough. The swell chappie— big man— asked for lemonade. Said very few society fellers took wine or spirits in England nowadays. Bad form and so on. He and Wilton had agreed not to touch anything stronger than "sodah" till they saw the old country again.'

'H'm, ha! Bad sign— fishy, I think so too. Of course all the women admire them more than ever.'

'Quite so. Been a run on lemonade ever since. Binns, at the cordial factory, says he'll make a fortune this year. Calls a new brand of soda— water "the Grandstone." Bowstead— where they stay— not so enthusiastic.'

'Time will tell, of course,' quoth Charlie oracularly. 'Nothing like a waiting race. By jove, what a bite!' as his float went down head-first like a dabchick, and his line tightened as if a young shark had impounded the bait.

'Patience, Jack, is our best ally. These temporary disturbances will subside. Some day all may yet go well, and after a little play we may each land our fish, just as this lovely silver bream— five pounds if he is an ounce— comes slowly but surely to grass.'

If there was any one in Barradoo who thought she possessed a slight advantage in the confidence of the reserved but interesting strangers it was Miss Bellenden. That young lady, a statuesque brunette, had from the first been singled out by the tall, fair Grandstone, and felt, naturally, somewhat flattered by the preference. Mary Woodrose, the Major's only child, thought Captain Wilton 'a most interesting person to talk to, so well read, had travelled so much, quite unaffected too; her father enjoyed his society; she liked seeing them together. Then his descriptions of the foreign countries he had seen were so graphic— they quite carried you away from this dull country.'

In her artless way she essayed to discover more than had been confided to the public. 'They must be travelling merely for amusement,' she was sure. 'Did Mr. Grandstone really want to buy a station and settle in Australia? Was he so very rich as was stated? Had he known him long?'

These inquiries, hazarded now and then as chance queries, were answered after a fashion. 'They had been friends in England. Both had a strong love of travel. Grandstone thought station life would suit him, but was uncertain in his movements. When their visit to Blocksleigh was over, he would make up his mind. For himself, he had fully decided upon his course. He would return to Australia, if— if— only— other arrangements'— here his eyes became bright and expressive— 'if, that is to say, everything went right.' Over Mary

Woodrose's delicately fair cheek stole a tell-tale blush, and the conversation took another turn.

Miss Bellenden, on her part, tested her influence, with a view to unravel the mystery. She secured an apparently larger and more unexpected slice of information. Stroking his blond moustache, and assuming a diplomatic expression, borrowed from practice in private theatricals, Mr. Grandstone asked the young lady whether he could rely on her secrecy. In an agitated voice she gave the required assurance.

'Well, then, my dear Miss Bellenden, let me confide to you that upon leaving England, Wilton and I, in order to avoid the bother of curiosity and attention, agreed to change names and characters.'

'Changed names!' said the girl, with a sudden tone of intense surprise. 'What an extraordinary thing to do! And characters? What do you mean?'

'If I had had the slightest idea that Australia was such a charming place, with such cultivated fascinating people, I should never have been a party to the innocent deception, I assure you.'

'But what can your reason be? You raise my curiosity,' almost gasped the damsel. 'Was he a duke's eldest son? What could it be?'

'Fact is'— here the diplomatic expression stole over his naturally frank features— 'Wilton is a man of fabulous wealth, slightly affected here' (he tapped his forehead significantly). 'He is really Walladmor of Walladmor— tremendous estates in the North, don't you know? Well, nothing but continuous travel and change of scene prevents frightful fits of despondency, in any one of which he may destroy himself. You've remarked his expression of eye? Sort of glare?'

'I always thought they were too bright,' murmured Miss Bellenden. 'But what a dreadful thing! And poor Mary— that is— and you are— '

'Point of fact, I'm his guardian-keeper, if you like— pro tem. Captain Mark Wilton, late Sixth Dragoon Guards, very much at your service. Assumed the business as a blind. Family give me two thousand a year to look after him.'

'Good gracious! How sad— how very shocking!— I mean what a dreadful pity that anything should be the matter with him! And you're quite sure that he's beyond recovery? Might not a happy attachment— you know there have been such cases.'

'Worst thing in the world for him,' said Mr. Grandstone, in a wholly different tone from that employed by him at first. 'Bring on cerebral excitement. Quite frightens me to think of it. But you'll keep our secret? I've never breathed it before to a living soul.'

'You need not fear my revealing one word,' replied Miss Bellenden, with a slight accession of coldness and dignity. 'But I can't see why you should have

taken all this trouble to mystify people, when there's nothing to be gained by it. Poor Mr. Walladmor— that is, Captain Wilton, I mean— it's horribly confusing. I shall never believe you are a military man, somehow. The character doesn't seem to suit you.'

Shortly after this momentous disclosure the two friends went to pay their promised visit to Blocksleigh Hall, leaving behind them such a stock of conversational matter as the dwellers in Barradoo had not had in hand for many a day. The coming election of a member to represent the district fell flat before its fascinating mystery. When the teatable authorities remarked upon the attentions which Captain Wilton had been paying to Mary Woodrose,— as to what a suitable match it would be, with regrets that he wasn't a medical man, as the town wanted another— Miss Bellenden sighed and remained silent.

When the friends of Miss Bellenden triumphantly alluded to Mr. Grandstone's fortunate position and great expectations, Mary Woodrose didn't respond, giving an impression that she didn't attach as much importance to these gratifying facts as the inhabitants of Barradoo.

'She's a trifle jealous of Kate Bellenden, poor dear,' suggested one interlocutor charitably. 'It must be hard upon her to see such a prize captured before her eyes— but what girl in Barradoo has a chance with Kate?'

In three weeks or thereabouts, the illustrious strangers returned to the town. They had been induced to lengthen their stay at Blocksleigh Hall. There had been picnics and shooting parties for their especial benefit, kangaroo battues, improvised dances, all manner of festivities and excursions. Men had been specially invited up from the Union Club, and between riding and driving, coursing and billiards by day, with a trifle of whist and nap at night, their time had been fully occupied. Mr. Grandstone was lost in amazement at finding the 'bush' so redolent of 'beer and skittles,' so to speak, and never ceased wondering how the money had been made which supported so costly an entourage.

'Monstrous pleasant, I'm sure,' he was heard to remark, 'but not much of the younger son about it, except going to a far country, you know. Might as well be in Wales or Scotland.'

'Never mind, Grandstone, my boy,' said Mr. Blocksleigh, slapping him familiarly on the back, 'wait till the Agricultural Show in Barradoo is over. I've promised to go this year. Chance of his Lordship coming up, I hear. Then I'll drive you and the Captain to one of my places, Outer Back Balah. There you'll see bush-life in earnest.'

'Suit me down to the ground. Should like a change to backwoods life. What do you say, Wilton?'

'First-rate idea; but hadn't we better go quietly up there before the Show, and wait there till our good host here joins us? Better, I think, in many ways, eh?'

Mr. Grandstone was evidently undecided, a strange look of hesitancy stole over his face. But Mr. Blocksleigh broke in.

'What, go before the Show— and the Ball too! Why, no girl in Barradoo would ever speak to us again. Besides I'm President of the P. & A. Society. I daren't be absent. Say it's a settled thing, and we'll drive four-in-hand to the Willandra Cowall afterwards.'

'Afraid we're putting you to an awful lot of inconvenience,' said the Captain formally; 'but really, we have business in Sydney which may prevent us from staying to the Show after all.'

'No use, old man,' said the host, with imperious good-nature; 'you're bound to go through with it, once you've begun. Grandstone, I'm sure Miss B. expects to see you at the Ball. Most likely His Excellency met some of your people at home, too. Must stay. No get-away.'

Mr. Grandstone looked at one and the other with doubtful gaze, before he spoke with his usual deliberation.

'A fellow must have his way sometimes, Wilton,' he said. 'Partly promised to be at the Show, don't you know. Awfully well worth seeing, they tell me. We can look up the desert afterwards. What do you say?'

'Just what I did at first. But as you are determined to take your own way, I suppose you must. You know my reasons.'

'Don't think they hold good, in this case. Blocksleigh, old boy, I'm your man till the Carnival's over.'

That afternoon all Barradoo was in possession of the fact that the visitors had returned to their quarters at the Woolpack, and were pledged to remain over the Show. Nothing more was wanted to complete the felicity of the inhabitants, already exhilarated by the crowning triumph of the Governor's promised visit.

During the week that elapsed between the settlement of this truly momentous question, and the wildly exciting opening day of the Show, things apparently settled down into something like their normal condition of cheerful monotony. Whispers, of course, circulated in the social atmosphere— some of a thrilling and melodramatic nature, others of the light and sportive kind, which in the air of the interior settlements would seem to be spontaneously generated. Then the ball; a fancy ball, too— certain to be the best since the one Mr. Blocksleigh gave in the Town Hall the year he won the wool trophy at the Exhibition, in honour of that worldwide triumph. That he did the thing well, when he set about it, nobody could deny. It was some time since he had done

anything for the good of the town, though. Perhaps in the expansion of his feelings, as the Governor was coming, he might. Whether or no, a man-of-war was in, and some of the officers were coming up with the Governor's party.

Then beneath the smooth surface of the social tide there were eddies and currents of distinct sway and tendency. Captain Wilton had continued to be so 'marked in his attentions' to Mary Woodrose that all the best-informed tea-tables were unanimous in their vote that the Major ought to 'speak to him,' in case he exhibited indecision at the hour of departure.

About Kate Bellenden and Mr. Grandstone no satisfactory conclusion was arrived at. He seemed calmly appreciative, as usual. But was no longer 'in her pocket' perpetually, as one fair critic graphically described it. Certainly he did not pay any one else any attention. That was something. Perhaps Kate herself had cooled off. She was a wide-awake girl when you knew her (this from a school friend). And more than that, Charlie Towers had come on again. Anyhow, he was seen driving her out to the racecourse last Saturday, to see Miss Gaythorn take Lorraine over the steeplechase jumps. Though this was held to be suspicious by the conclave, it separated without any definite deduction being formulated, if we may except the exclamation of a severe matron: 'How men can be such fools as to let that girl play fast and loose with them, I can't imagine.'

Finally the great day arrived; the great man also— His Excellency Lord Warrington, with certain military and naval magnates in his train, the very thought of whose uniforms caused the hearts of the country maidens to palpitate strangely; other nobles and notables also. The town was more than crowded. In the hotels rooms had not been procurable for weeks previously. Mr. Blocksleigh's four-in-hand and turn-out excited nearly as much attention as the Governor himself, from the fact of his being enabled to exhibit the English strangers thereon, though good judges declared Ralph Wardour's team superior in style and breeding. As for spectators— Shame on the false Etruscan Who lingers in his home, etc.

Which means that every squatter, free selector, farm labourer, and station hand, within a hundred miles of the township, was present at that most memorable of all the Barradoo Shows.

It was a paradisal day, all blue and golden. Dustless, for a smart shower had fallen within forty-eight hours, yet bright-hued, tender, glowing, breezy as an Arcadian summer morn. Every one— horses included— was in the highest possible spirits. The drags, phaetons, buggies, dogcarts, and waggonettes rattled and rumbled out from the town in one long procession. All the society personages, arrayed in the freshest of spring fashions, if they did not eclipse

Solomon in all his glory, nevertheless made a requisite and desirable impression upon those whom it was intended to subjugate.

The Governor was, as usual, most affable and intelligently appreciative. The Mayor, the Police Magistrate, and all the principal inhabitants were duly presented, lastly the two illustrious strangers, through the medium of the Aide-de-camp, who was personally acquainted with Mr. Blocksleigh. The Viceroy was politely pleased to make their acquaintance, even vouchsafing the remark that he was sure he had seen Captain Wilton before in the old country, but could not at that moment recollect where.

Then the Aide-de-camp directed His Excellency's attention to the Amazonian troop as they filed into the fenced arena below the grand stand, and took their places, preparatory to facing the jumps. That high official had seen numbers of fine horses, good sheep, and well-bred cattle in the show-yards of Britain before landing on Australian shores. He frankly admitted, however, that never before had he beheld a cavalry troop of pretty girls so exceptionally well mounted, who rode so fearlessly over timber so stiff. When Miss Gaythorn, a South Coast native, disdaining the regulation fence, ran her horse at the wing, a foot higher, and after a flying leap came down, sitting as composedly as if she had just pulled up from a canter, His Excellency was strongly moved to admiration. When Miss Queenbie, reared on a cattle station amid the mountain ranges of the Upper Hume, forced the unwilling gray, after an unsuccessful attempt to baulk, to take the fence at the rate of forty miles an hour, throwing up her whip hand as he landed from a tremendous fly over the middle post, His Excellency made as if, but for State reasons, he would have liked to shy his vice-regal hat in the air. But a yet more exciting surprise was in store for the genial Pro-consul, for the great congregation generally.

Captain Wilton and Lord Lacrosse, one of His Excellency's suite, were evidently having a confidential conversation, much to the wonder and admiration of all Barradoo, in which they evidently, for the moment, forgot their surroundings. Suddenly the Captain said, 'Bless my soul! where's Grandstone? I've not seen him lately. Have you?'

'I suppose he won't get lost,' answered the other. 'You seem anxious about him. When I saw him last, he was walking towards the booths at the back of the ground.'

'I'll look him up, if you'll allow me,' said Wilton. 'We're so used to hunt in couples that he feels quite lost out here— you've just hit the expression— if I'm not near him.'

'Good Gad!' exclaimed his lordship, 'who, in Heaven's name, can that be? Is it part of the Show?

For at that moment a tall man, bareheaded, and in his shirt sleeves, walked through a side gate, and planted himself immediately in front of the Governor's private compartment. In his hand he held a high-crowned hat, not unlike a fool's cap, with bells attached, which he shook violently from time to time. He waved his hand scornfully towards the Amazons, who, having just finished their contest, were retiring towards the starting-point, pending the final allotment of prizes by the judges.

'Then he placed the hat solemnly upon his head, and thus addressed the Governor in a loud voice—

'Unworthy delegate of the Royal power, you sit there like a Roman Emperor of the decadence, amusing yourself amid a degraded populace with paltry contests, while the British Empire is endangered. Know you not that within this very hour Russia has declared war with England, while France and Germany are at death grips? A hostile fleet, ordered here, may be expected at any moment. Would you ask who I am? Learn, minion, that you see Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, despatched here by telegraph to warn this people of their danger and deprive you of your rank and office. Consider yourself under arrest!'

All this was uttered so rapidly that there was scant time for interruption. The people generally were under the impression that it was some kind of impromptu performance of the minstrel bands or other mummers always permitted at Show time. They had not recognised the speaker, and it was only when he concluded his tirade with a loud whoop, and, casting his cap and bells into the arena, prepared to ascend the steps of the grand stand that misgivings assailed them.

Captain Wilton was the first to speak. 'Great God!' he said, 'it's Grandstone. He must have been drinking brandy at the booths. It always makes him fancy himself the Prince of Wales. He did the same thing at Ascot last year. Whisky turns him into the Emperor of Germany.' And with this brief explanation he rushed frantically down the steps, and, grasping the illusionist by the arm, led him unresistingly to the rear.

The murder was out. Mr. Grandstone was evidently 'off his head.' Whether the derangement was chronic or merely dipsomaniacal none could say. The excitement was unparalleled. Some of the ladies screamed; one fainted. His Excellency's expression was one of surprise, tinctured with sympathy. Mr. Blocksleigh, the A.D.C., and a few of the young men, among whom were Charlie Towers and Jack Ainslie, hastily followed the Captain, and arrived just in time to see Mr. Grandstone hustled into a cab, which dashed off in the direction of the town. Fortunately the hunter trials came next, as to which there was a trifle of betting. This, combined with the interest produced by the

stiff jumps at which they were ridden, absorbed the chief attention of the crowd.

At the Ball that evening everybody was aware that Captain Wilton had called for his account directly after arriving at the Woolpack, recommending his friend to lie down and rest the while. After a prompt settlement, and most liberal douceurs to all the servants, they had left by the late train for Sydney. Beyond regretting to Bowstead that his friend should have been taken suddenly ill on the show-ground, owing to the heat of the weather, the Captain had not volunteered further information. Within a week their names were seen in the list of outward-bound passengers by the Messageries mail steamer *Marengo*, on board of which luxurious paquebot the passengers were alternately fascinated by the social qualities of 'le Capitaine Villeton,' and distressed at the mysterious attacks which compelled 'Sir Grandstonne' to keep his cabin for days at a time.

In lonely and deserted Barradoo, meanwhile, the germs of sound, satisfactory, complicated, and mysterious gossip have been safely implanted. With careful nursing the crop might be trusted to last nearly to the next Show.

'Wasn't it like Kate Bellenden to draw off at the last moment from the poor fellow?— after all the encouragement she gave him too! Positively shameful, I call it. No wonder he went off his head. And now that fool of a Charlie Towers is as mad about her as ever. Serve her well right if he had dropped her for good and all.'

This was the charitable and forbearing line taken by one section of the community, not wholly unprejudiced, it may be surmised, as comprehending the mammas with marriageable daughters and unappreciated sons.

'Serve all you girls right for running after a couple of strangers fit to break your necks, without knowing anything about them in the wide world. Might have both been married men for all you knew to the contrary.' This was the moral enforced by the chief banker, a middle-aged but susceptible bachelor, whose ascendency, previously unquestioned in matters of sentiment and fashion, had declined visibly since the advent of these meteoric strangers.

'But they were so nice,' pleaded a mischievous little debutante, with a plaintive trainante voice, who enjoyed teasing the financial Adonis. 'One had such lovely eyes, and both seemed so different from all the Barradoo people. Mary Woodrose said the first evening she saw them that there was nothing like a thorough-bred Englishman.'

'Thoroughbred fiddlesticks!' growled the provincial autocrat. 'We're all that, I hope, though we've had the luck to be born in a decent climate. Even you— unpatriotic little humbug as you are— I'd back for looks against any girl I

ever saw at home. Nice thing Mary Woodrose has made of it! Likes wearing the willow, I suppose?'

'She got a long letter from the Captain last mail, though, with such a nice likeness of himself,' retorted the defender of the absent. 'He's coming out to marry her in a year, or she's going home, I don't know which. But she's satisfied.'

'If she doesn't mind living in a lunatic asylum it won't matter, perhaps,' muttered the indigène gloomily. 'Can't say I admire her taste.'

'Do you want to make me scream, Mr. Plumpton? Is he mad too? Is everybody that's nice out of their mind?'

'Hope not,' replied he, with practised readiness, 'or you would have to be locked up straight. But the A.D.C. told Blocksleigh and me before His Excellency that he was the well-known Captain Blank, a great authority on monomania, and owner of one of the best private lunatic asylums in England. Partly out of friendship, partly for an endowment to his pet hospital, he had undertaken to travel in charge of "Mr. Grandstone," who is in reality Sir Tudor Walladmor of Walladmor— terribly old family and immensely rich. Most exemplary fellow, but can't drink a glass of grog without fancying himself somebody else, royal personage mostly. Runs in the family. Dreadful affliction, isn't it?'

'Is that all?' demanded Miss Darrell, with scorn and indignation in every line of her expressive countenance. 'What a ridiculous fuss to make about a little eccentricity. You men are so jealous. Talk of girls, indeed! It's a lucky thing he didn't ask me. I'd have accepted him quick, and we might have been on our way to England, and left Barradoo to tattle about it till the day of judgment.'

'My dear Dollie,' quoth Mr. Plumpton paternally, 'you had better speak to your mamma, or wait till you are quite grown up before you decide on matters of importance. If you want to cure or reform people, suppose you commence a little nearer home. I should have no objection to test your— '

But here the deeply displeased damsel, first casting upon the speaker a look of scorn, which became her style of feature immensely, darted out of the room.

The substance of the foregoing conversation proved to be only too true. His Excellency and Lord Lacrosse had, after a while, recognised 'Wilton' as Captain Blank, a well-known reforming specialist in certain phases of lunacy. A man of iron nerve and active philanthropy, he had devoted an unexpected legacy to the practical exposition of his theory with regard to presumably curable cases. At the solicitation of General Grandstone, an early friend, to whom he was under obligations, he had undertaken to be Sir Tudor's guardian. How the trial of complete change of scene and surroundings terminated has been related.

For the rest, matters arranged themselves more or less satisfactorily, with the help of that experienced Master of the Ceremonies, old Father Time. Miss Mary Woodrose saw fit to accompany a married cousin to England in less than a year after all these wonders and surprises. In due course also appeared in both the Times and the Argus the following notice under the head of 'Marriages':—

'At St. George's, Hanover Square,——, Esq., late Captain of 14th Royals, to Mary, only daughter of Major Woodrose, late of Her Majesty's 50th Regiment, and now resident at Barradoo, New South Wales, Australia.'

The names of certain titled personages appeared in the list of guests at the wedding, including— strange as it may appear— that of Sir Tudor Walladmor, the mention of whose marriage gift, a complete set of diamond ornaments, nearly brought tears into the eyes of some eager readers in far Barradoo.

Mrs. Plumpton (née Darrell) declares she doesn't believe he was mad at all, and only did it to get clear of Miss Bellenden, that all men are mad more or less, excepting that some are handsomer lunatics than others. As Charlie Towers and the Kate aforesaid had been married, and gone to live at Sandy Creek before the Captain's final surrender, it is possible that they understood the undercurrents, and as their mutual contentment is manifestly extreme and all-sufficing, perhaps it is no one's business to speculate upon what might have happened if— if— the sun hadn't been so hot on that memorable Show day. That day will never be forgotten in Barradoo, amid whose chronicles it is destined to flourish till its peppermint gums turn into poplars, and the avenue of *eucalyptus globulus* into cocoa-palms and bananas.

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6: The Prisoner of Assiout

Grant Allen

Charles Grant Blairfindie Allen, 1848-1899

The Strand Magazine, Aug 1891

IT WAS a sultry December day at Medinet Habu. Gray haze spread dim over the rocks in the desert. The arid red mountains twinkled and winked through the heated air. I was weary with climbing the great dry ridge from the Tombs of the Kings. I sat on the broken arm of a shattered granite Rameses. My legs dangled over the side of that colossal fragment. In front of me vast colonnades stood out clear and distinct against the hot, white sky. Beyond lay bare hills; in the distance, to the left, the muddy Nile, amid green fields, gleamed like a thin silver thread in the sunlight.

A native, in a single dirty garment, sat sunning himself on a headless sphinx hard by. He was carving a watermelon with his knife— thick, red, ripe, juicy. I eyed it hard. With a gesture of Oriental politeness, he offered me a slice. It was too tempting to refuse, that baking hot day, in that rainless land, though I knew acceptance meant ten times its worth in the end in bakshish.

"*Arabi*?" I asked inquiringly of my Egyptian friend, which is, being interpreted, "Are you a Mussulman?"

He shook his head firmly, and pointed with many nods to the tiny blue cross tattooed on his left wrist. "Nusráni," he answered, with a look of some pride. I smiled my acquiescence. He was a Nazarene, a Christian.

In a few minutes' time we had fallen into close talk of Egypt, past and present; the bad old days; the British occupation; the effect of strong government on the condition of fellahin. To the Christian population of the Nile valley, of course, the advent of the English has been a social revolution. For ages downtrodden, oppressed, despised, these Coptic schismatics at last find themselves suddenly, in the ends of the earth, co-religionists with the new ruling class in the country, and able to boast themselves in many ways over their old Moslem masters.

I speak but little colloquial Arabic myself, though I understand it with ease when it is spoken, so the conversation between us was necessarily somewhat one-sided. But my Egyptian friend soon grew voluble enough for two, and the sight of the piastres laid in his dusky palm loosed the strings of his tongue to such an alarming extent that I began to wonder before long whether I should ever get back again to the Luxor Hotel in time for dinner.

"Ah, yes, excellency," my Copt said slowly, when I asked him at last about the administration of justice under Ismail's rule, "things were different then, before the English came, as Allah willed it. It was stick, stick, stick every month of the year. No prayers availed; we were beaten for everything. If a *fellah*

didn't pay his taxes when crops were bad, he was lashed till he found them; if he was a Christian, and offended the least Moslem official, he was stripped to the skin, and ruthlessly bastinadoed. And then, for any insubordination, it was death outright— hanging or beheading, slash, so, with a simitar." And my companion brought his hand round in a whirl with swishing force, as if he were decapitating some unseen criminal on the bare sand before him.

"The innocent must often have been punished with the guilty," I remarked, in my best Arabic, looking vaguely across at him.

"Ah, yes," he assented, smiling. "So Allah ordained. But sometimes, even then, the saints were kind; we got off unexpectedly. I could tell you a strange story that once happened to myself." His eyes twinkled hard. "It was a curious adventure," he went on; "the *effendi* might like, perhaps, to hear it. I was condemned to death, and all but executed. It shows the wonderful ways of Allah."

These Coptic Christians, indeed, speaking Arabic as they do, and living so constantly among a Mussulman population, have imbibed many Mahomedan traits of thought, besides the mere accident of language, such as speaking of the Christian God as Allah. Fatalism has taken as strong a hold of their minds as of Islam itself. "Say on," I answered lightly, drawing a cigarette from my case. "A story is always of interest to me, my friend. It brings grist to the mill. I am a man of the pen. I write down in books all the strange things that are told me."

My Egyptian smiled again. "Then this tale of mine," he said, showing all his white teeth, and brushing away the flies from his sore eye as he spoke, "should be worth you money, for it's as strange as any of the Thousand and One Nights men tell for hire at Cairo. It happened to me near Assiout, in Ismail's days. I was a bold young man then— too bold for Egypt. My father had a piece of ground by the river side that was afterward taken from us by Ismail for the Daira.

"In our village lived a Sheikh, a very hard man; a Mussulman, an Arab, a descendant of the Prophet. He was the greatest Sheik for miles and miles around. He had a large white house, with green blinds to the windows, while all the rest of us in his government lived in mud-built huts, round and low like beehives. He had date palms, very many, and doums, and doura patches. Camels were his, and buffaloes, and asses, and cows; 'twas a very rich man; oh, so rich and powerful. When he went forth to town he rode on a great white mule. And he had a harem, too; three wives of his own, who were beautiful as the day— so girls who had seen them said, for as for us, we saw them not— plump women every one of them, as the Khedive's at Cairo, with eyes like a gazelle's, marked round with kohl, and their nails stained red every day with henna. All the world said the Sheikh was a happy man, for he had the finest

dates of the country to eat, and servants and camels in plenty to do his bidding.

"Now, there was a girl in our village, a Nusráni like me, a beautiful young girl; and her name was Laila. Her eyes were like those of that child there— Zanobi— who carries the effendi's water-gourd on her head, and her cheeks were round and soft as a grape after the inundation. I meant to wed her; and she liked me well. In the evening we sat and talked together under the whispering palm-trees. But when the time drew near for me to marry her, and I had arranged with her parents, there came a message from the Sheikh. He had seen the girl by the river as she went down to draw water with her face unveiled, and though she was a Nusráni, she fired his soul, and he wished to take her away from me to put her into his harem.

"When I heard that word I tore my clothes in my rage, and, all Christian that I was, and of no account with the Moslems, I went up to the Sheikh's house in a very white anger, and I fell on my face and asked leave to see him.

"The Sheikh sat in his courtyard, inside his house, and gave audience to all men, after the fashion of Islam. I entered and spoke to him. 'Oh, Sheikh,' I said boldly, 'Allah and the Khedive have prospered you with exceeding great prosperity. You have oxen and asses, buffaloes and camels, men-servants and maid-servants, much millet and cotton and corn and sugar-cane; you drink Frank wine every day of your life, and eat the fat of the land; and your harem is full of beautiful women. Now in the village where I live is a Nusráni girl, whose name is Laila. Her eyes are bright toward mine, and I love her as the thirsty land loves water. Yet, hear, O Sheikh; word is brought me now that you wish to take this girl, who is mine; and I come to plead with you to-day as Nathan the Prophet pleaded with David, the King of the Beni Israel. If you take away from me my Laila, my one ewe lamb—'

"But, at the word, the Sheikh rose up, and clenched his fist, and was very angry. 'Who is this dog,' he asked, 'that he should dare to dictate to me?' He called to his slaves that waited on his nod. 'Take this fellow,' he cried in his anger, 'and tie him hand and foot, and flog him as I bid on his naked back, that he may know, being a Christian, an infidel dog, not to meddle with the domestic affairs of Moslems. It were well he were made acquainted with his own vileness by the instrumentality of a hundred lashes. And go to-morrow and bring Laila to me, and take care that this Copt shall never again set eyes on her!'

"Well, *effendi*, at the words, three strong Arabs seized me— fierce sons of the desert— and bound me hand and foot, and beat me with a hundred lashes of the kurbash till my soul was sick and faint within me. I swooned with the

disgrace and with the severity of the blows. And I was young in those days. And I was very angry.

"That night I went home to my own mud hut, with black blood in my heart, and took counsel with my brother Sirgeh how I should avenge this insult. But first I sent word by my brother to Laila's hut that Laila's father should bring her to meet us in the dusk, in very great secrecy, by the bank of the river. In the gray twilight she came down. A *dahabiah* was passing, and in it was a foreigner, a very great prince, an American prince of great wealth and wisdom. I remember his name even. Perhaps the effendi knows him. He was Cyrus P. Quackenboss, and he came from Cincinnati."

"I have not the honor," I answered, smiling at this very unexpected Western intrusion.

"Well, anyhow," my Copt continued, unheeding my smile, "we hailed the dahabiah, and made the American prince understand how the matter stood. He was very kind. We were brother Christians. He took Laila on board, and promised to deliver her safe to her aunt at Karnak, so that the Sheikh might not know where the girl was gone, nor send to fetch her. And the counsel I took next with my brother was this: In the dead of night I rose up from my hut, and put a mask of white linen over the whole of my face to conceal my features, and stole out alone, with a thick stick in my hands, and went to the Sheikh's house, down by the bank of the river. As I went, the jackals prowled around the village for food, and the owls from the tombs flitted high in the moonlight.

"I broke into the Sheikh's room by the flat-roofed outhouse that led to his window, and I locked the door; and there, before the Sheikh could rouse his household, I beat him, blow for blow, within an inch of his life, in revenge for my own beating, and because of his injustice in trying to take my Laila from me. The Sheikh was a powerful man, with muscles like iron, and he grappled me hard, and tried to wrench the stick from me, and bruised me about the body by flinging me on the ground; and I was weak with my beating, and very sore all over. But still, being by nature a strong young man, very fierce with anger, I fought him hard, and got him under in the end, and thwacked him till he was as black and blue as I myself was, one mass of bruises from head to foot with my cudgeling. Then, just as his people succeeded in forcing the door, I jumped out of the window upon the flat-roofed outhouse, and leaped lightly to the ground, and darted like a jackal across the open cotton-fields and between the plots of doura to my own little hut on the outskirts of the village. I reached there panting, and I knew the Sheikh would kill me for my daring.

"Next morning, early, the Sheikh sent to arrest me. He was blind with rage and with the effect of the blows: his face was livid, and his cheeks purple. 'By

the beard of the Prophet, Athanasio,' he said to me, hitting me hard on the cheek— my name is Athanasio, *effendi*, after our great patriarch— 'your blood shall flow for this, you dog of a Christian. You dare to assault the wearer of a green turban, a prince in Islam, a descendant of the Prophet! You shall suffer for it, you cur! Your base blood shall flow for it!'

"I cast myself down, like a slave, on the ground before him— though I hated him like sin: for it is well to abase one's self in due time before the face of authority. Besides, by that time, Laila was safe, and that was all I cared about. 'Suffer for what, O my Sheikh?' I cried, as though I knew not what he meant. 'What have I done to your Excellency? Who has told you evil words concerning your poor servant? Who has slandered me to my lord, that he is so angry against me?'

" 'Take him away!' roared the Sheikh to the three strong Arabs. 'Carry him off to be tried before the Cadi at Assiout.'

"For even in Ismail's days, you see, effendi, before the English came, the Sheikh himself would not have dared to put me to death untried. The power of life and death lay with the Cadi at Assiout.

"So they took me to Assiout, into the mosque of Ali, where the Cadi sat at the seat of judgment and arraigned me before him a week later. There the Sheikh appeared, end bore witness against me. Those who spoke for me pleaded that, as the Sheikh himself admitted, the man who broke into his room, and banged himself so hard, had his face covered with a linen cloth; how, then, could the Sheikh, in the hurry and the darkness, be sure he recognized me? Perhaps it was some other who took this means to ruin me. But the Sheikh, for his part swore by Allah, and by the Holy Stone of the Kaaba at Mecca, that he saw me distinctly, and knew it was I. The moonlight through the window revealed my form to him. And who else in the village but me had a grudge against his justice?

"The Cadi was convinced. The Cadi gave judgment. I was guilty of rebellion against the Sheikh and against *ul-Islam*; and, being a dog of a Christian, unworthy even to live, his judgment was that after three days' time I should be beheaded in the prison court of Assiout.

"You may guess, *effendi*, whether or not I was anxious. But Laila was safe; and to save my girl from that wretch's harem I was ready, for my part, to endure anything.

"Two nights long I lay awake and thought strange things by myself in the whitewashed cells of the jail at Assiout. The governor of the prison, who was a European— an Italian, he called himself— and a Christian of Roum, of those who obey the Pope, was very kind indeed to me. He knew me before (for I had worked in his fields), and was sorry when I told him the tale about Laila. But

what would you have? Those were Ismail's days. It was the law of Islam. He could not prevent it.

"On the third evening, my brother came round to the prison to see me. He came with many tears in his eyes, bringing evil tidings. My poor old father, he said, was dying at home with grief. They didn't expect he would live till morning. And Laila, too, had stolen back from Karnak unperceived, and was hiding in the village. She wished to see me just once before I died. But if she came to the prison, the Sheikh would find her out, and carry her off in triumph to his own harem.

"Would the governor give me leave to go home just that one night, to bid farewell to Laila and to my dying father?

"Now, the governor, excellency, was a very humane man. And though he was a Christian of Roum, not a Copt like us, he was kind to the Copts as his brother Christians. He pondered awhile to himself, and roped his mustache thus; then he said to me:

" 'Athanasio, you are an honest man; the execution is fixed for eight by the clock to-morrow morning. If I give you leave to go home to your father to-night, will you pledge me your word of honor before St. George and the Saints, to return before seven?'

" '*Effendi*,' I said, kissing his feet, 'you are indeed a good man. I swear by the mother of God and all the Saints that dwell in heaven, that if you let me go I will come back again a full hour before the time fixed for the execution.' And I meant it, too, for I only wished before I died to say good-by once more to Laila.

"Well, the governor took me secretly into his own house, and telling me many times over that he trusted to my honor, and would lose his place if it were known he had let me go, he put me forth, with my brother, by his own private door, making me swear on no account to be late for the execution.

"As soon as I got outside, I said to my brother: 'Tell me, Sirgeh, at whose house is Laila?'

"And my brother answered and smiled, 'Laila is still at Karnak, where we sent her for safety, and our father is well. But I have a plan for your escape that I think will serve you.'

" 'Never!' I cried, horror-struck, 'if I am to break my word of honor to the governor of the prison.'

" 'That isn't it,' he made reply. 'I have a plan of my own which I will proceed in words to make clear before you.'

"What happened next would be long to relate, *effendi*." But I noticed that the *fellah*'s eyes twinkled as he spoke, like one who passes over of set purpose an important episode. "All I need tell you now is, that the whole night through the good governor lay awake, wondering whether or not I would come home

to time, and blaming himself in his heart for having given such leave to a mere condemned criminal. Still, *effendi*, though I am but poor, I am a man of honor. As the clock struck six in the prison court next morning, I knocked at the governor's window with the appointed signal; and the governor rose, and let me into my cell, and praised me for my honor, and was well pleased to see me. 'I knew, Athanasio,' he said, roping his mustache once more, 'you were a man to be trusted.'

"At eight o'clock they took me out into the courtyard. The executioner was there already, a great black Nubian, with a very sharp simitar. It was terrible to look around; I was greatly frightened. 'Surely,' said I to myself, 'the bitterness of death is past. But Laila is saved; and I die for Laila.'

"I knelt down and bent my head. I feared, after all, no respite was coming. The executioner stood forth and raised the simitar in his hand. I almost thought I heard it swish through the air; I saw the bright gleam of the blade as it descended. But just at that moment, as the executioner delayed, a loud commotion arose in the outer court. I raised my head and listened. We heard a voice cry, 'In Allah's name, let me in. There must be no execution!' The gates opened wide, and into the inner courtyard there strode with long strides a great white mule, and on its back, scarcely able to sit up, a sorry figure!

"He was wrapped round in bandages, and swathed from head to foot like a man sore wounded. His face was bruised, and his limbs swollen. But he upheld one hand in solemn warning, and in a loud voice again he cried to the executioner, 'In Allah's name, Hassan, let there be no execution!'

"The lookers-on, to right and left, raised a mighty cry, and called out with one voice, 'The Sheikh! The Sheikh! Who can have thus disfigured him?'

"But the Sheikh himself came forward in great pain, like one whose bones ache, and, dismounting from the mule, spoke aloud to the governor. 'In Allah's name,' he said, trembling, 'let this man go; he is innocent. I swore to him falsely, though I believed it to be true. For see, last night, about twelve o'clock, the self-same dog who broke into my house before, entered my room, with violence, through the open window. He carried in his hands the self-same stick as last time, and had his face covered, as ever, with a linen cloth. And I knew by his figure and his voice he was the very same dog that had previously beaten me. But before I could cry aloud to rouse the house, the infidel had fallen upon me once more and thwacked me, as you see, within an inch of my life, and covered me with bruises, and then bid me take care how I accused innocent people like Athanasio of hurting me. And after that he jumped through the open window and went away once more. And I was greatly afraid, fearing the wrath of Allah, if I let this man Athanasio be killed in his stead, though he is but an infidel. And I rose and saddled my mule very early, and rode straight into

Assiout, to tell you and the Cadi I had borne false witness, and to save myself from the guilt of an innocent soul on my shoulders.'

"Then all the people around cried out with one voice, 'A miracle! a miracle!' And the Sheikh stood trembling beside, with faintness and with terror.

"But the governor drew me a few paces apart.

" 'Athanasio, you rascal,' he said, half laughing, 'it is you that have done this thing! It is you that have assaulted him! You got out last night on your word of honor on purpose to play this scurvy trick upon us!'

" 'Effendi,' I made answer, bowing low, 'life is sweet; he beat me, unjustly, first, and he would have taken my Laila from me. Moreover, I swear to you, by St. George and the mother of God, when I left the prison last night I really believed my father was dying.'

"The governor laughed again. 'Well, you can go, you rogue,' he said. 'The Cadi will soon come round to deliver you. But I advise you to make yourself scarce as fast as you can, for sooner or later this trick of yours may be discovered. I can't tell upon you, or I would lose my place. But you may be found out, for all that. Go, at once, up the river.'

"That is my hut that you see over yonder, *effendi*, where Laila and I live. The Sheikh is dead. And the English are now our real lords in Egypt."

7: On the Plains

Ernest Favenc

1845-1908

The Mataura Ensign, New Zealand, 14 April 1898

THE summer sun of tropical Queensland had done its best, or rather its worst. On the great, boundless, western plain stood a horse in all the agonies of a coming death from thirst. The staring, projecting eyes, pinched flanks, and quick, panting breath told that it would not be long before death came to release it of its pain. It still kept its legs, and owing to that fact the occupants of a buckboard buggy on the road about a mile or so distant caught sight of the dying animal, magnified by the deceptive heat mirage to about the dimensions of an elephant.

An elderly but tall and tough-looking man and a young girl were in the buggy; the girl was driving a pair of smart-looking nuggety little horses. She pulled up when they caught sight of the horse, and the man stood up.

"A knocked-up horse left out there," he said; "either knocked up or lame, or it wouldn't stop out there on the plain in the sun at this time of day."

"Let's drive over, dad," said the girl; "perhaps we can get the poor brute on to the water."

Her father nodded assent, and she turned the horses off the road, and they were soon with the unfortunate animal. The girl, with a cry of pity, impetuously jumped out of the buggy, and was hastening to the back of the vehicle, where a substantial-sized water-bag was swinging, when the end came. The horse staggered to his knees, rolled over on one side, and after a struggle, and beating its head once or twice on the ground, lay still—dead.

"Too late, Bertie," said the man, "all the water in North Queensland would be no good now; but we have other work before us."

A saddle and a saddle-cloth were lying on the ground, and on the front of the saddle was strapped a valise.

"Somebody's got bushed," he continued; "We must go after him."

"Not more than a mile from the road, and within five miles of water," remarked the girl.

"A new chum evidently," he replied, pointing to the cruel marks of the spurs on the dead horse's ribs. "No bushman would have punished a dying horse like that."

"But so close to the road!" repeated the girl.

"You don't know what these plains are like to a greenhorn, particularly now, in the middle of the day, with the sun straight overhead," answered her father. "But we must track him up; he can't have gone far. Put the saddle in the back of the buggy, and then drive slowly after me."

And Graham— or Long Graham as he was more popularly called— strode off on the foot-tracks leading from the dead horse. His daughter Bertha put the saddle, bridle, and valise in the buggy and drove slowly after him. After a while Graham stopped, and when the buggy reached him got into it.

"I can follow them easily now," he said, taking the reins. "He's not far off by the look of the tracks."

He was not far off. In about ten minutes Bertha, who had been standing up holding on by the back of the seat, called out that there was something like a man lying on the ground ahead. Graham roused the horses up, and they were soon at the prostrate form. The man was not dead, but he was terribly flushed in the face, and he groaned heavily at times. In his hand he still grasped an empty water-bag.

The exertions of the two and the application of water to his head and chest roused him somewhat, and he was able to drink a little, but he was not restored to consciousness.

