

Percy B. St. John



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or,
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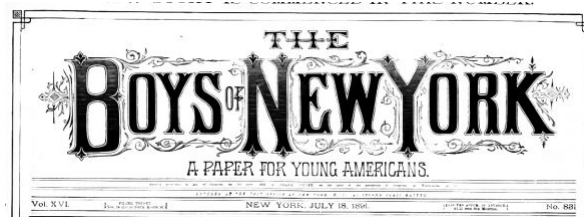


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**The Hidden House;
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By
Police Captain Howard (Percy B. ST. John)
Author of ›The Red Leather Bag,‹ ›The Yellow Diamond; or, Groping in
the Dark,‹ ›The Mystery of a Black Box,‹ ›Monte the French Detective in
Chicago,‹ etc., etc.



Chapter I.

Kicked Out.

Etta, I love you! I love you truly! Look up at me, darling, and say that some day, when I am rich enough to claim you, you will be my wife.«

Thus Spoke Edward Telford, aged twenty, as he stood facing pretty Etta Howe among the tree ferns in the conservatory at Treyton Hall.

»Ha! ha! ha! What a pretty speech!« rippled Etta. »Where did You learn it, Mr. Telford? I'm sure I've seen it Somewhere. Oh, yes! »Duffy's Standard of Etiquette.« Chapter »How to Propose.« No, thank you. I would not marry you even-«

»Even if I would give my consent to a daughter of mine countenancing so impertinent a puppy for a second! roared a voice behind them. »Out of my house, sir! Leave this place before I kick you out!«

»Oh, my! Here's the cruel father eavesdropping!« cried Etta, convulsed with laughter. »Go, Mr. Telford, go, I beg of you! Don't let there be a scene.«



Out from behind a broad palmetto Banker Howe, in full dress, blazing with passion and diamonds, had suddenly appeared.

»Mr. Howe: Permit me to explain, sir,« began the unfortunate suitor, his face the color of the geranium blossoms.

»Not a word!. You have insulted me, young man. Get out!«

»But, sir, I . . . «

»By heavens, if you can't take a hint, take a boot!« cried the banker.

Unceremoniously he seized Edward Telford by the collar, and literally booted him out upon the lawn.

Where Brazenhall's brass band was playing beneath the rows of Japanese lanterns strung between the poplar trees.

It was a terrible taking down for Ed Telford, to be sure.

But then if the bank clerk, on a \$10 a-week salary, will make love to the president's daughter, just because the young lady happened to flirt with him a few times when visiting the »pater« in-his business den, why what could be expected?

Ed picked himself up off the graveled walk with his nose scratched and his hands cut and bleeding; yet neither could be compared with the laceration of his feelings as a matter of course.

Fortunately the out-of-door guests were around on the other side of the mansion, where they had the view of the Hudson, and the moon descending into the dark shadows of the Palisades.

Thus not a soul saw Ed come flying through the conservatory door, but Harry Sproat, his bosom friend and room-mate, who was waiting behind the spruce trees to learn the result.

»Great Scott! What's the matter?« breathed Harry, springing from his concealment, and helping his friend to rise.

»Ca—can't you see what's the matter?« blurted the rejected lover. »For Heaven's sake, help me out of this, Harry. I'm a used up man!« -

»Fired out, eh?«

»Don't—don't!«

»I won't, old man! There! It's a blame shame! Come round here behind these trees. The right knee of your breeches is all bursted—what'll you do for your hat?«

And like a true friend, Harry Sproat forbore to carp or criticise, but just led Ed behind the spruces where he might hide his discomfiture from the invited guests of pretty Etta Howe's birthday ball.

»Say, Ed, did she reject you, or was it only the old man?«

»Rejected—of course I'm rejected,« growled the suitor. »Oh, Harry, what an ass I was to suppose she cared the snap of her finger for me. I suppose I shall be kicked out of the bank into the bargain. Of course I could never stay there, now.«

»Bad business! And me out of a job too.«

»Can't be helped though. We'll have to make the best it. Let's see, when is our room rent due?«

»Monday week.«

»And not a cent to pay it with. Blame it all! I don't know what will become of us.«

»Say, Ed, we want to get out of this. If they catch me here they'll set the dogs on me seeing as I wasn't invited to their blamed old ball like you were.«

»But I can't go without my hat, and that's in the coat-room up-stairs, Hal.«

»What'll you do?«

»Don't know. I . . . Hullo! what's that?«

A singular sound had made itself heard on the other side of the spruce tree.

It was just as if some one had flung a handful of pebbles against the glass of the conservatory.

Peerink through the spreading branches the boys saw a particularly interesting specimen of the tramp species standing in the shadows of the spruce tree next to the one behind which they were concealed.

»By George! how did that fellow come here?« whispered Ed.

»Must have jumped the wall same as I did,« was Harry's reply.

»He's a thief, I'll bet.«

»Don't look that way to me. Seems to be signaling somebody.«

»You're right! It's Mr. Howe himself, true as you live! See, there he comes.«

It seemed singular in the light of what had just occurred, that fate had so ordered that these boys should be witnesses to what was about to happen.

Down the conservatory steps Ronald Howe, president of the 29th National Bank, came hurrying, his face fully indicating the uncomfortable condition of his mind.