"We must get him on the buggy somehow, Bertie," said Graham, "but he's not a light weight to lift."

Between them they managed to dispose of the helpless body across the front of the buggy.

"You'll have to perch up behind Bertie," said her father. "I'll drive and hold him in. We'll have to camp at the Lily Lagoon tonight instead of going home. Fortunately we have got the tent and some rations with us."

The strange-looking caravan proceeded slowly over the plain for about an hour, when a clump of timber became visible above the horizon, and presently the buggy pulled up at a broad lagoon fringed with the beautiful pink lilies that stand up high out of the water. Round the banks grew some crooked coolibah trees and some shady bauhinias. The road ran past the place, and it was evidently a standing camping-place.

Getting their patient out of the buggy, they made him comfortable under the shade of one of the bauhinia trees, and then Graham and his daughter turned the buggy horses out, and fixed their camp.

IT was after dark before the stranger showed signs of returning consciousness, and after a while he was able to drink soma tea and eat some bread soaked in it. Somewhat revived, he was presently able to sit up and talk.

He was a man of about seven or eight and twenty, well made, and good-looking, but evidently new both to Australia and the bush, as shown by his clothes. He informed them that he was a doctor, and was proceeding to the district township of a Brookford, where he intended to start a practice. His

"traps" had gone on by a carrier, and he himself had ridden round by the different stations.

"How did you come to get bushed?" asked Graham,

"I left Valdock yesterday morning; they told me that if I kept due south I should strike the road leading past Haughton Downs, a station belonging to Long Graham—"

"I am Long Graham," said the owner of the name quietly.

"I beg your pardon."

"Not at all; I don't object to the name as I am over six foot two."

"I kept on until I thought I must have passed the road with out noticing, so I turned back, and then back again; and at last got completely confused. I was riding best part of the night, and at about 12 o'clock my confounded horse knocked up."

"I should think he did, when you had been riding him continuously night and day without water. But you should not abuse the poor brute, for if he had died ten minutes sooner we should not have seen him from the road, and you would by now have learned the great secret. You rode your horse to death, man, and the sooner you drop wearing spurs as those you've got on, the better."

The man glanced uneasily at the long-necked "rakers" that decorated his heels, and then said somewhat shame-facedly: "Was I so close to the road, then?"

"About a mile from it," said Bertha.

The young doctor looked at her rather earnestly, then said that he was tired and would try to go to sleep.

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"DAD," said Bertha the next evening when her father and she were alone, "it's my opinion Dr. Vernon is a humbug."

"Rather a hasty opinion to form. I think he's a bit of a muff myself, but that will wear off as he gets experience."

"Oh, it's not his innocence of the bush that l am alluding to, but his character apart from that. You see if I'm not right. He is not what we up here call a 'white man.' "

"Well, have it your own way. As soon as he is well enough to go on to Brookford we shall not see much more of him."

"Unless in your character as J.P. you have to commit him to take his trial before our friend Judge Fortescue."

"Come, come, Bertie; you're going too far. You're forgetting yourself."

Bertha shook a preternaturally wise head, but held her tongue, and Graham changed the subject.

THE western climate had dealt kindly with Bertha Graham. It had not shrivelled her up into a sallow, parchment-faced mummy, but had given her cheeks a healthy touch of brown that was rather an improvement to her piquant style of beauty. Her figure was perfection, and, like a sensible girl, she had taken good care of her hands.

Vernon noticed this, and, being a rather susceptible sort of man where female charms were concerned, and moreover with a past reputation as a lady-killer had considered the feasibility of getting up some sentimental passages. The fact that it was evident that the girl regarded him with a sort of pitying contempt as a poor creature who could not be trusted off a main road did not at all deter him. In fact he reckoned on his rescue from death as a groundwork of interest to start upon.

Graham had hospitably asked him to spend a week on the station; then he would himself drive him over to Brookford and help him to make the acquaintance of the local magnates. So for a week Vernon ogled and sighed without any response. If at times Bertha felt inclined to amuse herself with his openly-expressed admiration, the natural antipathy she felt for the man stopped her at once.

BROOKFORD was not celebrated for a large population; but, being the centre of a thriving pastoral district, it was a busy place. The general verdict on Dr. Vernon after a few weeks, was that he did not drink hard enough to be a clever man. A doctor who did not require shepherding to keep sober when he had a case on hand was nowhere in the estimation of the Brookfordians. Still it seemed probable that Vernon would make up a good enough practice to compensate him for what he considered his exile in the backblocks. Haughton Downs was only fifteen miles from Brookford, so Vernon often found opportunities to ride over and strive to win a smile from the unresponsive lips of Bertha Graham.

"Look here, old man," said an acquaintance to him one day with all frank familiarity of the west, "it's no good you're hanging your hat up at Long Graham's place; don't you know the girl's engaged?"

"No, I did not," said Vernon.

"Yes, and to one of the smartest fellows out here, who'd think nothing of twisting your neck if he caught you trying to poach on his preserve."

The doctor sniffed derisively at the idea,

"I tell you," said the candid friend, rather nettled, "Charley Hawkshaw is expected back every day. He's been away west of the Georgina. Take my advice and drop it. You're not Miss Graham's style. Better get up a spoon with the new barmaid, Flossie."

And, with this disinterested advice his affectionate friend left him.

But he had sown evil seed in a good soil to bring forth a crop. Vernon was a man who had already ruined himself in England by giving way to his passions, and he seemed likely to repeat the process in Australia. Certainly he had persuaded himself that he was madly in love with Bertha Graham, and was resolved to win her despite all rivals.

He was in this moody state when he heard that Hawkshaw had returned seriously ill with malarial fever. Vernon chuckled at the idea of being called in to treat his rival.

Yes, the man who had started out strong and healthy, fit to tackle the whole of the continent, had come back worn and wasted, racked by fever, and scarcely able to sit on his horse. Sick or well, Bertha welcomed her lover back with joy. She got her father to try to persuade him to come to Haughton Downs to be nursed, but with the obstinacy of an invalid he insisted on remaining on his own place, saying there were lots of things wanted doing that he could still look after. So he remained there, and Dr. Vernon was called in to attend him.

Hawkshaw had been ill nearly a fortnight, and there was no perceptible change, for the better in his state, and both Bertha and her father were urging him to go down South, while he had yet sufficient strength, when Dr. Vernon called at Haughton Downs on his way to Hawkshaw's place, which was only five miles further. Bertha was alone, and it was the doctor's opportunity, and he seized it.

To Bertha's cold inquiry, after his impassioned declaration, as to whether he was not well acquainted with the fact of her engagement to Hawkshaw, he replied that he was, but that only urged him on to attempt to win her for his wife. Just as Bertha was going to give him his dismissal, and him in her father's name from entering the house again, he said—

"Your engagement is only a farce, Hawkshaw is a dying man; nothing on earth can save him. The fever is in his system; if you marry him you marry a husband you will have to bury in a week or two."

He left the room without another word, leaving Bertha speechless between anger and grief. She heard the horse's steps die away, and then ages seemed to have passed before she heard her father's voice speaking to someone. She roused herself and went out.

"Bertha, don't you remember our Old friend Twisden?" asked her father.

"Of course, but you have been away nearly four years," she said as she greeted their old-time neighbor. "Where are you from last?"

"From a little village just a trifle larger than Brookford— London. I've been there for the last year."

Twisden was an inveterate gossip, and as such a welcome break to the monotony of the bush. At dinner he remarked: "I seem to have got on the track of a man you had best take care of. I believe he has settled at Brookford under the name of Dr. Vernon."

"Isn't he a doctor?" asked Graham, not noticing the sudden pallor of Bertha.

"Oh, he's a doctor right enough. His real name is Dr. Vernon Rushley, and he only escaped being tried for life by the skin of his teeth."

"The deuce! Why, Bertha and I picked him up on the point of death, and brought him back to life again. Seems a pity we did it."

"There was no moral doubt about his guilt, but it could not be proved. Anyhow, he was professionally ruined, and had to leave England. Why, Miss Graham, how white you are!"

"I'm not very well, and I think I'll get you to excuse me Mr. Twisden," said Bertha, rising. Twisden rose also and opened the door, and spoke a few words of sympathy as she went out.

"I say, Graham," he said as he returned to the table. "I hope I didn't put my clumsy foot in it. Miss Bertha's not got a liking for the doctor has she?" Graham burst out laughing.

"Quite the reverse; she took an instinctive dislike to him from the first. What were the particulars of the case?"

"Patient was the husband of a pretty woman, between whom and Rushley tender passages had long been suspected. Rushley was accused of helping him to a better world, where there are no marriages, and consequently no unfaithful wives. But there were no grounds for a committal."

Bertha had halted just outside the door. She had suspected that Twisden would say more after she left the room, and stopped and heard every word.

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BERTHA felt that there was need of action. She had lost her mother when young, and had grown up since then as her father's sole companion, and, having had a boy's education grafted on to a girl's she was thoroughly self-dependent. If she spoke to her father he would put it off until the morning, and she felt that action was imperative; she would go herself. Every minute that passed her lover's life was in danger.

She hastily put on her habit, strapped on her pretty revolver— a birthday present, a toy to look at, but anything but a toy in reality— and before long was cantering along the short five-mile road that divided the two stations. Taking the precaution of dismounting some distance from the house, she tied her horse up and advanced cautiously. Reaching the veranda, she took the extra precaution of taking her boots off, and then stole silently to the French light of the room where she knew Hawkshaw was lying, and looked through the glass.

VERNON, or Rushley, rode on to see after his patient with murder ripening in his heart. No thought of his narrow escape in the past troubled him, for the man who has successfully evaded the punishment of his crime once thinks he will be always immune. Hawkshaw was no better; Vernon had taken care of that, but the means he was employing were not quick enough for his purpose, and this night there was going to be a change of medicine.

Arrived at the station he dismissed the woman who was acting as nurse, saying that a crisis was impending, and he would remain all night; then, when his patient had fallen into a restless kind of stupor, he sat down and commenced to brood, a miserable man.

Strange to say, his anger was mainly directed against the girl who, with her father, had helped to save his life. Why could she not have had the sense to return his love without driving him to the necessity of putting this fellow out of the way? Handsomer women than she had been glad to have him as a lover. Who was this bush-bred girl to flout and despise him? So the thoughts of his warped brain ran on for an hour or more, when, glancing at the clock, he saw it was past 8 o'clock and time to act. He arose and looked at the sleeper; he was quieter now, and his lips wore a smile.

"He's dreaming of her," mused the watcher with a look of hate. "Well, dream on, old man, while you can." He opened his medicine case and took out a bottle, rinsed a glass out, and, holding it up, began to drop some of the fluid from the bottle into the glass. He counted twenty, put the glass down, and re-corked the bottle. As he did so a draught of air smote his cheek. Looking round to see if the door had blown open, a dark figure suddenly snatched the bottle from his hand, and stood between him and the bed.

Aghast he started back and gazed at the apparition in terror— Bertha Graham, with all the fury of a woman protecting a helpless loved one blazing in her eyes.

"Dr. Rushley," she said in a low voice, "I will give you a chance of your life. I know all about your past, and how near you escaped the penalty of the crime you were about to repeat. Your horse is in the stable; mount, and go back to

Brookford, and leave it at once. After twenty-four hours from now I will put the police on your tracks if you are not gone."

"What hysterical nonsense is this?" said Rushley, recovering himself a little. "Give me back that bottle, girl, at once," and he took a stop towards her.

"Stop, if you're wise," she said, raising the revolver. "What this bottle contains I do not know, but I feel certain it will convict you of attempted murder. Now, go while you have the chance. One cry from me would bring men here who would tie you up with a green hide rope till the police came for you."

"Then you will not give me back that bottle?"

"I will not. It is well said that if you save a man's life he will do you some injury, and my father and I saved the life of a murderer. Go quickly, or some of the men will be over directly. By to-morrow afternoon you must be gone from Brookford."

Rushley turned to leave.

"It would only have expedited matters," he said with a vindictive sneer; "he will die whether or no."

He passed out of the door and out of Bertha's life.

DR. VERNON had been suddenly called way. Rumor said that a wealthy relation had died and left a large fortune and a title. Anyhow, he had packed up his traps to come on by carrier, and had started for the terminus on horseback early in the morning.

He reached the Pink Lily Lagoon, where he had been brought back to life, just as the sun set; he hobbled, his horse out, brought out some food and a bottle of spirits, and tried to eat. Always a temperate man, the unaccustomed use of alcohol soon mounted to his brain, and he spent half the night wandering up and down the bank of the lagoon uttering impotent threats of vengeance against Bertha and her lover. What galled him most was the knowledge that his parting gibe was an empty threat, and that left to Nature and his own strong constitution Hawkshaw would soon recover.

Towards midnight he thought he would start on again, and after listening for some time he imagined he heard the clink of the hobble-chain in a certain direction, and taking his bridle started in that direction, first filling the half emptied bottle of whisky with water, and taking it with him.

On he went, the clinking hobble-chain of his excited fancy always ahead of him. Every time he stopped to listen the sound always seemed the same distance off. He cursed the horse at last and determined to sit down and wait for daylight. He took a long drink from the bottle, and was soon asleep on the spongy soil of the downs.

THE sun blazing in his face awoke him. He sat up and tried to get his scattered wits together. Then he arose and looked around him. He was alone on a wild treeless expanse of country. The timber surrounding the lagoon was no longer visible, nor was there any signs of his horse. He was once more lost, hopelessly lost, and he recognised the fact with terror. He sat down again and tried to reason things out and arrive at the direction he ought to go, and, having at last made up his mind, he arose and started.

There was still something left in the bottle, and he took a long drink, and then threw it away. Hotter grew the day, but no welcome timber appeared in sight, and he concluded he had made a mistake, and tried another direction. And so throughout the day— aimless wanderings in every direction, till night closed on a tired-out, despairing man on the brink of madness. And through it all there was ever before him the picture of Bertha nursing her lover back to health.

Night, peopled with phantoms of the past, who through the long hours came and talked with him, brought no solace. In the morning he was delirious, and staggered on, raving and talking incoherently. When the sun smote him down for good he fell near the dried skin and skeleton of a horse that had lain roasting there since he abandoned it months before.

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8: St. George and the Dragon

Robert Grant

1852-1940

Collected in: *The Law-Breakers, and Other Stories*, 1906

PAUL HARRINGTON, the reporter, shifted his eagle glance from one feature to another of the obsequies with the comprehensive yet swift perception of an artist. An experience of three years on the staff had made him an expert on ceremonies, and, captious as he could be when the occasion merited his scorn, his predilection was for praise, as he was an optimist by instinct. This time he could praise unreservedly, and he was impatient to transfer to the pages of his note-book his seething impressions of the solemn beauty and simplicity of the last rites in the painful tragedy. In the rustic church into which he had wormed his way he had already found time to scribble a brief paragraph to the effect that the melancholy event had "shrouded the picturesque little town of Carver in gloom," and now as he stood on the greensward near, though not too near, he hastily jotted down the points of interest with keen anticipation of working out some telling description on the way home.

Out from the little church where the families of the pair of lovers had worshipped in summer time for a generation, the two coffins, piled high with flowers (Harrington knew them reportorially as caskets), were borne by the band of pall-bearers, stalwart young intimate friends, and lifted by the same hands tenderly into the hearse. The long blackness of their frock-coats and the sable accompaniment of their silk hats, gloves, and ties appealed to the observant faculties of Harrington as in harmony both with the high social position of the parties and the peculiar sadness of the occasion. That a young man and woman, on the eve of matrimony, and with everything to live for, should be hurled into eternity (a Harringtonian figure of speech) by a railroad train at a rustic crossing, while driving, was certainly an affair heartrending enough to invite every habiliment of woe. As he thus reasoned Harrington became aware that one of the stalwart young men was looking at him with an expression which seemed to ask only too plainly, "What the devil are you doing here?"

As a newspaper man of some years' standing Harrington was hardened.

Such an expression of countenance was an almost daily experience and slipped off the armor of his self-respecting hardihood like water off the traditional duck's back. When people looked at him like this he simply took refuge in his consciousness of the necessities of the case and the honesty of his own artistic purpose. The press must be served faithfully and indefatigably—boldly, moreover, and at times officiously, in order to attain legitimate results; yet he flattered himself that no one could ever say of him that he had "butted

in" where others of his craft would have paused, or was lacking in reportorial delicacy. Was he not simply doing his professional duty for hire, like any respectable lawyer or doctor or architect, in order to support his family? Were he to trouble his head because impetuous people frowned, his wife, Amelia, and infant son, Tesla, would be the sufferers— a thought which was a constant stimulus to enterprise. His "job" required "cheek" perhaps, but nine people out of ten were not sensible enough to realize that he was a modern necessity, and to ask themselves, "Is this man doing his work creditably?" There was the essence of the situation for Harrington, and from the world's lack of nice perception he had made for himself a grievance which rendered him indifferent to ill-considered scowls.

But, however indifferent his attitude, nothing ever escaped Harrington, and he noticed that the young man whose eyes met his with the expression of annoyance was well set up and manly in appearance— a "dude," in Harrington's parlance, but a pleasant-looking dude, with an open and rather strong countenance. Such was Harrington's deduction, in spite of the obvious hostility to himself, and in confirmation of this view he had the satisfaction of perceiving the tension of the young man's face relax, as though he had come to the conclusion, on second thoughts, that interference was, on the whole, not worth while.

"He realizes," said the reporter to himself approvingly, "that there's no sense in being peevish. A swell funeral must be written up like any other society function."

While he thus soliloquized, the nearest relatives of the deceased victims issued from the church, seeking the carriages in waiting for them. Among those who came next was a handsome, spirited-looking girl of twenty-five, who, though not of the family group, was a sincere mourner. As she stepped forward with the elasticity of youth, glad of the fresh air on her tear-stained cheeks, it happened that she also observed the presence of the reporter, and she paused, plainly appalled. Her nostrils quivered with horrified distress, and she turned her head as though seeking some one. It proved to be the young man who had misjudged Harrington a few moments before. At least, he sprang to her side with an agility which suggested that his eyes had been following her every movement, thereby prompting Harrington, who was ever on the alert for a touch of romance amid the prose of every-day business, to remark shrewdly:

"That's plain as the nose on your face; he's her 'steady.'"

He realized at the same time that he was being pointed out in no flattering terms by the young lady in question, who cast a single haughty glance in his direction by way of identification. He saw her eyes flash, and, though the brief dialogue which ensued was necessarily inarticulate to him, it was plain that she

was laying her outraged feelings at the feet of her admirer, with a command for something summary and substantial by way of relief.

At any rate, Harrington jumped at once to this conclusion, for he murmured: "She's telling him I'm the scum of the earth, and that it's up to him to get rid of me." He added, sententiously: "She'll find, I guess, that this is about the most difficult billet a fair lady ever intrusted to a gallant knight." Whereupon, inspired by his metaphor, he proceeded to hum under his breath, by way of outlet to his amused sensibilities, the dulcet refrain which runs:

In days of old, when knights were bold
And barons held their sway,
A warrior bold, with spurs of gold,
Sang merrily his lay,
Sang merrily his lay:

"My love is young and fair,
My love hath golden hair,
And eyes so blue and heart so true
That none with her compare.

So what care I, though death be nigh?
I'll live for love or die!
So what care I, though death be nigh,
I'll live for love or die!"

What was going to happen? How would Sir Knight set to work to slay or expel the obnoxious dragon? Harrington felt mildly curious despite his sardonic emotions, and while he took mental note of what was taking place around him he contrived to keep an eye on his censors. He had observed that the young man's face while she talked to him had worn a worried expression, as though he were already meditating whether the situation was not hopeless unless he had recourse to personal violence; but, having put his Dulcinea into her carriage, he appeared to be in no haste to begin hostilities. Indeed, without further ado, or even a glance in Harrington's direction, he took his place in the line of mourners which was moving toward the neighboring cemetery.

Harrington was for a moment divided in his own mind between the claims of reportorial delicacy and proper self-respect. It had been his intention to absent himself from the services at the grave, out of consideration for the immediate family. It occurred to him now that it was almost his duty to show himself there, in order not to avoid a meeting. But the finer instinct prevailed. Why allow what was, after all, nothing save ignorant disapproval to alter his arrangements? He had just time to walk leisurely to the station without

overheating himself, and delay would oblige him to take a later train, as there was no vehicle at his disposal.

Consequently, after his brief hesitation, he followed a high-road at right angles to that taken by the funeral procession, and gave himself up to the beguilement of his own thoughts. They were concerned with the preparation of his special article, and he indulged in the reflection that if it were read by the couple who had looked at him askance they would be put to shame by its accuracy and good taste.

Before Harrington had finished three-quarters of the distance which lay between the church and his destination, the carriages of those returning from the cemetery began to pass him. When the dust raised by their wheels had subsided he looked for an undisturbed landscape during the remainder of his walk, and had just given rein again to contemplation when a sound which revealed unmistakably the approach of an automobile caused him to turn his head. A touring car of large dimensions and occupied by two persons was approaching at a moderate rate of speed, which the driver, who was obviously the owner, reduced to a minimum as he ran alongside him.

"May I give you a lift?" asked a strong, friendly voice.

Before the question was put Harrington had recognized in the speaker the young man whose mission it had become, according to his shrewd guess, to call him to account for his presence at the funeral. He had exchanged his silk hat for a cap, and drawn on a white dust-coat over his other sable garments, but his identity was unmistakable. Viewing him close at hand Harrington perceived that he had large, clear eyes, a smooth-shaven, humorous, determined mouth, and full ruddy cheeks, the immobility of which suggested the habit of deliberation.

Physically and temperamentally he appeared to be the antipodes of the reporter, who was thin, nervous, and wiry, with quick, snappy ways and electric mental processes. It occurred to him now at once that the offer concealed a trap, and he recalled, knowingly, the warning contained in the classical adage concerning Greeks who bear gifts.

But, on the other hand, what had he to fear or to apologize for?

Besides, there was his boy Tesla to consider. How delighted the little fellow, who already doted on electricity, would be to hear that his father had ridden in a huge touring car! He would be glad, too, of the experience himself, in order to compare the sensation with that of travelling in the little puffing machines with which he was tolerably familiar. Therefore he answered civilly, yet without enthusiasm:

"I don't mind if you do, as far as the station."

At his words the chauffeur at a sign made place for him, and he stepped in beside his pseudo-enemy, who, as he turned on the power, met Harrington's limitation as to distance with the remark:

"I'm going all the way to New York, if you care to go with me."

Harrington was tempted again. Apart from the peculiar circumstances of the case he would like nothing better. Then, why not? What had he or his self-respect to dread from a trip with this accommodating dude? He would hardly sandbag him, and were he— Harrington grinned inwardly at the cunning thought— intending to have the machine break down in an inaccessible spot, and leave him stranded, what difference would it make? His article was too late already for the evening papers, and he would take excellent care to see that nothing should interfere with its appearance the following morning, for at a pinch he was within walking distance of the city. The thought of such an attempt to muzzle the liberty of the press was rather an incentive than otherwise, for it savored of real adventure and indicated that a moral issue was involved.

While he thus reflected he appeared not to have heard the observation.

Meanwhile the automobile was running swiftly and smoothly, as though its owner were not averse to have his guest perceive what a superb machine it was.

"What make?" asked the reporter, wishing to show himself affable, yet a man of the world. He had come to the conclusion that if the invitation were repeated he would accept it.

His companion told him, and as though he divined that the inquiry had been intended to convey admiration, added, "She's going now only at about half her speed."

Harrington grinned inwardly again. "Springes to catch woodcock!" he said to himself, quoting Shakespeare, then went on to reflect in his own vernacular: "The chap is trying to bribe me, confound him! Well, here goes!" Thereupon he said aloud, for they were approaching the station: "If you really would like my company on the way to town I'd be glad to see how fast she can go." As he spoke he drew out his watch and added with suppressed humorous intention: "I suppose you'll guarantee to get me there in a couple of hours or so?"

"If we don't break down or are not arrested." The voice was gay and without a touch of sinister suggestion.

"Here's a deep one, maybe," thought Harrington.

Already the kidnapper— if he were one— was steering the car into a country way which diverged at a sharp curve from that in which they had been travelling. It was a smooth, level stretch, running at first almost parallel with the railroad, and in another moment they were spinning along at a hair-lifting

rate of speed, yet with so little friction that the reporter's enthusiasm betrayed itself in a grunt of satisfaction, though he was reflecting that his companion knew the way and did not intend to allow him to change his mind. But Harrington was quite content with the situation, and gave himself up unreservedly to the pleasant thrill of skimming along the surface of the earth at such a pace that the summer breeze buffeted his face so that his eyes watered. There was nothing in sight but a clear, straight road flanked by hedges and ditches, save the railroad bed, along which after a while the train came whizzing. A pretty race ensued until it crossed their path at almost a right angle.

"Now he thinks he has me," thought Harrington.

It almost seemed so, for in another moment he of the humorous, determined mouth diminished the power, and after they were on the other side of the railroad track he proceeded at a much less strenuous pace and opened conversation.

"You're a reporter, I judge?"

Harrington, who was enjoying himself, would have preferred to avoid business for a little longer and to talk as one gentleman to another on a pleasure trip. So, in response to this direct challenge, he answered with dry dignity:

"Yes. I have the honor of representing the Associated Press."

"One of the great institutions of the country."

This was reasonable— so reasonable, indeed, that Harrington pondered it to detect some sophistry.

"It must be in many respects an interesting calling."

"Yes, sir; a man has to keep pretty well up to date."

"Married or single, if I may be so bold?"

"I have a wife and a son nine years old."

"That is as it should be. Lucky dog!"

Harrington laughed in approval of the sentiment. "Then I must assume that you are a bachelor, Mr.—?"

"Dryden. Walter Dryden is my name. Yes, that's the trouble."

"She won't have you?" hazarded the reporter, wishing to be social in his turn.

"Exactly."

"Mrs. Harrington would not the first time I asked her."

"I have offered myself to her six separate times, and she has thus far declined."

Harrington paused a moment. The temptation to reveal his own astuteness, and at the same time enhance the personal flavor which the

dialogue had acquired, was not to be resisted. "May I venture to ask if she is the lady with whom you exchanged a few words this forenoon at the door of the church?"

The young man turned his glance from the road toward his questioner by way of tribute to such acumen. "I see that nothing escapes your observation."

"It is my business to notice everything and to draw my own conclusions," said the reporter modestly.

"They are shrewdly correct in this case. Would you be surprised," continued Dryden in a confidential tone, "if I were to inform you that I believe it lies in your power to procure me a home and happiness?"

Harrington chuckled in his secret soul. He would dissemble. "How could that possibly be?"

"I don't mind telling you that the last time I offered myself the young lady appeared a trifle less obdurate. She shook her head, but I thought I observed signs of wavering— faint, yet appreciable. If now I could only put her under an obligation and thus convince her of my effectiveness, I am confident I could win her."

"Your effectiveness?" queried Harrington, to whom the interview was becoming more psychologically interesting every moment.

"Yes, she considers me an unpractical person— not serious, you know. I know what you consider me," he added with startling divergence— "a dude."

Harrington found this searchlight on his own previous thought disconcerting. "Well, aren't you one?" he essayed boldly.

Dryden pondered a moment. "I suppose so. I don't wear reversible cuffs and I am disgustingly rich. I've shot tigers in India, lived in the Latin quarter, owned a steam yacht, climbed San Juan Hill— but I have not found a permanent niche. There are not places enough to go round for men with millions, and she calls me a rolling stone. Come, now, I'll swap places with you. You shall own this motor and— and I'll write the press notice on the Ward-Upton funeral."

Harrington stiffened instinctively. He did not believe that the amazing, splendid offer was genuine. But had he felt complete faith that the young man beside him was in earnest, he would have been proof against the lure of even a touring car, for he had been touched at his most sensitive point. His artistic capacity was assailed, and his was just the nature to take proper umbrage at the imputation. More; over, though this was a minor consideration, he resented slightly the allusion to reversible cuffs. Hence the answer sprang to his lips:

"Can you not trust me to write the notice, Mr. Dryden?"

"She would like me to write it."

"Ah, I see! Was that what she whispered to you this morning?"

Dryden hesitated. "Certainly words to that effect. Let me ask you in turn, can you not trust me? If so, the automobile is yours and—"

Harrington laughed coldly. "I'm sorry not to oblige you, Mr. Dryden.

If you understood my point of view you would see that what you propose is out of the question. I was commissioned to write up the Ward-Upton obsequies, and I alone must do so."

As he spoke they were passing at a lively gait through the picturesquely shaded main street of a small country town and were almost abreast of the only tavern of the place, which wore the appearance of having been recently remodelled and repainted to meet the demands of modern road travel.

"Your point of view? What is your point of view?"

Before Harrington had time to begin to put into speech the statement of his principles there was a sudden loud explosion beneath them like the discharge of a huge pistol, and the machine came abruptly to a stop. So unexpected and startling was the shock that the reporter sprang from the car and in his nervous annoyance at once vented the hasty conclusion at which he arrived in the words: "I see; this is a trap, and you are a modern highwayman whose stunt will make good Sunday reading in cold print." He wore a sarcastic smile, and his sharp eyes gleamed like a ferret's.

Dryden regarded him humorously with his steady gaze. "Gently there; it's only a tire gone. Do you suspect me of trying to trifle with the sacred liberties of the press?"

"I certainly did, sir. It looks very much like it."

"Then you agree that I chose a very inappropriate place for my purpose. 'The Old Homestead' there is furnished with a telephone, a livery-stable, and all the modern protections against highway robbery.

Besides, there is a cold chicken and a bottle of choice claret in the basket with which to supplement the larder of our host of the inn. We will take luncheon while my chauffeur is placing us on an even keel again, and no time will be lost. You will even have ten minutes in which to put pen to paper while the table is being laid."

Harrington as a nervous man was no less promptly generous in his impulses when convinced of error than he was quick to scent out a hostile plot. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Dryden. I see I was mistaken."

He thrust out a lean hand by way of amity. "Can't I help?"

"Oh, no, thank you. My man will attend to everything."

"You see I got the idea to begin with and then the explosion following so close upon your offer—"

"Quite so," exclaimed Dryden. "A suspicious coincidence, I admit." He shook the proffered fingers without a shadow of resentment. "I dare say my dust-coat and goggles give me quite the highwayman effect," he continued jollily.

"They sort of got on my nerves, I guess." Under the spell of his generous impulse various bits of local color flattering to his companion began to suggest themselves to Harrington for his article, and he added: "I'll take advantage of that suggestion of yours and get to work until luncheon is ready."

Some fifteen minutes later they were seated opposite to each other at an appetizing meal. As Dryden finished his first glass of claret, he asked:

"Did you know Richard Upton?"

"The man who was killed? Not personally. But I have read about him in the society papers."

"Ah!" There was a deep melancholy in the intonation which caused the reporter to look at his companion a little sharply. For a moment Dryden stirred in his chair as though about to make some comment, and twisted the morsel of bread at his fingers' ends into a small pellet.

But he poured out another glass of claret for each of them and said:

"He was the salt of the earth."

"Tell me about him. I should be glad to know. I might—"

"There's so little to tell— it was principally charm. He was one of the most unostentatious, unselfish, high-minded, consistent men I ever knew. Completely a gentleman in the finest sense of that overworked word."

"That's very interesting. I should be glad—"

Dryden shook his head. "You didn't know him well enough. It was like the delicacy of the rose— finger it and it falls to pieces. No offence to you, of course. I doubt my own ability to do him justice, well as I knew him. But you put a stopper on that— and you were right. My kind regards," he said, draining his second glass of claret. "The laborer is worthy of his hire, the artist must not be interfered with. It was an impertinence of me to ask to do your work."

Harrington's eyes gleamed. "It's pleasant to be appreciated— to have one's point of view comprehended. It isn't pleasant to butt in where you're not wanted, but there's something bigger than that involved, the—"

"Quite so; it was a cruel bribe; and many men in your shoes would not have been proof against it."

"And you were in dead earnest, too, though for a moment I couldn't believe it. But the point is— and that's what I mean— that the public— gentlemen like you and ladies like the handsome one who looked daggers at me this morning— don't realize that the world is bound to have the news on its breakfast-table and supper-table, and that when a man is in the business

and knows his business and is trying to do the decent thing and the acceptable artistic thing, too, if I do say it, he is entitled to be taken seriously and— and trusted. There are incompetent men— rascals even— in my calling. What I contend is that you'd no right to assume that I wouldn't do the inevitable thing decently merely because you saw me there. For, if you only knew it, I was saying to myself at that very moment that for a funeral it was the most tastefully handled I ever attended."

"It is the inevitable thing; that's just it. My manners were bad to begin to with, and later—" Dryden leaned forward with his elbows on the table and his head between his hands, scanning his eager companion.

"Don't mention it. You see, it was a matter of pride with me. And now it's up to me to state that if there's anything in particular you'd like me to mention about the deceased gentleman or lady—"

Dryden sighed at the reminder, "One of the loveliest and most pure-hearted of women."

"That shall go down," said the reporter, mistaking the apostrophe for an answer, and he drew a note-book from his side pocket.

Dryden raised his hand by way of protest. "I was merely thinking aloud. No, we must trust you."

Harrington bowed. He hesitated, then by way of noticing the plural allusion in the speech added: "It was your young lady's look which wounded me the most. And she said something. I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what she said? It wasn't flattering, I'm sure of that, but it was on the tip of her tongue. I admit I'm mildly curious as to what it was."

Dryden reflected a moment. "You've written your article?" he asked, indicating the note-book.

"It's all mapped out in my mind, and I've finished the introduction."

"I won't ask to see it because we trust you. But I'll make a compact with you." Dryden held out a cigar to his adversary and proceeded to light one for himself. "Supposing what the lady said referred to something which you have written there, would you agree to cut it out?"

Harrington looked gravely knowing. "You think you can tell what I have written?" he asked, tapping his note-book.

Dryden took a puff. "Very possibly not. I am merely supposing. But in case the substance of her criticism— for she did criticise— should prove to be almost word for word identical with something in your handwriting— would you agree?"

Harrington shrugged his shoulders. "Against the automobile as a stake, if it proves not to be?" he inquired by way of expressing his incredulity.

"Gladly."

"Let it be rather against another luncheon with you as agreeable as this."

"Done. I will write her exact language here on this piece of paper and then we will exchange copy."

Harrington sat pleasantly amused, yet puzzled, while Dryden wrote and folded the paper. Then he proffered his note-book with nervous alacrity. "Read aloud until you come to the place," he said jauntily.

Dryden scanned for a moment the memoranda, then looked up. "It is all here at the beginning, just as she prophesied," he said, with a promptness which was almost radiant, and he read as follows: "The dual funeral of Miss Josephine Ward, the leading society girl, and Richard Upton, the well-known club man, took place this morning at—" He paused and said: "Read now what you have there."

Harrington flushed, then scowled, but from perplexity. He was seeking enlightenment before he proceeded further, so he unfolded the paper with a deliberation unusual to him, which afforded time to Dryden to remark with clear precision:

"Those were her very words."

Harrington read aloud: "'Look at that man; he is taking notes. Oh, he will describe them in his newspaper as a leading society girl and a well-known club man, and they will turn in their graves. If you love me, stop it.'"

There was a brief pause. The reporter pondered, visibly chagrined and disappointed. The silence was broken by Dryden. "Do you not understand?" he inquired.

"Frankly, I do not altogether. I— I thought they'd like it."

"Of course you did, my dear fellow; there's the ghastly humor of it; the dire tragedy, rather." As he spoke he struck his closed hand gently but firmly on the table, and regarded the reporter with the compressed lips of one who is about to vent a long pent-up grievance.

"He was in four clubs; I looked him up," Harrington still protested in dazed condition.

"And they seemed to you his chief title to distinction? You thought they did him honor? He would have writhed in his grave, as Miss Mayberry said. Like it? When the cheap jack or the social climber dies, he may like it, but not the gentleman or lady. Leading society girl? Why, every shop-girl who commits suicide is immortalized in the daily press as 'a leading society girl,' and every deceased Tom, Dick, or Harry has become a 'well-known club man.' It has added a new terror to death. Thank God, my friends will be spared!"

Harrington felt of his chin. "You object to the promiscuity of it, so to speak. It's because everybody is included?"

"No, man, to the fundamental indignity of it. To the baseness of the metal which the press glories in using for a social crown."

Harrington drew himself up a little. "If the press does it, it's because most people like it and regard it as a tribute."

"Ah! But my friends do not. You spoke just now of your point of view.

This is ours. Think it over, Mr. Harrington, and you will realize that there is something in it." He sat back in his chair with the air of a man who has pulled victory out of the jaws of defeat and is well content.

Harrington meditated a moment. "However that be, one thing is certain—it has got to come out. It will come out. You may rest assured of that, Mr. Dryden." So saying he reached for his note-book and proceeded to run a pencil through the abnoxious paragraph.

"You have won your bet and— and the young lady, too, Sir Knight, I trust. You seem to have found your niche." Which goes to prove that the reporter was a magnanimous fellow at heart.

Dryden forbore to commit himself as to the condition of his hopes as he thanked his late adversary for this expression of good-will. Ten minutes later they were sitting in the rehabilitated motor-car and speeding rapidly toward New York. When they reached the city Dryden insisted on leaving the reporter at his doorsteps, a courtesy which went straight to Harrington's heart, for, as he expected would be the case, his wife and son Tesla were looking out of the window at the moment of his arrival and saw him dash up to the curbstone. His sturdy urchin ran out forthwith to inspect the mysteries of the huge machine.

As it vanished down the street Harrington put an arm round Tesla and went to meet the wife of his bosom.

"Who is your new friend, Paul?" she asked.

It rose to Harrington's lips to say— an hour before he would have said confidently— "a well-known club man"; but he swallowed the phrase before it was uttered and answered thoughtfully:

"It was one of the funeral guests, who gave me a lift in his motor, and has taught me a thing or two about modern journalism on the way up. I got stung."

"I thought you knew everything there is to know about that," remarked Mrs. Harrington with the fidelity of a true spouse.

To this her husband at the moment made no response. When, six months later, however, he received an invitation to the wedding of Walter Dryden and Miss Florence Mayberry, he remarked in her presence, as he sharpened his pencil for the occasion: "Those swells have trusted me to write it up after all."

———————

9: The MacSnorrt

P. C. Wren

1875-1941

Collected in: *Stepsons of France* (1917)

THE MacSNORRT was on the downward path, and had been for many years. Physically, mentally, and morally he was deteriorating; and as for the other aspects— social, financial, and worldly— he had been Chief Engineer on a Cunarder, and he was now the blackest of the black sheep of the VIIIth Company of the First Battalion of the Legion. From sitting at meals with the passengers in the First Saloon of a great liner, he had come to sitting with assorted blackguards over their tin *gamelles* of *soupe*; from drawing hundreds per annum, he had come to drawing a half-penny per day; his brain was failing from lack of use and excess of absinthe and mixed alcoholic filth, his superb health and strength were undermined, and he was becoming a Bad Man.

The history of his fall is told in one short word— Drink; and drink had turned a fine, useful, and honourable man into a degraded ruffian. The man who had thought of fame, wealth, inventions, patents, knighthood— now thought of the successful shikarring of the next drink, or the stealing of the wherewithal to get it. Whether this poor soul were married and the father of a family, I never knew, and did not care to ask, but it is quite probable that he was. Such men usually are. Let us hope he was not. Sober, he was a truculent, morose, and savage ruffian— ashamed of his ashamedness, hating himself and everybody else, dangerous and vile; a bad soldier till the fighting began, and then worth two. Drunk, he was exceedingly amusing, and one caught glimpses of the kindly, witty, and genial original.

THE BEST of soldiers, be he Maréchal or *Soldat deuxième classe*, as was the MacSnorrt, may be overcome by a combination and alliance of foes, any one of whom he could defeat alone.

As the MacSnorrt endeavoured to make clear to Captain d'Armentières next day, it was merely the conjunction against him of a good dinner, Haiphong, the stupeedity of the Annamese male in wearing a chignon and a petticoat like a wumman, *shum-shum*, sunstroke, and his own beautiful but ardent disposition, that had been his undoing. With any one of these he could have coped; by their unholy alliance he had been— he freely admitted it— completely defeated.

Captain d'Armentières heard him with courtesy, and awarded him eight days' *salle de police* and the *peloton de chasse* with sympathy.

He had known of similar fortuitous concatenations of adverse circumstance before in connection with le Légionnaire MacSnorrt.

It was the Captain's *ordonnance*, one Jean Boule, who had, luckily for that reveller, discovered the MacSnortt and encompassed his capture by a strong picket.

Passing a pagoda one night, he had heard, uplifted in monologue, a rich voice whose accents, or accent, he had heard before, that of the MacSnorrt, the Bad Man of the VIIIth Company, recently arrived in a draft from Sidi-bel-Abbès to reinforce the VIIth after certain painful dealings with the *Pavilions Noirs*, the "pirates" of the Yen Thé.

Mingled with, but far from subduing the vinous voice and hiccups of the MacSnorrt, were the angry murmurings, quick whispers, and the lisping and clicking voices of a native Annamese and Chinese crowd.

Was the fool interfering with those so-tender "religious susceptibilities," and intruding upon priests and their flock in search of moral consolation and fortification? He had no business in there at all.

Following the wall and rounding a corner, Jean Boule came to a gate. Pushing it open gently, he looked in.

Reclining majestically upon the ground, his back against the wall, was the MacSnorrt. In his vast left paw was a bottle of *shum-shum*, the deadly, maddening spirit distilled from rice. Clasped by his mighty right arm to his colossal bosom, the MacSnorrt held— a *doi* or Sergeant of Tirailleurs Tonkinois! *

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*Known as *Les Jeunes Filles* to the Legion, by reason of their long hair.

The little man, his lacquered hat, with its red bonnet-strings on one side, his chignon in grave disarray, looked even more like a devil than was his normal wont, as he struggled violently to escape from his degrading and undignified situation.

It was clear that, if the Annamese could get at his bayonet, there would be a vacancy at the head of the clan of MacSnorrt and at the tail of the VIIIth Company of the Legion.

"Lie ye still, lassie," adjured the gigantic Legionary, as his captive struggled again vainly, for the great right arm was not only round his waist, but round both his arms, and he could only pick at the handle of his bayonet with ineffectual finger-tips.

"Lie ye still, ye wee prood besom, or I'll e'en tak' ane o' the ither lasses to ma boosom," threatened the MacSnorrt, but softened the apparent harshness of the threat by a warm lingering kiss upon the yellow cheek of the murderously savage soldier.

He then applied the *shum-shum* bottle to his lips, poured a libation of the crude and poisonous spirit, and then frankly explained to his captive that he

had not selected "her" from among the other "sonsie lassies" by reason of any superior beauty, but simply because he liked her saucy fancy-dress— quite like a *vivaandière*, and he had always had a tender spot in his hearrt o' hearrts for a *vivaandière*.

The enraged and half-demented Sergeant screamed to the little crowd of priests, loafers, coolies and Haiphong citizens to knife the foreign devil, or, taking his bayonet, to drive it in under his ear.... The crowd allowed "I dare not" to wait upon "I would"— for the moment.

"Aye!... Oo-aye! It's not Jock MacSnorrt that could reseest the blaandishments o' onny little deevil o' a *vivaandière*," confessed the aged roué.... "It was for the sake o' the *vivaandières* I joined the French airrmy, ye'll ken— when I was an innocent slip o' a laddie.... Romaantic!...

"Aye— an' they're mostly fat auld runts wi' twa chins," he added, with a sudden fall to pessimism and confession of disillusionment.

"'Tis the ruin o' the British Airrmy, ye'll ken," he confided to the ugly crowd that gradually closed in around him, "that they hae no *vivaandières* to comfort the puir laddies.... Hae the Gorrdons onny *vivaandières*, I'll ask ye? The Seaforrths? The Caamerons? The Heelan' Light Infantry? The Royal Scots?... They hanna. It a' comes o' such matters being in the han's o' the Southrons— the drunken an' lasceevious deils. Look at the Navy.... Is there a ship o' them a'— fra' battleship to river gunboat— that has a *vivaandière*, I'm speirin' ye, lassie? There isna.... An' theenk o' the graan' worrk they could do for the puir wounded— instead o' they bluidy-minded, sick-bay orrderly deevils!

"Losh, maan! Contemplaate it!

"Eh, Wooman in oor 'oors o' ease
A settin' lightly on oor knees....

"Lie still, ye haverin', snoot-cockin' besom— an' I'll tell ye a' aboot the horrors o' a naval engagement— an' I seen hunnerds. I'll tell ye a' aboot the warrst o' the lot— when I lossed ma guid right arrm. Then conseeder what a deeference ane bonnie *vivaandière* lassie might ha' made..." A violent struggle from the insanely incensed and ferocious *doi*.

"Wull ye bide quiet, ma bonnie wean? Or shall I send ye awa' oot into the cauld warrld to airrn yere ain leevin'? Ye're awfu' sma' for sic a fate, ye'll ken, ma bairnie! An' this is no Sauchiehall Street, I'm tellin' ye.... Did ye see the wee-bit gunboats we came in, the morrn? Well, imaagine ane o' they ten times increased and multiplied, an', in fact, made a hantle bigger. I sairved in ane o' yon, but I shall not disclose in what capaacity— save an' except that it was

honourable to me on the ane side an' to her Majesty on the ither.... *Wull* ye bide quiet like a respeckitable *tai-tai* or I'll hae ye awa'....

"Eh! maan, a naval engagement's graand. Watter everywheer! On board, I mean. Everywheer. Gaallons o' it."...

"May a cat tread on your heart!" hissed the struggling *doi*. "May dragons tear you! May the bellies of mud-fish be your grave! May you be cast on a Mountain of Knives."...

"What did ye say, lassie? *Why* do they want watter on booarrd? *To hide the awfu' things that fall aboot*! Eyes, arrms, legs, noses, ears, toes, fingers— ye wouldna hae them lying there plain for the eye o' man to see? No! Gaallons o' watter...."

"Bide ye quiet, *kuniang*, or ye won't be a *kuniang* much longer, I'm thinkin'. Aye! Dozens o' gaallons o' watter. Everywheer. Hoses playin' a' aboot the plaace. Pumps squirrtin' it. Inches o' it on the decks. An' *blood*! Ma certie! Lassie— ye'd never believe. Hunnerds o' gaallons o' watter, an' as the shells burrst a' aroond— what falls into the watter in a pairrfect hail?"...

"Devils draw your entrails!" panted the writhing *doi*.

"Eh? Bullets, d'ye say? That's wheer ye're wrang, lassie. Na! Na!— Eyes, arrms, legs, noses, ears, toes, fingers! Ye'd scarcely credit it. An' thousands o' gaallons o' watter! Juist to hide the awfu' sichts and sounds.... There'll be a gun-team working their gun in watter. Thousan's o' gaallons o' watter. Feet deep. An' a maan wull stoop to fish up a shell for the gun— an' what'll he bring up belike?"

"Be the graves of your ancestors torn open by pariah dogs and their bones devoured!" cursed the Sergeant, getting one arm free at last.

"Bring up a shell, d'ye say, ma wean? More likely an eye or an arrm or a leg, or a nose or an ear or a toe or a finger frae beneath that fearfu' flood.... Oo-aye! Meelions o' gaallons o' water! Feet deep. An' the bed o' that awfu' sea, a wrack o' spare-parts o' the human forrm divine! Meelions o' gaallons o' watter. Yarrds deep on the decks. They always hae it the like o' that in a naval engagement. Aye— I seen hunnerds ..." and the *doi* had got at his bayonet at last. Then the *bonze* struck heavy blows upon the big bell hanging near in its bamboo-frame support, and the crowd closed in. If the *doi* struck, they would hack and tear this foreign devil to pieces.

With a *weeeep* of steel on steel the bayonet cleared the scabbard and the *doi* struck at his captor's throat as John Bull sprang forward. But the sound of the drawing of the bayonet had an extraordinary effect on the MacSnorrt— and it was with the weapon held only in his left hand that the *doi* struck— and missed. Seizing him by the throat with both huge hands the Légionnaire

scrambled to his feet and used him as a battering-ram in his headlong roaring drive at the closing knife-drawing crowd.

With a yell of "Ye dommed dirrty Jael!" he wrenched the bayonet from the little Annamese and flung him head-long as the crowd gave back.

John Bull sprang to his side, and the two in a whirling, punching, struggling plunge fought their way to the gate, burst through it— and were promptly arrested by the picket, opportunely passing.

With these new enemies the MacSnorrt did further battle, until a tap on the head from a Gras rifle in the skilful hands of Sergeant Legros brought him to that state in which he was perhaps best— unconsciousness.

10: The Golden Grasshopper

William Le Queux

1864-1927

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"SO the affair as it stands is a complete enigma!"

It was the Baron who spoke. The elegant, brown-bearded, rather sallow-faced Frenchman glanced around at the nine persons sitting at a large, round table in a private room with locked doors at the Café de L'Univers, an unpretentious little place, in the Rue St. Antoine, in Paris.

Upon the table were coffee and liqueurs, for the usual monthly dinner of the Crimes Club was being held, and one of its members, Monsieur Lucien Dubosq, a slim, dark-eyed, bearded, elegant man, who was Chef de la Sûreté, had just related an extraordinary story.

The others had listened intently, and the Baron had made the remark when Dubosq had finished.

The assembly was a curious one.

The membership of the club, formed for the study of the psychology of crime, was confined to ten, and that night all were present. They were Professor Ernest Lemelletier, grave, lantern-jawed, with iron-grey hair and moustache, who was the most eminent medico-legist in France, and who, it will be recollected, distinguished himself in the Landru case; Dr. Henri Plaud, an upright, sparse man of seventy with white hair and beard, who was a well-known toxicologist and Senator of Vaucluse; Maître Jean Tessier, a dark-eyed, round-faced man, who, though not yet of middle-age, had already distinguished himself as a lawyer and Deputy for the Yonne; Maurice Jacquinot, a slim, rather effeminate, fair-haired journalist, whose speciality was the investigation of crime mysteries for the great Paris newspaper *Le Journal*; the Baron Edouard d'Antenac, a podgy, over-fed man-about-town, who had spoken; M. Gustave Delcros, a wizened little man, who had been Minister of Marine in the Briand Cabinet; a fair-haired, clean-shaven English inventor of wireless television, named Gordon Latimer; and two ladies, one a pretty, dark-haired Parisienne of twenty-two, Mademoiselle Fernande Buysse, who followed the profession of lady journalist; and a stout, rather handsome woman of forty-five, Madame Léontine Van Hecke, who acted as secretary to the club which, however, had no president— all members being equal.

The Crimes Club was a secret organization to which no outsider was ever admitted under any pretext, while its proceedings were never mentioned in the newspapers.

Besides studying crime, its unique purpose was to assist the police of France, or of any other country, to unravel the mysteries that baffled them. In

certain bewildering cases the club had met with marked success, but the one which the Chief of the Paris detective police had placed before them for their consideration was, as the Baron had remarked, a complete enigma, which they began at once to discuss in detail.

Briefly put, the French police had been approached by the Swiss police at Berne for help in a mysterious case that had occurred in the Bernese Oberland, near the foot of the Jungfrau. A young clerk named Frank MacBean, engaged in the Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh, had gone to Switzerland for his summer holiday and had stayed at Interlaken, where his *fiancée*, a Swiss girl, Mariette Raeber, lived. Naturally, they went for excursions together up to Grindelwald, along by the lakes to Brienz, Thun, and other places, when one day they went off together by train up the dark, magnificent valley to Lauterbrunnen. There they changed trains, and ascended to the Jungfrau, where they spent the day. According to the Swiss girl's story, when they descended again in the evening to take the train back to Interlaken, he left her in the train at Scheidegg to go and take a photograph, saying that he would return in a few moments.

She waited until, without warning, the train went off. She tried to get out, but dare not jump, so she was taken down to Lauterbrunnen. There she awaited her *fiancé* until the last train; but he did not arrive. So she returned to Interlaken alone. She never saw him again, for he vanished, and every effort to trace him had failed.

"What about the books at the bank?" asked the lawyer Tessier.

"Examination has been made, and all accounts are in order," replied the Chief of Police. "He was known to have upon him only two fifty-franc Swiss notes, a few centimes, and a gold signet-ring. That was all. His camera was found in a wood near the road, about a mile down the Lütschine, a broad and swift mountain torrent."

"Deep?" asked the shrewd journalist, Jacquinot, greatly interested.

"No; shallow, but very swift. It runs over small boulders— glacier water from the Eiger Mountain," was Dubosq's reply.

A discussion followed, in which each of the ten gave his or her opinion, the general feeling being that the young man, having grown tired of the girl, had simply disappeared. The police of Europe daily receive hundreds of reports of friends who have disappeared, but in most cases the effacement is intentional, husbands leaving wives, and vice versa.

The Baron's views differed from those of the others.

"If the pair were in love with each other, why should the young fellow disappear?" he queried. "It might be accident, or foul play. I suspect the latter; and I, for one, will go to Switzerland," said the stout, over-fed man, who was an expert in criminal investigation.

"I will go with you," volunteered Jacquinot, who, as a journalist, saw a great story in the affair.

"I also will go," said the pretty young lady journalist, Fernande Buysse. "I want to question the Swiss girl, for I have a theory."

When an investigation was undertaken by the Crimes Club it was left to the two or three volunteers to carry it out, while the others were at all times ready to assist, either in making inquiries or watching suspected persons.

Therefore a week later the adventurous trio arrived at the Hôtel du Lac, in Interlaken, as ordinary visitors, without disclosing to anybody the object of their visit. They found the local police and newspaper correspondents busy and intense excitement in the town regarding the young Scotsman's disappearance. He had been staying at the Hôtel du Lac, the most popular hotel in the Bernese Oberland, therefore on the day following their arrival, the Baron made some casual inquiries of the genial proprietor, Mr. Walter Haller—Herr Walter as he is called by his English guests.

"It was simply an accident," said the latter. "When he did not return I telephoned to the Jungfraujoch, the upper end of the mountain railway, and with the aid of the railway officials we traced him down as far as Wengen. He had left the train at Scheidegg and started to walk down the Wengernalp, and to those in a small inn which he passed his manner seemed very peculiar. The theory held by our police and by the lawyer engaged in the affair is that in crossing a little bridge over the Lütschine, not far from Lauterbrunnen, he stumbled in the dark and fell into the roaring torrent. Among the boulders he soon became battered, and his body was carried down to the Lake of Brienz, where among the boulders at the estuary— which are ever shifting on account of the strong currents—his remains are still held down in the bed of the lake. The same thing happened to a peasant of Lauterbrunnen a few years ago."

"Then you think that it was an accident?" asked the Baron.

"Everyone is agreed," replied the courtly hôtelier. "Of course, I know nothing about the investigation of crime, but that is the general opinion."

After dinner the stout, bullet-headed Baron d'Antenac, with the alert Jacquinot and Mademoiselle, strolled out along the principal boulevard, the Höheweg, where one side is lined by colossal hotels, while the other lies open to the giant snow-capped mountain, the Jungfrau, which raised its lofty, white crest in the bright moonlight.

As they walked towards the gay Kursaal all three were agreed that accident was out of the question. It was either a case of self-effacement or of foul play. Mademoiselle was certain of the latter. As usual they were working independently of the police and, concealing their identity, worked upon novel and entirely different lines.

On that day, as a matter of fact, the English inventor, Gordon Latimer, whose services the Baron had invoked, was in Edinburgh making secret inquiries regarding the missing man.

Mademoiselle Fernande, ever chic and dressed in the latest mode, kept her theory to herself, and resorted to a clever ruse. She discovered that MacBean's *fiancée* had been a governess in a family living in Findhorn Place, in Edinburgh, where he had met her. Therefore, she called at the house of the girl's mother in the Bahnhof Strasse, and under pretext of having also been a governess in Edinburgh, had an interview with her.

As they sat together in the small, but cosily-furnished room which looked out over the broad, fertile meadows of the valley towards the Lake of Thun, she apologised for calling, and said in French, which Fräulein Raeber understood:

"I have read in the papers of the unfortunate disappearance of your friend, Mr. MacBean. He was my own friend, as well as yours. I often saw him before you met him, and I knew afterwards that he loved you."

The girl looked straight at her visitor. At first she waxed indignant, but next moment the tone of Mademoiselle's voice softened her.

"Yes," she said. "He told me he loved me— and I believed him."

"And you still believe that what he told you was really true?" asked Mademoiselle with a strange look.

"Yes," she said, after a slight hesitation.

"Ah! You are not quite sure," exclaimed the young French girl. "It is well that it is so, because— well, now that he is dead I will reveal the truth to you— much as it must pain you. *He was engaged to marry me!*"

"You?" shrieked the fair-haired Swiss girl excitedly. "You? You lie! He loved me—and was to marry me in October."

"And he was to marry me in that same month," Mademoiselle said, quite calmly.

"But he will not. He'll marry—" and she broke off short. "I mean he cannot, because he is dead."

Mademoiselle Fernande fixed her dark eyes upon the girl. Her ruse was succeeding.

"Are you quite certain that poor Frank is dead?" she asked.

"Absolutely. It is now twelve days since he left me at Scheidegg. No doubt he fell into the torrent and his body was carried away to the lake during the night," she replied brokenly. "If he lived, he would certainly return to me."

"There is a suspicion that you had quarrelled," Mademoiselle said.

The girl gave her a swift look of antagonism.

"We did not— we have never quarrelled," she protested strongly.

"Why are you so certain that Mr. MacBean met with an accident?" asked Mademoiselle Fernande. "Might not his death be due to foul play?"

"He had no enemies. Besides, he had nothing upon him of value."

"His camera was found in the wood quite a long way from the torrent," Fernande pointed out, a fact which the Swiss police had not overlooked, even though they had arrived at the conclusion that the young Scotsman had met with an accident.

"He may have passed through the wood before he reached the torrent," the girl Raeber replied.

"It is hardly likely he would discard it— eh?" Mademoiselle argued.

Half an hour later, when she rejoined her companions at the Hôtel du Lac, she described her interview with the bereaved *fiancée*, and added:

"That girl knows more about the affair than she will admit. She made a slip which she quickly corrected. The missing man is alive. Whether he has disappeared intentionally, or whether he is held in the hands of his enemies is a point we must investigate and establish."

"In that case we will continue to carry out the inquiry independently, and in our own way," said Jacquinot. "Let us begin by going over the same ground as the missing man, and continue to the spot where he was last seen."

"Excellent," said the Baron. "We'll go to-morrow by rail to the Jungfraujoch and follow the way he took."

Early next morning the three left Interlaken, the train taking them beside the roaring torrent up the wild, dark valley to Lauterbrunnen, where they changed carriages into the mountain railway, which climbed up the Wengernalp through the little Alpine resort of Wengen, up to Scheidegg on the plateau, and thence by the most wonderful railway in the world, that which runs to the region of eternal snow two thousand feet below the summit of the Jungfrau.

The experience of looking out upon the wide snowy slopes, the great green glaciers with their yawning crevasses in the ice, and the stupendous view of the mountain peaks beyond was most enjoyable. But it carried them no further towards the solution of the problem.

The conclusion formed by Fernande was not, however, shared by the others. The Baron now accepted the theory of the police, that the disappearance had been accidental, while Jacquinot, a thin-faced young man with a keen sense of humour, was of opinion that he and the girl had quarrelled, and that he had simply returned to Scotland.

On leaving the train at Scheidegg the three walked down the steep mountain path to Wengen with wonderful views on either side, and then, still down, to Lauterbrunnen, where they took the winding road beside the

foaming waters of the Lütschine torrent to the dark pine-wood where the camera had been found.

They spent nearly two hours searching that part of the wood, but discovered nothing which might lead to any clue except that not far from where the camera had been found the Baron picked up the end of a cigarette. Upon it was the mark of a well-known English brand, from which it would appear that young MacBean had halted there and smoked, and then, when moving on, forgot his camera. But, as Maurice Jacquinot pointed out, that particular brand of English cigarette was sold in a number of shops in Interlaken, therefore it was no proof that an Englishman had been there.

They walked back to the road which led to Interlaken, past a little inn where, late at night, the young man was said to have been seen to pass, and came to the narrow bridge where it was believed that he had slipped over in the darkness into the boiling torrent below.

"Nothing will convince me that he is dead!" declared Mademoiselle, as she walked between the two men.

"Then you will have to prove that he is alive," remarked the Baron. "But how?"

"We must first establish a motive for his disappearance," replied the shrewd young Frenchwoman. "Having done that, we must follow it up by close investigation. The police at first suspected murder, but now believe it to be accidental. I don't agree with either theory."

"Well, what can the motive have been, except, perhaps, he and the girl had words, and in order to punish her he has pretended suicide?"

"Not at all," declared Jacquinot. "If he had pretended suicide he would have left his hat and coat, or something, on the river bank. But nothing was found except his camera. It certainly is not a case of pretended suicide."

"Then what is it?" demanded the girl.

"It is for us to unravel the mystery."

They had walked through the dark, mysterious valley to the village of Zweilütschinen, and thence took train back to Interlaken, with its two great lakes surrounded by snow-capped mountains.

MEANWHILE the fourth member of the Crimes Club, the young inventor Latimer, was in Edinburgh pursuing his investigations. Quietly and methodically he was delving into the past of MacBean, whom everyone had regarded as a young man of exemplary conduct. The manager of the bank, while deploring the young fellow's death, made it plain that he was honourable, moral, and thrifty, for he had in the bank savings to the extent of over six hundred pounds. His father, a retired naval captain, and his mother, who lived at

Queensferry, spoke of their missing son in the highest terms. Indeed, Latimer, after nearly a fortnight, was about to give up the case and return to Paris when the affair took a most unexpected and sensational turn.

Latimer called upon Captain MacBean one morning to wish him good-bye, when he found him in a state of great agitation and excitement.

"I— I've received this by post this morning!" he gasped. "Look!" He placed upon the table a small, stout wooden box about five inches long, two inches wide, and three inches deep, which he opened.

Latimer gave vent to a loud exclamation of horror when he saw what it contained— a dark, shrivelled human finger, severed at the base, and bearing a man's gold signet-ring!

"It is my son's!" cried the distressed father, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I gave him the ring on his last birthday. My wife is away in Glasgow. I— I dare not tell her. It would kill her!"

By this an entirely different complexion was placed upon the affair. What did it portend?

"This has been sent to you, Captain MacBean, as some sign. Do you recognise what it means?" asked Latimer.

"It can only mean one thing— that he is dead! And yet, he had no enemy in the world to my knowledge."

"The sign certainly seems to portend that your poor son has met with foul play."

Then, after a pause, the young radio-inventor said:

"I wonder if you would allow me to have possession of it for a week. I want to make some further investigation."

"Certainly," was the father's reply. "Take the terrible thing! It is too horrible and ghastly for me to have in my possession. Take it and destroy it; who can have sent it, I wonder?"

"That, I and my friends will endeavour to discover. For that reason I want it."

So that same afternoon Gordon Latimer left the Waverley Station in Edinburgh direct for Switzerland, bearing the tiny box with its gruesome contents.

Two days later he joined the trio at Interlaken, where in secret, he exhibited the contents of the anonymous little box. All there were aghast at the sight of the shrivelled finger, with the heavy gold signet-ring engraved with the crest of the MacBeans. But the paper wrapping around the box was of greater interest. They examined it minutely. The box had apparently been posted in Switzerland, but the postmark was blurred. The handwriting of the address was typically English, a woman's bold handwriting, full of character.

The Baron took the wrappings to an official in the Interlaken post-office who at once deciphered the postmark to be that of the town of Thun, at the opposite end of the lake.

Was it possible that the murderers of young MacBean lived in that town?

Later, when the four members of the Club were discussing the gruesome object, the journalist, Jacquinot, remarked:

"I wonder why it has been sent to the dead man's father? It is some sign which possibly he recognises, but will not reveal. Perhaps an enemy of his has killed his son, and he sends that ghastly object to prove that he had had his revenge, well knowing that MacBean dare not accuse him, lest he should make some damning revelation."

"The father is greatly distressed. He is not going to tell his wife," Latimer remarked.

"Ah, for some obvious reason!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Fernande.

Again they examined the severed finger. Doubt was expressed whether it was actually that of Frank MacBean, but it was noticed that the ring, fitting tightly, had caused quite a ridge in the flesh.

"Ugh! It's horrible!" Fernande declared, as she touched it. "The work of either someone with a fiendish revenge, or it is actually a terrible sign to MacBean's father which he recognises and fears to acknowledge."

"You think that some enemy of the young man's father has killed the son?" asked the Baron of Mademoiselle.

"My theory remains the same— that clearly MacBean is still alive, held prisoner somewhere with some motive that we fail to establish." Then she added: "We are not very brilliant members of the Club, are we? Plaud and Lemelletier will sneer at us. So will Dubosq."

"I had a letter from the latter four days ago," said Latimer. "He asked me to see Sandy Mackay of the Edinburgh police upon another matter—an insurance fraud. I did so, and reported to him."

Next day another idea occurred to Mademoiselle Fernande. Taking the little box, she called upon the girl Raeber and showed her its gruesome contents.

"Why— that is his ring— his finger! Ugh!" she gasped breathlessly, staring at it in horror. "Where did you get it?"

Mademoiselle told her, whereupon she reeled and fell fainting.

Fernande was puzzled. The effect which sight of it had upon the girl was unexpected, for it did not fall in with the theory she held.

When, after a short time, the girl recovered, she asked again to see the ring which she examined closely. Then, quite calmly, she said:

"Yes. It is most mysterious! It has evidently been sent anonymously to his father as proof of his death and mutilation. Who, I wonder, was his enemy?"

"That is what my friends are endeavouring to discover. Have you any suspicion— the slightest suspicion which might furnish us with a clue?" asked the pretty French girl.

"No. I have no knowledge of any enemy," was Mariette Raeber's reply, but she spoke in a tone which filled her questioner with considerable suspicion.

After a month, a fourth meeting of the Crimes Club was held at their headquarters in Paris at which all the members were present. After dinner the doors were locked, and the Baron reported upon the Mountain Mystery, as the newspapers called it.

Having related the details already here described, he took up the wrappings which were around the box, and said:

"There is much mystery surrounding this package. We have, by dint of analysis and with the aid of experts in paper-making, established the fact that this piece of paper is English, not Swiss. The string is English, made by a firm at Oldham, and, further, the box itself was impregnated with some deadly, but subtle drug, for a few hours after the missing man's father received it and opened it, he was seized by a sudden and mysterious illness which the doctors believed to be due to acute poisoning. For a fortnight he lay hovering between life and death, and is only just now out of danger. Again, while I myself was handling the box soon after it was brought to us, I was seized by a curious feeling, and almost collapsed. Therefore, it is evident that whoever sent this box to Captain MacBean intended to wreak some terrible revenge, by bringing death upon him by a most secret and devilish method. Therefore, if the young man has met with foul play, it is at the hands of enemies of his father. They sent the severed finger as proof of their triumph. That, ladies and gentlemen, is as far as we have been able to proceed up to the present."

A long and critical discussion followed, each point being dealt with by experts. Professor Lemelletier told the club that the amputation of the finger had been done by a skilled hand. Dr. Henri Plaud dealt with the theory of poison upon the box, and described two deadly substances that might have been used, but which would be harmless to anyone unless they had abrasions on their fingers, while Maître Tessier, the great lawyer, discussed the various motives which might have induced Captain MacBean's enemies to seize and murder his son.

The Baron further pointed out that while the packet might have been posted from the little town of Thun and bore Swiss stamps, it was a curious fact that the Captain was surcharged eightpence from the West Central district office in London.

"The question arises whether the packet was posted in Switzerland, or whether in London. The Thun postmark is simply a smudge, although a Swiss postal official recognised it as the obliterating mark of Thun," he went on. "We have to remember, too, that though the box is of German make, yet the wrappings and string are English, hence it seems possible that the box was posted in London, without pre-payment. You ask how that could be done? Easily. The box is sufficiently small to be dropped into any of the large post boxes at the chief offices, and would then be conveyed as a letter and surcharged."

This theory was accepted in place of any better one and, after a consultation lasting until two o'clock in the morning, it was decided to continue the investigations and unravel the mystery.

The Swiss police, in ignorance of the mystery of the signet-ring about which Captain MacBean had said nothing to anybody, because of his wife's mental condition, had long ago dismissed the affair as a fatal accident as, indeed, had everyone in the Bernese Oberland. The Crimes Club were, however, far from satisfied. Their habit was to take up cases which had baffled the police who, in turn, had set the public mind at rest.

To obtain any further clue of value in the case in question seemed an utterly forlorn hope. Maurice Jacquinot, the journalist, who had become quite well known in Interlaken, returned there, and again putting up at the Hôtel du Lac, set about watching Mariette Raeber. As his assistant he employed a young Swiss named Stutz, who kept an ever-watchful eye upon the girl's movements. But there was nothing suspicious about them, though her altitude was not that of a girl sorrowing for her lover. Indeed, she was seen at the Casino and at several local dances, where she apparently enjoyed herself.

Suddenly the affair assumed yet another and astounding phase. Mariette Raeber was missing from her home.

Her mother reported that she had gone out about one o'clock one day to meet a girl friend of hers named Rochs and go by the steamer up the Lake of Thun. But she had not returned. The girl Rochs declared that the appointment was only a pretence, as she had never promised to meet her. The crew of the lake steamer recollected her on board alone, but she had left at a little lake-side village called Gunten, a popular resort of the people of Thun. With what object?

The Swiss police ascertained that in the shady garden of the hotel which adjoins the landing-stage, she had sat for some ten minutes, until a car arrived and she joined a round-faced man of forty, who drove her off. That was the last seen or heard of her. The affair was now a complete mystery.

A special meeting of the Crimes Club was held in Paris when the whole puzzle was reviewed, and, further, a decision was arrived at.

A week after Mariette's disappearance, her mother received a typewritten message posted in Brussels and bearing no signature, as follows:

"To search for Mariette is useless. She will not be found until the mystery of Frank MacBean's death is solved."

The mother in great distress showed it to Fernande, who had again returned to Interlaken for a few days, and afterwards gave it over to the Swiss police. As soon as this message was known, the Baron d'Antenac took train from Paris to Brussels, the doctor, Plaud, accompanying him. There they held consultation with the Brussels police, who, in turn, strove to discover the missing girl, all, however, to no purpose. Meanwhile, Dubosq, the Chef de la Sûreté of Paris, ordered inquiries to be made all over France regarding her, just as he had done in the case of young MacBean.

The problem was rendered the more inscrutable by the news which Gordon Latimer received from Captain MacBean to the effect that a mysterious explosion had occurred at night in his house, which afterwards had taken fire, he having had a very narrow escape from death. It was, no doubt, a case of incendiarism. A second attempt had been made upon the life of the father of the missing man.

This caused the Crimes Club to redouble its efforts to solve the mystery, which had become a complete enigma with many ramifications. Jacquinot and Fernande returned from Interlaken, and the only member of the club absent from Paris was Maître Jean Tessier.

No further development occurred until nearly six weeks later. Lemelletier, pale and rather impatient, was one day shown into the private room of Monsieur Dubosq, at the Prefecture of Police in Paris. The dark-bearded Chef de la Sûreté greeted him warmly, but when he read a brief letter which the Professor handed him, he sat speechless and open-mouthed, in surprise.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed when he had recovered from his astonishment. "To-day is Thursday. We must act at once." And he glanced hurriedly at his watch. Then he took up his telephone and asked to be put on to the Prefect of Police at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

A few moments later his bell rang, and he gave some hurried instructions.

"Now we must await events," he remarked to the Professor. "The club should meet to-morrow night, if it can be arranged."

"I will see that the meeting is called," replied the other. "We will all be present." And he walked out, smiling with self-satisfaction.

On the following night at the large round table in the private room in the Café de l'Univers there assembled the secret council of ten. Dinner was over, and only coffee and liqueurs remained on the table when Dubosq rose, and said:

"I have to announce that, having received information from a certain member of the club, I have caused the arrest of two Chinese named Wou-fang and Le-K'an, on their arrival at Boulogne from Switzerland in connection with the Interlaken mystery. Those members engaged upon the independent inquiries held divers theories, one being that the girl Raeber knew more of her lover's disappearance than she cared to tell. For that reason our fellow-member, Maître Tessier, succeeded in enticing her from her home to Brussels, by means of a message purporting to come from young MacBean. At Brussels she was given comfortable quarters, but was made to understand that she would be held in bondage there until she revealed all she knew concerning her lover's disappearance. For weeks she remained obdurate, apparently fearing lest she might bring trouble upon him, though it was plain that she knew the truth. The Baron, Maître Tessier, Mademoiselle Fernande, and our friend Jacquinot, all interviewed her— Mademoiselle Fernande being her companion in her imprisonment— but she refused to say a word, until at last, she was told of the two dastardly attempts upon Captain MacBean's life. Then her lips became unsealed." He paused briefly, and, looking around the table, added: "I will now produce Mademoiselle Raeber and her lover, and they shall tell you their remarkable stories."

Jacquinot, at a sign from him, rose and unlocked the door. It was a dramatic moment when he conducted the pair to two chairs which Tessier drew forward for them.

Both were well dressed, but pale, wan and nervous.

Dubosq's first words were congratulatory, whereupon MacBean thanked them all for their untiring efforts on his behalf.

"I was the victim of a cunning plot formed by the enemies of my father for purposes of revenge," he said, in a rather low voice. "When I left the train at Scheidegg to take a photograph, I walked behind the station to obtain a view of the Eiger Mountain. A man who had travelled down from the Jungfrau with us also got out with his camera and began to chat about photography. In the meantime the train went off with Mariette. He was annoyed, as I was, that we had lost the train, but we started to walk down to Wengen, for we had an hour to wait for the next train. My companion was a charming, much travelled man, and at an hotel near the station at Wengen we had a drink together, when he suggested that we should walk still farther, right down to Lauterbrunnen, where we could take the train to Interlaken. I recollect arriving at

Lauterbrunnen station, where in a state of collapse, owing to some drug in the drink, I believe, I had to be assisted into a closed car that was waiting, and after that I knew no more until consciousness slowly returned, and I found myself in a small châlet on the side of a mountain, with the window and door securely fastened. My gaolers were two evil-looking Chinese who, though they treated me kindly, pretended not to understand any language but their own.

"I quickly realised that I had fallen into a trap. I at once feared Mariette would believe that I had committed suicide, because of a foolish story I had told her two days before in order to test her love for me— a fictitious story that I had embezzled a large sum of money at the bank, and asked her what I should do if it were discovered. She had believed me. I grew frantic at thoughts of her agony of mind, and because of the close confinement, but I managed at length to send a note to her through a young goat-herd who frequently passed the house, telling her of my whereabouts. Naturally, she pretended to assume that I was dead, in order to prevent any search being made for me. My captors had taken good care to leave my camera in the wood, so that it would point to either accident or suicide. As the long days passed my utter loneliness nearly drove me mad, for I had only a dog as companion and no exercise was allowed me. My small window looked up out upon a pasture where cows grazed, and beyond was a distant mountain. The motive of my capture was a complete puzzle until the elder of the Chinese, Wou-fang, told me that a powerful secret society of Canton, the sign of which is a golden grasshopper, and which had many murders to its discredit, had sworn to be revenged upon my father because, while in command of a gunboat during an insurrection, he had ordered the bombardment of a small town inhabited by Chinese. They had sent word to my father that I had fallen captive at their hands, and that they would submit me to all the terrible tortures known to the Chinese if he refused to make ample recompense to those injured by the gun-fire.

"Naturally, my father did not take it seriously, fully believing the police theory that I had fallen into the torrent. But when they took my ring from my finger and sent it to him upon a dead finger obtained from a hospital student who had it for dissection, he realised the extreme seriousness of the affair, and that the two agents of the Golden Grasshopper were intent on taking his life, as well as mine.

"Thanks to Mariette and to you all, I have been saved from the hideous tortures and ignominious end in store for me," he added. "She herself will tell you what occurred."

Rather shyly, the pretty, fair-haired Swiss girl said in her faulty French:

"All along I believed Frank to be a thief, as he foolishly told me he was. Therefore I did all I could to support the theory of accidental death, even when

I was shown the severed finger. One day I received a message purporting to come from him, telling me to meet a friend of his at Gunten, who would accompany me to him as he wanted to see me in secret. Judge my surprise when I found myself captive in the hands of three women at a house outside Brussels. The man who met me was, I now know, Maître Jean Tessier; the plot was one formed by him in order to worm from me where my lover was concealed. Many days went by, and I remained mute until I was told of the two attempts made upon the life of Frank's father, and how, if I divulged the secret, I should be the means of the culprit's punishment. So, somewhat reluctantly, I told all I knew, with the result that I was released. Frank was found in a lonely house on the mountainside near Grindelwald and released, while the two Chinamen fled towards London, being, however, arrested at Boulogne."

Champagne was soon afterwards brought, and the Council of Ten filled their glasses and drank to the future happiness of the young couple, the evening ending with great enthusiasm and conviviality.

Three months later Mariette was married to Frank in Edinburgh, where in the same week in the same city the two narrow-eyed Celestials were each sentenced to ten years' penal servitude for the attempted murder of Captain MacBean.

Thus ended the activity in Europe of the agents of The Golden Grasshopper.

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11: A Terribly Strange Bed

Wilkie Collins

1824-1889

Household Words, 24 April 1852

Collected in: *After Dark*, 1856

SHORTLY after my education at college was finished, I happened to be staying at Paris with an English friend. We were both young men then, and lived, I am afraid, rather a wild life, in the delightful city of our sojourn. One night we were idling about the neighborhood of the Palais Royal, doubtful to what amusement we should next betake ourselves. My friend proposed a visit to Frascati's; but his suggestion was not to my taste. I knew Frascati's, as the French saying is, by heart; had lost and won plenty of five-franc pieces there, merely for amusement's sake, until it was amusement no longer, and was thoroughly tired, in fact, of all the ghastly respectabilities of such a social anomaly as a respectable gambling-house.

"For Heaven's sake," said I to my friend, "let us go somewhere where we can see a little genuine, blackguard, poverty-stricken gaming, with no false gingerbread glitter thrown over it at all. Let us get away from fashionable Frascati's, to a house where they don't mind letting in a man with a ragged coat, or a man with no coat, ragged or otherwise."

"Very well," said my friend, "we needn't go out of the Palais Royal to find the sort of company you want. Here's the place just before us; as blackguard a place, by all report, as you could possibly wish to see."

In another minute we arrived at the door, and entered the house.

When we got upstairs, and had left our hats and sticks with the doorkeeper, we were admitted into the chief gambling-room. We did not find many people assembled there. But, few as the men were who looked up at us on our entrance, they were all types— lamentably true types— of their respective classes.

We had come to see blackguards; but these men were something worse. There is a comic side, more or less appreciable, in all blackguardism: here there was nothing but tragedy— mute, weird tragedy. The quiet in the room was horrible. The thin, haggard, long-haired young man, whose sunken eyes fiercely watched the turning up of the cards, never spoke; the flabby, fat-faced, pimply player, who pricked his piece of pasteboard perseveringly, to register how often black won, and how often red, never spoke; the dirty, wrinkled old man, with the vulture eyes and the darned greatcoat, who had lost his last sou, and still looked on desperately after he could play no longer, never spoke. Even the voice of the croupier sounded as if it were strangely dulled and thickened in the atmosphere of the room. I had entered the place to laugh, but the

spectacle before me was something to weep over. I soon found it necessary to take refuge in excitement from the depression of spirits which was fast stealing on me. Unfortunately I sought the nearest excitement, by going to the table and beginning to play. Still more unfortunately, as the event will show, I won— won prodigiously; won incredibly; won at such a rate that the regular players at the table crowded round me; and staring at my stakes with hungry, superstitious eyes, whispered to one another that the English stranger was going to break the bank.

The game was Rouge et Noir. I had played at it in every city in Europe, without, however, the care or the wish to study the Theory of Chances— that philosopher's stone of all gamblers! And a gambler, in the strict sense of the word, I had never been. I was heart-whole from the corroding passion for play. My gaming was a mere idle amusement. I never resorted to it by necessity, because I never knew what it was to want money. I never practised it so incessantly as to lose more than I could afford, or to gain more. than I could coolly pocket without being thrown off my balance by my good luck. In short, I had hitherto frequented gambling-tables— just as I frequented ball-rooms and opera-houses— because they amused me, and because I had nothing better to do with my leisure hours.

But on this occasion it was very different— now, for the first time in my life, I felt what the passion for play really was. My successes first bewildered, and then, in the most literal meaning of the word, intoxicated me. Incredible as it may appear, it is nevertheless true, that I only lost when I attempted to estimate chances, and played according to previous calculation. If I left everything to luck, and staked without any care or consideration, I was sure to win— to win in the face of every recognized probability in favor of the bank. At first some of the men present ventured their money safely enough on my color; but I speedily increased my stakes to sums which they dared not risk. One after another they left off playing, and breathlessly looked on at my game.

Still, time after time, I staked higher and higher, and still won. The excitement in the room rose to fever pitch. The silence was interrupted by a deep-muttered chorus of oaths and exclamations in different languages, every time the gold was shoveled across to my side of the table— even the imperturbable croupier dashed his rake on the floor in a (French) fury of astonishment at my success. But one man present preserved his self-possession, and that man was my friend. He came to my side, and whispering in English, begged me to leave the place, satisfied with what I had already gained. I must do him the justice to say that he repeated his warnings and entreaties several times, and only left me and went away, after I had rejected

his advice (I was to all intents and purposes gambling drunk) in terms which rendered it impossible for him to address me again that night.

Shortly after he had gone, a hoarse voice behind me cried, "Permit me, my dear sir— permit me to restore to their proper place two napoleons which you have dropped. Wonderful luck, sir! I pledge you my word of honor, as an old soldier, in the course of my long experience in this sort of thing, I never saw such luck as yours— never! Go on, sir— *Sucre mille bombes*! Go on boldly, and break the bank!"

I turned round and saw, nodding and smiling at me with inveterate civility, a tall man, dressed in a frogged and braided surtout.

If I had been in my senses, I should have considered him, personally, as being rather a suspicious specimen of an old soldier. He had goggling, bloodshot eyes, mangy mustaches, and a broken nose. His voice betrayed a barrack-room intonation of the worst order, and he had the dirtiest pair of hands I ever saw— even in France. These little personal peculiarities exercised, however, no repelling influence on me. In the mad excitement, the reckless triumph of that moment, I was ready to "fraternize" with anybody who encouraged me in my game. I accepted the old soldier's offered pinch of snuff; clapped him on the back, and swore he was the honestest fellow in the world— the most glorious relic of the Grand Army that I had ever met with. "Go on!" cried my military friend, snapping his fingers in ecstasy— "Go on, and win! Break the bank— *Mille tonnerres!* my gallant English comrade, break the bank!"

And I *did* go on— went on at such a rate, that in another quarter of an hour the croupier called out, "Gentlemen, the bank has discontinued for to-night." All the notes, and all the gold in that "bank," now lay in a heap under my hands; the whole floating capital of the gambling-house was waiting to pour into my pockets!