»Sam Slyman! How dare you come here?« he demanded, fiercely, as he approached the tramp. »Do you want to bleed me again? I tell you the end of your rope has been reached at last. Leave these grounds at once or I'll set the dogs on you! I'm a desperate man, I want you to understand.«

»Phew!« muttered Harry. »There's going to be fun here.«

»What's the matter with you?' demanded the tramp, sneeringly. »One would think that I had no right to be here the way you talk.«

»Neither you have. I . . .«

»Stop! Haul in your horns or I'll expose you before all your guests.«

»Twould make but-little difference. I'm a ruined man, Slyman. I can't run a month longer, under the most favorable circumstances.«

»Who says so?«

»I say so.«

»Pshaw! I don't believe it. All you want is a cool head to assist you. I came here for money, but if things are as bad as you say, I've another plan to propose.«

»What is it?«

»Come in here behind the tree and I'll tell you«

Now what transpired behind the tree the listeners never knew, for the conversation between the banker and the tramp was carried on in low whispers, and fearful of discovery they did not dare to move.

»I'll try it; it's a good scheme,« they heard Mr. Howe say at last. »I'll go into the house and draw up a paper to that effect.«

He now re-entered the conservatory and presently returned with a folded paper in his hand.

»There you are,« he said. »There's the paper and \$50. Be at the bank to-morrow at noon and I'll make you cashier.«

The tramp pocketed the money eagerly, and striking a match proceeded to examine the paper.

Filled with curiosity, the boys continued to watch.

»Say, there's one thing more,« said the tramp, as the match went out.

»What is that?«

»I'm getting along in life, Howe. I want to marry and settle down. You must give me your daughter Etta for a wife.«

»What!« gasped the banker.

»Oh, you heard me.«

»Never!«

»I say yes. Unless you do—«

»Give me back that paper! Give it back, I say!« roared Mr. Howe, suddenly springing upon the fellow. »Sooner would I end my days in Sing Sing than sell Etta to a wretch like you!«

»Look out, Howe! Look out!« hissed the tramp, trying to shake him off.

»Give me the paper! Give it to me! your game!«

»I'll give you this!« breathed the fellow, tearing himself free and dealing the banker a crushing blow on the forehead.

»Murder! Murder!« yet Mr. Howe, falling backward to the ground.

»Great heavens! He is killing him Ed, springing out from behind the tree.

They were too late to prevent a second attack though—they saw the tramp kick the prostrate man brutally about the head and face.

»Help! Murder!« shouted Harry, dashing after his friend.

The tramp heard and leaped back running rapidly toward the wall, over which he leaped with the agility of a cat.

Now came the sounds of hurrying footsteps—the guests alarmed by the cries were approaching—the band ceased to play.

»After him, Harry! After him!« cried Ed.

They gained the wall in a few seconds and went scrambling over.

»There they go! There they go!« shouted several voices. »See! They are leaping the wall! One of them has no hat!«

»By thunder! we're in a fix! Sure's a gun they'll arrest us, Ed!« breathed Harry, as they landed on the other side.

The tramp had vanished.

Too plain was the danger of the boys to think of further pursuit.

»You're ee must look to ourselves,« exclaimed Ed. s

Losing no time they dashed down the road at full speed.

Chapter II.

At the ringing of the Midnight Bell.

»WELL, young man, what can I do for you?«

»You sent for me, sir, and I am here.«

»I sent for you? What is your name?«

»Philip Kline, sir.«

»What!«

»Philip Kline, Pinkerton detective.«

»You don't mean it. Well, you are cleverly disguised, I must say. I should never have known you—never in the world.«

»Thank you, sir. I take that as a compliment.«

»Take it for what you like, I mean it; but come in and shut the door. I have an important mission to confide to you, Mr. Kline. While we talk we must be alone.«

Where upon Phil Kline closed the office door and sat down beside the pompous president of the Mechanics Mutual life Insurance Co., whose refusal to pay a policy of \$20,000 upon the life of Ronald Howe, the banker, was just then creating quite a stir in the financial world.

»Mr. Kline, I have sent for you in the matter of the Howe case,« began the president, drumming with the heavy glass paper-weight upon his desk.

»Yes, sir.«

»How much do you know of the case?«

»Only what the papers have reported, sir.«

»To the effect that Mr. Howe was murdered by tramps on the night of the ball recently given at his estate at Inwood.«

»Yes, sir.«

»Furthermore that the tramps carried off his body and threw it in the Hudson, from whence it was fished out a few days later in an unrecognizable condition.«

»Yes, sir.«

»That is all you know?«

»That is all.«

»Very good. Now hear me.«

»I am adl attention, sir.«

»Mr. Kline, understand that I feel very sure of my assertion when I tell you that the body taken from the river and buried as Ronald Howe's was certainly not his.«

»I know that is the ground you take, sir.«

»It is based on facts, sir. Are you aware that on the night of his disappearance Mr. Howe made an assignment of all his property to one Samuel Slyman, a man whom nobody knows, and who at the present moment, by virtue of his control of the balance of power is president of the Twenty-ninth National Bank.«

»Why no, sir. I had not heard of that.«

»It is a fact, although it has been kept very quiet. You see Howe owned one share more than was necessary for a control of the bank stock. It is my belief that the bank has been gutted. This we shall know to-morrow, for the State examiner will visit it to-day. There is a large-sized colored gentleman in the fence somewhere in this business, and just where he is hiding is what I want you to find out.

»I'll do my best, sir.«

»I suggest that you shadow this man Slyman who has suddenly blossomed out into a bank president.«

»I shall most certainly do it, sir. Is the case to be entirely in my hands?«

»For one week I will leave it so.«

»I want no more; may I ask a question or two?«:

»As many as you wish.«

»In whose benefit was this life policy of \$20,000?«

»Benefit of Miss Etta Howe, the banker's only child. Howe was a widower, you know, and . . .«

»Beg pardon, but who is trying to collect it?«

»Mr. Slyman.«

»Has the daughter appeared in the matter at all?«

»Only by signature.«

»Good. It is enough, I'm off now, Mr. Henschel, and I'll do my best.«

»Bright fellow that,« murmured Mr. Henschel as the office door closed upon Phil Kline.

Such was the standing of the now famous Howe disappearance case one month from the night which had seen Ed Telford kicked out of the conservatory door.

Would Phil Kline succeed in unraveling the mystery!

If pluck and perseverance went for anything, yes.

No better shadow existed in the whole city of New York than this same Phil Kline, and when Mr. Samuel Slyman left the 29th National Bank in his coupe that afternoon Phil Kline was at his heels.

The coupe drove straight to a noted »Bachelor Apartment« house on Broadway below 23d street, where Mr. Slyman alighted.

This was all correct.

For three weeks the new bank president had been on the tenants' roll, though seldom in his rooms.

He entered now without fear, for each day had fixed him more firmly in his position.

At first he had been terribly afraid of shadows, but he was getting bravely over that now.

Immensely disgusted would he have been, though, if he had only known that at that very moment Phil Kline's eye was upon him.

So it was later when he entered Delmonico's; again later still when he called at a fashionable club house of which, between ourselves, he was trying to become a member.

So it was at a quarter to ten when he emerged from a second-hand clothing dealer's on Sixth avenue dressed like a tramp, and went shuffling around into Carmine street with his old whisk of a hat pulled well down over his eyes.

»By George! I've struck it rich!« muttered Phil Kline. »Wonder what he wanted in there? I'm on the verge of a discovery. So far luck has run all my way. I'm sure he never tumbled to my presence once.«

Indeed there was nothing so very wonderful about this, seeing that Phil Kline had only changed his disguise six times!

Now Phil was great on disguises.

First it had been a gentlemanly broker who drove up Broadway. Up and down in front of Delmonico's a shoestring peddler had paced; it was a beggar with his hat in his hand who waited opposite the club, and tracked Samuel Slyman to the clothing store from which he had just emerged.

»I'll stick to this for awhile,« remarked Phil as he followed down Carmine street. »It seems to work first rate, anyhow. I declare that fellow looks more natural as a tramp than he does in his fine clothes, blame me if he don't!«

He was right.

Mr. Samuel Slyman's hair was very gray for a man not over forty, his face was blotched, his eyes bleared and watery, all of which matched the ragged clothes which he now wore to the last degree.

Where can he be heading for?' muttered Phil. Rather strange. But it was part of Phil Kline's business to fathom the strange and mysterious, so he traveled on down Carmine street after the tramp until he reached the »triangle« where he saw the banker shuffle into a shop on Bellows Court.

Now the »triangle« was located somewhere near the foot of West Houston street—just where, we propose to keep a secret.

Houston street on one side, Bellows Court on another, Van Dusen street on the third.

Starting from Houston Street a block apart, Bellows Court and Van Dusen street ran into each other a block away.

There are several such triangles over on the west side of New York city in the neighborhood of the Ninth Ward.

There is one at Canal, Watts and Varick streets, another at Carmine, Bedford and Varick streets, and there are others still, for here streets, alleys and half hidden courts cross and recross each other in the most perplexing way.

Phil Kline, in his shabby disguise, peered round the corner of Houston street into Bellows Court, a mere alley with old-fashioned brick houses on either side.

Some were evidently lodging houses. Others had small stores started in the basement. Right at the junction of the court and Van Dusen street was a factory. It was into the basement of the last house on the right next to the factory that the tramp had entered.

Under the parlor windows hung a sign which read:

»PETER McGILLICUDDY,
»Taxidermist.«

In the window were two stuffed parrots, one poodle dog, one monkey and a very much dilapidated owl.

»What has he gone in there for, I wonder?« thought Phil Kline.

He did not know at a few minutes before midnight.

In fact at that time the detective felt very much disturbed, for he thought he had lost his man.

Time had passed and no sign of the tramp coming out of the bird stuffer's. It seemed rather strange.

At last the shop closed, and of course this was discouraging. Without making a dead set upon the taxidermist which would have interfered with his plans, Phil Kline did not know what to do.

»He's tumbled to me and slipped out in some way by Van Dusen street,« muttered Phil. »I'm afraid I'm through for the night.«

And indeed it looked so.