"Tie up the money in your pocket-handkerchief, my worthy sir," said the old soldier, as I wildly plunged my hands into my heap of gold. "Tie it up, as we used to tie up a bit of dinner in the Grand Army; your winnings are too heavy for any breeches-pockets that ever were sewed. There! that's it— shovel them in, notes and all! *Credie!* what luck! Stop! another napoleon on the floor. *Ah! sacre petit polisson de Napoleon!* have I found thee at last? Now then, sir— two tight double knots each way with your honorable permission, and the money's safe. Feel it! feel it, fortunate sir! hard and round as a cannon-ball— *A bas* if they had only fired such cannon-balls at us at Austerlitz— *nom d'une pipe*! if they only had! And now, as an ancient grenadier, as an ex-brave of the French army, what remains for me to do? I ask what? Simply this, to entreat

my valued English friend to drink a bottle of champagne with me, and toast the goddess Fortune in foaming goblets before we part!"

"Excellent ex-brave! Convivial ancient grenadier! Champagne by all means! An English cheer for an old soldier! Hurrah! hurrah! Another English cheer for the goddess Fortune! Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

"Bravo! the Englishman; the amiable, gracious Englishman, in whose veins circulates the vivacious blood of France! Another glass? *A bas!*— the bottle is empty! Never mind! *Vive le vin!* I, the old soldier, order another bottle, and half a pound of *bonbons* with it!"

"No, no, ex-brave; never— ancient grenadier! *Your* bottle last time; my bottle this! Behold it! Toast away! The French Army! the great Napoleon! the present company! the croupier! the honest croupier's wife and daughters— if he has any! the ladies generally! everybody in the world!"

By the time the second bottle of champagne was emptied, I felt as if I had been drinking liquid fire— my brain seemed all aflame. No excess in wine had ever had this effect on me before in my life. Was it the result of a stimulant acting upon my system when I was in a highly excited state? Was my stomach in a particularly disordered condition? Or was the champagne amazingly strong?

"Ex-brave of the French Army!" cried I, in a mad state of exhilaration, "*I* am on fire! how are you? You have set me on fire! Do you hear, my hero of Austerlitz? Let us have a third bottle of champagne to put the flame out!"

The old soldier wagged his head, rolled his goggle-eyes, until I expected to see them slip out of their sockets; placed his dirty forefinger by the side of his broken nose; solemnly ejaculated "Coffee!" and immediately ran off into an inner room.

The word pronounced by the eccentric veteran seemed to have a magical effect on the rest of the company present. With one accord they all rose to depart. Probably they had expected to profit by my intoxication; but finding that my new friend was benevolently bent on preventing me from getting dead drunk, had now abandoned all hope of thriving pleasantly on my winnings. Whatever their motive might be, at any rate they went away in a body. When the old soldier returned, and sat down again opposite to me at the table, we had the room to ourselves. I could see the croupier, in a sort of vestibule which opened out of it, eating his supper in solitude. The silence was now deeper than ever.

A sudden change, too, had come over the "ex-brave." He assumed a portentously solemn look; and when he spoke to me again, his speech was ornamented by no oaths, enforced by no finger-snapping, enlivened by no apostrophes or exclamations.

"Listen, my dear sir," said he, in mysteriously confidential tones— "listen to an old soldier's advice. I have been to the mistress of the house (a very charming woman, with a genius for cookery!) to impress on her the necessity of making us some particularly strong and good coffee. You must drink this coffee in order to get rid of your little amiable exaltation of spirits before you think of going home— you must, my good and gracious friend! With all that money to take home to-night, it is a sacred duty to yourself to have your wits about you. You are known to be a winner to an enormous extent by several gentlemen present to-night, who, in a certain point of view, are very worthy and excellent fellows; but they are mortal men, my dear sir, and they have their amiable weaknesses! Need I say more? Ah, no, no! you understand me! Now, this is what you must do— send for a cabriolet when you feel quite well again— draw up all the windows when you get into it— and tell the driver to take you home only through the large and well-lighted thoroughfares. Do this; and you and your money will be safe. Do this; and to-morrow you will thank an old soldier for giving you a word of honest advice."

Just as the ex-brave ended his oration in very lachrymose tones, the coffee came in, ready poured out in two cups. My attentive friend handed me one of the cups with a bow. I was parched with thirst, and drank it off at a draft. Almost instantly afterward I was seized with a fit of giddiness, and felt more completely intoxicated than ever. The room whirled round and round furiously; the old soldier seemed to be regularly bobbing up and down before me like the piston of a steam-engine. I was half deafened by a violent singing in my ears; a feeling of utter bewilderment, helplessness, idiocy, overcame me. I rose from my chair, holding on by the table to keep my balance; and stammered out that I felt dreadfully unwell— so unwell that I did not know how I was to get home.

"My dear friend," answered the old soldier— and even his voice seemed to be bobbing up and down as he spoke— "my dear friend, it would be madness to go home in *your* state; you would be sure to lose your money; you might be robbed and murdered with the greatest ease. *I* am going to sleep here: *do* you sleep here, too— they make up capital beds in this house— take one; sleep off the effects of the wine, and go home safely with your winnings to-morrow— to-morrow, in broad daylight."

I had but two ideas left: one, that I must never let go hold of my handkerchief full of money; the other, that I must lie down somewhere immediately, and fall off into a comfortable sleep. So I agreed to the proposal about the bed, and took the offered arm of the old soldier, carrying my money with my disengaged hand. Preceded by the croupier, we passed along some passages and up a flight of stairs into the bedroom which I was to occupy. The

ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand, proposed that we should breakfast together, and then, followed by the croupier, left me for the night.

I ran to the wash-hand stand; drank some of the water in my jug; poured the rest out, and plunged my face into it; then sat down in a chair and tried to compose myself. I soon felt better. The change for my lungs, from the fetid atmosphere of the gambling-room to the cool air of the apartment I now occupied, the almost equally refreshing change for my eyes, from the glaring gaslights of the "salon" to the dim, quiet flicker of one bedroom-candle, aided wonderfully the restorative effects of cold water. The giddiness left me, and I began to feel a little like a reasonable being again. My first thought was of the risk of sleeping all night in a gambling-house; my second, of the still greater risk of trying to get out after the house was closed, and of going home alone at night through the streets of Paris with a large sum of money about me. I had slept in worse places than this on my travels; so I determined to lock, bolt, and barricade my door, and take my chance till the next morning.

Accordingly, I secured myself against all intrusion; looked under the bed, and into the cupboard; tried the fastening of the window: and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing, put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood-ashes, and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

I soon felt not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake, and in a high fever. Every nerve in my body trembled— every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed and rolled, and tried every kind of position, and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, and all to no purpose. Now I thrust my arms over the clothes; now I poked them under the clothes; now I violently shot my legs straight out down to the bottom of the bed; now I convulsively coiled them up as near my chin as they would go; now I shook out my crumpled pillow, changed it to the cool side, patted it flat and lay down quietly on my back; now I fiercely doubled it in two, set it up on end, thrust it against the board of the bed, and tried a sitting posture. Every effort was in vain; I groaned with vexation as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read. And yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors; to rack my brain with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror.

I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room— which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window— to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments that I could at all clearly

distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of Le Maistre's delightful little book, "Voyage autour de ma Chambre," occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness, by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash-hand stand may be made to call forth.

In the nervous, unsettled state of my mind at that moment, I found it much easier to make my inventory than to make my reflections, and thereupon soon gave up all hope of thinking in Le Maistre's fanciful track— or, indeed, of thinking at all. I looked about the room at the different articles of furniture, and did nothing more.

There was, first, the bed I was lying in; a four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris— yes, a thorough clumsy British four-poster, with a regular top lined with chintz— the regular fringed valance all round— the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then there was the marble-topped wash-hand stand, from which the water I had spilled, in my hurry to pour it out, was still dripping, slowly and more slowly, on to the brick floor. Then two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat, and trousers flung on them. Then a large elbow-chair covered with dirty white dimity, with my cravat and shirt collar thrown over the back. Then a chest of drawers with two of the brass handles off, and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then the dressing-table, adorned by a very small looking-glass, and a very large pincushion. Then the window— an unusually large window. Then a dark old picture, which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers. A swarthy, sinister ruffian, looking upward, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently upward— it might be at some tall gallows on which he was going to be hanged. At any rate, he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward too— at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat— they stood out in relief— three white, two green. I observed the crown of his hat, which was of a conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favored by Guido Fawkes. I wondered what he was looking up at. It couldn't be at the stars; such a desperado was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the

executioner come into possession of his conical crowned hat and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again— three white, two green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment, my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England— the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. Every incident of the drive homeward, through lovely scenery, which the moonlight made lovelier than ever, came back to my remembrance, though I had never given the picnic a thought for years; though, if I had *tried* to recollect it, I could certainly have recalled little or nothing of that scene long past. Of all the wonderful faculties that help to tell us we are immortal, which speaks the sublime truth more eloquently than memory? Here was I, in a strange house of the most suspicious character, in a situation of uncertainty, and even of peril, which might seem to make the cool exercise of my recollection almost out of the question; nevertheless, remembering, quite involuntarily, places, people, conversations, minute circumstances of every kind, which I had thought forgotten forever; which I could not possibly have recalled at will, even under the most favorable auspices. And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect? Nothing but some rays of moonlight shining in at my bedroom window.

I was still thinking of the picnic— of our merriment on the drive home— of the sentimental young lady who *would* quote "Childe Harold" because it was moonlight. I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements, when, in an instant, the thread on which my memories hung snapped asunder; my attention immediately came back to present things more vividly than ever, and I found myself, I neither knew why nor wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what?

Good God! the man had pulled his hat down on his brows! No! the hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers— three white, two green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers, what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead, his eyes, his shading hand?

Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back and looked up. Was I mad? drunk? dreaming? giddy again? or was the top of the bed really moving down— sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly, right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth— right down upon me, as I lay underneath?

My blood seemed to stand still. A deadly, paralyzing coldness stole all over me as I turned my head round on the pillow and determined to test whether the bed-top was really moving or not, by keeping my eye on the man in the picture.

The next look in that direction was enough. The dull, black, frowzy outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly. And steadily and slowly— very slowly— I saw the figure, and the line of frame below the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, anything but timid. I have been on more than one occasion in peril of my life, and have not lost my self-possession for an instant; but when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed-top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up shuddering, helpless, panic-stricken, beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

I looked up, motionless, speechless, breathless. The candle, fully spent, went out; but the moonlight still brightened the room. Down and down, without pausing and without sounding, came the bed-top, and still my panic terror seemed to bind me faster and faster to the mattress on which I lay— down and down it sank, till the dusty odor from the lining of the canopy came stealing into my nostrils.

At that final moment the instinct of self-preservation startled me out of my trance, and I moved at last. There was just room for me to roll myself sidewise off the bed. As I dropped noiselessly to the floor, the edge of the murderous canopy touched me on the shoulder.

Without stopping to draw my breath, without wiping the cold sweat from my face, I rose instantly on my knees to watch the bed-top. I was literally spellbound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round; if a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended— the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down— down— close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me from beneath to be the ordinary light canopy of a four-post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amidst a dead and awful silence I beheld before me— in the nineteenth century, and in the civilized capital of France— such a machine for

secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move, I could hardly breathe, but I began to recover the power of thinking, and in a moment I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed, and had never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered at the bare idea of it.

But ere long all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed— as nearly as I could guess— about ten minutes, it began to move up again. The villains who worked it from above evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed-top rose toward its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen; the bed became in appearance an ordinary bed again— the canopy an ordinary canopy— even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move— to rise from my knees— to dress myself in my upper clothing— and to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed by the smallest noise that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking toward the door.

No! no footsteps in the passage outside— no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above— absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold as I thought of what its contents *might* be!) without making some disturbance was impossible; and, moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me— the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an entresol, and looked into the back street. I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung, by the merest hair-breadth, my chance of safety. They keep vigilant watch in a House of Murder. If any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge

creaked, I was a lost man! It must have occupied me at least five minutes, reckoning by time— five hours reckoning by suspense— to open that window. I succeeded in doing it silently— in doing it with all the dexterity of a house-breaker— and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me would be almost certain destruction! Next, I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side ran a thick water-pipe— it passed close by the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe, I knew I was saved. My breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me!

To some men the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough— to me the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed, by the practise of gymnastics, to keep up my schoolboy powers as a daring and expert climber; and knew that my head, hands, and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent or descent. I had already got one leg over the window-sill, when I remembered the handkerchief filled with money under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me, but I was revengefully determined that the miscreants of the gambling-house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat.

Just as I had made it tight and fixed it in a comfortable place, I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. No! dead silence still in the passage— I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment I was on the window-sill— and the next I had a firm grip on the water-pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off at the top of my speed to a branch "Prefecture" of Police, which I knew was situated in the immediate neighborhood. A "Sub-prefect," and several picked men among his subordinates, happened to be up, maturing, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story, in a breathless hurry and in very bad French, I could see that the Sub-prefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman who had robbed somebody; but he soon altered his opinion as I went on, and before I had anything like concluded, he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat, supplied me with another (for I was bareheaded), ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping up brick flooring, and took my arm, in the most friendly and familiar manner possible, to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say that when

the Sub-prefect was a little boy, and was taken for the first time to the play, he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the gambling-house!

Away we went through the streets, the Sub-prefect cross-examining and congratulating me in the same breath as we marched at the head of our formidable *posse comitatus*. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the house the moment we got to it, a tremendous battery of knocks was directed against the door; a light appeared at a window; I was told to conceal myself behind the police— then came more knocks, and a cry of "Open in the name of the law!" At that terrible summons bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand, and the moment after the Sub-prefect was in the passage, confronting a waiter half dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which immediately took place:

"We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in this house?"

"He went away hours ago."

"He did no such thing. His friend went away; *he* remained. Show us to his bedroom!"

"I swear to you, Monsieur le Sous-prefect, he is not here! he— "

"I swear to you, Monsieur le Garçon, he is. He slept here— he didn't find your bed comfortable— he came to us to complain of it— here he is among my men— and here am I ready to look for a flea or two in his bedstead. Renaudin! (calling to one of the subordinates, and pointing to the waiter), collar that man, and tie his hands behind him. Now, then, gentlemen, let us walk upstairs!"

Every man and woman in the house was secured— the "Old Soldier" the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept, and then we went into the room above.

No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The Sub-prefect looked round the place, commanded everybody to be silent, stamped twice on the floor, called for a candle, looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on, and ordered the flooring there to be carefully taken up. This was done in no time. Lights were produced, and we saw a deep raftered cavity between the floor of this room and the ceiling of the room beneath. Through this cavity there ran perpendicularly a sort of case of iron thickly greased; and inside the case appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed-top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled; levers covered with felt; all the complete upper works of a heavy press— constructed with infernal ingenuity so as to join the fixtures below, and when taken to pieces again to go into the smallest possible compass— were next discovered and pulled out on the floor. After some little difficulty the Sub-prefect succeeded in putting the machinery together, and, leaving his men to work it, descended with me to the bedroom.

The smothering canopy was then lowered, but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered. When I mentioned this to the Sub-prefect, his answer, simple as it was, had a terrible significance. "My men," said he, "are working down the bed-top for the first time— the men whose money you won were in better practise."

We left the house in the sole possession of two police agents— every one of the inmates being removed to prison on the spot. The Sub-prefect, after taking down my "procès verbal" in his office, returned with me to my hotel to get my passport. "Do you think," I asked, as I gave it to him, "that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother *me*?"

"I have seen dozens of drowned men laid out at the Morgue," answered the Sub-prefect, "in whose pocketbooks were found letters stating that they had committed suicide in the Seine, because they had lost everything at the gaming-table. Do I know how many of those men entered the same gambling-house that *you* entered? won as *you* won? took that bed as *you* took it? slept in it? were smothered in it? and were privately thrown into the river, with a letter of explanation written by the murderers and placed in their pocketbooks? No man can say how many or how few have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling-house kept their bedstead machinery a secret from us— even from the police! The dead kept the rest of the secret for them. Good-night, or rather good-morning, Monsieur Faulkner! Be at my office again at nine o'clock— in the meantime, au revoir!"

The rest of my story is soon told. I was examined and reexamined; the gambling-house was strictly searched all through from top to bottom; the prisoners were separately interrogated; and two of the less guilty among them made a confession. I discovered that the Old Soldier was the master of the gambling-house— *justice* discovered that he had been drummed out of the army as a vagabond years ago; that he had been guilty of all sorts of villainies since; that he was in possession of stolen property, which the owners identified; and that he, the croupier, another accomplice, and the woman who had made my cup of coffee, were all in the secret of the bedstead. There appeared some reason to doubt whether the inferior persons attached to the house knew anything of the suffocating machinery; and they received the benefit of that doubt, by being treated simply as thieves and vagabonds. As for the Old Soldier and his two head myrmidons, they went to the galleys; the woman who had drugged my coffee was imprisoned for I forget how many years; the regular attendants at the gambling-house were considered "suspicious," and placed under "surveillance"; and I became, for one whole week (which is a long time), the head "lion" in Parisian society. My adventure was dramatized by three illustrious play-makers, but never saw theatrical

daylight; for the censorship forbade the introduction on the stage of a correct copy of the gambling-house bedstead.

One good result was produced by my adventure, which any censorship must have approved: it cured me of ever again trying "Rouge et Noir" as an amusement. The sight of a green cloth, with packs of cards and heaps of money on it, will henceforth be forever associated in my mind with the sight of a bed canopy descending to suffocate me in the silence and darkness of the night.

12: The Rival Ghosts

Brander Matthews

1852-1929

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THE GOOD SHIP sped on her way across the calm Atlantic. It was an outward passage, according to the little charts which the company had charily distributed, but most of the passengers were homeward bound, after a summer of rest and recreation, and they were counting the days before they might hope to see Fire Island Light. On the lee side of the boat, comfortably sheltered from the wind, and just by the door of the captain's room (which was theirs during the day), sat a little group of returning Americans. The Duchess (she was on the purser's list as Mrs. Martin, but her friends and familiars called her the Duchess of Washington Square) and Baby Van Rensselaer (she was quite old enough to vote, had her sex been entitled to that duty, but as the younger of two sisters she was still the baby of the family)— the Duchess and Baby Van Rensselaer were discussing the pleasant English voice and the not unpleasant English accent of a manly young lordling who was going to America for sport. Uncle Larry and Dear Jones were enticing each other into a bet on the ship's run of the morrow.

"I'll give you two to one she don't make 420," said Dear Jones.

"I'll take it," answered Uncle Larry. "We made 427 the fifth day last year." It was Uncle Larry's seventeenth visit to Europe, and this was therefore his thirty-fourth voyage.

"And when did you get in?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer. "I don't care a bit about the run, so long as we get in soon."

"We crossed the bar Sunday night, just seven days after we left Queenstown, and we dropped anchor off Quarantine at three o'clock on Monday morning."

"I hope we shan't do that this time. I can't seem to sleep any when the boat stops."

"I can; but I didn't," continued Uncle Larry; "because my state-room was the most for'ard in the boat, and the donkey-engine that let down the anchor was right over my head."

"So you got up and saw the sunrise over the bay," said Dear Jones, "with the electric lights of the city twinkling in the distance, and the first faint flush of the dawn in the east just over Fort Lafayette, and the rosy tinge which spread softly upward, and—"

"Did you both come back together?" asked the Duchess.

"Because he has crossed thirty-four times you must not suppose that he has a monopoly in sunrises," retorted Dear Jones. "No, this was my own sunrise; and a mighty pretty one it was, too."

"I'm not matching sunrises with you," remarked Uncle Larry, calmly; "but I'm willing to back a merry jest called forth by my sunrise against any two merry jests called forth by yours."

"I confess reluctantly that my sunrise evoked no merry jest at all." Dear Jones was an honest man, and would scorn to invent a merry jest on the spur of the moment.

"That's where my sunrise has the call," said Uncle Larry, complacently.

"What was the merry jest?" was Baby Van Rensselaer's inquiry, the natural result of a feminine curiosity thus artistically excited.

"Well, here it is. I was standing aft, near a patriotic American and a wandering Irishman, and the patriotic American rashly declared that you couldn't see a sunrise like that anywhere in Europe, and this gave the Irishman his chance, and he said, 'Sure ye don't have 'em here till we're through with 'em over there.'"

"It is true," said Dear Jones, thoughtfully, "that they have some things over there better than we do; for instance, umbrellas."

"And gowns," added the Duchess.

"And antiquities,"— this was Uncle Larry's contribution.

"And we do have some things so much better in America!" protested Baby Van Rensselaer, as yet uncorrupted by any worship of the effete monarchies of despotic Europe. "We make lots of things a great deal nicer than you can get them in Europe— especially ice-cream."

"And pretty girls," added Dear Jones; but he did not look at her.

"And spooks," remarked Uncle Larry casually.

"Spooks?" queried the Duchess.

"Spooks. I maintain the word. Ghosts, if you like that better, or spectres. We turn out the best quality of spook—"

"You forget the lovely ghost stories about the Rhine, and the Black Forest," interrupted Miss Van Rensselaer, with feminine inconsistency.

"I remember the Rhine and the Black Forest and all the other haunts of elves and fairies and hobgoblins; but for good honest spooks there is no place like home. And what differentiates our spook— *Spiritus Americanus*— from the ordinary ghost of literature is that it responds to the American sense of humour. Take Irving's stories for example. *The Headless Horseman*, that's a comic ghost story. And Rip Van Winkle— consider what humour, and what good-humour, there is in the telling of his meeting with the goblin crew of

Kendrick Hudson's men! A still better example of this American way of dealing with legend and mystery is the marvelous tale of the rival ghosts."

"The rival ghosts?" queried the Duchess and Baby Van Rensselaer together. "Who were they?"

"Didn't I ever tell you about them?" answered Uncle Larry, a gleam of approaching joy flashing from his eye.

"Since he is bound to tell us sooner or later, we'd better be resigned and hear it now," said Dear Jones.

"If you are not more eager, I won't tell it at all."

"Oh, do, Uncle Larry; you know I just dote on ghost stories," pleaded Baby Van Rensselaer.

"ONCE UPON a time," began Uncle Larry— "in fact, a very few years ago— there lived in the thriving town of New York a young American called Duncan— Eliphalet Duncan. Like his name, he was half Yankee and half Scotch, and naturally he was a lawyer, and had come to New York to make his way. His father was a Scotchman, who had come over and settled in Boston, and married a Salem girl. When Eliphalet Duncan was about twenty he lost both of his parents. His father left him with enough money to give him a start, and a strong feeling of pride in his Scotch birth; you see there was a title in the family in Scotland, and although Eliphalet's father was the younger son of a younger son, yet he always remembered, and always bade his only son to remember, that his ancestry was noble. His mother left him her full share of Yankee grit, and a little house in Salem which has belonged to her family for more than two hundred years. She was a Hitchcock, and the Hitchcocks had been settled in Salem since the year 1. It was a great-great-grandfather of Mr. Eliphalet Hitchcock who was foremost in the time of the Salem witchcraft craze. And this little old house which she left to my friend Eliphalet Duncan was haunted."

"By the ghost of one of the witches, of course," interrupted Dear Jones.

"Now how could it be the ghost of a witch, since the witches were all burned at the stake? You never heard of anybody who was burned having a ghost, did you?"

"That's an argument in favour of cremation, at any rate," replied Jones, evading the direct question.

"It is, if you don't like ghosts; I do," said Baby Van Rensselaer.

"And so do I," added Uncle Larry. "I love a ghost as dearly as an Englishman loves a lord."

"Go on with your story," said the Duchess, majestically overruling all extraneous discussion.

"This little old house at Salem was haunted," resumed Uncle Larry. "And by a very distinguished ghost— or at least by a ghost with very remarkable attributes."

"What was he like?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer, with a premonitory shiver of anticipatory delight.

"It had a lot of peculiarities. In the first place, it never appeared to the master of the house. Mostly it confined its visitations to unwelcome guests. In the course of the last hundred years it had frightened away four successive mothers-in-law, while never intruding on the head of the household."

"I guess that ghost had been one of the boys when he was alive and in the flesh." This was Dear Jones's contribution to the telling of the tale.

"In the second place," continued Uncle Larry, "it never frightened anybody the first time it appeared. Only on the second visit were the ghost-seers scared; but then they were scared enough for twice, and they rarely mustered up courage enough to risk a third interview. One of the most curious characteristics of this well-meaning spook was that it had no face— or at least that nobody ever saw its face."

"Perhaps he kept his countenance veiled?" queried the Duchess, who was beginning to remember that she never did like ghost stories.

"That was what I was never able to find out. I have asked several people who saw the ghost, and none of them could tell me anything about its face, and yet while in its presence they never noticed its features, and never remarked on their absence or concealment. It was only afterward when they tried to recall calmly all the circumstances of meeting with the mysterious stranger, that they became aware that they had not seen its face. And they could not say whether the features were covered, or whether they were wanting, or what the trouble was. They knew only that the face was never seen. And no matter how often they might see it, they never fathomed this mystery. To this day nobody knows whether the ghost which used to haunt the little old house in Salem had a face, or what manner of face it had."

"How awfully weird!" said Baby Van Rensselaer. "And why did the ghost go away?"

"I haven't said it went away," answered Uncle Larry, with much dignity.

"But you said it *used* to haunt the little old house at Salem, so I supposed it had moved. Didn't it?"

"You shall be told in due time. Eliphalet Duncan used to spend most of his summer vacations at Salem, and the ghost never bothered him at all, for he was the master of the house— much to his disgust, because he wanted to see for himself the mysterious tenant at will of his property. But he never saw it, never. He arranged with friends to call him whenever it might appear, and he

slept in the next room with the door open; and yet when their frightened cries waked him the ghost was gone, and his only reward was to hear reproachful sighs as soon as he went back to bed. You see, the ghost thought it was not fair of Eliphalet to seek an introduction which was plainly unwelcome."

Dear Jones interrupted the story-teller by getting up and tucking a heavy rug snugly around Baby Van Rensselaer's feet, for the sky was now overcast and gray and the air was damp and penetrating.

"One fine spring morning," pursued Uncle Larry, "Eliphalet Duncan received great news. I told you that there was a title in the family in Scotland, and that Eliphalet's father was the younger son of a younger son. Well, it happened that all Eliphalet's father's brothers and uncles had died off without male issue except the eldest son of the eldest, and he, of course, bore the title, and was Baron Duncan of Duncan. Now the great news that Eliphalet Duncan received in New York one fine spring morning was that Baron Duncan and his only son had been yachting in the Hebrides, and they had been caught in a black squall, and they were both dead. So my friend Eliphalet Duncan inherited the title and the estates."

"How romantic!" said the Duchess. "So he was a baron!"

"Well," answered Uncle Larry, "he was a baron if he chose. But he didn't choose."

"More fool he," said Dear Jones sententiously.

"Well," answered Uncle Larry, "I'm not so sure of that. You see, Eliphalet Duncan was half Scotch and half Yankee, and he had two eyes to the main chance. He held his tongue about his windfall of luck until he could find out whether the Scotch estates were enough to keep up the Scotch title. He soon discovered that they were not, and that the late Lord Duncan, having married money, kept up such state as he could out of the revenues of the dowry of Lady Duncan. And Eliphalet, he decided that he would rather be a well-fed lawyer in New York, living comfortably on his practice, than a starving lord in Scotland, living scantily on his title."

"But he kept his title?" asked the Duchess.

"Well," answered Uncle Larry, "he kept it quiet. I knew it, and a friend or two more. But Eliphalet was a sight too smart to put Baron Duncan of Duncan, Attorney and Counsellor at Law, on his shingle."

"What has all this got to do with your ghost?" asked Dear Jones pertinently.

"Nothing with that ghost, but a good deal with another ghost. Eliphalet was very learned in spirit lore— perhaps because he owned the haunted house at Salem, perhaps because he was a Scotchman by descent. At all events, he had made a special study of the wraiths and white ladies and banshees and bogies of all kinds whose sayings and doings and warnings are recorded in the annals

of the Scottish nobility. In fact, he was acquainted with the habits of every reputable spook in the Scotch peerage. And he knew that there was a Duncan ghost attached to the person of the holder of the title of Baron Duncan of Duncan."

"So, besides being the owner of a haunted house in Salem, he was also a haunted man in Scotland?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer.

"Just so. But the Scotch ghost was not unpleasant, like the Salem ghost, although it had one peculiarity in common with its trans-Atlantic fellow-spook. It never appeared to the holder of the title, just as the other never was visible to the owner of the house. In fact, the Duncan ghost was never seen at all. It was a guardian angel only. Its sole duty was to be in personal attendance on Baron Duncan of Duncan, and warn him of impending evil. The traditions of the house told that the Barons of Duncan had again and again felt a premonition of ill fortune. Some of them had yielded and withdrawn from the venture they had undertaken, and it had failed dismally. Some had been obstinate, and had hardened their hearts, and had gone on reckless of defeat and to death. In no case had a Lord Duncan been exposed to peril without fair warning."

"Then how came it that the father and son were lost in the yacht off the Hebrides?" asked Dear Jones.

"Because they were too enlightened to yield to superstition. There is extant now a letter of Lord Duncan, written to his wife a few minutes before he and his son set sail, in which he tells her how hard he had to struggle with an almost overmastering desire to give up the trip. Had he obeyed the friendly warning of the family ghost, the latter would have been spared a journey across the Atlantic."

"Did the ghost leave Scotland for America as soon as the old baron died?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer, with much interest.

"How did he come over," queried Dear Jones— "in the steerage, or as a cabin passenger?"

"I don't know," answered Uncle Larry calmly, "and Eliphalet, he didn't know. For as he was in danger, and stood in no need of warning, he couldn't tell whether the ghost was on duty or not. Of course he was on the watch for it all the time. But he never got any proof of its presence until he went down to the little old house of Salem, just before the Fourth of July. He took a friend down with him— a young fellow who had been in the regular army since the day Fort Sumter was fired on, and who thought that after four years of the little unpleasantness down South, including six months in Libby, and after ten years of fighting the bad Indians on the plains, he wasn't likely to be much frightened by a ghost. Well, Eliphalet and the officer sat out on the porch all the evening smoking and talking over points in military law. A little after twelve

o'clock, just as they began to think it was about time to turn in, they heard the most ghastly noise in the house. It wasn't a shriek, or a howl, or a yell, or anything they could put a name to. It was an indeterminate, inexplicable shiver and shudder of sound, which went wailing out of the window. The officer had been at Cold Harbor, but he felt himself getting colder this time. Eliphalet knew it was the ghost who haunted the house. As this weird sound died away, it was followed by another, sharp, short, blood-curdling in its intensity. Something in this cry seemed familiar to Eliphalet, and he felt sure that it proceeded from the family ghost, the warning wraith of the Duncans."

"Do I understand you to intimate that both ghosts were there together?" inquired the Duchess anxiously.

"Both of them were there," answered Uncle Larry. "You see, one of them belonged to the house and had to be there all the time, and the other was attached to the person of Baron Duncan, and had to follow him there; wherever he was there was the ghost also. But Eliphalet, he had scarcely time to think this out when he heard both sounds again, not one after another, but both together, and something told him— some sort of an instinct he had— that those two ghosts didn't agree, didn't get on together, didn't exactly hit it off; in fact, that they were quarreling."

"Quarreling ghosts! Well, I never!" was Baby Van Rensselaer's remark.

"It is a blessed thing to see ghosts dwell together in unity," said Dear Jones.

And the Duchess added, "It would certainly be setting a better example."

"You know," resumed Uncle Larry, "that two waves of light or of sound may interfere and produce darkness or silence. So it was with these rival spooks. They interfered, but they did not produce silence or darkness. On the contrary, as soon as Eliphalet and the officer went into the house, there began at once a series of spiritualistic manifestations, a regular dark séance. A tambourine was played upon, a bell was rung, and a flaming banjo went singing around the room."

"Where did they get the banjo?" asked Dear Jones sceptically.

"I don't know. Materialized it, maybe, just as they did the tambourine. You don't suppose a quiet New York lawyer kept a stock of musical instruments large enough to fit out a strolling minstrel troupe just on the chance of a pair of ghosts coming to give him a surprise party, do you? Every spook has its own instrument of torture. Angels play on harps, I'm informed, and spirits delight in banjos and tambourines. These spooks of Eliphalet Duncan's were ghosts with all the modern improvements, and I guess they were capable of providing their own musical weapons. At all events, they had them there in the little old house at Salem the night Eliphalet and his friend came down. And they played on

them and they rang the bell, and they rapped here, there, and everywhere. And they kept it up all night."

"All night?" asked the awe-stricken Duchess.

"All night long," said Uncle Larry solemnly; "and the next night, too. Eliphalet did not get a wink of sleep, neither did his friend. On the second night the house ghost was seen by the officer; on the third night it showed itself again; and the next morning the officer packed his grip-sack and took the first train to Boston. He was a New Yorker, but he said he'd sooner go to Boston than see that ghost again. Eliphalet, he wasn't scared at all, partly because he never saw either the domiciliary or the titular spook, and partly because he felt himself on friendly terms with the spirit world, and didn't scare easily. But after losing three nights' sleep and the society of his friend, he began to be a little impatient, and to think that the thing had gone far enough. You see, while in a way he was fond of ghosts, yet he liked them best one at a time. Two ghosts were one too many. He wasn't bent on making a collection of spooks. He and one ghost were company, but he and two ghosts were a crowd."

"What did he do?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer.

"Well, he couldn't do anything. He waited awhile, hoping they would get tired; but he got tired out first. You see, it comes natural to a spook to sleep in the daytime, but a man wants to sleep nights, and they wouldn't let him sleep nights. They kept on wrangling and quarreling incessantly; they manifested and they dark-séanced as regularly as the old clock on the stairs struck twelve; they rapped and they rang bells and they banged the tambourine and they threw the flaming banjo about the house, and worse than all, they swore."

"I did not know that spirits were addicted to bad language," said the Duchess.

"How did he know they were swearing? Could he hear them?" asked Dear Jones.

"That was just it," responded Uncle Larry; "he could not hear them— at least not distinctly. There were inarticulate murmurs and stifled rumblings. But the impression produced on him was that they were swearing. If they had only sworn right out, he would not have minded it so much, because he would have known the worst. But the feeling that the air was full of suppressed profanity was very wearing and after standing it for a week, he gave up in disgust and went to the White Mountains."

"Leaving them to fight it out, I suppose," interjected Baby Van Rensselaer.

"Not at all," explained Uncle Larry. "They could not quarrel unless he was present. You see, he could not leave the titular ghost behind him, and the domiciliary ghost could not leave the house. When he went away he took the

family ghost with him leaving the house ghost behind. Now spooks can't quarrel when they are a hundred miles apart any more than men can."

"And what happened afterward?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer, with a pretty impatience.

"A most marvelous thing happened. Eliphalet Duncan went to the White Mountains, and in the car of the railroad that runs to the top of Mount Washington he met a classmate whom he had not seen for years, and this classmate introduced Duncan to his sister, and this sister was a remarkably pretty girl, and Duncan fell in love with her at first sight, and by the time he got to the top of Mount Washington he was so deep in love that he began to consider his own unworthiness, and to wonder whether she might ever be induced to care for him a little— ever so little."

"I don't think that is so marvelous a thing," said Dear Jones glancing at Baby Van Rensselaer.

"Who was she?" asked the Duchess, who had once lived in Philadelphia.

"She was Miss Kitty Sutton, of San Francisco, and she was a daughter of old Judge Sutton, of the firm of Pixley and Sutton."

"A very respectable family," assented the Duchess.

"I hope she wasn't a daughter of that loud and vulgar old Mrs. Sutton whom I met at Saratoga, one summer, four or five years ago?" said Dear Jones.

"Probably she was."

"She was a horrid old woman. The boys used to call her Mother Gorgon."

"The pretty Kitty Sutton with whom Eliphalet Duncan had fallen in love was the daughter of Mother Gorgon. But he never saw the mother, who was in 'Frisco, or Los Angeles, or Santa Fe, or somewhere out West, and he saw a great deal of the daughter, who was up in the White Mountains. She was traveling with her brother and his wife, and as they journeyed from hotel to hotel, Duncan went with them, and filled out the quartette. Before the end of the summer he began to think about proposing. Of course he had lots of chances, going on excursions as they were every day. He made up his mind to seize the first opportunity, and that very evening he took her out for a moonlight row on Lake Winnipiseogee. As he handed her into the boat he resolved to do it, and he had a glimmer of a suspicion that she knew he was going to do it, too."

"Girls," said Dear Jones, "never go out in a row-boat at night with a young man unless you mean to accept him."

"Sometimes it's best to refuse him, and get it over once for all," said Baby Van Rensselaer.

"As Eliphalet took the oars he felt a sudden chill. He tried to shake it off, but in vain. He began to have a growing consciousness of impending evil.

Before he had taken ten strokes— and he was a swift oarsman— he was aware of a mysterious presence between him and Miss Sutton."

"Was it the guardian-angel ghost warning him off the match?" interrupted Dear Jones.

"That's just what it was," said Uncle Larry. "And he yielded to it, and kept his peace, and rowed Miss Sutton back to the hotel with his proposal unspoken."

"More fool he," said Dear Jones. "It will take more than one ghost to keep me from proposing when my mind is made up." And he looked at Baby Van Rensselaer.

"The next morning," continued Uncle Larry, "Eliphalet overslept himself, and when he went down to a late breakfast he found that the Suttons had gone to New York by the morning train. He wanted to follow them at once, and again he felt the mysterious presence overpowering his will. He struggled two days, and at last he roused himself to do what he wanted in spite of the spook. When he arrived in New York it was late in the evening. He dressed himself hastily and went to the hotel where the Suttons put up, in the hope of seeing at least her brother. The guardian angel fought every inch of the walk with him, until he began to wonder whether, if Miss Sutton were to take him, the spook would forbid the banns. At the hotel he saw no one that night, and he went home determined to call as early as he could the next afternoon, and make an end of it. When he left his office about two o'clock the next day to learn his fate, he had not walked five blocks before he discovered that the wraith of the Duncans had withdrawn his opposition to the suit. There was no feeling of impending evil, no resistance, no struggle, no consciousness of an opposing presence. Eliphalet was greatly encouraged. He walked briskly to the hotel; he found Miss Sutton alone. He asked her the question, and got his answer."

"She accepted him, of course," said Baby Van Rensselaer.

"Of course," said Uncle Larry. "And while they were in the first flush of joy, swapping confidences and confessions, her brother came into the parlour with an expression of pain on his face and a telegram in his Frisco hand. The former was caused by the latter, which was from 'Frisco, and which announced the sudden death of Mrs. Sutton, their mother."

"And that was why the ghost no longer opposed the match?" questioned Dear Jones.

"Exactly. You see, the family ghost knew that Mother Gorgon was an awful obstacle to Duncan's happiness, so it warned him. But the moment the obstacle was removed, it gave its consent at once."

The fog was lowering its thick damp curtain, and it was beginning to be difficult to see from one end of the boat to the other. Dear Jones tightened the rug which enwrapped Baby Van Rensselaer, and then withdrew again into his own substantial coverings.

Uncle Larry paused in his story long enough to light another of the tiny cigars he always smoked.

"I infer that Lord Duncan"— the Duchess was scrupulous in the bestowal of titles— "saw no more of the ghosts after he was married."

"He never saw them at all, at any time, either before or since. But they came very near breaking off the match, and thus breaking two young hearts."

"You don't mean to say that they knew any just cause or impediment why they should not forever after hold their peace?" asked Dear Jones.

"How could a ghost, or even two ghosts, keep a girl from marrying the man she loved?" This was Baby Van Rensselaer's question.

"It seems curious, doesn't it?" and Uncle Larry tried to warm himself by two or three sharp pulls at his fiery little cigar. "And the circumstances are quite as curious as the fact itself. You see, Miss Sutton wouldn't be married for a year after her mother's death, so she and Duncan had lots of time to tell each other all they knew. Eliphalet, he got to know a good deal about the girls she went to school with, and Kitty, she learned all about his family. He didn't tell her about the title for a long time, as he wasn't one to brag. But he described to her the little old house at Salem. And one evening toward the end of the summer, the wedding-day having been appointed for early in September, she told him that she didn't want to bridal tour at all; she just wanted to go down to the little old house at Salem to spend her honeymoon in peace and quiet, with nothing to do and nobody to bother them. Well, Eliphalet jumped at the suggestion. It suited him down to the ground. All of a sudden he remembered the spooks, and it knocked him all of a heap. He had told her about the Duncan Banshee, and the idea of having an ancestral ghost in personal attendance on her husband tickled her immensely. But he had never said anything about the ghost which haunted the little old house at Salem. He knew she would be frightened out of her wits if the house ghost revealed itself to her, and he saw at once that it would be impossible to go to Salem on their wedding trip. So he told her all about it, and how whenever he went to Salem the two ghosts interfered, and gave dark séances and manifested and materialised and made the place absolutely impossible. Kitty, she listened in silence, and Eliphalet, he thought she had changed her mind. But she hadn't done anything of the kind."

"Just like a man— to think she was going to," remarked Baby Van Rensselaer.

"She just told him she could not bear ghosts herself, but she would not marry a man who was afraid of them."

"Just like a girl— to be so inconsistent," remarked Dear Jones.

Uncle Larry's tiny cigar had long been extinct. He lighted a new one, and continued: "Eliphalet protested in vain. Kitty said her mind was made up. She was determined to pass her honeymoon in the little old house at Salem, and she was equally determined not to go there as long as there were any ghosts there. Until he could assure her that the spectral tenants had received notice to quit, and that there was no danger of manifestations and materialising, she refused to be married at all. She did not intend to have her honeymoon interrupted by two wrangling ghosts, and the wedding could be postponed until he had made ready the house for her."

"She was an unreasonable young woman," said the Duchess.