Again and again Phil had gone round the triangle, but nothing came of it until now coming into Bellows Court for perhaps the fortieth time he saw a young man just in the act of entering one of the dwellings opposite the taxidermists.

»Hold on,« muttered the detective. »I'll try a word with him, Maybe he can tell me what I want to know.«

He had advanced but a step when he saw that the young man was intoxicated.

This, however, did not deter him, for he was anxious to put a question about the bird-stuffer before me

»Hello! Hold on a second. I want to speak to you!« called the detective.

»Whad yer want?» growled the fellow, turning round, half way up the stoop, when suddenly his feet seemed to slip from under him, and down he flew, striking heavily on the sidewalk almost at Phil Kline's feet.

»Heavens and earth! Are you killed?« cried the detective.

Before the fellow could possibly have answered a bell somewhere in the neighborhood sounded a single stroke.

Dong!

It was a deep, penetrating sound, and must have been audible blocks away.

Whence it came the detective could not tell, of course, but the effect upon the fallen inebriate was to bring him to his feet with a bound.

»Holy Smoke!« he whispered. »Shay, young feller—don't yer hear it? It's the midnight bell.«

»What do you mean?« questioned Phil.

»Look over there by the arch an' you'll see the stiff come out.«

»What! What are you talking about?«

»Talkin' about ther bell. Every time it rings a stiff comes out, an' 't always rings duly 't midnight. There she comes! See!«

The words were scarcely spoken when the gate in the arch under the factory was suddenly thrown open as if by invisible hands, and a hearse to which two coal black horses were attached drove out and turned down Bellows Court.

There was a man on the box driving, but his face was so muffled up that no one could have distinguished his features.

»Hic—the phantom hearse,« cried the inebriate, lurching heavily against Phil.

»Every time ther midnight—hic—midnight bell rings out comes that hearse, but no man 'bout these 'ere diggins ever seen it go in.«

Chapter III.

Strange visitors in the storm.

»More thunder!« cried Ed Telford, as a fearful clap followed by a dazzling flash of lightning broke outside the half closed blinds.

»Great Scott! I should say so. Shut 'em in, Eddy! Shut 'em. I'm a regular old maid about a thunder storm. It always scares me half to death.«

Ed pulled the blinds shut and secured them, for he was in the act of doing this when the thunder clap came.

»Now, then, leave the window down a little at the top so we won't quite roast,« said Harry. »That's the talk. What time is it? Half after eleven? By George I'm going to turn in whether you do or not—oh blazes! There's someone hammering on the door.«

Ed Telford turned pale. Even easy going Harry Sproat looked disturbed.

So would any two fellows out of work, who hadn't paid their room rent in three weeks.

»By George! It's old Mother Brickman after the spondulicks!« breathed Harry.

»Or a detective after me,« echoed Ed.

For weeks Ed had been living in fear and trembling, for the papers had somehow got hold of the incident of the conservatory, and one had been bold enough to mention the name of Edward Telford in connection with the mysterious disappearance of Ronald Howe.

As for Ed, he had never had the courage to go to the bank again for fear of becoming in some way mixed up in the matter.

This was weak, of course, but we can only describe the young man as we find him.

»If they want me they can come after me,« thought Ed; »they have my address.«

But so far no one had appeared.

»Say, well have to open the door,« said Harry, as the knock was timidly repeated. 'It don't sound like Mother Brickman's rap.«

Ed was nearest, and he turned the Key and flung back the door.

To the intense surprise of both boys a young woman enveloped from head to foot in a shabby old waterproof entered the room.

»Etta! Etta Howe! for Heaven's sake what brings you here?' Ed Telford gasped.

Well might he be surprised, for it was indeed the banker's daughter who stood before him.

Her face was as pale as death, and her manner greatly excited.

She carried no umbrella, the rain ran from the waterproof cloak in streams.

»Shut the door,« she whispered; »no one must know I am here. Fortunately the hall door was unlatched and I managed to slip in unseen.«

Harry sprang forward, closed the door and locked it, while Ed, but little recovered from this astonishment, placed a chair.

»Mr. Telford, you are surprised to see me,« said the girl, with her eye upon the carpet of the shabby bedroom. »I am surprised to be here, but necessity has driven me to this step.«

»I—I am sure you are quite welcome,« stammered Ed, his affection for the girl, scarcely altered by her treatment of him on the night of her father's strange disappearance, now coming back with a rush.

»Can't you guess why I am here?«

»Indeed I cannot.«

»It is on account of my poor father. Do you know I cannot bring myself to believe that the body I followed to the grave was really his.«

»Etta! Miss Howe, I mean.«

»Call me Etta, as you have always done. I—I am not the proud girl I was, Mr. Telford. Do you know that I have virtually been a prisoner in my own house ever since this dreadful calamity befell us? That man Slyman lives there now. He claims to own everything. He wants me to marry him!«

»What!« cried Ed. »Etta, do you know who that man is?'

»I suspect.«

»But I know. I . . .«

»Hark!« cried Harry. »Some one knocking at the door.«

The girl sprang to her feet with a face whiter even than before.

»Hide me! Hide me! No one must see me here!« she breathed.

It was very imprudent, of course, but Ed suggested the closet.

»Bang! Bang! Bang!«

Nothing timid about the knocking now.