"Well, that's what Eliphalet thought, much as he was in love with her. And he believed he could talk her out of her determination. But he couldn't. She was set. And when a girl is set, there's nothing to do but yield to the inevitable. And that's just what Eliphalet did. He saw he would either have to give her up or to get the ghosts out; and as he loved her and did not care for the ghosts, he resolved to tackle the ghosts. He had clear grit, Eliphalet had— he was half Scotch and half Yankee, and neither breed turns tail in a hurry. So he made his plans and he went down to Salem. As he said good-bye to Kitty he had an impression that she was sorry she had made him go, but she kept up bravely, and put a bold face on it, and saw him off, and went home and cried for an hour, and was perfectly miserable until he came back the next day."

"Did he succeed in driving the ghosts away?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer, with great interest.

"That's just what I'm coming to," said Uncle Larry, pausing at the critical moment, in the manner of the trained story teller. "You see, Eliphalet had got a rather tough job, and he would gladly have had an extension of time on the contract, but he had to choose between the girl and the ghosts, and he wanted the girl. He tried to invent or remember some short and easy way with ghosts, but he couldn't. He wished that somebody had invented a specific for spooks— something that would make the ghosts come out of the house and die in the yard."

"What did he do?" interrupted Dear Jones. "The learned counsel will please speak to the point."

"You will regret this unseemly haste," said Uncle Larry, gravely, "when you know what really happened."

"What was it, Uncle Larry?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer. "I'm all impatience."

And Uncle Larry proceeded:

"Eliphalet went down to the little old house at Salem, and as soon as the clock struck twelve the rival ghosts began wrangling as before. Raps here, there, and everywhere, ringing bells, banging tambourines, strumming banjos sailing about the room, and all the other manifestations and materializations followed one another just as they had the summer before. The only difference Eliphalet could detect was a stronger flavour in the spectral profanity; and this, of course, was only a vague impression, for he did not actually hear a single word. He waited awhile in patience, listening and watching. Of course he never saw either of the ghosts, because neither of them could appear to him. At last he got his dander up, and he thought it was about time to interfere, so he rapped on the table, and asked for silence. As soon as he felt that the spooks were listening to him he explained the situation to them. He told them he was in love, and that he could not marry unless they vacated the house. He appealed to them as old friends, and he laid claim to their gratitude. The titular ghost had been sheltered by the Duncan family for hundreds of years, and the domiciliary ghost had had free lodging in the little old house at Salem for nearly two centuries. He implored them to settle their differences, and to get him out of his difficulty at once. He suggested they'd better fight it out then and there, and see who was master. He had brought down with him the needful weapons. And he pulled out his valise, and spread on the table a pair of navy revolvers, a pair of shot-guns, a pair of duelling swords, and a couple of bowie-knives. He offered to serve as second for both parties, and to give the word when to begin. He also took out of his valise a pack of cards and a bottle of poison, telling them that if they wished to avoid carnage they might cut the cards to see which one should take the poison. Then he waited anxiously for their reply. For a little space there was silence. Then he became conscious of a tremulous shivering in one corner of the room, and he remembered that he had heard from that direction what sounded like a frightened sigh when he made the first suggestion of the duel. Something told him that this was the domiciliary ghost, and that it was badly scared. Then he was impressed by a certain movement in the opposite corner of the room, as though the titular ghost were drawing himself up with offended dignity. Eliphalet couldn't exactly see these things, because he never saw the ghosts, but he felt them. After a silence of nearly a minute a voice came from the corner where the family ghost stood— a voice strong and full, but trembling slightly with suppressed passion. And this voice told Eliphalet it was plain enough that he had not long been the head of the Duncans, and that he had never properly considered the characteristics of his race if now he supposed that one of his blood could draw his sword against a woman. Eliphalet said he had never suggested that the

Duncan ghost should raise his hand against a woman and all he wanted was that the Duncan ghost should fight the other ghost. And then the voice told Eliphalet that the other ghost was a woman."

"What?" said Dear Jones, sitting up suddenly. "You don't mean to tell me that the ghost which haunted the house was a woman?"

"Those were the very words Eliphalet Duncan used," said Uncle Larry; "but he did not need to wait for the answer. All at once he recalled the traditions about the domiciliary ghost, and he knew that what the titular ghost said was the fact. He had never thought of the sex of a spook, but there was no doubt whatever that the house ghost was a woman. No sooner was this firmly fixed in Eliphalet's mind than he saw his way out of the difficulty. The ghosts must be married!— for then there would be no more interference, no more quarrelling, no more manifestations and materializations, no more dark séances, with their raps and bells and tambourines and banjos. At first the ghosts would not hear of it. The voice in the corner declared that the Duncan wraith had never thought of matrimony. But Eliphalet argued with them, and pleaded and persuaded and coaxed, and dwelt on the advantages of matrimony. He had to confess, of course, that he did not know how to get a clergyman to marry them; but the voice from the corner gravely told him that there need be no difficulty in regard to that, as there was no lack of spiritual chaplains. Then, for the first time, the house ghost spoke, in a low, clear gentle voice, and with a quaint, old-fashioned New England accent, which contrasted sharply with the broad Scotch speech of the family ghost. She said that Eliphalet Duncan seemed to have forgotten that she was married. But this did not upset Eliphalet at all; he remembered the whole case clearly and he told her she was not a married ghost, but a widow, since her husband had been hung for murdering her. Then the Duncan ghost drew attention to the great disparity of their ages, saying that he was nearly four hundred and fifty years old, while she was barely two hundred. But Eliphalet had not talked to juries for nothing; he just buckled to, and coaxed those ghosts into matrimony. Afterward he came to the conclusion that they were willing to be coaxed, but at the time he thought he had pretty hard work to convince them of the advantages of the plan."

"Did he succeed?" asked Baby Van Rensselaer, with a young lady's interest in matrimony.

"He did," said Uncle Larry. "He talked the wraith of the Duncans and the spectre of the little old house at Salem into a matrimonial engagement. And from the time they were engaged he had no more trouble with them. They were rival ghosts no longer. They were married by their spiritual chaplain the very same day that Eliphalet Duncan met Kitty Sutton in front of the railing of

Grace Church. The ghostly bride and bridegroom went away at once on their bridal tour, and Lord and Lady Duncan went down to the little old house at Salem to pass their honeymoon."

UNCLE LARRY stopped. His tiny cigar was out again. The tale of the rival ghosts was told. A solemn silence fell on the little party on the deck of the ocean steamer, broken harshly by the hoarse roar of the fog-horn.

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13: The Case of the "Flitterbat Lancers"

Arthur Morrison

1863-1945

The Windsor Magazine, April 1896

IT WAS LATE on a summer evening, two or three years back, that I drowsed in my armchair over a particularly solid and ponderous volume of essays on social economy. I was doing a good deal of reviewing at the time, and I remember that this particular volume had a property of such exceeding toughness that I had already made three successive attacks on it, on as many successive evenings, each attack having been defeated in the end by sleep. The weather was hot, my chair was very comfortable, and the book had somewhere about its strings of polysyllables an essence as of laudanum. Still something had been done on each evening, and now on the fourth I strenuously endeavoured to finish the book. I was just beginning to feel that the words before me were sliding about and losing their meanings, when a sudden crash and a jingle of broken glass behind me woke me with a start, and I threw the book down. A pane of glass in my window was smashed, and I hurried across and threw up the sash to see, if I could, whence the damage had come.

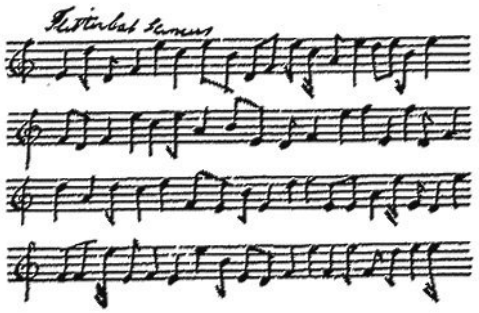
The building in which my chambers (and Martin Hewitt's office) were situated was accessible— or rather visible, for there was no entrance— from the rear. There was, in fact, a small courtyard, reached by a passage from the street behind, and into this courtyard, my sitting-room window looked.

"Hullo, there!" I shouted. But there came no reply. Nor could I distinguish anybody in the courtyard. Some men had been at work during the day on a drainpipe, and I reflected that probably their litter had provided the stone with which my window had been smashed. As I looked, however, two men came hurrying from the passage into the court, and going straight into the deep shadow of one corner, presently appeared again in a less obscure part, hauling forth a third man, who must have already been there in hiding. The third man struggled fiercely, but without avail, and was dragged across toward the passage leading to the street beyond. But the most remarkable feature of the whole thing was the silence of all three men. No cry, no exclamation, escaped any of them. In perfect silence the two hauled the third across the courtyard, and in perfect silence he swung and struggled to resist and escape. The matter astonished me not a little, and the men were entering the passage before I found voice to shout at them. But they took no notice, and disappeared. Soon after I heard cab wheels in the street beyond, and had no doubt that the two men had carried off their prisoner. I turned back into my room a little perplexed. It seemed probable that the man who had been borne off had broken my window. But why? I looked about on the floor, and presently found

the missile. It was, as I had expected, a piece of broken concrete, but it was wrapped up in a worn piece of paper, which had partly opened out as it lay on my carpet, thus indicating that it had just been crumpled round the stone.

I disengaged the paper and spread it out. Then I saw it to be a rather hastily written piece of manuscript music, whereof I append a reduced facsimile:

This gave me no help. I turned the paper this way and that, but could make nothing of it. There was not a mark on it that I could discover, except the music and the scrawled title, "Flitterbat Lancers," at the top.



The paper was old, dirty, and cracked. What did it all mean? One might conceive of a person in certain circumstances sending a message— possibly an appeal for help— through a friend's window, wrapped round a stone, but this seemed to be nothing of that sort.

Once more I picked up the paper, and with an idea to hear what the Flitterbat Lancers sounded like, I turned to my little pianette and strummed over the notes, making my own time and changing it as seemed likely. But I could by no means extract from the notes anything resembling an air. I half thought of trying Martin Hewitt's office door, in case he might still be there and offer a guess at the meaning of my smashed window and the scrap of paper, when Hewitt himself came in. He had stayed late to examine a bundle of papers in connection with a case just placed in his hands, and now, having finished, came to find if I were disposed for an evening stroll before turning in. I handed him the paper and the piece of concrete, observing, "There's a little job for you, Hewitt, instead of the stroll." And I told him the complete history of my smashed window.

Hewitt listened attentively, and examined both the paper and the fragment of paving. "You say these people made absolutely no sound whatever?" he asked.

"None but that of scuffling, and even that they seemed to do quietly."

"Could you see whether or not the two men gagged the other, or placed their hands over his mouth?"

"No, they certainly didn't do that. It was dark, of course, but not so dark as to prevent my seeing generally what they were doing."

Hewitt stood for half a minute in thought, and then said, "There's something in this, Brett— what, I can't guess at the moment, but something deep, I fancy. Are you sure you won't come out now?"

I told Hewitt that I was sure, and that I should stick to my work.

"Very well," he said; "then perhaps you will lend me these articles?" holding up the paper and the stone.

"Delighted," I said. "If you get no more melody out of the clinker than I did out of the paper, you won't have a musical evening. Goodnight!"

Hewitt went away with the puzzle in his hand, and I turned once more to my social economy, and, thanks to the gentleman who smashed my window, conquered.

At this time my only regular daily work was on an evening paper so that I left home at a quarter to eight on the morning following the adventure of my broken window, in order, as usual, to be at the office at eight; consequently it was not until lunchtime that I had an opportunity of seeing Hewitt. I went to my own rooms first, however, and on the landing by my door I found the housekeeper in conversation with a shortish, sun-browned man, whose accent at once convinced me that he hailed from across the Atlantic. He had called, it appeared, three or four times during the morning to see me, getting more impatient each time. As he did not seem even to know my name, the housekeeper had not considered it expedient to give him any information about me, and he was growing irascible under the treatment. When I at last appeared, however, he left her and approached me eagerly.

"See here, sir," he said, "I've been stumpin' these here durn stairs o' yours half through the mornin'. I'm anxious to apologize, and fix up some damage."

He had followed me into my sitting-room, and was now standing with his back to the fireplace, a dripping umbrella in one hand, and the forefinger of the other held up boulder-high and pointing, in the manner of a pistol, to my window, which, by the way, had been mended during the morning, in accordance with my instructions to the housekeeper.

"Sir," he continued, "last night I took the extreme liberty of smashin' your winder."

"Oh," I said, "that was you, was it?"

"It was, sir— me. For that I hev come humbly to apologize. I trust the draft has not discommoded you, sir. I regret the accident, and I wish to pay for the fixin' up and the general inconvenience." He placed a sovereign on the table. "I 'low you'll call that square now, sir, and fix things friendly and comfortable as between gentlemen, an' no ill will. Shake."

And he formally extended his hand.

I took it at once. "Certainly," I said. "As a matter of fact, you haven't inconvenienced me at all; indeed, there were some circumstances about the affair that rather interested me." And I pushed the sovereign toward him.

"Say now," he said, looking a trifle disappointed at my unwillingness to accept his money, "didn't I startle your nerves?"

"Not a bit," I answered, laughing. "In fact, you did me a service by preventing me going to sleep just when I shouldn't; so we'll say no more of that."

"Well— there was one other little thing," he pursued, looking at me rather sharply as he pocketed the sovereign. "There was a bit o' paper round that pebble that came in here. Didn't happen to notice that, did you?"

"Yes, I did. It was an old piece of manuscript music."

"That was it— exactly. Might you happen to have it handy now?"

"Well," I said, "as a matter of fact a friend of mine has it now. I tried playing it over once or twice, as a matter of curiosity, but I couldn't make anything of it, and so I handed it to him."

"Ah!" said my visitor, watching me narrowly, "that's a puzzler, that Flitterbat Lancers— a real puzzler. It whips 'em all. Ha, ha'." He laughed suddenly— a laugh that seemed a little artificial. "There's music fellers as 'lows to set right down and play off anything right away that can't make anything of the Flitterbat Lancers. That was two of 'em that was monkeyin' with me last night. They never could make anythin' of it at all, and I was tantalizing them with it all along till they got real mad, and reckoned to get it out o' my pocket and learn it at home. Ha, ha! So I got away for a bit, and just rolled it round a stone and heaved it through your winder before they could come up, your winder being the nearest one with a light in it. Ha, ha! I'll be considerable obliged you'll get it from your friend right now. Is he stayin' hereabout?"

The story was so ridiculously lame that I determined to confront my visitor with Hewitt, and observe the result. If he had succeeded in making any sense of the Flitterbat Lancers, the scene might be amusing. So I answered at once, "Yes; his office is on the floor below; he will probably be in at about this time. Come down with me."

We went down, and found Hewitt in his outer office. "This gentleman," I told him with a solemn intonation, "has come to ask for his piece of manuscript music, the Flitterbat Lancers. He is particularly proud of it, because nobody who tries to play it can make any sort of tune out of it, and it was entirely because two dear friends of his were anxious to drag it out of his pocket and practice it over on the quiet that he flung it through my windowpane last night, wrapped round a piece of concrete."

The stranger glanced sharply at me, and I could see that my manner and tone rather disconcerted him. Burt Hewitt came forward at once. "Oh, yes," he said "just so— quite a natural sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I quite expected you. Your umbrella's wet— do you mind putting it in the stand? Thank you. Come into my private office."

We entered the inner room, and Hewitt, turning to the stranger, went on: "Yes, that is a very extraordinary piece of music, that Flitterbat Lancers. I have been having a little bit of practice with it myself, though I'm really nothing of a musician. I don't wonder you are anxious to keep it to yourself. Sit down."

The stranger, with a distrustful look at Hewitt, complied. At this moment, Hewitt's clerk, Kerrett, entered from the outer office with a slip of paper. Hewitt glanced at it, and crumpled it in his hand. "I am engaged just now," was his remark, and Kerrett vanished.

"And now," Hewitt said, as he sat down and suddenly turned to the stranger with an intent gaze, "and now, Mr Hoker, we'll talk of this music."

The stranger started and frowned. "You've the advantage of me, sir," he said; "you seem to know my name, but I don't know yours."

Hewitt smiled pleasantly. "My name," he said, "is Hewitt, Martin Hewitt, and it is my business to know a great many things. For instance, I know that you are Mr Reuben B. Hoker, of Robertsville, Ohio."

The visitor pushed his chair back, and stared. "Well— that gits me," he said. "You're a pretty smart chap, Mr Hewitt. I've heard your name before, of course. And— and so you've been a-studyin' the Flitterbat Lancers, have you?" This with a keen glance at Hewitt's face. "Well, s'pose you have. What's your idea?"

"Why," answered Hewitt, still keeping his steadfast gaze on Hoker's eyes, "I think it's pretty late in the century to be fishing about for the Wedlake jewels."

These words astonished me almost as much as they did Mr Hoker. The great Wedlake jewel robbery is, as many will remember, a traditional story of the 'sixties. I remembered no more of it at the time than probably most men do who have at some time or another read the *causes celèbres* of the century. Sir Francis Wedlake's country house had been robbed, and the whole of Lady Wedlake's magnificent collection of jewels stolen. A man named Shiels, a strolling musician, had been arrested and had been sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. Another man named Legg— one of the comparatively wealthy scoundrels who finance promising thefts or swindles and pocket the greater part of the proceeds— had also been punished, but only a very few of the trinkets, and those quite unimportant items, had been recovered. The great bulk of the booty was never brought to light. So much I remembered, and Hewitt's sudden mention of the Wedlake jewels in connection with my

broken window, Mr Reuben B. Hoker, and the Flitterbat Lancers, astonished me not a little.

As for Hoker, he did his best to hide his perturbation, but with little success. "Wedlake jewels, eh?" he said; "and— and what's that to do with it, anyway?"

"To do with it?" responded Hewitt, with an air of carelessness. "Well, well, I had my idea, nothing more. If the Wedlake jewels have nothing to do with it, we'll say no more about it, that's all. Here's your paper, Mr Hoker— only a little crumpled." He rose and placed the article in Mr Hoker's hand, with the manner of terminating the interview.

Hoker rose, with a bewildered look on his face, and turned toward the door. Then he stopped, looked at the floor, scratched his cheek, and finally sat down and put his hat on the ground. "Come," he said, "we'll play a square game. That paper has something to do with the Wedlake jewels, and, win or lose, I'll tell you all I know about it. You're a smart man and whatever I tell you, I guess it won't do me no harm; it ain't done me no good yet, anyway."

"Say what you please, of course," Hewitt answered, "but think first. You might tell me something you'd be sorry for afterward."

"Say, will you listen to what I say, and tell me if you think I've been swindled or not? My two hundred and fifty dollars is gone now, and I guess I won't go skirmishing after it anymore if you think it's no good. Will you do that much?"

"As I said before," Hewitt replied, "tell me what you please, and if I can help you I will. But remember, I don't ask for your secrets."

"That's all right, I guess, Mr Hewitt. Well, now, it was all like this." And Mr Reuben B. Hoker plunged into a detailed account of his adventures since his arrival in London.

Relieved of repetitions, and put as directly as possible, it was as follows: Mr Hoker was a wagon-builder, had made a good business from very humble beginnings, and intended to go on and make it still a better. Meantime, he had come over to Europe for a short holiday— a thing he had promised himself for years. He was wandering about the London streets on the second night after his arrival in the city, when he managed to get into conversation with two men at a bar. They were not very prepossessing men, though flashily dressed. Very soon they suggested a game of cards. But Reuben B. Hoker was not to be had in that way, and after a while, they parted. The two were amusing enough fellows in their way, and when Hoker saw them again the next night in the same bar, he made no difficulty in talking with them freely. After a succession of drinks, they told him that they had a speculation on hand— a speculation that meant thousands if it succeeded— and to carry out which they were only

waiting for a paltry sum of £50. There was a house, they said, in which was hidden a great number of jewels of immense value, which had been deposited there by a man who was now dead. Exactly in what part of the house the jewels were to be found they did not know. There was a paper, they said, which was supposed to contain some information, but as yet they hadn't been quite able to make it out. But that would really matter very little if once they could get possession of the house. Then they would simply set to work and search from the topmost chimney to the lowermost brick, if necessary. The only present difficulty was that the house was occupied, and that the landlord wanted a large deposit of rent down before he would consent to turn out his present tenants and give them possession at a higher rental. This deposit would come to £50, and they hadn't the money. However, if any friend of theirs who meant business would put the necessary sum it their disposal, and keep his mouth shut, they would make him an equal partner in the proceeds with themselves; and as the value of the whole haul would probably be something not very far off £20,000, the speculation would bring a tremendous return to the man who w as smart enough to put down his £50.

Hoker, very distrustful, skeptically demanded more detailed particulars of the scheme. But these the two men (Luker and Birks were their names, he found, in course of talking) inflexibly refused to communicate.

"Is it likely," said Luker, "that we should give the 'ole thing away to anybody who might easily go with his fifty pounds and clear out the bloomin' show? Not much. We've told you what the game is, and if you'd like to take a flutter with your fifty, all right; you'll do as well as anybody, and we'll treat you square. If you don't— well, don't, that's all. We'll get the oof from somewhere— there's blokes as 'ud jump at the chance. Anyway, we ain't going to give the show away before you've done somethin' to prove you're on the job, straight. Put your money in, and you shall know as much as we do."

Then there were more drinks, and more discussion. Hoker was still reluctant, though tempted by the prospect, and growing more venturesome with each drink.

"Don't you see," said Birks, "that if we was a-tryin' to 'ave you we should out with a tale as long as yer arm, all complete, with the address of the 'ouse and all. Then I s'pose you'd lug out the pieces on the nail, without askin' a bloomin' question. As it is, the thing's so perfectly genuine that we'd rather lose the chance and wait for some other bloke to find the money than run a chance of givin' the thing away. It's a matter o' business, simple and plain, that's all. It's a question of either us trustin' you with a chance of collarin' twenty thousand pounds or you trustin' us with a paltry fifty. We don't lay out

no 'igh moral sentiments, we only say the weight o' money is all on one side. Take it or leave it, that's all. 'Ave another Scotch?"

The talk went on and the drinks went on, and it all ended, at "chucking-out time," in Reuben B. Hoker handing over five £10 notes, with smiling, though slightly incoherent, assurances of his eternal friendship for Luker and Birks.

In the morning he awoke to the realization of a bad head, a bad tongue, and a bad opinion of his proceedings of the previous night. In his sober senses it seemed plain that he had been swindled. All day he cursed his fuddled foolishness, and at night he made for the bar that had been the scene if the transaction, with little hope of seeing either Luker or Birks, who had agreed to be there to meet him. There they were, however, and, rather to his surprise, they made no demand for more money. They asked him if he understood music, and showed him the worn old piece of paper containing the Flitterbat Lancers. The exact spot, they said, where the jewels were hidden was supposed to be indicated somehow on that piece of paper. Hoker did not understand music, and could find nothing on the paper that looked in the least like a direction to a hiding-place for jewels or anything else.

Luker and Birks then went into full particulars of their project. First, as to its history. The jewels were the famous Wedlake jewels, which had been taken from Sir Francis Wedlake's house in 1866 and never heard of again. A certain Jerry Shiels had been arrested in connection with the robbery, had been given a long sentence of penal servitude, and had died in jail. This Jerry Shiels was an extraordinarily clever criminal, and travelled about the country as a street musician. Although an expert burglar, he very rarely perpetrated robberies himself, but acted as a sort of traveling fence, receiving stolen property and transmitting it to London or out of the country. He also acted as the agent of a man named Legg, who had money, and who financed any likely looking project of a criminal nature that Shiels might arrange.

Jerry Shiels traveled with a "pardner"— a man who played the harp and acted as his assistant and messenger in affairs wherein Jerry was reluctant to appear personally. When Shiels was arrested, he had in his possession a quantity of printed and manuscript music, and after his first remand his "pardner," Jimmy Snape, applied for the music to be given up to him, in order, as he explained, that he might earn his living. No objection was raised to this, and Shiels was quite willing that Snape should have it, and so it was handed over. Now among the music was a small slip, headed Flitterbat Lancers, which Shiels had shown to Snape before the arrest. In case of Shiels being taken, Snape was to take this slip to Legg as fast as he could.

But as chance would have it, on that very day Legg himself was arrested, and soon after was sentenced also to a term of years. Snape hung about in

London for a little while, and then emigrated. Before leaving, however, he gave the slip of music to Luker's father, a rag-shop keeper, to whom he owed money. He explained its history, and Luker senior made all sorts of fruitless efforts to get at the information concealed in the paper. He had held it to the fire to bring out concealed writing, had washed it, had held it to the light till his eyes ached, had gone over it with a magnifying glass— all in vain. He had got musicians to strum out the notes on all sorts of instruments— backwards, forwards, alternately, and in every other way he could think of. If at any time he fancied a resemblance in the resulting sound to some familiar song-tune, he got that song and studied all its words with loving care, upside-down, right-side up— every way. He took the words Flitterbat Lancers and transposed the letters in all directions, and did everything else he could think of. In the end he gave it up, and died. Now, lately, Luker junior had been impelled with a desire to see into the matter. He had repeated all the parental experiments, and more, with the same lack of success. He had taken his "pal" Birks into his confidence, and together they had tried other experiments till at last they began to believe that the message had probably been written in some sort of invisible ink which the subsequent washings had erased altogether. But he had done one other thing: he had found the house which Shiels had rented at the time of his arrest, and in which a good quantity of stolen property— not connected with the Wedlake case— was discovered. Here, he argued, if anywhere, Jerry Shiels had hidden the jewels. There was no other place where he could be found to have lived, or over which he had sufficient control to warrant his hiding valuables therein. Perhaps, once the house could be properly examined, something about it might give a clue as to what the message of the Flitterbat Lancers meant.

Hoker, of course, was anxious to know where the house in question stood, but this Luker and Birks would on no account inform him. "You've done your part," they said, "and now you leave us to do ours. There's a bit of a job about gettin' the tenants out. They won't go, and it'll take a bit of time before the landlord can make them. So you just hold your jaw and wait. When we're safe in the 'ouse, and there's no chance of anybody else pokin' in, then you can come and help find the stuff."

Hoker went home that night sober, but in much perplexity. The thing might be genuine, after all; indeed, there were many little things that made him think it was. But then, if it were, what guarantee had he that he would get his share, supposing the search turned out successful? None at all. But then it struck him for the first time that these jewels, though they may have lain untouched so long, were stolen property after all. The moral aspect of the affair began to trouble him a little, but the legal aspect troubled him more. That consideration

however, he decided to leave over for the present. He had no more than the word of Luker and Birks that the jewels (if they existed) were those of Lady Wedlake, and Luker and Birks themselves only professed to know from hearsay. At any rate, he made up his mind to have some guarantee for his money. In accordance with this resolve, he suggested, when he met the two men the next day, that he should take charge of the slip of music and make an independent study of it. This proposal, however, met with an instant veto.

Hoker resolved to make up a piece of paper, folded as like the slip of music as possible, and substitute one for the other at their next meeting. Then he would put the Flitterbat Lancers in some safe place, and face his fellow conspirators with a hand of cards equal to their own. He carried out his plan the next evening with perfect success, thanks to the contemptuous indifference with which Luker and Birks had begun to regard him. He got the slip in his pocket, and left the bar. He had not gone far, however, before Luker discovered the loss, and soon he became conscious of being followed. He looked for a cab, but he was in a dark street, and no cab was near. Luker and Birks turned the corner and began to run. He saw they must catch him. Everything now depended on his putting the Flitterbat Lancers out of their reach, but where he could himself recover it. He ran till he saw a narrow passageway on his right, and into this he darted. It led into a yard where stones were lying about, and in a large building before him he saw the window of a lighted room a couple of floors up. It was a desperate expedient, but there was no time for consideration. He wrapped a stone in the paper and flung it with all his force through the lighted window. Even as he did it he heard the feet of Luker and Birks as they hurried down the street. The rest of the adventure in the court I myself saw.

Luker and Birks kept Hoker in their lodgings all that night. They searched him unsuccessfully for the paper; they bullied, they swore, they cajoled, they entreated, they begged him to play the game square with his pals. Hoker merely replied that he had put the Flitterbat Lancers where they couldn't easily find it, and that he intended playing the game square as long as they did the same. In the end they released him, apparently with more respect than they had before entertained, advising him to get the paper into his possession as soon as he could.

"And now," said Mr Hoker, in conclusion of his narrative, "perhaps you'll give me a bit of advice. Am I playin' a fool-game running after these toughs, or ain't I?"

Hewitt shrugged his shoulders. "It all depends," he said, "on your friends Luker and Birks. They may want to swindle you, or they may not. I'm afraid they'd like to, at any rate. But perhaps you've got some little security in this

piece of paper. One thing is plain: they certainly believe in the deposit of the jewels themselves, else they wouldn't have taken so much trouble to get the paper back."

"Then I guess I'll go on with the thing, if that's it."

"That depends, of course, on whether you care to take trouble to get possession of what, after all, is somebody else's lawful property."

Hoker looked a little uneasy. "Well," he said, "there's that, of course. I didn't know nothin' of that at first, and when I did I'd parted with my money and felt entitled to get something back for it. Anyway, the stuff ain't found yet. When it is, why then, you know, I might make a deal with the owner. But, say, how did you find out my name, and about this here affair being jined up with the Wedlake jewels?"

Hewitt smiled. "As to the name and address, you just think it over a little when you've gone away, and if you don't see how I did it. You're not so cute as I think you are. In regard to the jewels— well, I just read the message of the Flitterbat Lancers, that's all."

"You read it? Whew! And what does it say? How did you do it?" Hoker turned the paper over eagerly in his hands as he spoke.

"See, now," said Hewitt, "I won't tell you all that, but I'll tell you something, and it may help you to test the real knowledge of Luker and Birks. Part of the message is in these words, which you had better write down: *Over the coals the fifth dancer slides, says Jerry Shield the homey*.'"

"What?" Hoker exclaimed, "fifth dancer slides over the coals? That's mighty odd. What's it all about?"

"About the Wedlake jewels, as I said. Now you can go and make a bargain with Luker and Birks. The only other part of the message is an address, and that they already know, if they have been telling the truth about the house they intend taking. You can offer to tell them what I have told you of the message, after they have told you where the house is, and proved to you that they are taking the steps they talked of. If they won't agree to that, I think you had best treat them as common rogues and charge them with obtaining your money under false pretenses."

Nothing more would Hewitt say than that, despite Hoker's many questions; and when at last Hoker had gone, almost as troubled and perplexed as ever, my friend turned to me and said, "Now, Brett, if you haven't lunched and would like to see the end of this business, hurry!"

"The end of it?" I said. "Is it to end so soon? How?"

"Simply by a police raid on Jerry Shiels's old house with a search warrant. I communicated with the police this morning before I came here."

"Poor Hoker!" I said.

"Oh, I had told the police before I saw Hoker, or heard of him, of course. I just conveyed the message on the music slip— that was enough. But I'll tell you all a out it when there's more time; I must be off now. With the information I have given him, Hoker and his friends may make an extra push and get into the house soon, but I couldn't resist the temptation to give the unfortunate Hoker some sort of sporting chance— though it's a poor one, I fear. Get your lunch as quickly as you can, and go at once to Colt Row, Bankside— Southwark way, you know. Probably we shall be there before you. If not, wait."

Colt Row was not difficult to find. It was one of those places that decay with an excess of respectability, like Drury Lane and Clare Market. Once, when Jacob's Island was still an island, a little farther down the river, Colt Row had evidently been an unsafe place for a person with valuables about him, and then it probably prospered, in its own way. Now it was quite respectable, but very dilapidated and dirty. Perhaps it was sixty yards long— perhaps a little more. It was certainly a very few yards wide, and the houses at each side had a patient and forlorn look of waiting for a metropolitan improvement to come along and carry them away to their rest.

I could see no sign of Hewitt, nor of the police, so I walked up and down the narrow pavement for a little while. As I did so, I became conscious of a face at the window of the least ruinous house in the row, a face that I fancied expressed particular interest in my movements. The house was an old gabled structure, faced with plaster. What had apparently once been a shop-window on the ground floor was now shuttered up, and the face that watched me— an old woman's— looked out from the window above. I had noted these particulars with some curiosity, when, arriving again at the street corner, I observed Hewitt approaching, in company with a police inspector, and followed by two unmistakable plainclothesmen.

"Well," Hewitt said, "you're first here after all. Have you seen any more of our friend Hoker?"

"No, nothing."

"Very well— probably he'll be here before long, though."

The party turned into Colt Row, and the inspector, walking up to the door of the house with the shuttered bottom window, knocked sharply. There was no response, so he knocked again, equally in vain.

"All out," said the inspector.

"No," I said; "I saw a woman watching me from the window above not three minutes ago."

"Ho, ho!" the inspector replied. "That's so, eh? One of you— you, Johnson— step round to the back, will you?"

One of the plainclothesmen started off, and after waiting another minute or two the inspector began a thundering cannonade of knocks that brought every available head out of the window of every inhabited room in the Row. At this the woman opened the window, and began abusing the inspector with a shrillness and fluency that added a street-corner audience to that already congregated at the windows.

"Go away, you blaggards!" the lady said, "you ought to be 'orse-w'ipped, every one of ye! A-comin' 'ere a-tryin' to turn decent people out o' 'ouse and 'ome! Wait till my 'usband comes 'ome— 'e'll show yer, ye mutton-cadgin' scoundrels! Payin' our rent reg'lar, and good tenants as is always been— and I'm a respectable married woman, that's what I am, ye dirty great cowards!"— this last word with a low, tragic emphasis.

Hewitt remembered what Hoker had said about the present tenants refusing to quit the house on the landlord's notice. "She thinks we've come from the landlord to turn her out," he said to the inspector. "We're not here from the landlord, you old fool!" the inspector said. "We don't want to turn you out. We're the police, with a search warrant, and you'd better let us in or you'll get into trouble."

"'Ark at 'im!" the woman screamed, pointing at the inspector. "'Ark at 'im! Thinks I was born yesterday, that feller! Go 'ome, ye dirty pie-stealer, go 'ome!"

The audience showed signs of becoming a small crowd, and the inspector's patience gave out. "Here, Bradley," he said, addressing the remaining plainclothesman, "give a hand with these shutters," and the two— both powerful men— seized the iron bar which held the shutters and began to pull. But the garrison was undaunted, and, seizing a broom, the woman began to belabour the invaders about the shoulders and head from above. But just at this moment, the woman, emitting a terrific shriek, was suddenly lifted from behind and vanished. Then the head of the plainclothesman who had gone round to the back appeared, with the calm announcement, "There's a winder open behind, sir. But I'll open the front door if you like."

In a minute the bolts were shot, and the front door swung back. The placid Johnson stood in the passage, and as we passed in he said, "I've locked 'er in the back room upstairs."

"It's the bottom staircase, of course," the inspector said; and we tramped down into the basement. A little way from the stair-foot Hewitt opened a cupboard door, which enclosed a receptacle for coals. "They still keep the coals here, you see," he said, striking a match and passing it to and fro near the sloping roof of the cupboard. It was of plaster, and covered the underside of the stairs.

"And now for the fifth dancer," he said, throwing the match away and making for the staircase again. "One, two, three, four, five," and he tapped the fifth stair from the bottom.

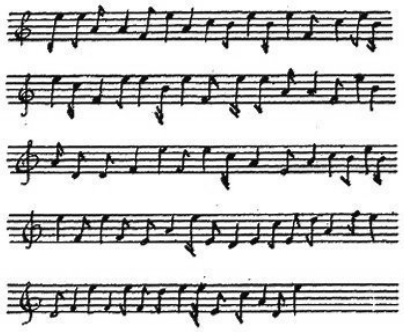
The stairs were uncarpeted, and Hewitt and the inspector began a careful examination of the one he had indicated. They tapped it in different places, and Hewitt passed his hands over the surfaces of both tread and riser. Presently, with his hand at the outer edge of the riser, Hewitt spoke. "Here it is, I think," he said; "it is the riser that slides."

He took out his pocketknife and scraped away the grease and paint from the edge of the old stair. Then a joint was plainly visible. For a long time the plank, grimed and set with age, refused to shift; but at last, by dint of patience and firm fingers, it moved, and was drawn clean out from the end.

Within, nothing was visible but grime, fluff, and small rubbish. The inspector passed his hand along the bottom angle. "Here's something," he said. It was the gold hook of an old-fashioned earring, broken off short.

Hewitt slapped his thigh. "Somebody's been here before us," he said "and a good time back too, judging from the dust. That hook's a plain indication that jewellery was here once. There's plainly nothing more, except— except this piece of paper." Hewitt's eyes had detected— black with loose grime as it was— a small piece of paper lying at the bottom of the recess. He drew it out and shook off the dust. "Why, what's this?" he exclaimed. "More music!"

We went to the window, and there saw in Hewitt's hand a piece of written musical notation, thus:—



Hewitt pulled out from his pocket a few pieces of paper. "Here is a copy I made this morning of the Flitterbat Lancers, and a note or two of my own as well," he said. He took a pencil, and, constantly referring to his own papers, marked a letter under each note on the last-found slip of music. When he had done this, the letters read:

You are a clever cove whoever you are but there was a cleverer says Jim Snape the horney's mate.

"You see." Hewitt said handing the inspector the paper. "Snape, the unconsidered messenger, finding Legg in prison, set to work and got the jewels for himself. The thing was a cryptogram, of course, of a very simple sort, though uncommon in design. Snape was a humorous soul, too, to leave this message here in the same cipher, on the chance of somebody else reading the Flitterbat Lancers."

"But," I asked, "why did he give that slip of music to Laker's father?"

"Well, he owed him money, and got out or it that way. Also, he avoided the appearance of 'flushness' that paying the debt might have given him, and got quietly out of the country with his spoils."

The shrieks upstairs had grown hoarser, but the broom continued vigorously. "Let that woman out," said the inspector, "and we'll go and report. Not much good looking for Snape now, I fancy. But there's some satisfaction in clearing up that old quarter-century mystery."

We left the place pursued by the execrations of the broom wielder, who bolted the door behind us, and from the window defied us to come back, and vowed she would have us all searched before a magistrate for what we had probably stolen. In the very next street we hove in sight of Reuben B. Hoker in the company of two swell-mob-looking fellows, who sheered off down a side turning in sight of our group. Hoker, too, looked rather shy at the sight of the inspector.

"The meaning of the thing was so very plain," Hewitt said to me afterwards, "that the duffers who had the Flitterbat Lancers in hand for so long never saw it at all. If Shiels had made an ordinary clumsy cryptogram, all letters and figures, they would have seen what it was at once, and at least would have tried to read it; but because it was put in the form of music, they tried everything else but the right way. It was a clever dodge of Shiels's, without a doubt. Very few people, police officers or not, turning over a heap of old music, would notice or feel suspicious of that little slip among the rest. But once one sees it is a cryptogram (and the absence of bar lines and of notes beyond the stave would suggest that) the reading is as easy as possible. For my part I tried it as a cryptogram at once. You know the plan— it has been described a hundred times. See here— look at this copy of the Flitterbat Lancers. Its only difficulty— and that is a small one— is that the words are not divided. Since there are positions for less than a dozen notes on the stave, and there are twenty-six letters to be indicated, it follows that crotchets, quavers, and semiquavers on the same line or space must mean different letters. The first step is obvious. We count the notes to ascertain which sign occurs most frequently, and we find that the crotchet in the top space is the sign

required— it occurs no less than eleven times. Now the letter most frequently occurring in an ordinary sentence of English is e. Let us then suppose that this represents e. At once a coincidence strikes us. In ordinary musical notation in the treble clef the note occupying the top space would be E. Let us remember that presently.

"Now the most common word in the English language is '*the*.' We know the sign for *e*, the last letter of this word, so let us see if in more than one place that sign is preceded by two others identical in each case. If so, the probability is that the other two signs will represent *t* and *h*, and the whole word will be '*the*.' Now it happens in no less than four places the sign e is preceded by the same two other signs— once in the first line, twice in the second, and once in the fourth. No word of three letters ending in e would be in the least likely to occur four times in a short sentence except '*the*.' Then we will call it '*the*', and note the signs preceding the *e*. They are a quaver under the bottom line for the *t*, and a crotchet on the first space for the *h*. We travel along the stave, and wherever these signs occur we mark them with *t* or *h*, as the case may be.

"But now we remember that *e*, the crotchet in the top space, is in its right place as a musical note, while the crotchet in the bottom space means *h*, which is no musical note at all. Considering this for a minute, we remember that among the notes which are expressed in ordinary music on the treble stave, without the use of ledger lines, *d*, *e* and *f* are repeated at the lower and at the upper part of the stave. Therefore, anybody making a cryptogram of musical notes would probably use one set of these duplicate positions to indicate other letters, and as *a* is in the lower part of the stave, that is where the variation comes in. Let us experiment by assuming that all the crotchets above *f* in ordinary musical notation have their usual values, and let us set the letters over their respective notes. Now things begin to shape. Look toward the end of the second line: there is the word *the* and the letters *f f t h*, with another note between the two *f*'s. Now that word can only possibly be *fifth*, so that now we have the sign for *i*. It is the crotchet on the bottom line. Let us go through and mark the *i*'s.