»It's the landlady this time sure,« said Harry. »Great Scott! What shall we do?«

Without another word, Etta darted into the closet.

To make matters sure, Ed turned the key and put it into his pocket.

»Let her come!« he whispered. »I'll get rid of the old hen somehow, you bet!«

But Harry was not quite so sanguine and opened the door with considerable anxiety.

To the intense surprise of both the boys in walked a tall man, dripping with rain, who carried a large gripsack in his hand.

It was impossible to see his face, for the collar of his coat turned up about his ears, almost met the brim of his low, slouch hat, beside which was the fact that the lamp allowed by Mrs. Brickman gave a very poor light.

»Say, haven't you made a mistake?« cried Harry, as the stranger strode in. »This room is private, We -«

»No, there's no suspicious!« said the man, closing the door. »Edward look at me. Do you know who I am?«

»Mr. Howe!« gasped Ed, starting back.

Probably nothing could have made him forget Etta but this.

»Yes, it is I, Edward. The dead has come to life, but, my boy, I am in danger of death at any moment, and I have come to appeal to you as the only man in the wide world whom I can trust to-night.«

»Mr. Howe—«

»Stop! I know I have wronged you shamefully, but . . .«

»Mr. Howe, I just want to say- . . .«

»Stop! Do not interrupt me. I tell my life is in danger. Do you see this bag? In it is the sum of \$10,000—my all. Hide it, keep it, for Etta's sake. To-morrow I shall return and explain everything. Until then, far well.

He dropped the bag, and flinging open the door, shot off down stairs.

»Stop! Stop!« called Ed, springing into the hall.

»Here! here!« whispered Harry, drawing him back by the coat tail.
»Think of the girl, Ed. Do you want Mother Brickman up here?«

»But he must know! Just think of it, Harry! He . . .«

»Hold up! Hold up! There! Now the door's shut and locked. It's twenty-one. Let him do what he likes. \$10,000! Great Scott!«

Harry's hands seemed to close instinctively upon the handle of the grip.

»He—I—you—that is—we must let Etta out!« gasped Ed, who seemed to be most horribly confused.

»Well I should say so. Ticklish business locking that closet. What did you do it for?«

»I was afraid of Mother Brickman,« replied Ed, fumbling for the key.

»S'pose she's smothered?«

»For Heaven's sake, Harry!«

»\$10,000. Oh, gee! I'm dying to get a look at the cash.«

»Here's the key at last!« exclaimed Ed, producing it and thrusting it into the lock. »Good gracious! The thing won't turn!«

»What!«

»'Can't budge—it's stuck.«

»Get out of the way and let me try it,« cried Harry.

He dropped the grip and tackled the key.

»Etta? Etta!« called Ed, greatly disturbed. There was no answer.

Meanwhile, Harry was meeting with no success whatever with the key.

»Confound the thing! What ails it? he exclaimed.

»Etta! Etta! Speak!« shouted Ed.

Still profound silence reigned behind the door.

»She's fainted!« gasped Ed. »Oh, what shall we do? Here, let me take it again. I was mad to let her enter that confounded closet.«

»Pooh You can't do it any better than I can!«

»Can't I? You let me try, Harry Sproat!«

Dong!

Outside a bell sounded.

One single, deep-toned stroke rang out, followed instantly by a deafening thunder crash.

»The mysterious midnight bell!« groaned Ed. »Oh, it sounds like a warning. Harry, will you let me try that key?«:

»Try it and be blown if you think you can do any better. I'd like to know what you've done to it, anyhow?'

Harry stepped aside and Ed clutched at the key again.

What had been the matter?

Who will ever know?

Now the key moved so easily that a child could have turned it. Open came the door and with it rose a cry from both the boys which might have been heard a block away.

For with the opening of the door a human body came pitching forward, not the body of Etta Howe, but that of a man.

It toppled against Harry, almost tipping him over, the face striking the floor at Ed Telford's feet.

»Mr. Howe! Oh Heavens! What is this? gasped Ed starting back.

What, indeed?

The girl in the closet had vanished,

Instead there lay the corpse of her father who had left the room but a few minutes before!

Chapter IV.

Where money brought sorrow.

»Mr. Howe!« gasped Ed Telford.

»It is Mr. Howe!« echoed Harry Sproat, »and as true as you live he's dead!«

»But how—where—what's become of Etta?« cried Ed, almost stupefied with perplexity at the peculiar turn affairs had taken.

They searched the closet for Etta Howe, but in vain.

Everything remained unchanged inside the closet; there were just the four white walls and the boys' Sunday clothes hanging to the pegs—but nothing more.

There was no scuttle above nor trap-door below—positively no visible means by which the fugitive bank president could have come in or his daughter gone out.

»It beats the very deuce!« gasped Harry Sproat. »Just so sure as we've got a dead man on our hands, so sure that girl is gone.«

»Bang! Bang! Bang!« came thundering on the door again just at this juncture.

»Don't go, Ed. Don't you let anybody in, breathed Harry. »Great Scott! We'll be in for a murder next thing you know!«:

»Bang! Bang! Bang!« came the rapping again, and the shrill voice of the landlady was heard shouting out for the boys to open.