"And now observe. The first sign of the lot is *i*, and there is one other sign before the word '*the*.' The only words possible here beginning with *i*, and of two letters, are *it*, *if*, *is* and *in*. Now we have the signs for *t* and *f*, so we know that it isn't *it* or *if*. Is would be unlikely here, because there is a tendency, as you see, to regularity in these signs, and *t*, the next letter alphabetically to *s*, is at the bottom of the stave. Let us try *n*. At once we get the word *dance* at the beginning of line three. And now we have got enough to see the system of the thing. Make a stave and put *G A B C* and the higher *D E F* in their proper musical places. Then fill in the blank places with the next letters of the

alphabet downward, *h i j*, and we find that *h* and *i* fall in the places we have already discovered for them as crotchets. Now take quavers, and go on with *k l m n o*, and so on as before, beginning on the A space. When you have filled the quavers, do the same with semiquavers— there are only six alphabetical letters left for this— *u v w x y z*. Now you will find that this exactly agrees with all we have ascertained already, and if you will use the other letters to fill up over the signs still unmarked you will get the whole message:

"In the Colt Row ken over the coals the fifth dancer slides says Jerry Shiels the horney.

"'Dancer,' as perhaps you didn't know, is thieves' slang for a stair, and 'horney' is the strolling musician's name for cornet player. Of course the thing took a little time to work out, chiefly because the sentence was short, and gave one few opportunities. But anybody with the key, using the cipher as a means of communication, would read it easily.

"As soon as I had read it, of course I guessed the purport of the Flitterbat Lancers. Jerry Shiels's name is well-known to anybody with half my knowledge of the criminal records of the century, and his connection with the missing Wedlake jewels, and his death in prison, came to my mind at once. Certainly here was something hidden, and as the Wedlake jewels seemed most likely, I made the shot in talking to Hoker."

"But you terribly astonished him by telling him his name and address. How was that?" I asked curiously.

Hewitt laughed aloud. "That," he said; "why, that was the thinnest trick of all. Why, the man had it engraved on the silver band of his umbrella handle. When he left his umbrella outside, Kerrett (I had indicated the umbrella to him by a sign) just copied the lettering on one of the ordinary visitors' forms, and brought it in. You will remember I treated it as an ordinary visitor's announcement." And Hewitt laughed again.

ON THE afternoon of the next day Reuben B. Hoker called on Hewitt and had half-an-hour's talk with him in his private room. After that he came up to me with half-a-crown in his hand. "Sir," he said, "everything has turned out a durned sell. I don't want to talk about it any more. I'm goin' out of this durn country. Night before last I broke your winder. You put the damage at half-a-crown. Here is the money. Good-day to you, sir."

And Reuben B. Hoker went out into the tumultuous world.

14: The Ferret and the Bet

J. Allan Dunn

1872-1941

Adventure, 18 Aug 1918.

THE "FERRET" could have reported the conversation between the warden and the man from headquarters very accurately, that part of it, at least, that generalized upon himself and the three others who were to leave the penitentiary that morning, having, it was supposed, if not generally practised, fully expiated their crimes and being restored to freedom if not full citizenship. For the Ferret was very, very far from being a fool.

"Once a crook, always a crook!" announced the detective, somewhat wearily. "You wait till they begin coming back to you. I ain't running down your dope or your methods but you're new to the game, if you'll pardon my saying so. There's a heap of improvement needed in penitentiaries, I'll grant you, but all your honor system, your free talk and your baseball games ain't going to make an honest man out of a blown-in-the-glass crook. Do what you will with 'em, they figure the mistake they made was in getting caught, not in the crime itself.

"They come in sore and they go out sore, for all your coddling of 'em. You can't make 'em glad to be here. A man in a cell nurses a grouch and a guy with a grouch ain't going to repent. He may think it pays best to run straight but he gets out and he reads about something good that was pulled off and then he meets his woman or some woman and then some of the gang come around and show him an easy thing. Well— he's sick of prison grub and prison fare and so's his woman of the skimping she's done while he was in. The excitement gets him— and then we get him and you see him registering at your hotel inside of a few months at best.

"Take it from me, Mr. Warden, I know 'em. 'Once a crook, always a crook.' Take the Ferret, first-class cracksman and high-flier, going out today after five years less eight months for behaving himself; he'll be back. I'll bet you a month's pay he'll be back inside of six months, or, if he isn't, we'll be looking for him. Why was he good in quod? Because he wanted to get out of quod. Not because he means to go straight."

"I'll take that bet, Henderson," said the new warden quietly. "Call it an even hundred. You know only the seamy side of human nature. There's a right and wrong side to every man, but you never turn over the goods to have a look at the pattern that was intended to be shown. A crook may be always a crook, but all convicts are not crooks, Henderson. Circumstance, environment, desire of that same excitement you mentioned, the same sort of desire that sent men

viking in old times, have a lot to do with it. The Ferret," he broke off to smile, "do you know what the Ferret has been doing and what he wants to do?"

"I'd make another little bet on the last end of it. What has he been doing?"

"Doing wonderful things in my garden and greenhouse. The man is a born genius with grafting and crossing."

"I believe all of that," said Henderson. "Double-crossing and grafting are easy to him."

"And he wants— wait, we'll have him in and ask him."

The Ferret was escorted in. He might have been anywhere between forty and fifty. His hair, that had been allowed to grow since his time of freedom approached, was long enough to be laid back hi a smooth gray pompadour. The forehead was well- shaped, the nose well-chiseled and the mouth neither small nor thin-lipped. His eyes— Henderson would have called them cunning— to the warden they were shrewd. He was slight but built with all the suggestive agility of the animal after which the underworld had christened him.

The work among the warden's shrubs and flowers had banished all trace of prison pallor, his cheap, ready-made suit fitted him surprisingly well, he looked not at all like a discharged prisoner, not at all like a malefactor, a wizard at coaxing combinations and blowing stubborner safes— he had used oxy-acetylene on the last one. His hands might have been those of a woodcarver, a musician even, or a master-gardener. Though Henderson would have set them down as the hands of a forger or a master-cracksman. And he stood respectful with a certain dignity, quite at his ease, the hint of an ironic smile on his lips for Henderson, the gleam of a friendly one in his eyes for the warden.

"What are you figuring on doing, Rogers?" asked the latter in kindly fashion.

"I should like to take up the raising of fancy shrubs, sir," answered the Ferret, ignoring Henderson's grin at his words. "It takes more capital than I have. To go into it properly it would take a thousand dollars before I'd get any return but I'll go at it quietly, if I can get an opening."

Henderson snickered. "Be careful of the kind of opening you choose, Ferret," he said. "Too bad you ain't got something tucked away to start you out. Now, see here, Ferret, I ain't up here on your account so don't let that worry you."

"I won't, Mr. Henderson."

Henderson flushed a little at the irony. He had been the chief instrument in sending the Ferret up for his stretch but it had not been his cleverness, it had been through the treachery of a stool-pigeon and he felt that the Ferret did not rate his professional acumen over-highly.

"The warden tells me you are trying to go on the level," he said. "You go ahead and raise fancy shrubs all you want, I'll never bother you. But I'm going to be on the level with you. I've made a little bet with the warden here, never mind for how much or how long, that you'll be tapping the tumblers again. Now I'll warn you, I'm going to keep close tabs on you, but I am warning you and if you win I lose."

The Ferret raised his expressive eye- brows.

"That's mighty square of you, Mr. Henderson," he said. "And mighty nice of you to take a chance on me, sir," he said to the warden. But he made no protestation of his determination or ability to win the warden's bet.

"That's all, Rogers," said the latter, rising. "Good-by and good luck."

They shook hands, warden and ex-convict and the latter passed from the private office quietly, unobtrusive but unslinking and, presently, went out of the Gate of Sorrow and down to the train with the others who had also shaken off the shackles of judgment.

"Want to hedge, Henderson?" asked the warden.

"Not me. Wait till he sees Broadway and a Jane he wants and who wants a flash. You can book that bet."

And the warden booked it.

IT HAPPENED that Henderson got through with his penitentiary business in time to take the same train as the Ferret, whom he found in the smoking-car. Being a sport, Henderson, known to all the trainmen, did not help to make the Ferret conspicuous by even nodding to him but he took a seat across the aisle and a little back of his man, lit one of the warden's cigars and kept a casual, but keen eye on the Ferret.

The Ferret looked out of the window for a while at the green meadows of Westchester County, at the green woodlands, the blue distance, the nigh flowers, the birds, at a butterfly that vagrantly fluttered with the train for a few seconds and there was a look in the eyes that would have surprised Henderson, almost a suggestion of the dew that might still be moist on the ferns in the shady coppices.

Then he bought a paper from the news-butcher, a paper and an orange, and glanced at one long-forbidden luxury while he. slowly swallowed the other, segment by segment.

Suddenly he sat up, absorbed in an item. Henderson noticed the swift change, noticed the heading of the paper, bought one himself when the boy came through again and read where the Ferret was reading for the second time. There was no dewy look in the Ferret's eyes now, only the hard shine of gray steel. And into Henderson's eyes crept a look of triumph.

"What did I tell the warden," said Henderson to himself, "what'd I tell him. What he's reading is like catnip to an old Tom. He's sore he wasn't in on it. His mouth's watering now, I'll bet. Wonder if I'll get on the case?"

And he settled himself to read the item with professional absorption. There had been a week-end gathering at the Long Island home of a Wall Street successful broker, whose wife affected the close acquaintanceship of Bohemia. Her guests had many names famous in the Four Arts plus the Art of the Theater and the Roof Garden and there were others more eccentric than famous, a rollicking, unconventional crew who had participated in a fancy-dress dance, starting in the house, transferred to the moonlit, lantern-painted lawn and winding up with an early breakfast at the Country Club. And the next morning the pearls of the hostess were missing, after many of the guests had departed. It was not a matter for the police, declared the hostess. Not yet, at all events. They might have been taken in mistake. There had been necessarily a great confusion in the leave-takings and donning of wraps. She hoped, she expected, they would be returned. Followed a detailed description of the necklace of matched pearls with a sapphire clasp. Henderson bit savagely into the stub of his cigar.

"Bah!" he told himself. "One of the Bohemian bums hooked 'em. Lot's of 'em 'ud starve if it wasn't for a lot of crazy women who want to entertain 'em. I'll bet she suspects one of them right now. Not a matter for the police? Rot. If some of those spangled poets and paint-daubers was jugged once in a while it 'ud do 'em all good. I wonder— yes, there it is."

He had turned over the sheets to the advertising columns and there in the personals he found what he expected.

$500 REWARD and no questions asked for the return of the pearl necklace owned by a certain hostess and missed yesterday morning after a dance. Apply to Throop & Towne, Jewelers, New York City.

Curiously enough, the Ferret had also turned to that column. But now he was reading the sporting page with zest. Apparently his interest had ceased with the fact that the job had been turned— and turned by an amateur.

But Henderson still mentally spluttered.

"—fool ad. Wrote it herself. Got her husband to put up the five hundred. It's a cinch she not only guesses who it was and wants to cover them but she wants to help 'em out of the mess that put them up to the swipe. Maybe—"

His eyes narrowed as his mind wandered down the devious and dirty alleys that his profession sometimes led him to. An infatuated, foolish woman, a shrewd adventurer, the five hundred an acknowledgment of attempted

blackmail and an implied willingness to meet it. Busy husband and idle wife. The old triangle stuff. It was old to Henderson.

Presently he too was deep in the possibilities of war-time baseball. But he kept the Ferret in view when the train got in.

The Ferret wandered along almost jauntily, an idler in New York. He bought a gardenia from a police-dodging vender, smelled it and set it in his lapel and strolled on again, the flower utterly redeeming the cheapness of his suit.

At Fifth Avenue he made his way to the library steps and, standing beside one of the supercilious twin lions, a woman met him. She was no taller than the Ferret and she was slender, her clothes giving her a youth that still lingered in her quick, impetuous rush, matched by the Ferret's embrace. Henderson caught sight of a carefully tinted face, that yet did not avoid the Ferret's kiss, of hair carefully made golden, and he smiled as he passed on. He was through with the Ferret for the present. But he felt reasonably sure of his bet. He even pondered as to how he should spend it.

"A painted moll. They all fall for them," he told himself. He was looking at the only side he knew, the seamy one; he did not guess that rouge and powder and eyebrow-pencils that hide the ravages of time are sometimes the camouflage of love, love that seeks to hold and is a little afraid.

"You're lookin' fine, Jim. Who gave you the gardenia?"

"I bought it for you, Nan. Lookin' great yourself. Let's get out of here. Let's get a regular meal. Somewhere where there's music and singing stuff and dancing."

"Got any money, Jim?"

"Seven dollars, old girl. Enough for eats."

"I've got nearly four hundred left, Jim." "You wonder! You ain't been starving yourself, have you?"

"Not me. Do I look it? But I moved to a smaller place."

"Good dope. Keep the bunch off for a while."

She looked earnestly at him. "Don't you want to see them, Jim? I saw Flynn on the street. He told me to tell you he had something good that needed you. They was waiting for you to come out, he said."

"Did you tell him where you was living?"

"No, Jim. He told me where I could find him."

"Good! Nan," he took her arm, "I'm going to cut out all that stuff."

"Jim! You mean it?" Her voice rang out so that people turned to look at them.

The Ferret nodded. "We'll talk it over later. But I'll tell you this much. I'm going into growing fancy shrubs. Got it all doped out. Remember how I always

could make things grow? Remember the first garden we had? You was always good at it too, Nan— brace up, old girl, here's the grill."

She winked back the happy tears that welled and they turned into the grill.

Looking at things dispassionately it seemed as if the chances of winning lay even between Henderson and the warden at that moment.

Later that afternoon the Ferret started down-town to take the Long Island ferry. There was a famous arboriculturist whose plantations and nurseries were located there, close to many of his customers, and the Ferret, who never allowed the grass to grow under his feet, intended to get his prices and other information at first-hand as well as look for a likely piece of land for the leasing. Just how he was going to tackle the problem of an independent nursery on the three hundred-odd dollars that constituted his and Nan's capital he could not figure out but his consuming energy to get going forced him to a start.

Also, at the arboriculturist's he might hear of a job. For the warden had promised to give him references that would not hold the taint of his work having been done in the penitentiary. And, to the Ferret, the warden was a good deal of a surprise and somewhat of a god, a superman, at least, one who never failed in his promises.

WHEN he walked aboard the ferry and made his way forward to the bows, a red-headed, pasty-faced man spotted him and followed him. The Ferret did not see the man, for he walked silently as a cat, until the latter caught him by the elbow and, as the Ferret swiftly slewed his neck to look at him, led the way to the rail.

It was Flynn. Flynn of his old crowd, Flynn who found the plants and did the scouting and preliminary investigation.

"Been looking for you, Jim," said Flynn. "Figured you'd ring up some time tomorrow. I gave Nan the number. But the sooner the better. We been waiting for you to get back. Where you bound?"

"To look at a place on the Island, Flynn. Where you off to?"

Flynn grinned. "I got a date," he said. "There's a flash maid over at this plant we're figuring on you for, and she and me is keeping company. Where's this dump you're after? Who put you wise to it. Tip from up there, eh?"

"You're a way off, Flynn," said the Ferret. "I'm through."

"Through what?"

"I'm going straight, Flynn."

"The —— you are. Say, what's the idea. You ain't got converted to that Billy Sun- day stuff have you?"

"Figure it how you want to, Flynn. I'm through."

The other fell back and studied the Ferret's face, inflexible with purpose. Then he whistled softly.

"You've gone balmy up there, Jim. You'll come out of it after a while, after what you got salted is used up. Nan didn't seem to be extra flush, at that. Say, Jim, you ain't in earnest, are you? Listen, this plant is a cinch. Five thou' apiece in it, easy. Don't be a mutt, Jim. What's your lay?"

"I'll tell you what my lay is, Flynn. I'm sick of this hide-out game. There's nothing in it to offset what you lose. I want to be able to live in one place and know it's mine and it ain't going to be taken away from me and Nan, or me taken away from it. Nan feels the same way about it. She's always wanted to be on the level, Flynn, and I guess she's got something coming to her after my trip up the river."

"Lost your nerve up there?" sneered Flynn.

"No," said the Ferret, looking him straight in the eyes, "I don't believe I have, Flynn. I hope not, I'm going to need it all. But I'm through."

Flynn shrugged his shoulders.

"You know your own business best," he said. "Anyway Nan's got my 'phone number. So long."

He turned away and the Ferret lost him when they took different trains. He looked out at the fields and gardens and the earth seemed calling to him.

What he had told Nan was quite true. Things grew for him, he was a born gardener, a real craftsman. A vision of peace grew slowly, of him with his shrubs and Nan with her flowers— she always loved flowers— there were geraniums struggling in the tiny apartment he had just left. But it would be a hard road and he did not yet see the start.

And then, timed to his own pulse, the wheels seemed clacking out a rhythm that presently voiced itself persistently.

"Five thou'- apiece. Five- thousand- easy."

To turn this one trick and then the way would be clear! He saw what he could do with that. Land, a house, tools, young plants in the upturned soil.... He swept the thoughts from his brain and sat frowning until his station was reached. The big grower was cordial and sympathetic but the Ferret was soon convinced how utterly impracticable was his plan. With war-prices and war-payments he would have to spend all his scanty hundreds for fertilizer alone. The grower offered him a certain credit for plants when he was once established but where was the rent to come from for the land, the dwelling, the living-expenses?

"You say you can get recommendations," said the grower. "I can place you in a job. Good salary. I wouldn't wonder if they could find a place for your wife if she's handy. No kids, you say?"

"No," said the Ferret slowly, "no kids."

"Well, I know they are having a hard time with their help. It isn't far from here, Mr. Rogers. You can tell them I sent you up. They are a bit upset at this time. Had a robbery night before last. But I dare say Mrs. Haskins'll see you."

The Ferret listened to the directions and started for the Haskins place. It would be the best thing to do for the present, especially if Nan got on, and that should be easy. For Nan was more than just handy, she had been a maid when he first met her, much as Flynn was going to meet the girl he mentioned.

But there was a peculiar irony in it all. He and Nan, ex-con and ex-con's wife, applying for a job in a place where a pearl necklace had been stolen, for this was the Mrs. Haskins of the news item. It was risky. If he was ever tipped off of course he had an alibi as to the necklace; no one could accuse a man of robbery who was in jail when it occurred. But every place was risky in a way and, since he had no capital, he could not turn down the first chance.

The warden would manage his credentials. The warden did not believe in showing the seamy side of a man who was trying to make good. He would only say that he recommended the pattern.

"Mrs. Haskins is somewhere in the garden," the maid told him, and, if he had come about a gardener's position, he might as well see her there. So the Ferret trod the walks between trim lawns and flower-beds, through a rose garden and so down, as directed by a man who was handling watering-hose, to a terrace backed by a yew hedge, high as the Ferret's head.

He walked along the hedge toward the gap of its entrance on to the terrace, screened himself by masses of shrubbery, and his trained ears caught the syllables of earnest talk and, from a nature not yet subdued, listened with the habit of his recent profession.

"So, when I saw the news in the paper this morning, Helen, I made up my mind to come over and see what could be done. I got up late but I came as soon as I could. I'm terribly sorry about it."

Now the Ferret had learned to read men in many ways, by looks, by apparently trivial actions and by the intonations of the voice. This voice sounded frank, sympathetic as it was cultured, but there was a purring quality to it that made the Ferret distrust its owner before he saw him, and feel sure that his suspicion was well placed. It was the voice of a man accustomed to talk much with women— a voice that could flatter readily and did— that could charm and woo, the voice of a stage lover. The woman's voice was harder to interpret. It held a hint of fear, a hint of insincerity, or offence, but it was charming. And the Ferret, rooted suddenly, still listened.

"Did you see the reward I offered, Clinton? Harry was very kind about it. He offered to make it more but I thought it was enough. And I want my pearls

back, Clinton. I love them. The money does not matter so much but they were Harry's wedding-gift to me and I want them."

The insincerity, or whatever it was, left the voice as she spoke of her desire for the gems. Then it came back.

"Can you suggest anything, Clinton?"

"I can't. I'm a dub at such things. I suppose you might double the reward if you don't get any response. The necklace is worth much more." "It cost ten thousand dollars. But— whoever took it— would not be easily able to dispose of it, Harry says. Mr. Throop, the jeweler, told him that the pearls would lose value immediately they were separated or sold unmatched, and of course the full description was in the paper."

"Yes. But I think I should double that reward tomorrow." The Ferret did not shift his position but his eyes hardened and his fists clenched.

"Clinton," went on the woman. "Do you remember you promised to return to me those two letters I sent you. They did not mean anything. They were just foolish letters but Harry— won't you let me have them?"

"I will, tomorrow, Belle. If there is nothing else I can do, I'll be getting back on the 5:50. That is, if you're not going to ask me to stay to dinner."

He laughed as he spoke.

"No, it isn't convenient tonight, Clinton." "If I were you I'd telephone to those jeweler people and also to the paper, doubling that reward. I think it will bring results. You say your husband was willing to increase it. And I'll send you those — foolish—letters you speak of."

The Ferret looked at his cheap but competent watch. It was 5.30 and the station was a full mile back. He intended to catch the 5.50. The job— could wait.

The man and the woman moved on. Doubtless they were going back to the house. The Ferret ambuscaded behind the shrubs, glimpsed the graceful figure and pretty face of the woman and paid especial attention to the man, a handsome, somewhat haggard chap, faultlessly dressed, who passed on with a covert smile as he passed out of sight.

Within a hundred yards of the station a car sped by the hurrying Ferret and in it sat the man whose first name was Clinton. He got out at the station and the car returned toward the Haskins place.

Up-town, and later, the man whose first name was Clinton descended from the elevated in the nineties and walked to the door of a bachelor-apartment house which he opened with a key. He entered. A minute later the Ferret inspected the small foyer and noted a card that read:

Clinton Howard Bowdin. Apt. 8.

He looked at the rest of the names, apparently comparing them with an envelop he carried, frowned and crossed the street, seemingly looking at numbers. But he glanced back at the house he had left, quite casually. It was dark and some of the windows were already illuminated.

"Apartment eight," mused the Ferret. "That should be on the top floor back. Seven is in front. No one home there." He walked up the street and back again slowly. Three doors from the house that Clinton Bowdin had entered was one evidently vacant—"To Let" signs in its windows.

NAN greeted the Ferret expectantly. Supper was ready for him.

"The first home meal, Jim," she said. "Any news? Or do you want to keep it until after supper?"

"No news, old girl," he said. "But prospects. And I have to go out after supper."

She did not question him but, after he had gone, she went into the bedroom where he had been rummaging in a closet and herself reached down a box on the back of the shelf. Hardly knowing she carried it she bore it into the next room and sat down heavily with the box on her lap. Her face was old now, old and pinched between the lines, and gray.

"He has taken his keys and his gun," she repeated to herself over and over as she rocked, her face a mask of dread— dread and sorrow.

THE Ferret entered the doorway of the vacant house like a shadow and deftly set in the lock a twisted piece of tempered wire. A little pull, a pause, a quick thrust and a turn and the lock slid, the shadowed door opened and closed again. Two minutes later the scuttle leading to the roof lifted and the Ferret emerged, keeping well back from the front coping and making his swift and subtle progress over the roofs. He tried the scuttle-hatch of the house that stood the third below and found it tightly fastened from within. Hardly visible in the gloom, he glided to the back of the roof, peered over, tested a gutter, let himself down with the agility of a gymnast, swinging to his hands, and dropped without noise on to the top landing of a fire-escape. The landing was outside a room before whose window a blind was drawn, almost to the bottom, all but an inch. The Ferret bent— looked through. Handsome Clinton Bowdin was seated at a table gazing at a lustrous string of pearls clasped by a sapphire.

"Wondering if she's doubled that reward," the Ferret told himself. "He's figuring on getting up early tomorrow to see that paper. But he can't cash in until the jeweler opens."

He stood upright, struck silently a safety match, showing the barest glimmer through his shielding fingers while he briefly surveyed the latch of the window. With the precision of an expert he inserted something between the sashes upward, gave a twist to the handle of the instrument and the catch was sprung with the tiniest of clicks.

Within, Bowdin did not move. The Ferret nosed the breeze, almost imperceptible, tried its strength with a wet finger and then a loosely held bit of paper. He eased up the bottom sash with the tool that had started the catch and, inch by inch under his wide-spread fingers, quick to sense any lack of balance, the lower pane moved upward, back of the blind. Bowdin put back the necklace into its case and took up two letters that he read through with a sneering smile. "Cheap at the price," he said. "The little fool to— Hell!"

He jumped to his feet as the spring blind rushed up and flapped about its roller. Coming through the window was a slight man of whose face nothing could be seen but a resolute chin and two eyes, hard as steel, showing through a mask. One remarkably steady hand held an automatic aimed for Bowdin's heart.

Bowdin did not move.

"I'll put up my hands if you want me to," he said. "But you've come to the wrong apartment. I am broke, my murderous friend, always, perennially broke. Nothing worth your while shooting for. Besides the house is full, some one might hear the shot."

"*You* wouldn't," said the Ferret. "You'd see the flash and feel the smash of the bullet and that would be the end of you. I'll look out for myself afterward. But I'll shoot."

Bowdin turned pale, sweat broke out on his forehead and the fingers of his hand on the table trembled. The brutal description and the tone that backed it had broken his bravado.

"What do you want?" he said in a low voice.

"The necklace you were admiring. Don't move!"

He shoved the automatic forward so that its grim muzzle brushed the serge of Bowdin's coat and picked up the case with one hand, sliding it into his own pocket. Then he took up the letters.

"What do you want those for? They are private letters—"

"Same thing you wanted them for. Now, Mr. Bowdin, don't start anything after I go. I'm going out the front way. It might be awkward for you to explain how you got that necklace. Get me?"

He deftly ran his hand over Bowdin in a search for a weapon.

"Now then," he said, "you climb out that window on to the fire-escape. Go on."

With a glance of furious but futile resentment Bowdin obeyed.

"You can break the glass after a while if you can't open the sash like I did. Or you can climb down and stir up the janitor. Good night."

He pulled down the pane and set the catch, leaving the discomfited Bowdin glaring at him through the glass, went down the stairs, opened the front door-latch and passed into the street, confident that he would not be followed.

NAN looked up with a white face and red-rimmed eyes as he entered and tossed the jeweler's case into her lap.

"Jim," she said. Jim! You said—"

"Nan. There's a reward of one thousand hung up for this and no questions asked. I fell on to it. The thousand means everything to us just now. I turned down Flynn's job, though there was five times the amount in it. The people who put up this reward won't miss a thousand as much as we would ten cents. A cheap thief swiped it and I took it from the thief. I took something else from him, two letters a woman would give the thousand for without a murmur."

"You said you'd go straight, Jim. I was so happy till I saw what you'd taken from the box."

"We'll chuck them all in the river tomorrow, Nan, after I get the thousand."

"But it's stealing, Jim. Stealing and blackmail."

"Where do you get that? I ain't selling the letters. I ain't read 'em and I ain't going to. I'm sending 'em back. I didn't take the necklace. Luck chucked it my way when I most needed it and I'm going to get that thousand."

His face was dogged.

"Jim, it's just the same. You didn't earn the thousand."

"The —— I didn't."

"Jim, I'll put it to you this way. Maybe I don't put it well but I know it ain't straight. Which way would the warden look at it?"

The Ferret flushed. He sat down with a straight line between his brows. Then he laughed.

"The warden! If the warden knew he'd figure he'd lost his bet, I reckon."

"How's that, Jim?" And he told her of the wager.

THROOP, senior partner of Throop & Towne, Fifth Avenue jewelers, looked in perplexity at the slight, gray-headed man who sat opposite him in his private office. Between them the Haskins necklace lay on the leather-topped desk like a coiling snake.

"You say you don't want any reward?" he asked. "But the money is here. I give you my word the matter goes no further."

The Ferret shook his head. "Won't you leave your name— confidentially? This is most extraordinary. Do you realize the necklace is worth ten thousand dollars?"

"Yes, I realize that, Mr. Throop. But you are breaking the compact."

"What compact?"

"No questions asked. Good morning, sir."

Outside the store the Ferret dropped a letter in a mail-box. It was addressed to Mrs. Belle Haskins of Long Island and marked "personal."

As he turned away, some one tapped him on the shoulder and he whirled.

"Hello, Ferret," said Henderson." What are you doing in Throop & Towne's?"

"Pricing diamonds with Mr. Throop," said the Ferret. "If you don't believe me, ask him."

Henderson looked at him with a halfgrin.

"You're a foxy one, Ferret, but I've got my eye on you. I'm going to collect that bet."

"Will you do me a favor, Mr. Henderson?"

"What is it?"

"Just how much did you bet with the warden about me?"

The detective looked at him quizzically.

"A century. Why? Want to pay it for the warden?"

"I might. I'm going up to see him this afternoon."

He walked off, leaving Henderson looking after him in a muddle of speculation.

Presently the detective shadowed him, the Ferret perfectly conscious of the operation. And, when Henderson, flashing his badge, asked his question at the ticket office, the puzzle on his face deepened at the answer.

"Ossining. Round trip."

In the train the Ferret skinned off his roll. Five twenties he put in his vest pocket, the balance, a little over two hundred and seventy dollars, he returned to his hip.

"I'LL tell you what I think of it, Rogers," said the warden as he handed the Ferret a cigar. "I should like to meet that wife of yours. I wish you'd arrange it."

"Why, of course, I'm proud to, sir."

"For one thing I want to ask her if she considers I've lost this bet to Henderson. Because I'm not at all sure about it myself, Rogers, and her vision is rather wonderful. So you had better keep the hundred till we talk it over. I've been thinking about you, Rogers. How would you like to have me as a business partner?"

"Why— why?" The Ferret gasped and choked.

"I've got a thousand or so I could invest in, say the fancy shrub business, Rogers. Like to go into it?"

"You'd trust me?"

"I'd trust you and that wife of yours, together, anywhere, Rogers. You've won your own best bet."

In the eyes of the Ferret, riding through Westchester County in the early evening, was a look that might have suggested the dew on the ferns in the shady coppices that graced the verdant hills. And a vision came again, to stay, a vision of upturned earth and the balm of shrubs, of fragrant flowers, and, tending them, himself and Nan.

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15: The Phantom Luncheon

"Saki"

H. H. Munro, 1870-1916

The Bystander, 27 March 1912

"THE SMITHLY-DUBBS are in Town," said Sir James. "I wish you would show them some attention. Ask them to lunch with you at the Ritz or somewhere."

"From the little I've seen of the Smithly-Dubbs I don't thing I want to cultivate their acquaintance," said Lady Drakmanton.

"They always work for us at election times," said her husband; "I don't suppose they influence very many votes, but they have an uncle who is on one of my ward committees, and another uncle speaks sometimes at some of our less important meetings. Those sort of people expect some return in the shape of hospitality."

"Expect it!" exclaimed Lady Drakmanton; "the Misses Smithly-Dubb do more than that; they almost demand it. They belong to my club, and hang about the lobby just about lunch-time, all three of them, with their tongues hanging out of their mouths and the six-course look in their eyes. If I were to breathe the word 'lunch' they would hustle me into a taxi and scream 'Ritz' or 'Dieudonne's' to the driver before I knew what was happening."

"All the same, I think you ought to ask them to a meal of some sort," persisted Sir James.

"I consider that showing hospitality to the Smithly-Dubbs is carrying Free Food principles to a regrettable extreme," said Lady Drakmanton; "I've entertained the Joneses and the Browns and the Snapheimers and the Lubrikoffs, and heaps of others whose names I forget, but I don't see why I should inflict the society of the Misses Smithly-Dubb on myself for a solid hour. Imagine it, sixty minutes, more or less, of unrelenting gobble and gabble. Why can't *you* take them on, Milly?" she asked, turning hopefully to her sister.

"I don't know them," said Milly hastily.

"All the better; you can pass yourself off as me. People say that we are so alike that they can hardly tell us apart, and I've only spoken to these tiresome young women about twice in my life, at committee-rooms, and bowed to them in the club. Any of the club page-boys will point them out to you; they're always to be found lolling about the hall just before lunch-time."

"My dear Betty, don't be absurd," protested Milly; "I've got some people lunching with me at the Carlton to-morrow, and I'm leaving Town the day afterwards."

"What time is your lunch to-morrow?" asked Lady Drakmanton reflectively.

"Two o'clock," said Milly.

"Good," said her sister; "the Smithly-Dubbs shall lunch with me to-morrow. It shall be rather an amusing lunch-party. At least, I shall be amused."

The last two remarks she made to herself. Other people did not always appreciate her ideas of humour. Sir James never did.

The next day Lady Drakmanton made some marked variations in her usual toilet effects. She dressed her hair in an unaccustomed manner, and put on a hat that added to the transformation of her appearance. When she had made one or two minor alterations she was sufficiently unlike her usual smart self to produce some hesitation in the greeting which the Misses Smithly-Dubb bestowed on her in the club-lobby. She responded, however, with a readiness which set their doubts at rest.

"What is the Carlton like for lunching in?" she asked breezily.

The restaurant received an enthusiastic recommendation from the three sisters.

"Let's go and lunch there, shall we?" she suggested, and in a few minutes' time the Smithly-Dubb mind was contemplating at close quarters a happy vista of baked meats and approved vintage.

"Are you going to start with caviare? I am," confided Lady Drakmanton, and the Smithly-Dubbs started with caviare. The subsequent dishes were chosen in the same ambitious spirit, and by the time they had arrived at the wild duck course it was beginning to be a rather expensive lunch.

The conversation hardly kept pace with the brilliancy of the menu. Repeated references on the part of the guests to the local political conditions and prospects in Sir James's constituency were met with vague "ahs" and "indeeds" from Lady Drakmanton, who might have been expected to be specially interested.

"I think when the Insurance Act is a little better understood it will lose some of its present unpopularity," hazarded Cecilia Smithly-Dubb.

"Will it? I dare say. I'm afraid politics don't interest me very much," said Lady Drakmanton.

The three Miss Smithly-Dubbs put down their cups of Turkish coffee and stared. Then they broke into protesting giggles.

"Of course, you're joking," they said.

"Not me," was the disconcerting answer; "I can't make head or tail of these bothering old politics. Never could, and never want to. I've quite enough to do to manage my own affairs, and that's a fact."

"But," exclaimed Amanda Smithly-Dubb, with a squeal of bewilderment breaking into her voice, "I was told you spoke so informingly about the Insurance Act at one of our social evenings."

It was Lady Drakmanton who stared now. "Do you know," she said, with a scared look around her, "rather a dreadful thing is happening. I'm suffering from a complete loss of memory. I can't even think who I am. I remember meeting you somewhere, and I remember you asking me to come and lunch with you here, and that I accepted your kind invitation. Beyond that my mind is a positive blank."

The scared look was transferred with intensified poignancy to the faces of her companions.

"*You* asked *us* to lunch," they exclaimed hurriedly. That seemed a more immediately important point to clear up than the question of identity.

"Oh, no," said the vanishing hostess, "*that* I do remember about. You insisted on my coming here because the feeding was so good, and I must say it comes up to all you said about it. A very nice lunch it's been. What I'm worrying about is who on earth am I? I haven't the faintest notion?"

"You are Lady Drakmanton," exclaimed the three sisters in chorus.

"Now, don't make fun of me," she replied, crossly, "I happen to know her quite well by sight, and she isn't a bit like me. And it's an odd thing you should have mentioned her, for it so happens she's just come into the room. That lady in black, with the yellow plume in her hat, there over by the door."

The Smithly-Dubbs looked in the indicated direction, and the uneasiness in their eyes deepened into horror. In outward appearance the lady who had just entered the room certainly came rather nearer to their recollection of their Member's wife than the individual who was sitting at table with them.

"Who *are* you, then, if that is Lady Drakmanton?" they asked in panic-stricken bewilderment.

"That is just what I don't know," was the answer; "and you don't seem to know much better than I do."

"You came up to us in the club—"

"In what club?"

"The New Didactic, in Calais Street."

"The New Didactic!" exclaimed Lady Drakmanton with an air of returning illumination; "thank you so much. Of course, I remember now who I am. I'm Ellen Niggle, of the Ladies' Brasspolishing Guild. The Club employs me to come now and then and see to the polishing of the brass fittings. That's how I came to know Lady Drakmanton by sight; she's very often in the Club. And you are the ladies who so kindly asked me out to lunch. Funny how it should all have slipped my memory, all of a sudden. The unaccustomed good food and wine must have been too much for me; for the moment I really couldn't call to mind who I was. Good gracious," she broke off suddenly, "it's ten past two; I should

be at a polishing job in Whitehall. I must scuttle off like a giddy rabbit. Thanking you ever so."

She left the room with a scuttle sufficiently suggestive of the animal she had mentioned, but the giddiness was all on the side of her involuntary hostesses. The restaurant seemed to be spinning round them; and the bill when it appeared did nothing to restore their composure. They were as nearly in tears as it is permissible to be during the luncheon hour in a really good restaurant. Financially speaking, they were well able to afford the luxury of an elaborate lunch, but their ideas on the subject of entertaining differed very sharply, according to the circumstances of whether they were dispensing or receiving hospitality. To have fed themselves liberally at their own expense was, perhaps, an extravagance to be deplored, but, at any rate, they had had something for their money; to have drawn an unknown and socially unremunerative Ellen Niggle into the net of their hospitality was a catastrophe that they could not contemplate with any degree of calmness.

The Smithly-Dubbs never quite recovered from their unnerving experience. They have given up politics and taken to doing good.

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16: The Body in the Garage

Mark Hellinger

1903-1947

The Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 31 Dec 1936

THE Miltons were poor people. They lived in a little frame house on the outskirts of a large city, and I don't suppose either the husband or wife ever had much happiness together.

They had been married some five or six years when they moved into the neighborhood.

The husband's occupation was a mystery. Some said he drove a truck when he could find work and others insisted that he was a small-time gunman. None of them really knew, and I doubt if the wife was much wiser than they.

One thing, however, everybody knew. There wasn't a man or woman in the vicinity who wasn't aware that the Miltons were staging some excellent battles. There would be hoarse cries from the man and startling shrieks from the woman.

The neighbors, of course, blamed the man. They didn't know anything about the circumstances then, and they don't today. But when a husky male is living with a frail female and one of the two is getting slapped around, I imagine it's only human to give the lady the break.

Came the night when there was the fiercest fight of all. The woman screamed violently. The foulest of language poured from the man's lips. A chair went through a window and fell to the walk below. Several of the neighbors were tempted to rush in and put a stop to the battle. But suddenly, after one piercing shriek from Mrs. Milton, everything grew very still. A few seconds later, the lights went out, and the neighbors went back to bed.

Several days went by before anybody missed the woman. As a matter of fact, I think the neighbors missed the quarrels before they suspected that anything had happened to Mrs. Milton.

People can become so accustomed to a routine that when anything is omitted they grow suspicious. When a week had passed, and there was still no sign of the woman, the police were called. The next day, in the husband's absence, the officers walked in.

They found very definite traces of the last brutal fight between husband and wife. Bloodstains on the rug. Torn dresses. A broken table that had evidently been hurled, causing the hole in the wall. And so on. When the husband returned, he was immediately seized and questioned. His explanation was simple.

"If you fellers think I killed her," he muttered, "you're crazy. I hit her: sure I did. I've been hittin' her right along because she's been crazy about another

guy. She'd throw his name at me when I had a coupla drinks under my belt and that would drive me nuts.

"I was pretty stewed the last time I seen her. We had a fight. And when I waked up in the morning, she was gone. That's all I know, fellers, and you ain't gettin' nothin' more outa me."

They quizzed him, of course, at length. They asked him where the other man lived. He said h didn't know. They did everything possible to get a confession from him. But they got nowhere. Everything pointed to the belief that the husband had murdered his wife. The neighbor's testimony about the violent quarrels. The husband's unsavory past. The bloodstains The complete disappearance of the wife. The stillness after the last terrific shriek.

Yes, everything was present for an iron-clad murder charge. Everything but the body. And without that, where were the police? They held the husband for some time while they searched and searched.

They let him go, and then they picked him up again. And just about four months after the first quiz they found a woman's body in the tiny garage in the rear of the frame house.

The body had been hacked to bits. Nobody was willing positively to identify the remains. It was in such a state that identification was almost impossible. But the police dug up a distant relative and brought her on. She looked— and she nodded. Yes, that was Susie. Susie had had a mark on her left hand just like that. Yes, she was positive.

Milton was tried for the murder or his wife. He was lucky enough to have a conscientious attorney assigned to him, and the evidence against him was purely circumstantial. He finally wound up by being convicted of one of the lesser degrees of murder, and was sent to the penitentiary at Joliet, Ill., for some 15 years. He had been let off, I guess, comparatively lightly.

THE man served 14 years before he was again turned loose in the world. He skipped the big city this time and wandered into one of the smaller towns in the Middle West in search of a job. He was sitting in a beanery and gazing gloomily through the window when he saw his wife walk by. She had been alive all this time, and had made no effort to save him from the murder charge. And all she would have had to do, of course, was walk into the court room.

He raced from the restaurant and trailed her. The man was wild with rage. His nails digging into his palms, and his lips in a bitter line, he followed her every step. She walked into a dingy house and up a flight of stairs.

Just as she opened the door he nailed her. He placed a hand over her mouth, slammed the door behind him, and threw her into a chair.

"You're the lowest rat that ever lived. You let me spend 14 years in hell for something I never did. Well, I'll fool them. They said I did it— and I'm going to make good for them. You're going to die—"

This time there was no question about it. He knocked the woman out with a punch, dragged her into the kitchen, and finished the job with a bread knife.

He was just stealing from the apartment when another man walked in. There was a struggle. The police arrived. The body was discovered.

So, for the second time, Milton was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife...

THAT IS all of the Milton case that I can give you. The man who told it to me dropped from sight, and I could find nothing about it in the newspapers. So the story must stand as written. You will tell me, I suppose, that no man can be convicted twice for the same crime. Milton, many lawyers state, must be released. But is it the same crime? How can it be when one happened some 15 years after the other? Yet there it is. The man was punished for the killing of his wife, even though it was a crime he didn't commit. He paid his debt. Has society the right to punish him again?