»Oh, Lord! It's Mother Brickman!« breathed Harry. »We've got to open the door, Ed.«

Ed was bending over the body of Mr. Howe trying to see if there was any hope.

Evidently there was not.

Heart and pulse were motionless.

The eyes had assumed a fixed, glassy appearance—the face was already growing cold.

»Help me draw him under the bed,« whispered Ed. »Hurry, Harry! We'll put the bag under there, too, for we've got to open the door.«

»Mr. Telford! Mr. Telford!« shrieked the shrill voice of the landlady.

»Will you open the door or not? Pretty how-to-do if I'm to be locked out of my own rooms! Open the door! Open the door!«

Ed Telford was panting like a winded race horse when he opened the door at last.

Mrs. Brickman bounced into the room and stood with arms akimbo.

»Well, gentlemen, are you prepared to pay the rent you owe me?« she cried.

»Mrs. Brickman, we'll pay you to-morrow,« said Harry, for Ed seemed to have lost his tongue.

»To-morrow! To-morrow! I thought by the noise you were making that you must be packing up to move out, so I takes the liberty of intruding to see if I couldn't get my rent tonight.«

»We really couldn't give it to you to-night, Mrs. Brickman and we haven't the faintest idea of moving.«:

»Oh, indeed! Were you playing leap frog or practicing for the Turnfest? Upon my word, I never saw the like for impudence! There's a piece of my ceiling down as big as the lid of a band-box.«

»Really, Mrs. Brickman, we are sorry. We -«

»Oh don't go to explaining, you'll only lie about it, and I'm opposed to lying myself or letting anybody else lie to me, but I want you to understand, Mr. Sproat, and you too, Mr. Telford, that you can't keep on pollyfoxing with me no longer. It's cash to-morrow and no more promises, or out you go kerslap!«

Whereupon Mrs. Brickman bounced out of the room and banged the door behind her.

It took Harry just two seconds to turn the key.

»Ed, old man, we are in a bad box!« he whispered. »In heaven's name what are we going to do?«

»I—I'm sure I don't know, Hal,« replied Ed faintly. 'I'm all mixed up.«

»Well then you'd better get unmixed mighty sudden. Is the old man dead or not! That's the first thing. Out with him till we see!«

Together they drew out the body of the banker and laid it on the bed.

Most certainly the man had ceased to breathe.

There was no wound upon the body that the boys could discover—no sign of violence.

Every moment the mystery deepened—they discussed the situation in vain.

»Say, we mustn't forget the money!« said Harry at last. »Let's open the bag, Ed. Let's see if there really is \$10,000 inside.«

The bag was not locked—simply fastened by straps.

Upon opening it several bundles of bills were disclosed, held tight in position by wads: of old newspapers.

Harry pulled out one bundle and hastily examined it.

Each bill in the package was of the denomination of \$20.

There were fifty bills in each package and ten packages in the bag.

If the packages were all alike then there was \$10,000 fast enough.

The boys were stupefied—amazed at what they saw.

»Ed, we've got to do something,« said Harry at last.

»But what can we do? I'm almost wild about Etta. I—«

»We've got to go straight to the police, old man, tell them all that happened and give this money up.«

»I suppose that's the only thing to do.«

»Of course it is. We shall be arrested for murder as sure as fate if we don't do it.«

»But Etta . . .«

»Ed, what's the use talking? We know Etta Howe went into that closet, we know she ain't there now. We can't go one step further toward solving the mystery. Come, let's make a start.«

It was use less for Ed Telford to attempt to deny that there was sound sense in Harry Sproat's advice.

»We'll go at once,« he replied.

Seizing his hat, he took up the bag and started for the door.

»Don't make any more noise than you can help, or we'll have that old she dragon bouncing out upon us,« whispered Harry.

Noiselessly they stole down-stairs and gained the street.

The storm was still raging. Rain fell in torrents; every moment, it seemed, brought the lightning flashes, with a rattling peal of thunder following close upon it.

The boys paused on the doorstep in dismay.

»By George, we ought to have an umbrella,« said Harry. »We shall be drenched.«

»Go back and get one—that's a good fellow, Hal.«

»Say, Ed?«

»What is it?«

»See that fellow watching up there at the point of the triangle at the corner of Bellows Court?«.

Ed looked in the direction indicated.

As he did so, a shabbily dressed man who stood against the building at the corner of Bellows Court and Van Dusen street suddenly drew back out of sight.

»Great Scott!« breathed Ed.

»What's the matter?«

»Nothing—nothing!«

»But there is something the matter. Ed, do you know that man?«

»No, no! Of course not!«

»What did you say Great Scott for?«

»I—that is—Hal, I thought mebbe he was laying for us.«

»Looks mighty like it.«

»He's gone now, though. Get the umbrella, old man, and we'll make a start.«

»You're keeping something back from me, Ed Telford, and in a time like this you oughtn't to do it, that's what I say.«

Ed's face was as pale as death, but he made no reply.

Greatly disturbed, Harry hurried back upstairs for the umbrella.

He was still more disturbed upon his return to find that Ed was no longer on the door step.

Looking toward Bellow's Court he was amazed to see him talking with the man who had peered out at them.

The man was speaking rapidly, and gesticulating with his hands. Suddenly Harry saw him point to the bag, and make a movement as though to snatch it away from Ed.

With one bound Harry Sproat darted along Van Dusen street toward the corner.

Evidently Ed and his friend saw him coming for they instantly turned into Bellows Court and disappeared.

In a moment Harry had a full view of the court for its entire length, but not a trace of Ed and his mysterious friend was to be seen.

Harry was thunderstruck.

»What can it mean?« he muttered. »Has Ed gone back on me? Has . . .«

He paused abruptly, clapped his hand suddenly to his head and fell to the pavement with a groan.

Moments passed—the thunder crashed—the rain o in torrents but Harry Sproat never moved.

Chapter V.

Phil Kline and the Hearse.

For a moment or two Phil Kline stood watching the hearse, too much astonished to know what course to take.

Back to his memory came rushing something that he had read in the papers that morning.

It was the account of an unidentified dead body found in one of the upper rooms of a lodging house on Van Dusen street.

Phil had only half read the article, but now it suddenly dawned upon him that Van Dusen street was right around the corner—that it ran from Houston street into Bellows court.

»I must look into this,« muttered the detective. »Working on one mystery I seem to have stumbled upon another. For the present I shall have to let Mr. Slyman drop.«

Perhaps this was bad detective business, but we can tell what Phil Kline did.

Without stopping to question the drunkard, who had managed to crawl up the steps, Phil shot down Bellow's court after the hearse.

Now this was rather a change from Phil Kline's former plans.

Before he had gone three blocks down Houston street he was almost sorry that he had undertaken it.

The hearse rolled leisurely along, the driver never looking to the right or the left.

Now that it was away from the place where it had so suddenly appeared, there was nothing suspicious about it except the bare fact of its being in the streets at all at that hour of the night.

»I'm afraid I'm a fool,« muttered the detective, »and yet—ah! He's turning. Where's he going now?«

The hearse had turned up-town, but presently it turned again, this time into Leroy street.

Straight ahead it went to the water front now, and crossing West street, stopped before the ae gate of the pier shed.

»That's the French line pier,« muttered Phil. »This is certainly most mysterious. I'll stick it out until I learn what it means.«

He crossed the street and sat down upon a barrel with his eyes fixed upon the hearse.

The driver had alighted and was busy talking with the watchman on the pier.

Presently the two passed through the gate and disappeared.

Now was Phil's chance and he hastened to embrace it.

Gliding over to the hearse he cautiously opened the door and peered in.

The hearse was empty.

The detective resumed his seat on the barrel in a moment, feeling that he had had his labor for his pains.

»I can't understand it,« he muttered. »What can it mean?«

He had but a moment to wait.

Presently through the little gate set in the larger one he saw the driver and the watchman coming.

They were carrying an oblong box between them—just such a box as coffins are usually placed in.

It seemed to be very heavy, as they set it down behind the hearse.

Now the driver opened the door and helped to put the box into the hearse.

If it was not a coffin, certainly the two men handled it just as though it was one.

Once it was in the hearse the driver slammed the door, mounted the box, turned his horses and drove away.

»Strangel!« muttered Phil. »Of course this is all irregular. I'm in for it now. I've got to see where that hearse goes.«

He followed on.

The hearse driver seemed to be in no hurry.

One or two policemen were passed.

The driver nodded to both familiarly and kept straight on.

»Seems to be all right so far as the police are concerned,« thought Phil, »but it don't prove that this ain't crooked business all the same.«

But Phil Kline's faith began to waver when the hearse drew up at last before an undertaker's shop in Abingdon Square.

There was a faint light: visible behind the curtain of the show window.

Phil looked at the sign, and read the name of Moran, attached to which were the words »Funeral Director,« undertaker evidently being a word altogether too vulgar for Mr. Moran.

Now the driver leaped down and pulled the night bell alongside the undertaker's door.

Presently the door was opened, and a man in his shirt-sleeves appeared.

He seemed to comprehend what was wanted of him at a glance, for with the driver he immediately went round behind the hearse, the door was opened, the box taken out and carried into the store.

Presently the driver returned, mounted the box and again the hearse rolled away.

»Now to prove whether that fellow lied or not,« thought Phil. »will the hearse go back to Bellows Court?«

No. The hearse driver evidently had no such intention.

He turned down Bank street and paused before an alley gate, which appeared to lead in to stables in the rear.

Giving a peculiar whistle he waited for a moment, after which the gate was opened, the hearse drove in and disappeared.

»I'll soon know what oo are doing in there, my friend,« muttered the detective, »unless I'm away off there's another alley in the rear.«

He hurried down to West street, finding the alley as he had anticipated, for few men knew New York city better than he.

It was very narrow and very dirty.

Stables lined both sides of it, but the space was entirely too narrow for carts.

»He drove into the yard in front of one of these stables,« muttered Phil, »but which one is it? There's the rub.«

It was very difficult to determine, for all the stables looked pretty much alike.

Presently, when he had advanced about as far as seemed necessary, Phil's eye caught a light shining in the window of a small stable on the left.