It's a swell problem I think.

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17: Le Diable

Huan Mee

Walter E. Mansfield, 1870-1916
and Charles Mansfield, 1864-1930
Cassell's Magazine July 1899
In: *A Diplomatic Woman*, 1900

WE were a gathering of diplomacy, science, and beauty. Monsieur Roché, the Premier, the first, Monsieur Vicenne, the Minister of Marine, the second, and it was I who completed the trio.

"I have offered five million francs!" Monsieur Vicenne exclaimed, with a gesture as though he had mentioned the total of the Treasury of the Republic.

"But that is not so very much, monsieur," I ventured to suggest, "if the invention be all that is pretended for it."

"Five million francs!" he ejaculated again, with wide-opened eyes, until I feared that his eyebrows would altogether disappear into his bushy hair.

"It is the method of calculating that is at fault," I said. "Five million francs. It sounds stupendous; but what is it? In Napoleons, merely two hundred and fifty thousand; in English sovereigns, only two hundred thousand. What do you really estimate the invention to be worth?"

"It is priceless. *Mon Dieu*! Imagine." The dear man always spoke in this staccato manner. "A boat— a submarine boat. Sixty knots an hour. *Mon Dieu*! If we— if France could possess it. England! Bah!" He snapped his fingers disdainfully.

"And all for five million francs ?"

"I would pay ten. *Nom de Diable*! Fifteen — twenty."

"Ah!" I smiled. Monsieur Roché laid his long fingers upon my arm.

"A commission, eh, *ma chere*?"

"Mercy, no ! What do I know of such affairs?"

"Twenty million francs. Mon Dieu! If you could buy for ten, sell for twenty— eh?" sharply interjected Monsieur Vicenne.

Monsieur Roché tapped him upon the shoulder, somewhat irritably.

"Madame is the loveliest woman in Paris," he observed.

The Minister of Marine interrupted. "You talk commonplaces," he cried. "Tell me next that the sun is shining." And I was constrained to rise and bow my acknowledgments for the twin compliment.

"But she is one of the richest," Monsieur Roché continued. "Money can be no inducement."

"To serve Prance?" Monsieur Vicenne hazarded.

"And the love of adventure," I added. "Monsieur, I will do my best. If I am successful, I will claim as my reward that the first boat built upon this invention shall be named after me."

"*L'Incomparable*," suggested M. Vicenne.

"*Merci, monsieur, mais non*, ' *L'Aide*.' "

I HAD started on my journey before I had seriously considered what a mad-brained scheme I had taken in hand. I, who knew nothing of such things, was about to attempt to persuade where the whole diplomatic tact of French administrators had failed. I was to be a bidder for this wonderful boat that had startled the world; appearing to-day at Ostend, to-morrow a thousand miles away, and all the power in the hands of a man who was deaf to entreaty, impervious to persuasion.

The experts of the navy had pleaded to be allowed to inspect the boat. His answer had been, "Keep level with it, and watch."

"Keep level, and watch"— it was a pleasant satire. England's latest toy, the *Turbina*, steamed only thirty-four knots an hour, and there were those who swore that this submarine boat at times got near to sixty. Still the die was cast. I was to obtain, somehow, an interview with the inventor, who was so unlike others of his species that he invented for his own satisfaction, and not to sell his discovery. I was to offer whatever I liked. And if, as was probable, he refused, try and induce him to take me for a cruise, and learn what I could as fortune favored me.

It was as foolish a scheme for them to suggest as for me to undertake; but everything about the vessel was so secret and mysterious, that even if I could bring back the vaguest idea of how this craft was propelled it would be of inestimable value.

It was to the wild coast of Normandy that I was speeding, clad in a rusty black gown and a still rustier mantle that libelled nature in the manner it distorted me; and the day was as wild and boisterous as I could wish for the first act of the play, comedy, or tragedy, as Fate decreed.

The gray eve was fading to a dirty twilight, and inky clouds scurried across the gloomy sky, as I alighted some four kilometres from the Chateau de Lorme, and, setting my face resolutely to the wind, started to walk the distance.

The wind, howling and biting from the sea, brought with it merciless sheets of hail and sleety rain; and after the first ten minutes I realized that I could get no wetter, and so I mechanically battled onward, my wretched, ill-shapen garments streaming with water, and flapping miserably around me.

Saints! what a walk! A dozen times I was for relinquishing the whole thing and turning back in despair, but something kept me struggling on until more

than half the distance had been traversed, and then it was better to press forward than to return.

On and on, the sharp hailstones stinging my cheeks, until I felt it must be seclusion for a month before I dared appear in Paris again, and then a turn of the road brought me before a house standing on the edge of the cliff, an enormous mansion shrouded in blackness, and apparently deserted.

Night had fallen, and everywhere was darkness and solitude. An avenue of trees led to the door, and while I walked under their shelter I had an opportunity of gaining my breath before I grasped the heavy iron knocker, and, with determined hand, knocked until the house seemed to shake with the echoes.

"Well?" at last came a gruff shout above my head. "Well, what is it?"

"I want shelter," I cried, irritably, and not with feigned annoyance, for I was shivering with the damp and cold, and wished I had never left Paris.

"This is not an inn."

"No, but it's a house," I cried, defiantly. "I must have shelter. I can pay for it."

A man's voice chuckled— what a mirthless chuckle it was!— the window was banged down with a thud, and I had seized the knocker to hammer again, when the entrance-hall blazed into light, and the door was opened.

A gust of wind threw me forward, and as I recovered myself and stepped across the threshold I caught my breath in amazement, for I, who have viewed the mansions of the greatest, never before beheld such barbaric splendor. It was an entrance-hall fit for the palace of a prince, and lighted with enormous clusters of incandescent lamps.

My wretched rain-soaked dress was making pools upon the parquetry, and I moved to a rug and surveyed my host, who was as striking as his surroundings— a tall, thin individual, with long, gray, straggling hair that hung round his shoulders, and a wild, unkempt beard. His eyes, which flashed fiercely, and seemed to read one through and through, were overhung by heavy, jet-black eyebrows.

He looked the very embodiment of Eugene Sue's Wanderer, and yet he was politeness personified, for his eyes did not turn to the pools upon the polished floor, nor to the wet trail I had made with my bedraggled skirt.

"I am favored, madame," he said, bowing, with a thin, transparent hand upon his breast.

"And I am cold and wet and hungry," I answered, prosaically, for I was determined to be in no wise awed by these unexpected surroundings.

"Three evils so easily remedied that it is scarcely worth designating them even as evils," he replied; and then, with another bow, escorted me up the

staircase into a spacious corridor, were he opened a door, and stood aside for me to enter.

"I have so many guests to-night," he murmured, apologetically, "that I fear I cannot treat you as I would wish; but you will find all your needs supplied in the dressing-room beyond."

He paused in the doorway.

"There is only hunger left now," he exclaimed, with another chuckle, "and dinner is at eight. May I expect you in the reception-room a few minutes before that hour?"

"With pleasure," I answered. "And, monsieur, you have my gratitude."

He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, and then, with a momentary glance at my costume, waved his hand towards the adjoining room.

"You will dress to meet my guests, madame, and look your best, for you will meet the greatest men the world has ever seen."

With that he chuckled again, closed the door, and left me; while I shot the bolt behind him, and stood— I confess it— and laughed— laughed a long peal of merriment. The greatest men of the world visiting here. It was too droll.

But I was in the house of the inventor of *Le Diable*, received as his honored guest. Already I had been startled and surprised, and I wondered what the next few hours might hold in store for me. A shiver brought me back to realities. I passed into the adjoining room, a dressing-room lined with wardrobes, containing gowns and feminine adornments, before which even my own treasures from the Rue de la Paix were insignificant. Through curtains beyond was the bath-room, with every dainty requisite that a woman of fashion could desire.

In an hour I was ready to do honor to my host and his famous guests. I missed Thérèse. But who could look anything but bewitching in the magnificent creations at my disposal? I passed from my apartment into the lengthy corridor, noticing that on either side, with the doors flung open, were suites of rooms similar to my own.

My gown was, perhaps, an inch shorter than I could have wished, but in every other respect it was perfection, hanging loosely from the low-cut shoulders to the hem, except for an elaborate silver filigree belt that caught in its silken folds at the waist, and I felt confident that, no matter whom I might meet, I had no reason to be ashamed of my appearance.

I descended the stairs, and should have wandered about the building, impelled by natural curiosity; but I caught sight of monsieur standing alone in the middle of a spacious room upon my left, and so I entered and walked towards him, feeling a keen satisfaction in my improved appearance as my train rustled across the floor.

"You have kept us all waiting," he cried, with evident annoyance in his tone.

I glanced round in astonishment, for there was no one save our two selves in the great apartment.

"I will present you to my guests, Madame—?" and he paused interrogatively.

"Lerestelle," I exclaimed, still bewildered.

And then he took me by the hand, and we made the tour of the room.

Truly, as he said, his guests were the greatest ones of the earth; truly my host was hopelessly mad, for no reception-room that the world has ever known has been filled with such a gathering. And truly, too, he and I were alone.

Living and dead, these imaginary creatures of his disordered brain were massed together in hopeless confusion. He flung a witticism at Madame de Staël, a cynicism at Voltaire, a quotation from "Fédora" at Sardou, and a line from a sonnet at Alfred de Musset. And I bowed to the empty chairs, and humored this weird pleasantry.

We reached the climax when my host presented me to Napoleon Bonaparte, and I could scarcely restrain the hysteric laughter which was dangerously near escaping. But relief came as he introduced me to the last imaginary guest of all, the present Minister of Marine, my friend Monsieur Vicenne.

There seemed a certain irony in the fact that the man upon whose behalf I had braved this dwelling should have been, in the crazed mind of my host, included with his illustrious guests. He left me beside my friend, and I sank into a chair, with a vague uneasiness that I could not dispel, a feeling of restless horror that deepened, as monsieur, like an ideal host, sauntered from one chair to another, chatting lightly to these impalpable creatures of his imagination; laughing at some jest with this one, and anon leaning towards another, as though interchanging a whispered confidence.

I felt I was growing hysterical: a moment longer and I should have shrieked. The strain was becoming too great, the horror at being alone with such a man too much; but a gong boomed without, and he, with some imaginary beauty leaning upon his arm, passed from the room, while I sauntered behind, and far behind, too, for I was fearful of the order of precedence.

It was a relief to find that we two were not absolutely alone in the house. I was conducted to a seat near my host in the dining-room by a liveried man-servant, while a dozen more stood around the table.

Noiselessly they moved about the spacious apartment, apparently attending to the wants of the shadowy guests, at that long table set for a score.

The soup was brought, and placed not only before my host and myself, but in front of every empty chair. The wine was poured into every glass, and as each course was finished, so were the untouched plates removed and others brought.

It would have been nearly ludicrous, but for the deadly dreariness of the scene, the ghostly grimness of the picture, the all-pervading nervous atmosphere of the impending unknown. I gazed at the vacant seats, until I could almost fancy an illustrious company filling them; not the witty, animated throng that he could see, but a gathering of chattering skeletons, that grinned and gibed at me over the flower-decked and silver-laden damask.

And all the while he merrily smiled and jested— smiled at this beauty whom only his eyes could see, laughed at that jest which only his ears could hear.

Nerves, I have always proudly averred, I know not, but now I caught at the table to rise and flee from the room, when he fixed his eyes upon my face, and turned confidentially towards me.

Then he raised his glass and pledged his guests. "*A vôtre santé, madame*," he murmured to me.

"*A la vôtre, monsieur.*"

As he set down his glass he placed his long, bony finger upon my arm. "Do you know why they're all here?" he chuckled. "Ah, to try and steal my invention— my boat, *Le Diable*."

Here, at last, was a gleam of sense, a scrap of rational talk, and it came to me like cold water to the fainting.

"What boat?" I asked, and my brain seemed to quicken to life again.

"Ah! ah! what boat?" he said, with a grim chuckle; "what boat?— *Le Diable*. You're the only innocent one here, and I will madden them all by allowing you to see it. I'll show it to her, Monsieur Vicenne," he cried, glaring fiercely at the empty chair beside me, "but not to you, no, not to any of you," he almost shouted, with a sharp look right down the table.

"When?" I exclaimed, scarcely able to hide my anxiety.

"Never!" he screamed, with a flash of rage. "You want to rob me, like the rest of them; you're all thieves!" he cried, banging his fist upon the table, till the glasses rang again, "a crowd of hypocritical, thieving knaves," and then as suddenly as he blazed forth he calmed down, and resumed his meal in silence, while I, perceiving that he had forgotten me, with the rest of his guests, stepped from my seat, and stole quietly from the room.

I have no shame in confessing that my self-control lasted but to the foot of the staircase, and then, like a frightened child, I caught my skirt in my hands, and flew up the stairs, and along the corridor, never halting until I was back in my room again, with the door securely locked.

To pass the night in such a house was impossible, and I unfastened the casement windows to see if the storm had spent itself. With a vicious howl the wind tore them from my grasp and flung them back with a crash, while the hail and rain streamed in, deadening the delicate tints of the carpet. To leave was worse than to stay. I could not face such a night, and, exerting all my strength, I fastened the windows again, and turned with a nervous gasp as someone knocked upon the door.

It was only a servant with my coffee upon a silver tray, which he placed upon a fancy Oriental stand, saying that monsieur would excuse me.

He seemed inclined to say more had I permitted, but one cannot question the servants of one's host. I thanked him, and he bowed and left.

I had thought of sitting through the night, but the slight indulgence of a spoonful of cognac in my coffee restored my brain to reason, while the fatigue of my journey and the excitement of the evening had worn me to death. I munched a few wafers, for I had scarcely eaten more than the spectral guests, and then crept contentedly between the scented sheets, and it seemed but an instant before the room was bathed in sunshine. The night had passed.

What a blessing is the sunlight! Sleep had completely revived me, and in more borrowed plumes I walked from my room, all intent upon my mission, and with a fixed determination that I would succeed; and then another surprise awaited me, for the dainty breakfast was only set for two, and my host courteously greeted me, and talked as a sane man upon every-day commonplaces.

Only once during the meal he relapsed, and then he leaned towards me and chuckled.

"They've all gone!" he cried; "they come suddenly at times, and try and steal my boat, but they never see it, and then, when they realize they never will, they leave altogether. Sometimes they stay a whole week," he continued, in a whisper, "and threaten me all the time, until I fear I shall go mad, but last night, after you had left, I told them boldly what I thought of them, and silently, one by one, they crept away."

"You promised me that I should see the boat?" I said, softly.

"It is a lie," he cried, with a blaze of fury.

"Very well, it's a lie," I answered, coldly, with simulated scorn.

For an instant he remained silent, and then, with a grave smile, he craved forgiveness.

"If I promised, I will keep my word," he said, quietly. "I will trust you; you shall see what no one in this world has seen, because I know you are an honorable woman, and will not betray my secret."

"Thank you," I said, devoting more attention to my cutlet than I had ever given to a Count, "but if you would rather not—"

"I never break my word," he responded. "Come to this room at five o'clock to-morrow morning, and you shall breakfast off the Isle of Wight at nine," and with that he rose from the table, and, courteously bowing to me, strolled from the apartment.

The day passed swiftly, for I was absorbed in pleasant thoughts at my own good fortune. That I could win him to sell his invention I doubted greatly, but that I should be able to gain some insight into the mechanism of the boat during the promised cruise, I felt assured.

The momentary thought that he was going to trust his secret with me because he believed me an honorable woman, did uncomfortably occur to me, but I dispelled it with disdain. What right, I asked myself, had a man to keep such an invention to himself, when it would be a crowning laurel to the glory of France?

Throughout the day my heart was high with elation, but as darkness fell my spirits drooped too, for I recollected the events of the previous night, and speculated on the wisdom, or want of wisdom, of a cruise beneath the sea with a man who, to say the least of it, was distinctly eccentric.

Yet he was sane enough now, and I would not waver from my purpose with success so near to my grasp. My fears were groundless. I dined alone, retired at ten, and slept peacefully until a quarter to five, when I rose, and, swiftly dressing, threw a long warm cloak over my arm, and descended the staircase.

The early morning was fine, but cold; no sign was yet apparent of the approaching dawn, and only an indigo sky, dotted with sparkling stars, was visible, as I passed the windows in the corridor.

My host, enveloped in a thick ulster, stood awaiting me in the morning-room, and with a cheery smile he apologized for the hour of our start, and opening a bottle of champagne, poured out for me a glassful.

"To our cruise."

"To our cruise," I responded, touching his glass with mine.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Quite," I answered, with rather a white smile, for I was cold, and, I own, a trifle nervous.

He took a lantern from the table and led the way, while I followed him along the entrance hall and down a steep flight of steps.

"You see, I guard my secret well," he said, unlocking an iron door at the end of what seemed to be a cellar, and then carefully fastening it behind us; "you are the first living soul to see my boat."

With the utmost care he guided me along the narrow passage, warning me of every inequality in the ground, and casting the light, so that I might walk with ease, until we reached a roughhewn flight of steps, seemingly cut from the native rock, that disappeared into the blackness beneath our feet, and there I instinctively paused and drew back.

"It is not tempting to a woman," he murmured, apologetically; "but the house stands on the cliff, and we are descending to the caves below."

Down, down, ever down we went, until I lost count of distance; but at last the steps ceased, and we stood upon a narrow platform of slippery stone, and I could hear the sweesh of the sea against the sides of the cave.

He flashed the light around. We were standing upon a ledge, about four feet above the water, and on every side were wet and greasy rocks; the roof above us was hidden in densest gloom, and at our feet lay the boat!

"My secret is safe, eh?" he cried, and the echoes flung back, "eh? eh? eh?" with a flood of chuckling scorn. "Even at low water," he continued, "the entrance to this cavern is hidden; only you and I, who move beneath the sea, can go to and fro."

He turned the rays of the lamp upon the boat, which lay quietly rocking in the water, a boat which seemed but little different from others of its style; the usual build of submarine vessels, cigar-shaped, with a conning-tower of steel, studded with thick glass port-holes, and a man-hole next to it.

Monsieur handed the lamp to me, and I kept its light fixed upon the vessel, while he strode across the deck, and, unscrewing the circular trap, passed into the interior. In an instant the conning-tower blazed with light, throwing brilliant beams from each of the round windows that looked like eyes staring into vacancy, and then, after what seemed an eternity, he appeared again, and beckoned me to come aboard.

For an instant I hesitated, but he walked towards me, and helped me across the sloping deck, down the man-hole, and into the cabin below.

In one glance I perceived the luxury of the interior, a small saloon, tapering off slightly at one end, upholstered in amber satin, save at the smaller end, where, upon a polished switchboard, was a group of strange handles of brass and ebony. Just in front of them a high seat was placed, which seemed arranged so that the whole of the handles were within the reach of a single operator, whose eyes would be on a level with the windows of the conning-tower. To the right was a steering-wheel, and to the left a compass.

I turned to my companion; he was busy adjusting the screws of the man-hole, and then, when all was finished to his satisfaction, he came towards me, and led me to the group of handles.

"It is your cruise, madame," he said, with a smile, "therefore you shall be the captain. Draw down the handle on the right."

I pulled it sharply downward, and felt the boat sink under my feet— we were beneath the water.

"Up!" he cried, and I obeyed him, and instantly the vessel's descent was arrested.

"The handle next to it," he said, "an inch down," and as I moved it the boat sprang forward, while he stood by my side, his eyes fixed on the compass, and his hand upon the wheel, now giving a turn to the left, and now to the right.

"We are clear of the cave," he cried, after a moment, "and in the open sea." Then, with a glance at the clock, he continued: "It has taken longer than usual to get away. Let *Le Diable* show his power, if you would breakfast where I promised. Pull down that handle, madame, as far as it will go."

Grasping it firmly, I obeyed him, and as I did so the boat bounded forward with such speed and suddenness that I should have fallen had he not caught me by the arm.

"Too sudden!" he cried, with his usual chuckle. "You must not drive even the devil too furiously."

I seated myself on a lounge, while he remained at the wheel, his eyes alternating between the compass and a chart.

Presently he became blurred to me, for I had risen unconscionably early, and the motion of the boat, after the first plunge, was conducive to slumber, so that I sank back and knew no more until I felt a touch upon my arm and found him bending over me.

"In a quarter of an hour you will breakfast," he said.

"*Merci, monsieur*," I answered; "I am hungry."

"This boat is my coffin," he suddenly ejaculated, looking me straight in the face. "That is why I will sell it to no one."

I nodded, and tried to smile in spite of my terror at this sudden change in his manner and the fierceness with which he gripped my wrist.

"When I am tired of life I shall drive into the midst of the Atlantic, sink *Le Diable* to the lowest ocean depths, and die."

"Yes, when you are tired of life," I answered.

"And who knows when that may be!" he cried. "Perhaps to-day, perhaps to-morrow," and he chuckled in a mirthless fashion.

I gazed at him and shivered, but in a few moments his frenzy passed, and, taking my hand, he led me towards the mechanism that controlled the boat, and pointed to the clock. "In ten minutes more we shall be there," he cried.

"How do these handles work the boat?" I asked, gently, with my mind upon my mission. "Where is the actual machinery?"

"That is my secret!" he shouted. "Pull." And he placed my fingers on another handle. Obedient to the touch the vessel slowed, and then stopped.

Again he placed my fingers upon a lever. "Hold it," he cried; and then suddenly he switched out the light, and we were in densest blackness.

"Raise it gently; give me your hand."

He drew me back with him, and I waited nervously in the darkness, until a faint, ghostly light flickered through the glass before me. A deep green grew lighter and lighter, until at last the sunlight streamed full in my eyes and the foam-flecked sea danced before me, with the roofs of a town, backed by English hills, beyond it.

It was Ventnor, and we had reached the spot that he had promised.

Then we breakfasted, and all through the meal, while the morning sunshine streamed through the circular windows, I wondered how I was to tempt the secret from him. Of what use was it for me to return to my friends and say I had cruised in the boat, that it was controlled by a series of handles, and that was all I knew? As well not have ventured at all.

"Now show me what guides the boat," I exclaimed, in my most ingenuous voice, as he rose from the meal and moved towards the tower.

"These handles," he answered. "See!" The sunlight vanished, the opalescent green of the sea grew darker and darker, and then blackness enshrouded all. There was not a sound save the click of the wheel as he moved it, and then the boat sprang forward again.

Then, in the darkness, he seized my arm and drew me towards him.

"There are no works," he whispered, "no mechanism at all. All the power is in my brain— *I* drive it, *I* control it."

I laughed a nervous laugh. "You are droll, monsieur."

"And you're a fool!" he shouted, wildly. "It's my brain, I tell you, that controls it all."

I wrenched myself free, and he switched on the light again, and then gave a shriek that froze my blood.

I turned with a start, and my flesh prickled as I saw him standing with madness blazing in his eyes, his attenuated hand extended, pointing to the far end of the cabin. "Who is that?" he gasped.

"There is no one here but ourselves," I cried, trembling with apprehension.

"You lie! Look there, and there, and there," and his bony finger pointed to every corner of the saloon. "And there, and there! *Nom de Diable!* They are all here!"

"Who are here?" I cried, with a weak attempt at bravado.

"They are; those who have tried to rob me of my secret— those whom you met at dinner. Ah!" He turned swiftly and moved slowly towards me, his body half bent, like a wild animal about to spring upon its prey.

"Ah!" he hissed again. "Those you met at dinner. Those you conspired to bring upon the boat to rob me."

"You're mad!" I shrieked, my courage utterly deserting me.

"Mad!" he raved, pointing about the cabin and grimacing at the imaginary intruders. "It's you who are mad. All of you, for you've come to your death. And you're in your coffin now!"

I had gradually crept as far from him as the limited space would allow, but he still advanced with a stealthy tread; and then, when only a few inches separated us, and I hid my face in my trembling hands, I realized that he had halted.

He turned, and, with a bound, made for the switchboard and stopped the boat, pulled the lever right down, and then, snatching a heavy wrench from the side, hammered with the fury of a maniac, until the brass and ebony splintered to fragments, and the handles were snapped off and lay on the floor.

I could feel the vessel sinking rapidly beneath my feet, and he stood grinning hideously, until a slight jar showed that we could descend no farther.

"We are at the bottom of the sea," he chuckled, "and no power on earth can move us."

With two blows he demolished the compass and steering-gear, and then, with a shriek of laughter, stood and viewed the wreckage.

And, dazed and bewildered, deprived of power of speech or movement, I sank back on a seat, the words ringing in my ears, "At the bottom of the sea, and no power on earth can move us."

How long we remained so who can say? for my senses were numbed. I kept no count of time, and was only aroused to consciousness as I saw him, with the wrench still in his hand, creeping towards me again.

I shut my eyes, knowing his purpose, and yet in apathy whether he struck or not. After what seemed ages I opened them, and he had only advanced one step. As I waited, so quietly, so slowly, that I could scarce see any movement, he made another step, and I found myself calculating how many more would be needful, and how long would be the time before he was near enough to strike.

Suddenly, as I watched him, the boat gave a lurch, as though the ground had slipped from beneath it, casting me upon the floor; while he, flinging up his hands to save himself, missed his footing, and fell backwards with a crash, his head striking the jagged edges of the shattered brass-work.

I saw him lying there senseless, and then saw no more, for when I recovered the electric light was spent, and the cabin was in densest darkness. The boat seemed to have righted itself, for the floor was level again, but the air had grown hot and stifling.

Not a sound broke the stillness, unless it was the beating of my heart. There was naught but silence and inky blackness— the silence of the tomb, the loneliness of death.

The air seemed to grow more close and stifling, and my breath came in quick, short gasps. Better any death than this gradual suffocation. If I could only let the water into the boat, and so die swiftly, it would be easier. And so I crawled across the floor. Once I touched him, and drew away; but by his side I found a wrench, and in the darkness I groped on, till I found the steps to the tower and felt for the glass.

Poor Vanity! the reigning passion with us all. I turned my head, so that the flying splinters of glass should not cut my face, and brought the wrench with all my force against the window. It resisted stoutly. But again and again I struck, until at last, with a crash, it flew outwards. And then, in that fraction of a second, so strong is the love of life, I wished I had held my hand.

But there came no torrent of water, only a rush of cold air, and I realized that I was on the surface of the ocean— realized that when the madman fell backwards upon the shattered switchboard he must have moved the lever. But night had fallen again, and so I had not known it.

Trembling the more now that there was hope of escape, I climbed on deck and waited for the dawn.

And with the first faint streaks upon the eastern horizon came rescue, for a French cruiser had seen us, and steamed down like the wind to examine *Le Diable*.

Yet, with it all, the madman kept his secret— and his coffin.

When the boat from the cruiser was but a yard away I glanced through the open man-hole, and saw that he was moving across the cabin below, and as I stepped upon the gunwale of the launch *Le Diable* sank like a stone from beneath my feet.

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18: My Christmas Burglary

A. T. Quiller-Couch

1863-1944

The Pacific Monthly, Dec 1909

Canadian Home Journal, Dec 1920

I HAD come, with high expectations; for Mr. Felix, a bachelor of sixty-five, was reputed to have made for thirty years this particular cabinet his idol.

Any nabob or millionaire can collect. Mr. Felix, being moderately well-to-do, had selected. He would have none but the best; and the best lay stored delicately on cotton-wool, ticketed with the tiniest handwriting, in a nest of drawers I could have unlocked with a hair-pin.

The topmost drawer contained scarabs (of which I am no connoisseur); the second some two dozen intaglios, and of these by the light of my bull's eye lantern, I examined five or six, before sweeping the lot into my bag— Europe and the Bull. Ganymede in the eagle's claw. Agare carrying the head of Pentheus, Icarus with relaxed wing dropping headlong to a sea represented by one wavy line; each and all priceless. In the third drawer lay an unset emerald, worth a king's ransom, a clasp of two amethysts, and a necklace of black pearls graduated to a hair's breadth; these only, and (as I guessed) because they disdained the company of inferior gems. By this time I could see—I read it even in the exquisite parsimony of the collection— that I had to deal with an artist, and sighed that in this world artists should prey upon one another. The fourth drawer was reserved for miniatures, the most of them circleted with diamonds; the fifth for snuff-boxes, gold snuff-boxes bearing royal cyphers, snuff-boxes of tortoise-shell and gold, snuff-boxes of blue enamel set with diamonds. A couple of these chinked together as they dropped into the bag. The sound startled me, and I paused for a moment to look over my shoulder.

The window stood open as I left it. Outside, in the windless frosty night, the snow on the house-roofs sparkled under a wintering moon now near the close of her first quarter. But, though the night was windless, a current of air poured into the room, and had set a flame dancing in the fireplace where, three minutes ago, the sea-coals had held but a feeble glow, half sullen. Down stairs, in some distant apartment, fiddles were busy with a waltz tune, and a violoncello kept the beat with a low thudding pizzacato. For Mr. Felix was giving a Christmas party.

I turned from this hasty glance to pick up another snuff-box. As my fingers closed on it the music suddenly grew louder, and I looked up as the door opened, and a man stood on the threshold— a short, square-set man, dressed in black.

"Eh?" He gave a little start of surprise. "No, no, excuse me, my friend, but you are seeking in the wrong cabinet."

Before I could pull myself together, he had stepped to the window and closed it. "You had best keep still," he said; "and then we can talk. There are servants on the stairs below and should you attempt the way you came, there are three constables just around the corner. I hired them to regulate the carriage traffic: but now that the last guest has arrived, they will be cooling their heels for a spell, and I have a whistle. I have also a pistol." With a turn of his hand he flung open a door in a dark armoire beside the window, dived a hand into its recesses, and produced the weapon. "And it is loaded," he added, still in the same business-like voice, in which, after his first brief exclamation, my ear detected no tremor.

"By all means let us talk," I said.

He was crossing to the fireplace, but wheeled about sharply at the sound of my voice. "Eh? An educated man, apparently!" Laying the pistol on the mantelshelf, he plucked a twisted spill of paper from a vase hard by, stooped, ignited it from the flame dancing in the sea-coals, and proceeded to light the candles in an old-fashioned girandole that overhung the fireplace. There were five candles, and he lit them all.

They revealed him a clean-shaven, white-haired man, meticulously dressed in black— black swallow-tail coat, open waistcoat, and frilled shirt-front, on which his laundress must have spent hours of labor; closely fitting black knee-breeches, black silk stockings, black polished shoes. They silhouetted, too, in the moment before he swung round on me, an enormous nose, like a punchinello's, and the outline of a shapely head, sufficiently massive to counterbalance and save it from caricature. The size of the head again would have suggested deformity, but for the broad shoulders that carried it. As he faced me, squarely with his back to the hearth, his chest and shoulders narrowing to the hips of a runner, and still narrowing (though he stood astraddle) to ankles and feet that would not have disgraced a lady, he put me in mind of a matador I had seen years before, facing his bull in a ring at Seville. The firelight behind them emphasized the neat outline of his legs. He carried a black coat on his left arm, and in his left hand an opera hat, pressed flat against his left side. In closing the window, in finding and producing the pistol, and again in lighting the candles, he had used his right hand only.

"A gentleman?" he asked, contracting his brows and eyeing me.

"Well," said I, with an uncomfortable, nervous laugh, that itself accused my breeding, so inferior it was to the situation, "possibly you are one of those who mix up the name with moral conduct—"

"To some extent," he answered, without seeming to interrupt. "Everyone does, I fancy."

"At any rate I won't challenge it," said I. "But you may, if you will, call me a man of some education. I was at Magdalen once, but left Oxford without taking my degree."

"Ah!" He inclined his head a little to one side. "Cards?"

"Certainly not," I answered with heat. "I own that appearances are against me, but I was never that kind of man. As a matter of fact, it happened over a horse."

He nodded. "So you, too, though you won't challenge the name, have to mix up moral conduct with your disposition. We draw the line variously, but everyone draws it somewhere.... Magdalen, hey? If I mistake not, the foundationers of Magdalen— including, perhaps, some who were undergraduates with you— are assembled in the college hall at this moment to celebrate Christmas, and hear the choir sing Pergolesi's Gloria."

"The reminder hurts me," said I, "—if that be any gratification to you."

"A sentimentalist?" Mr. Felix's eyes twinkled. "Better and better! I have the very job for you— but we will discuss that by and by. Only let me say that you must have dropped on me, just now, from heaven— you really must. But please don't make a practice of it! I have invested too much in my curios: and others have invested more.... That snuff-box, for instance, which you were handling a moment ago... at one time in its history it cost— aye, and fetched— close on two hundred millions of money."

I began to have hopes that I was dealing with a madman.

"Or rather," he corrected himself, "the money was paid for a pinch of the snuff it contains. Open it, carefully, if you please!— and you will behold the genuine *rappee*, the very particles over which France fought with Austria. What says Virgil? '*Hi motus animorum atque heac certamina tanta Pulveris exigui jactu*'—yes but in this instance, you see, the pinch of dust was the exciting cause. Sir, the Austrian ambassador, one fatal afternoon, refused to take from the box in your hand that which, three weeks later, and all too late, he would gladly have purchased with many millions. Observe the imperial crown on the lid, with the bees around it, as if to illustrate Virgil's warning. I bought the thing myself, sir, for six napoleons, off a dealer in the Rue de Fouaire: but the price will rise again. Yes, certainly, I count on its fetching three hundred pounds at least when I have departed this life, and three hundred pounds will go some little way towards my monument."

"Your monument?" I echoed.

He nodded again. "In good time, my friend, you shall hear about it; for you make, I perceive, a good listener. You have gifts, though you do less than

justice to them. Suffice it to say that I am a sentimentalist, like yourself. I never married nor begat children; and I have but a shaky belief in the future state; but my sentimentality hankers after— you may even say it postulates— some kind of continuity. I cannot discuss this here and now, for by the sound of the violins, the dance is coming to an end, and my guests will be growing impatient. But you remember Samson's riddle? Well, out of my corpse (I trust) shall come forth honey: whereas out of yours, unless you employ your talents better—" He broke off, and stepped up close to me. "Ah, but excuse me," he said, and reaching out a hand, caught me suddenly by the collar.

The arrest— I made sure it was an arrest— took me unprepared, and threw me off my balance. I broke away a pace, drawing back my fist to strike: and in that moment I felt his hand relax with a curious fluttering movement as though his fingers drummed on the back of my neck. I heard him laugh, too; and before I could hit out he sprang back, holding in his hand a white rabbit!

"An old trick— eh?— and a simple one." He pressed out the spring of his opera hat, dropped the rabbit inside, dived his hand after it, and drew out two white rabbits by the ears. "But it will amuse my young friends downstairs, and I practise this kind of thing at odd whiles."

He set the rabbits on the floor, where they gave themselves a shake, and hopped off toward the shelter of the window curtains.

"Now you are the very man I wanted," said he, "and I am going to make you sing for your supper." He stepped to the armoire, and drew out a long cloak of scarlet, furred with ermine. "I had meant to wear this myself," he went on; but stopped all of a sudden at sight of my face, and began to laugh quietly, in a way that made me long to take him by the throat. "Dear me, dear me! I understand! Association of ideas— Court of Assize, eh? But this is no judicial robe, my friend; it belongs to Father Christmas. Here's his wig now—quite another sort of wig, you perceive—with a holly wreath around it. And here's his beard, beautifully frosted with silver." He held wig and beard towards the window, and let the moonlight play over them. "On with them, quick!... And the boots." Again he dived into the armoire, and produced a pair of Bluchers, the long ankle leathers gummed over with cotton-wool, to represent snow. "It's lucky they reach a good way up the leg, seeing the cloak is a trifle short for a man of your inches." He stepped back a pace and surveyed me as I fitted on the beard.

"There are punishments and punishments," said I. "And I hope, whatever your game may be, you will remember that there's punishment in dressing up like a tom-fool."

"Ah, but you'll catch the spirit of it!" he assured me: and then, rubbing his hands, he appeared to muse for a moment. "I ought," said he, with a glance

towards the fireplace. "I really ought to send Father Christmas down by way of the chimney. The flue opens just above here, and I believe it would accommodate you; but I am not very sure if my housekeeper had it swept last spring. No," he decided, "the music has ceased, and we must lose no time. I will spare you the chimney."

He called to his rabbits, picked them up as they came hopping from behind the curtains, popped them into his hat, shut it with a snap, and lo! they had vanished.

"You'll excuse me," I ventured, as he stepped to the door; "but—but the—the few articles here in the bag——"

"Oh, bring them along with you: bring them along by all means! We may have a present or two to make, down below."

From the head of the staircase we looked down into a hall gaily lit with paper lanterns. Holly and ivy wreathed the broad balustrade and the old pictures around the walls. A bunch of mistletoe hung from a great chandelier that sparkled with hundreds of glass prisms, and under it a couple of footmen in gilt liveries and powder crossed at that moment with trays of jellies and syllabubs. They were well-trained footmen, too, for at sight of me descending the stairs in my idiotic outfit they betrayed no surprise at all. One of them set his tray down on a table, stepped neatly ahead as Mr. Felix reached the lowest stair, and opened a door for us on the right. I found myself at a stand on the threshold, blinking at a blaze of light, and staring up a perspective of waxed floor at a miniature stage which filled the far end of the room. Light, as everyone knows, travels faster than sound: were it not so, I should say that almost ahead of the blaze there broke on us a din of voices—of happy children's voices. Certainly it stunned my ears before I had time to blink.

Herrings— red herrings— filled to the brim!

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The room was lined with children—scores of children: and some of them were gathered in little groups, and some of them, panting and laughing from their dance, had dropped into the chairs, ranged along the walls. But these were the minority. The most of the guests lay in cots, or sat with crutches beside them, or with hands dropped in their laps. These last were the blind ones. I do not set up to be a lover of children; but the discovery that the most

of these small guests were crippled hit me with a kind of pitiful awe; and right on top of it came a second and worse shock, to note how many of them were blind.

To me those blind eyes were the only merciful ones, as Mr. Felix beckoned Father Christmas to follow him up to the stage between the two lines of curious gazers. "O-oh!" had been their first cry, as they caught sight of me in the doorway: and "O-oh!" I heard them murmuring, child after child, in long-drawn fugue, as we made our way up the long length of the room that winked detection from every candle, every reflector, every foot of its polished floor.

We gained the stair together by a short stairway draped with flags. Mr. Felix with a wave of his opera hat, called on the orchestra to strike up "A Fine Old English Gentleman," (meaning me or, if you like it, Father Christmas: and I leave you to picture the fool I looked). Then, stepping to the footlights, he introduced me, explaining that he had met me wandering upstairs, rifling his most secret drawers to fill my bag with seasonable presents for them. Five or six times he interrupted his patter to pluck a cracker or a bon-bon out of my beard, and toss it down to the audience. The children gasped at first, and stared at the magic spoil on the floor. By-and-by one adventurous little girl crept forward, and picked up a cracker, and her cry of delight as she discovered that it was real, gave the signal for a general scramble. Mr. Felix continued his patter without seeming to heed it: but his hand went up faster and faster to my beard and wig, and soon the crackers were falling in showers. I saw children snatch them off the floor and carry them to their blind brothers and sisters, pressing them between the wondering, groping hands with assurance that they were real.... Mr. Felix saw it, too, and his flow of words ceased with a gulp, as though a flowing spring gurgled suddenly, and withdrew itself underground.

"I am a sentimentalist," he said to me quickly, in a pause which nobody heeded; for by this time crackers were banging to right and left, and the children shouting together. Their shouts rose to one yell of laughter as, recovering himself, he dived at my neck, and produced the two struggling rabbits. His opera hat opened with a snap, and in they went. A second later it shut flat again, and they were gone, into thin air. He opened the hat with a puzzled frown, plunged a hand, and dragged forth yard upon yard of ribbon—red, green, white, blue, yellow ribbon, mixed up with packs of playing cards that, with a turn of the hand he sent spinning into air, to fall thick as leaves in Vall'ombrosa.

"Your turn!" he panted as, at the end of the ribbon he lugged out an enormous cabbage, and trundled it down the room. Catching my bag from me, he shook his cloak over it once, and returned it to my hands, bulging, stuffed

full to the brim with toys— dolls, tops, whips, trumpets, boxes of animals, boxes of tin soldiers....

"Father Christmas, now! Make way for Father Christmas!"

The infection took me, and stumbling down from the stage by the stairway, I fell to distributing the largesse left and right. The first bagful carried me less than a third of the way down the room, for I gave with both hands, and, when a blind child fumbled long with a toy, dropped it at his feet, and tried another, and yet another till his smile suited me. The dropped toys lay where they had fallen. The spirit of the game had made me reckless; and I halted with a cold shiver as my fingers touched the gems at the bottom of the bag, and looking down the room, I was aware that my store was exhausted, and as yet two-thirds of the children had received no gift. I turned— all in a cold shiver— to retrace my steps and pick up the toys at the blind children's feet, and as I did so, felt myself a bungler past pardon. But in the act of turning, I cast a look back at the stage; and there stood Mr. Felix, nodding approval and beckoning. So, as in a dream, I went back. "Capital!" was his only comment. Taking my bag, he passed his cloak over it again, and again handed it to me, stuffed to the brim.

Thrice I returned it to him; but the third refill was a scanty one, since by this time there lacked but half-a-score of the taller children to be satisfied. To these, too, I distributed their gifts, and when every eager pair of hands had been laden, I wheeled about for the next word of command.

But Mr. Felix had skipped down from the stage, letting the curtain fall behind him. He stood with his back to me, waving both arms to the orchestra, and as the musicians plunged at the opening bars of the Toy Symphony, the curtain rose, almost as soon as it had dropped; and rose upon a scene representing a street with shops decked for Christmas, and snow upon their eaves and window ledges.

Then, still to the strains of the Toy Symphony, a Harlequin ran in, with a Columbine, whom he twisted upon his bent knee, and tossed lightly through the upper window of a baker's shop, himself diving a moment later, with a slap of his wand, through the flap of a fishmonger's door, hard by. Next, as on a frozen slide, came the clown, with red-hot poker, the Pantaloon tripping over his stick, and two Constables wreathed in strings of sausages. The Clown boxed the Pantaloon's ears; the Pantaloon passed on the buffet to the Constables, and all plunged together into the fishmonger's. The Clown emerged running with a stolen plaice, passed it into the hands of the Pantaloon, who followed, and was in turn pursued off the scene by the Constables; but the fishmonger, issuing last in chase, ran into the Clown, who caught up a barrel of red herrings

and bonneted him. The fishmonger extricated himself, and the two began to pelt each other with herrings, while the children screamed with laughter....

It was a famous harlequinade; and, as usual, it concluded the entertainment. For after a harlequinade, what can stand between a child and happy dreams?— especially if he go to them with his arms full of Christmas presents. Five minutes after the curtain had fallen I found myself standing beside Mr. Felix in the hall, while he bade good-night to his guests. Carriages of his hiring had arrived for them, and the coachmen apparently had received their orders. A dozen well-trained nurses moved about the hall and, having dressed the little ones— who by this time were almost too drowsy with pleasure to thank their entertainer— carried them out into the portico, where the liveried footmen stood by the carriage doors. Slam! went the doors, and one after another— with scarcely a word of command— the carriages bowled off over the thick snow.

When the last guest had gone, Mr. Felix turned to me.

"The play is over," said he. "When I am gone, it will be repeated year after year at Christmas, at the Cripples' Hospital. My will provides for that; and that will be my monument. But for a few years to come I hope to hold the entertainment here, in my own house. Come, you may take off your robe and wig and go in peace. I would fain have a talk with you, but I am tired, as perhaps you may guess. Go, then— and go in peace!"

Motioning the footman to fall back, he walked out with me and down the steps of the portico, but halted on the lowest step by the edge of the frozen snow, and with a wave of the hand dismissed me into the night.

I had gained the end of the street, and the bridge that there spans the river, before it occurred to me that I was carrying my bag, and— with a shock— that my bag still held the stolen jewels.

By the second lamp on the bridge I halted, lifted the bag on to the snow-covered parapet, thrust in a hand, and drew forth— a herring!

Herrings— red herrings— filled to the brim. I dragged them forth, and rained handful after handful overboard into the black water. Still, below them, I had hoped to find the jewels. But the jewels were gone, at least, I supposed that all were gone, when— having jettisoned the last herring— I groped around the bottom of the bag.

Something pricked my finger. I drew it out and held it under the lamp-light. It was a small turquoise brooch, set around with diamonds.

For at least two minutes I stared at it, there, under the lamp, and slipped it half-way into my waistcoat pocket; but suddenly took a new resolve, and walked back along the street to the house.

Mr. Felix yet stood on the lower step of the portico. Above him, still as a statue, a footman waited at the great house-door, until it should please his master to re-enter.

"Excuse me, sir—" I began, and held up the brooch.

"I meant it for you," said Mr. Felix quietly, affably, "I gave precisely five pounds for it, at an auction: and I warn you that it is worth just thrice that sum. Still, if you would prefer ready money, as in your circumstances I daresay you do"— he felt in his breeches pocket— "here are the five sovereigns, and— once more— go in peace."

———————

19: Masterpiece

Irvin S. Cobb

1876-1944

Cosmopolitan, Oct 1930

LOOKING BACK on it all, Staggner could see no flaws and no blow-holes in the murder he committed. The best proof of that was that the police never once singled him out from the others who were in the house at the time, for direct suspicion or even for special scrutiny.

In fact, the police never really suspected anybody in particular. They might talk big about "theories" and "investigations along new lines," and they did talk big about those things. They might dig up so-called "clues" and go through the motions of following so-called "leads," but they only traveled in circles, like a horse with the blind staggers, and came back where they started from.

So Staggner could look over his shoulder without real apprehension and certainly without remorse. Regret that his original object had failed? Yes, naturally he had that. But remorse?— no, none whatsoever. His chief feeling was rather one of satisfaction for his own smartness.

This feeling prevailed with him during those first few weeks when public interest was febrile and brisk, and before the case began to be listed among the "unsolved mysteries" of the year. Along there his main sensation might have been likened to that of a player who, single-handed and for high stakes, plays a difficult and unfamiliar and exciting game against a whole troupe of skilled adversaries and at each turn of the cards wins, and wins, and keeps on winning.

All through his life Staggner had been hearing of the fool-proof murder, the perfect crime, in which the criminal leaves behind no loose ends for detectives to pick up, no trails for bloodhounds to smell out. Often enough he had heard it said or had read that this perfect crime likewise is the impossible crime because, being a thing of human contriving, the equation of human error inevitably must enter into it. Murder Will Out! That was an old saying.

Now, lo and behold, the perfect crime had been committed and he, of all men alive, was the man who had committed it. Why, he was one in a million. Indeed, if the United States census figures didn't lie about it, he was one in about a hundred and twenty millions.

He wasn't a professional killer, either. Far from it. This Olivia Thames was the only person he had ever killed. He never expected to have to kill any one else. He wasn't the sort to go around killing people, although he was beginning to understand how such a career might have a kind of fascination for an individual who succeeded at it.

To make it all the stranger, he was without prior experience along the lines of criminal endeavor. Finally, there was this to be said: it is not an act which in advance had been planned or contemplated even. It had grown out of an unforeseen contingency, so that all the covering-up of tracks, all the destroying of dangerous evidence, had to be done after the event, and done within a space of minutes, and some part of it done before the eyes of witnesses.

Nevertheless, he, Wally Staggner, and he a rank amateur, had killed this fat beldame of a woman deftly, quietly, quickly, and as you might almost say, cleanly, and had come out of the subsequent emergency and general messiness as smooth as a whistle and as free as a bird. He told himself he couldn't blame himself for being a bit toploftical over the outcome. With him, his confidence fed on his conceit and his conceit fed on his confidence, and both grew fatter rather than lean.

Nobody had known how desperately he had wanted a lot of money. That had helped. The fact that nobody was aware he wanted money stood him in good stead during all those prolonged inquiries when the police were prying about and casting about, lifting the lid on this one's life and that one's life, trying to find a possible motive, a plausible reason, any peg upon which to hang an accusation.

He wanted this money so he might marry that alleged Polish countess he had met in Italy during the summer. She wouldn't marry any man who hadn't plenty of money. She told him so, practically in so many words. But nobody over here knew of his infatuation for this woman with her chinchilla-colored eyes and her honey-colored hair, and nobody at all, with the possible exception of the lady adventurer herself, knew how, with so desperate a craving, he craved for money.

He had come home panting after her as the hart is said to pant after the water-brooks and with a brain whirling to a desire for money and plenty of it. Oh, she'd spend it for him once he got it and she got him. He appreciated that all right enough, but for what might follow in their future together he took no thought nor gave any heed. Possession of her— that was what his whole being demanded, and since a heap of good hard Yankee dollars was the price he must pay for his season in a lover's paradise, why, so be it.

The big notion which led to everything else came to him the Friday night in October when he drove up to Winchester for the week-end party that was being given by Solly Lennix, the moving-picture man, and Solly Lennix's newest wife. Two factors entered into the sudden forming of his purpose. The first of these was the presence of this Mrs. Olivia Thames. Besides being a woman who still kept, embedded in unwholesome bloat, some few traces of a beauty which once had made her notorious, this Thames woman was at least four

other things: namely, a former actress, a frequent divorcee, a habitual souse and a reputed hophead.

Staggner, having been shown to his room on arrival and having dressed, came down to the overdone library, to find her there with the Lennixes and most of their guests. She blazed with jewels and already was incandescent with brandy or whatever it was she drank between times in private when not engaged in drinking cocktails or high-balls or wine or what-have-you in company.

Giving her a nod and a quick glance of appraisal, Staggner merely remarked inwardly that already she was pretty thoroughly illuminated, even for her. That, for the moment, was all the thought he gave her.

A minute later, when the butler came to him offering a laden tray, Staggner, with a little interior throb, recognized the man. Less than three months before, getting local color for an underworld scenario on which he was working, he had gone down to Police Headquarters one morning for the crooks' line-up, and there, unless he was mistaken now— and he wasn't mistaken now; of that he was sure— this selfsame smug-faced, light-stepping individual who now offered him cocktails had been paraded out as one of the catch of the preceding twenty-four hours before an audience of masked plain-clothes men; and the master of ceremonies, a Central Office lieutenant, had gabbled off the routine about this here party being Somebody, alias Somebody Else, sneak, inside worker, general thief, number so-and-so in the Gallery, such-and-such previous convictions, picked up on suspicion, and so on and so forth.

The incident of the fellow's arraignment stood out in Staggner's mind. Something about this particular person's manner or appearance had impressed itself upon him at the time and the memory had stuck.

Staggner's first impulse was to draw Solly aside and warn him that he had a rogue, probably with forged credentials, in his household staff but just then, snap!— like that— an idea clicked in his brain, an idea in which, thus quickly and thus soon, he was coupling the pussy-footed butler with Olivia Thames. Over his tilted glass, he studied her by piecemeal and, with suddenly covetous eyes, summed up what two minutes before he casually had been cognizant of. On fingers and arms and breast she was burdened with jewels— diamonds, emeralds, rubies and, looped about her great throat and dangling below her problematical waistline, a certain famous rope of matched pearls, reputed formerly to have been the possession of a refugee Russian princess, and bestowed on the present possessor by the most recent of her string of affluent husbands. It would be like her to go about, a perambulating hock-shop, with all the precious junk she owned on display. She was the type.

And a good thing, too, that she was the type, because all in one swift instant he was saying to himself that assuming, just for instance, some of her jewels or, for that matter, all of them, should disappear and on top of that, assume further, it developed that a notorious thief, a rascal with a long police record, was masquerading as a servant under the same roof with her at the moment of their disappearance, why, then, in such case what more natural, yes, what more inevitable a conclusion could any one conceive of than that official suspicion would center upon the exposed scoundrel for long enough to enable the real culprit to make a clean get-away with the swag? He didn't take into account that purloined gems of great value and of reputation among the gem-dealers might be hard things to dispose of.

Swiftly, over and over again, he was telling himself that the pearls alone were said to be worth, by expert valuation, two hundred thousand dollars and to be insured for some such sum. All that concerned him— and this should help to show what a novice at larcenous games was Staggner— was the certainty that with the worth of half what that overfleshed caricature yonder wore draped on her frame, he could buy the favor of his Polish countess.

Give him a chance, give him but an opening to make a chance and he'd have a brisk try for it. All in this flash of time his resolution took on a shape and substance.

It was a typical Solly Lennix dinner— persons who were smartly polished and persons who merely shone with the thin shellac of a sudden affluence; boisterous ones and sinister-looking ones and simple-looking ones sitting down together, twenty-odd strong, at an overburdened table: and plenty to eat and drink there, and plenty to laugh at and be noisy over. As an established but not a notable free-lancing scenario writer, Staggner, in a way, fitted the setting and, in another way, did not.

From where he sat among the lesser fry down toward the foot of the table, sandwiched in between the flashy wife of a flashy Wall Street man named Glosscup and a somewhat stringy and faded woman playwright named Baylor, he could watch Olivia Thames whose place was almost opposite him. He did watch her and, with a secret glow of satisfaction, marked how steadily she punished Solly's sweet champagne.

Solly, up yonder at the head, was in his best form or his worst; it depended on how you took Solly. Whatever else you might say about Solly you had to give him credit for being game. About him there was nothing to indicate that he was in deep waters financially and about to be in still deeper; in fact, clear over his head.

Within three months' time Solly would be out of the moving-picture game and out of this house, and the house and its contents and the contents of his

big city apartment would be for sale to pay off some of the judgments against him. The wolves would be on him then, picking his bones clean. But to-night he was the life of the party.

The guzzling Thames woman proved her capacity. Not until the dinner ended did the liquid ballast begin to shift on her so that she lurched and listed heavily as she rose to her feet. Her waddle had changed to a stagger. She reached the doorway, though, before she went down on her knees, her gross face becoming suddenly blank of all expression.

There was a guffaw from some of the men, a giggle from some of the women, and two men who hadn't laughed heaved her up on her feet. They had to prop her upright. She was dead to the world. Her legs flopped and waggled under her.

"Help her up-stairs, will you, boys?" said little Mrs. Solly. "Get her into her room— it's the Blue Room on the second floor, first door on the right at the top of the steps. She didn't bring her maid with her; her maid's sick or something. I'll trail along and get her undressed. No need for anybody to watch her— she'll be like that till morning."

She laughed over her shoulder as she started up the stairs behind the helpers with their sagging burden between them.

"Smart gal, Olivia," she said gaily. "She always knows when she's got enough. She knows it about half an hour after she's got it."

Coffee and brandy had been served by the time she reappeared in the doorway. Glosscup was just getting under way, telling one of his off-color stories. Mrs. Solly's prompt return interrupted him.

"All done," she announced. "Mama's off to Shut-eye Town. Trust little Fannie Fix-it, the Camp-fire Girl. Say, how long are you boys going to loll around here, being dirty? Don't you hear those dames sharpening their teeth on the other side of this hall? There'll be three tables of bridge and a free-for-all poker table, dealer's choice and heaven's dome for the limit; everybody's set to go as soon as you big Camemberts get through pawing into the city dump. So make it snappy."

"Beat it," said Solly with affectionate violence. "Let them female sharks wait; these poor fish will be along soon enough. This gag Glossy's pullin' is too good to miss."

Glosscup's story posthumously begot another like it from the same abundant source, and then a third. Solly looked at his watch.

"By gosh, it's later than I thought!" he exclaimed. "Quarter to twelve already, if this kettle's right."

"Twelve minutes of, to be exact," said the man next him. "I set mine in town to-day by Western Union."

"Let's go," ordered Solly. "Gamblers to the center! Serious drinkers can stick right here or else go to the bar in the library. A library makes a swell bar—once you've throwed out enough of them fool books."

By intent, Staggner was at the tail of the procession which at once was straggling across the broad entrance hall of this big Georgian barn of a house and on into one or the other of the twin drawing-rooms. Here at once there was a clamor of preferences being shrilly stated, of partners being drawn, of chips being counted and, on the part of a few, of refusals to play anything at all.

Nobody, whether servants or fellow-guests, was paying any attention to Staggner. That suited his book admirably. He was sure then— and later had confirmation for it— that his leisurely dawdling withdrawal was unobserved. Once out of sight of the rest, his retreat up the stairs was swift but not so swiftly timed as to breed suspicion, did some person come unexpectedly into view either from above or from below.

The broad upper corridor was dimly lighted. He slipped into a still darker side hall, took a handkerchief from his pocket and, drawing it across the bridge of his nose, tied it behind his ears. It covered the lower part of his face; made a good-enough improvised mask. He meant to run no risk of recognition should the sleeper awake.

Emerging from the crossway, he crept to the first door on the right. A light shone through the keyhole but through the keyhole came no sound that he could detect. So softly and very gently he turned the knob and pushed. As he had expected, the door was unlocked. He pushed it farther, slipped through and closed and bolted it behind him.

Now, being inside, he heard the woman's heavy breathing. Partly undressed, she lay on the bed, face upward, puffing through her painted lips. There was a comforter over the lower part of her body. The bed light alongside her was on. It made plenty of illumination. One pudgy arm, on top of the coverlet, still carried its load of broad bracelets. But her throat had been stripped of its rich burden:

Had the pearls been locked away? No, there they were in a coil on the dresser between the two windows, making a lustrous little heap. Silently he crossed the room to where they were. There were other things with them— a huge diamond sunburst, emerald earrings, a diamond hair ornament, various costly gauds.

The job, thus far, had been so ridiculously easy that almost it was funny. He had only to scoop up the spoils and tiptoe out.

In the act of scooping them up a problem unforeseen until the present moment beset him. When discovery of the robbery came, as inevitably and

within a few hours it must, there would be a house-wide search. In justice to the servants, in justice to one another, all hands would surely submit to an examination of their persons and their belongings and their rooms. Where, then, would be the safest place to hide this loot until that phase passed?

With the treasure clinking in his grasp, he gave consideration to this puzzle. In the midst of it he was aware, all of a sudden, that the thick breathing behind him had stopped short. Startled, he swung about.

Her eyes wide open, her jaw agape, the Thames woman was sitting up in bed— indeed, was moving to get out of bed. She did not offer to scream, but as plainly as a drawing taking shape against a canvas, a conscious understanding was replacing the blank stupor on those swollen features. Shock was sobering her; was sobering her with a miraculous swiftness.

Squinting hard at him, she flung the covers aside, thrust her legs out of bed, got on her feet and stood barring his path to the door. There was no fear in the scowl on that dissipated face, no panic betrayed in the glare from those bleared eyes, but only a great hostility.

Then he came to himself and took a step toward her and as he did this he felt his badly tied disguisement slipping off his nose. He threw up his free hand to hold it and his fumble at it completed the damage. The handkerchief fell down about his throat and in the virago's staring look, along with the rage, there was now recognition. She knew him, so that settled her hash for her.

"You dirty dog!" she said in a sort of slow fierce undertone. "I've got you! You'll pay –"

In that same flash he struck her down. She took the first blow on an upturned forearm but the second, delivered with all his might and main, landed squarely on her unprotected head and he could feel the sink of the weapon's iron butt right into the bone structure.

She was down now, face forward, on the thick bearskin before the hearth, which had muffled the soft thud of her dropping. And he was standing over her, ready to strike again, holding poised the heavy ornamental poker which he had caught up from the side of the fireplace.

Afterward he could not remember dropping the jewels and snatching for the poker. He must have acted instinctively. But he remembered everything else— how very clearly he did remember it all, reconstructing each detail in his mind!

She was dead, all right— no cause for worry there. The very sprawl of her body told him she was dead. Besides, the top of her skull was bashed in.

He was perfectly calm. Even in that hurried phase of it, he subconsciously marveled that he should be so entirely calm and marveled also that he should marvel. Of course, taking the jewels was now out of the question. Who would

dare to risk being caught with a murdered woman's jewels in his possession? Who would dare try to market them?

There they were— scattered on the floor. So he gathered them up, making sure no article was missing, and put them on the dresser where he had found them. But before he did this, he slid the poker under the bed on the side nearer the body, leaving the brass handle exposed. There was method in this partial concealment of the poker.

He undid the handkerchief from his throat and wadded it into his pocket. Next he came and stood over the dead woman and thought very hard. What else, if anything, was to be done? A crowning inspiration flashed across his brain.

His victim's pulpy left arm was outstretched. It had a crumpled, curiously foreshortened aspect to it. He bent and looked closer, and that was when he got his inspiration. Where his first blow had fallen, her wrist was shattered. The stroke had smashed the gemmed band which held her wrist-watch in place. The watch, though, was not injured; only the band was.

He slid the wrecked bracelet out from beneath the broken wrist and put the watch to his ear. It ticked steadily. So he turned the hands back from twelve-seven until they registered eleven-forty-six, and then tapped the face of the watch against his heel until the crystal smashed and the mechanism failed.

Again applying the mistreated bauble to his ear, he made sure it had quit running. He shook it, listened once more. Its tick was silenced. With his handkerchief he wiped it well and, keeping it nested in the handkerchief to avoid touching it again, he deposited the watch on the rung a finger's length from its late owner's relaxed left hand.

He drew the bolt, passed out of the door, closing it softly behind him and, meeting no one in his descent, was immediately back down-stairs, making a leisurely reappearance in the front drawing-room. No person there so much as lifted a head or cocked an inquiring eyebrow at his sauntering, indifferent entrance. Well, all told, he'd only been away a matter of some seven or eight minutes.

Casually, he stationed himself behind two others— dumb kibitzers— who were standing back of one of the players at one of the bridge tables. The player was a woman.

A deal was played out; the woman and her partner had gone down.

"My luck is terrible," she declared. "Not a decent hand since we started."

"That's right," said Staggner sympathetically, "I've been looking over your shoulder and you haven't had a really good hand since you began playing."

She glanced up at him, grimacing and nodding. Staggner meant that the alibi he had built should have no chinks in it. Big things counted in its

construction, but trifles might help too. He was sure this woman would be willing, in perfect good faith, to testify that he had been in her vicinity all the while.

He idled off to another table and lingered, observing the play for perhaps a quarter of an hour more. He wasn't the least bit nervous.

He was still there near this second quartet of player when from up-stairs came a shrill frightened outcrop— Solly Lennix's wife's voice.

"Come quick, somebody!" she was screaming. "Something's happened to Olivia. Come quick!"

There was a scuffle, a stir of bodies suddenly galvanized into movement. A table went over with a small crash, a glass smashed, chips were clattering in a cataract and Mrs. Lennix was repeating her call.

In the excited jostling rush up the stairs, Staggner was one of the first; not the first— he saw to that— but one of the first.

Very pale, Mrs. Lennix met them at the head of the steps.

"I slipped up to see how Olivia was," she was screechily proclaiming, "and she's flat on the floor! And she's all over blood! I took one look and ran. Something's happened— oh, something terrible's happened!"

Staggner shoved forward. He was over the threshold hard on Lennix's heels, bumping into Solly as that pudgy person balked at the dread sight before him.

"Gott! " cried Solly, relapsing into the accents of his early youth. "Keep the women out from here," he barked over his shoulder. "Keep out from here— you women. Come on, some of you men."

He still hesitated himself. With others, Staggner shoved past Solly. At once there was a ringed huddle of men's bodies about the shape on the rug. A futile clamor of interlaced, overlapping voices arose.

"Get a doctor quick," somebody was saying but himself making no move to do so. "Phone for a doctor."

"She's dead," somebody else was saying, "she certainly looks dead, boys."

"Maybe— maybe she fell out of bed and hurt herself," a third somebody was saying but in a strangely flattened tone.

"And maybe she didn't," snapped Staggner, his voice dominating the small tumult so that it ended and a quick tense hush ensued. "Look at her head! And look at her arm! Never mind getting any doctor. What we need here is the police!"

"Mein Gott , then it's moider!" yelled Solly hysterically.

"And look at this!" added Staggner. He stooped and from beneath the bed drew the heavy brass-handled poker. "Here's what it was done with, I'd guess."

He passed the poker into the hands of a neighbor. The neighbor happened to be Glosscup. And immediately another man, seized with a morbid inquisitiveness, took it away from Glosscup.

"See if that poker doesn't fit that dent in her head," Staggner bade him. "I'm no good at that sort of thing— makes me sick!"

Glosscup— and for it Staggner was secretly grateful to him— said now what Staggner had meant to say in a moment or two. He took the words right out of Staggner's mouth and Staggner was glad of it.

"We've played hell!" declared Glosscup. "Handling that poker was all wrong. There might have been finger-prints on it. And now we've messed 'em all up with our finger-prints."

"That's so," agreed Staggner contritely. "Lay it down and don't anybody touch it again."

Glosscup, it would seem, was by way of being an amateur detective; probably was a reader of crime fiction. For he dropped down on his knees and closely eyed the ruined wrist-watch; next was stooping closer and applying his ear close to it.

"Be still," he commanded. "I want to see if this watch is still going." He straightened up. "It's stopped," he stated. "It stopped when that lick hit it— no wonder. Her wrist's all smashed up. It stopped at exactly forty-six past eleven— that's when this killing was done! We've got that much to go on."

"Gott! " cried Solly. "Chust almost the very minute when I was saying to you fellows down-stairs that we'd better be joinin' the wimmin. You remember?"

Haply, he appealed to Staggner.

"I remember," said Staggner.

"So do I," put in Walters, the effeminate little costume designer. "You asked me, Solly, and I told you it was exactly twelve minutes of twelve. The whole crowd of us gabbling down there and this going on up here. Let me out of here, men— I'm getting sick, too."

Glosscup, all palpitant with his self-appointed role, was delivering an order now. "Lock the outside doors!" he proclaimed with tremendous authority. "Nobody leaves this house until the police get here— nobody! This looks like an inside job to me. By the way, where's all her jewelry— those pearls and everything?"

"Right here on this dressing-table," stated an eager voice. "A whole pile of 'em."

"Oh!" grunted Glosscup as though baffled or at least disappointed. "So that's how it stands, eh?"

So it stood and so, until the end of the chapter, it continued to stand. The crime must have been committed by some person on the premises. The city detectives who came up from town to aid the Westchester County constabulary in its gruesome guessing contest agreed with the local cops on that point.

Likewise they all agreed that the woman must have been stricken down at eleven-forty-six— her wrist-watch proved that much, so they all decided. But at eleven-forty-six practically all the guests and practically all the servants could account, at least approximately, for their whereabouts.

And why had it been done at all? What reason other than an outburst of homicidal insanity— and that a frenzied thing without any reason to it— was there for it? What cause? Nobody in all the wide world, so far as was known, hated this chronic grass widow of an Olivia Thames, or had a grudge against her even. Some might have contempt for her; some undoubtedly had pity. The poor vain weak creature had been her own worst enemy, with no other identifiable enemy anywhere.

After the first few hours— after the false butler had been recognized and locked up, after each individual on the place had been pumped and badgered and cross-questioned— the case just stood still. The butler spent a month or two in jail, where he learned things about the third degree he never knew before. The rest underwent a week or two of being interviewed for the press and being photographed for the press and being resummoned for more futile, footless examinations by harassed police chiefs and perplexed police underlings and by a pestered district attorney.

Then some newer nine-day sensation bobbed up and the "House-party Mystery," as the head-lines had dubbed it, was put upon the shelf. Only the gaudy Broadway prominence of a few of the names concerned in it had kept it alive for as long as it did live.

Staggner, feeling altogether comfortable and assured, waited until January before he drew out of the bank what cash he had there and went abroad. He was going over to see if his Polish countess wouldn't take him just as he was, financially speaking. He crossed on an Italian liner and landed at Genoa, and the day he landed read in the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* that his countess had been married to an Argentine nabob.

So he went on one spectacular lone-handed drunk and then he turned around and started back home again. He wasn't by any means as broken-hearted as he had figured he was going to be when he first heard the news.

Still, he was unhappy and most depressed. His conceit had taken an awful wallop. He drank hard on the steamer. He turned in groggy every night of the

return voyage and would be at it again, headachy and shaky, as soon as he waked up next morning. He kept mostly to himself.

On the afternoon before they landed at New York he was sitting alone, mopy and morose, in a chair in the smoking-room when, with a sudden jolt, it came to him, cutting through the alcoholic haze which enveloped his brain, that he was beginning to think more about the dead woman, the worthless one he had killed, than about the live woman, the delectable one he had lost; that in his mind he was repetitiously calling up the repugnant image of that spraddled corpse on that bear-skin robe. Why should he be doing that?

He shook his head, to clear it of the fumes and the memory. Probably he'd been brooding so much over his latest disappointment that by some vague mental phenomenon, some twisted relationship of ideas, the unpleasant vision of what had happened last October kept recurring. That must be it.

Anyway, he'd been hitting the hard liquor pretty constantly. That was enough, by itself, to unsettle a fellow temperamentally.

Whatever the explanation was, the thing persisted all through that night. He drank in his berth, sending his steward to the bar for high-balls until the bar closed, but somehow couldn't drug himself into sleep. He lay awake, foggily miserable, until nearly daylight and that wasn't like him. And when he did sleep he had dreams— that same lurid dream invariably repeating itself and the dream had to do with Olivia Thames, with her skull caved in, spraddled at his feet.

So when he got up he decided that if his head was going to play him these funny tricks, it was time to soft-peddle on the drinking. Conscience didn't enter into the situation at all. Neither then nor thereafter did conscience enter into it. It was imagination, that's all— just a freak of the imagination. Why, it naturally had to be.

Things went along in this fashion for two months or so. There was a harassed-looking, morose-acting literary man, a young man steadily losing in flesh and in spirits, a man by turns abstracted or garrulous with an almost feverish intensity, a man seeking company to-day and to-morrow avoiding it; by spells working hard at his trade, and by spells engaged in restless idling; a man who tried cutting down on his consumption of liquor and once, for a week, cutting it out altogether— only that seemed to make the situation worse— and finally a man who reached the stage where he kept constantly in a sodden state; and this man all the while seeking desperately to rid himself of a certain retrospective mind-picture which refused to fade out but instead grew stronger and more vivid and, waking or sleeping, bided with him through the days and nights.

Along in the early spring, another and an infinitely more disconcerting phase developed itself. One bright windy afternoon toward the end of March this man was walking up Madison Avenue on his way to keep an appointment with an independent producer who wanted him to redraft the dialogue of a "talkie" script. He was waiting at Fifty-Seventh Street for the cop to stop the cross-traffic when right in front of him appeared the scene of the murder, reproduced, with setting and physical accessories and all, against a shifting perspective of cars and pedestrians and buildings.

He felt himself going stiff and chilly, felt the little hairs on the back of his neck pricking and rising stiffly. For this was altogether different from what had gone before. Before always he had seen the apparition within his brain only. But now he was seeing it, life-size and complete, in broad harsh daylight, seeing it with his eyes. It seemed inconceivable that none of these persons about him likewise saw it with their eyes. None of them did, though. They streamed past, oblivious and unconcerned.

To the frozen Staggner it was as though he stood facing a three-sided stage, as in a theater. Barring that the two ends and the top and bottom of the stage blurred off into the background, instead of making a sharp framing, he might have been the lone spectator of the thrillsome silent episode in a melodrama, a preliminary, say, to a strong second-act climax.

For here, directly ahead of him, was the sprawled body on the bearskin rug, and, alongside it to the left, the fireplace and beyond it the door to the hall, and behind these the rumpled bed and the burning bed light on the stand, and farther on and slightly to the right, the dresser between the two draped windows, and, for a finishing touch, the far corners of Mrs. Solly Lennix's Blue Room shading off into gloominess— a perfect replica of every detail of the original occurrence, save only that his own figure was missing from down-stage, so that the dead woman's shape dominated the whole scene, her broken arm stiffly outthrust, her cropped yellow-dyed hair gleaming except where the matted red stain at the poll of the head showed, her bare bleached feet revealed below the hem of a twisted undergarment.

Staggner's first impulse, where he stood enveloped in a rigor of cold clamminess, was to turn and run away. By an almost visible effort, he rid himself of that desire. Exerting his will power to the uttermost he forced himself to advance across the sidewalk toward the curb and toward the embodied hallucination, or whatever it was. On that the mirage— if you could call it that?— became dim and dimmer, hazy and hazier, and then vanished.

Staggner didn't keep his engagement with the independent producer up on Fifty-Ninth Street. Instead, he hailed a taxi cruising south and rode down-town

to his bachelor apartment on Washington Square, having a hard chill on the way.

Reaching his quarters he locked himself in and sought comfort in a full quart of Scotch. Before he found comfort, or any thin semblance of it, the bottle was empty and Staggner was very full.

And next morning while he, still dazed and befuddled, was crossing through Times Square to the Paramount Building— of all unlikely places for daytime nightmares— the thing recurred. And that afternoon when, in an effort to get away from himself he was riding up Riverside Drive on top of a bus, it duplicated itself for the second time within the space of six hours, springing up ten feet high on the horizon of the river shore and fading out as the bus lumbered closer to it. But to the murderer it seemed that perceptibly it endured for a breath of time longer than either of its predecessors had, as though it were reluctant to shred off into the air.

Promptly, then, Staggner went to an eye specialist and the specialist subjected him to various tests and told him that for a person of his age and sedentary pursuits he had excellent vision. So then— but he felt this was merely another utterly vain gesture on his part— he visited a stomach specialist, saying to the latter that he was troubled with a sort of shifting spottiness before his gaze when he stared intently at outdoor objects, and especially when he stared at the sky-line. As he put it, he thought perhaps indigestion might be responsible for this optic derangement. The physician agreed with him that he might be right and prescribed a simple diet, regular habits, outdoor exercise— the customary ritual.

Staggner nodded as though converted and paid the fee but had no intention of following the advice. He had knowledge which no one else would ever have unless— unless— and from this point a certain dire foreboding came to add to his burden of hidden distress. It was this: Suppose others should begin to see what he was seeing almost daily, and, on some days, several times in a day? No one yet had beheld the manifestation, for all that now it was lingering longer so that advancing on it, he almost could enter the scene before it dissipated.

To himself he began saying: "If ever it turns solid, if ever it stays there until I can touch it and feel it with my own fingers, I'm gone. I'm gone then; I'll have to quit fighting then. I'm licked."

Although the thing presented itself oftener in the open, in public or semi-public places, than when he was alone, he now sought spots where there were masses of people and plenty of stir and movement. Conceded that from nursing his delusion his mind was sick with a subtle disease, Staggner

nevertheless had a purpose behind this preference for multitudes, this deliberately seeking out surroundings where strangers numerously were.

It was a sort of testing of his security. For so long as no one else saw what he was seeing he would be safe. So he punished himself with long walks on busy thoroughfares, attended theater openings, a solitary, liquor-saturated figure; frequented prize-fights, ball games, even the cheaper amusement resorts.

One hot June evening when New York was frying in its own grease, the dipsomaniac that Staggner had become rose on a sightseeing car, with a flock of gaping out-of-towners for his fellow-passengers, down to Coney Island. Coney was packed and jammed— it was the first big night of the opening season there— and was brilliant with lights and blatant with a thousand discordant noises. It was Coney at its gayest and best and, by that same token, its most delirious worst.

Staggner, more alone in the midst of these two hundred thousand bedraggled pleasure seekers than he would have been as a castaway on a desert island, went shambling along a board walk in a whisky fog. He traveled the board walk for hours, bumping into people and getting cursed for his clumsiness, being bumped into and paying no heed.

All day he had been drinking hard— harder even than usual. He had a flask on his hip. At intervals he entered into some darker corner— a pocket behind a refreshment stand, a byway leading into a labyrinth of rear entrances, any convenient recess— and took a swig.

It got to be very late. The crowds thinned out; the shows and the concession booths were closing. A good many of them already had closed, and Staggner, with no remembrance of how and when he had quitted the board walk or how he came to be where he was now, found himself at the farther end of a sort of blind alley opening back from Surf Avenue.

Gusts of freshened air were blowing in off the sea and there was comparative quiet about him. A misty, indefinite distaste for the bumpy trip back to Manhattan, through the steaming side streets of Brooklyn, took possession of him. Besides, he felt so fearfully tired.

He'd sleep a while right here at Coney, lying on the sand where it was cool, as tenement dwellers often did on a hot night, and go home in the morning. As a matter of fact he was in a semi-coma already, and very near the end of his endurance.

He fumbled at his flank for his flask. A good long drink of the biting raw spirits was still in it. He emptied the bottle, tossed it aside and sat down in a doorway. He lurched back into an easier posture and behind him a poorly secured latch clicked and the door, under the pressure of his shoulders, slid

slowly open, revealing near at hand a clutter of mechanical odds and ends, and on beyond an inviting, still darkness. Why wouldn't it be better to rest a while in this secluded harborage rather than down yonder on the gritty beach? It would be better.

The new inclination hoist him to his feet. He pulled his heavy, uncertain feet over the low shelf of the entryway and blindly invaded the building. He was sketchily conscious of passing down a sort of narrow, dimly lighted corridor, then of turning a corner, where he stumbled into projecting solid obstacles that felt like boxes or trunks, and then of moving along a wider passage, flanked on either side by open-faced cubicles or booths.

The beginnings of the flimsy partitions between these spaces he could make out but their interiors were inky-black. Midway of this crossway weariness overcame him— weariness, plus bootlegger's Scotch— and he lay down on his back on the bare planking, with a bent arm for a pillow, and was immediately asleep.

He slept there until nearly three o'clock in the morning. A bright glare, flashing on suddenly and shining down from above into his upturned face, was what roused him. He blinked his gummed eyelids apart and sat up, staring about him in bewilderment. He was in some perfectly strange place and for the drowsy moment had no recollection of how he got there.

The truth was that a slovenly night watchman was just then operating a switchboard at the front of the building, turning on one set of overhead electrics after another, the better to see his way about as he started his belated first round of the place since closing time. The watchman, who had an uneasy nagging feeling that he had forgotten to lock the alley exit, as was his bounden duty, didn't see Staggner then or thereafter, and didn't hear his departure.

The watchman was still in a cuddy just behind the barred main entrance, out of sight and earshot of the intruder. Nor did Staggner see the watchman at all, while the two of them were together under that high-corniced roof.

What Staggner did see— and it drew him up on his feet as though strong invisible wires pulled at him— was what he had seen so many times before since springtime, but never like this, never in just this hideous fashion. Solly Lennix's Blue Room was there right in front of him, not ten feet away and, as always, complete to the final familiar touch. It was the same thing as before and still not the same. It was the Real Thing.

Here it was at last, all solid, substantial, indubitable. One faltering foot dragging behind the other, Staggner forced himself forward, step by step, until he crossed the dividing line between the boards from which he had risen and the verge of that three-sided Blue Room. He sensed the yielding texture of the

carpet through his soles, got next the softer nap of the bearskin robe before the fireplace.

He was sure, but he must make very sure. He reached across to the mantel and touched an ornament— some sort of vase. It joggled to his touch— it had the genuine feel to it. He half straddled the dead woman's body and bent over and gripped the handle of the poker, where it lay half under and half from under the tousled bed. It was heavy and solid in his grasp and made a small muffled sound when he let it slide out of his fingers.

And the woman was real too— the waxy-looking naked white feet, the stiff distorted figure, the distorted arm, the matted red stain on the yellow bobbed head. He didn't touch her. He didn't need to. When a man was licked, he was licked, and that was all there was to it.

He backed away until he stood beyond The Thing. Being all at once sobered, he recalled in a cloudy way how he had come to this place. Besides, the path of his retreat was well illuminated now. Quietly but briskly, looking neither to the right nor to the left, he issued forth by the alley door and hurried out of the alley and passed into Surf Avenue, looking for a policeman.

He came upon a policeman, a bored-looking young policeman, after he had traveled perhaps a quarter of a mile. Staggner went up to him.

"Officer," he said. "I would like to give myself up."

"Oh, you would, would you?" said the policeman. "And what have you been doin' "— he caught a whiff of Staggner's breath— "besides drinkin' a lot of bum hooch?"

"Yes," admitted Staggner, "I've been drinking. And I was drunk, I guess. I'm not drunk now. I know what I'm doing and I know what I'm saying. I killed somebody."

"You killed somebody?" The policeman's tone was sharper but still edged with cynicism. Coney abounds in freaks, and not all of them are in side-shows either.

"Yes; a woman."

"When?"

"Last year— in October. So I want to give up— I've got to, that's all. I don't believe they'll do much to me. Either I'm going crazy, or else the whole world's gone crazy around me. They can't send a crazy man to the chair."

"They send a lot of 'em to the bug-house but others have luck. Last October you say it was?"

"Yes."

"Well, what's delayed you so long about comin' clean? Why pick on me now?" He was still skeptical.

"Because she's here now— her body, I mean."

"Where?"

"I can show you; it's not far. It won't be gone when we get there, I know that."

"Oh, it won't?" He'd humor this poor fish along. "Well, did you kill her here and keep her hid all this time, or did you just fetch her here so as to give me a treat?"

"No, the place where I killed her is fifty miles from here— maybe sixty. And I didn't bring her here. But she's here. Devils from hell must have brought her. I'll show you, and then you'll have to believe me."

"You'll show me a pair of heels, getting' away from here to where you belong at, that's what you'll show me. You be off out of this now, and you go and sleep off that load that you're carryin' around with you and in the mornin' you'll feel different about all this here murder stuff."

"I think you'll be sorry," said Staggner. "Well, there's only one other thing left for me to do." He turned his face toward where the surf just yonder was slapping against the beach.

"Here, just a minute. What's your name?"

Staggner turned to him.

"Spell it out?"

Staggner spelled it out. The name seemed to strum some thin fiddlestring of recollection in the policeman's brain. Where had he heard that name before?

"Come along, then," agreed the cop. "You get your wish. I'll leave you recite your piece to the desk man over at the station. Whatever kind of nut you are, my guess is you need to be took in out of the wet."

Behold, how on such small hinges do the big gates of circumstance sometimes swing. Had that blasé young policeman obeyed his first inclination, Siggy Gottschalk's concession at Coney might have finished out the season as it had begun it— deep in the red ink. A wiser and a shock-proof generation must have grown up since the Chamber of Horrors at the old Eden Musée made money and the Gallery of Famous Criminals at Huber's on Fourteenth Street was turning 'em away. Siggy had figured that his Grotto of Great Murder Mysteries, with a good ballyhoo outside and a swell flash for the front entrance, ought to suck the suckers in, but from the start-off he had been a heavy loser.

Not any more though. Not with the newspapers giving him a billion dollars' worth of free advertising on their front pages; not with the dimes rattling down at the door and the boobs stampeding in and rushing on past the Elwood Case layout and the Dot King layout and the Arnold Rothstein layout to jam, with goggling eyes and round mouths and greedy ears for the spiel of the

official orator— and he getting fresh dope every day out of the headlines— in front of the section devoted to the Olivia Thames Case.

All along that Olivia Thames layout had been Siggy's pride and his masterpiece. The rest of the stuff, however true to the original models, was synthetic stuff. But this was absolutely, positively authentic. Hadn't Siggy bid in, at the sheriff's sale, the furnishings and the hangings and the other contents of Solly Lennix's Blue Room and set it up just as it was, except, of course, that the figure on the rug in the foreground was a waxworks figure, although most lifelike, so Siggy claimed? He had done that very little thing back in May, had smart Mr. Siggy. He didn't know then how smart he was. But in July he knew and everybody else knew. Siggy's masterpiece was Siggy's meal ticket now, and from now on.

End