»That's it—I'll bet a hat!« exclaimed the detective. »This is dangerous business, but I'm going to try it. I mean to know what has become of that hearse.«

There was a separation between this stable and the next of perhaps three feet, a bit of fence stretching between them.

Phil leaped to the top of the fence and looked down.

There was nothing visible but a manure heap—it was only a jog—the walls of the two stables joined just beyond.

»Guess I can climb on the roof and crawl along,« thought Phil.

There was no trouble about it. The stable was but alow, two story affair of frame. Reaching as high as possible the detective managed to catch the cornice and pulled himself up.

Now he lay flat upon the gravel, and crawling along to the front, thrust his head over and looked down.

He had made no mistake.

There stood the hearse in a small yard surrounded on. all sides but the stable by a high fence.

There was the driver also in the act of unhitching the horses, talking at the same time to a man who held a lantern. It was the light of this lantern shining through the rear window of the stable that Phil Kline had seen.

»They are going to put the thing up here for the night, that's sure,« muttered the detective. »What a strange business it is. I wish I could see through it. Confound them! why don't they speak up a little louder so's I could hear what they say.«

He strained his ears to the utmost, but could not catch a word.

Had he been less intent on listening he might have heard a sound behind him, and so saved himself a world of trouble.

It was like the shifting of a scuttle—it was the shifting of a scuttle, and the scuttle was in the stable roof.

While the detective watched the movements of the two men in the yard, the scuttle was softly raised and a man's head came up.

It was a big head with a great deal of hair and beard connected with it; the eyes winked violently several times upon finding themselves within an inch of Phil Kline's feet.

»Jerusalem Jones!« muttered the lips, and the head was ducked down out of sight again.

»There's no use staying here any longer,« thought Phil, oblivious to what was going on behind him. »I'll get round in front and scoop in that driver when he comes out.«

He was just about to draw himself back when a slight noise behind attracted his attention.

Before he could turn to learn what it meant, before there was time to think, in fact, his heels were suddenly grasped by iron hands and he was pushed violently forward over the edge of the cornice.

»Oh! Oh! For God sake don't kill me!« Phil had just time to exclaim, when down he went flying, head first into the yard below.

»There he is boys!« called a voice from the roof.

A man enveloped in an India rubber coat with the collar turned up around his ears, was leaning down.

It was a bad business for Phil Kline.

He struck head first on-a manure heap and rolled over on the ground.

Instantly the man on the roof jumped down into the yard joining the pair already there, who were bending over the detective's prostrate form.

»Is he dead?« asked the man in the rubber coat.

»Seems to be. He don't say nothing,« replied the man with the lantern, throwing the light full in the detective's face. »Guess his neck's broke!«

»Better harness up again and run him out of this,« said the man in the rubber coat. »He's a detective if I know anything. Murphy, the cop on

West street, warned me he was prowling about the alley. Murphy says he's a Pinkerton man.

»Well, he's a dead one then and the best thing we can do is to dump him. Here, take hold and chuck him in!«

While the man held the lantern his companion and the man in the rubber coat picked up the unfortunate detective and threw him into the hearse head first.

A few moments later and the gale on Bank street opened and the hearse rolled through.

Continuing down Bank street to West, it turned up town and disappeared.

Next day, Mr. Henschel, President of the Mechanic's Mutual Insurance Co., waited until six o'clock expecting to see something of Phil Kline, but in vain.

He waited all the day following and the day following that; he waited a week, a month and still the detective came not.

Not that Mr. Henschel kept on expecting him.

Long before this he had been notified by the Pinkertons that Phil Kline, one of their best city men for all around business, had most mysteriously disappeared.

Chapter VI.

A night adventure in the old room.

»Goop day, young man. Wish you all the luck in the world,« said the head nurse in Ward 44, Bellevue.

»There won't be much luck for me, I'm afraid,« replied a poorly dressed youth whose attenuated form and whitened features told of a long and painful illness. »I was bad enough off before, but it is worse now. Good day.«

He was about to pass out, having just been discharged after a month's residence in the hospital, when the nurse called him back.

»Got any money, Smith?« he asked kindly.

»Not a cent.«

»Here's a dollar. It'll pay for a night's lodging.«

The young man refused it at first but afterward thanked him and took it.

Descending to the office he reported his intended departure at the desk.

»Let's see, what name?« asked the clerk.

»Henry Smith.«

»Date of admission?«

»I don't remember. It was a little more than a month ago.«

The clerk turned to his register and running over the names presently read:

»Henry Smith, aged about 20, white, a native of New York. Found in Bellows court unconscious on the night of August —. Claims to have been hit with a slung-shot and robbed. No friends.«

To this record the clerk added the date of dismissal and closed the book.

After that the patient walked out, traveled slowly down the long yard and departed by the 27th street gate, after five long, weary weeks in Bellevue.

It was all right, that record, save in one particular.

The name was wrong.

Instead of Henry Smith, it should have been Henry Sproat.

It was our unfortunate young friend, Harry, who came to his senses in a hospital bed, and lay for days in a half-stupefied condition.

They had misunderstood him when they took his name, and later when Harry came to know of the blunder he let it stand.

He had his reasons, and he felt that they were good ones.

The fact is Harry Sproat was no saint, and during the long weary hours that he lay upon that hospital cot with his brain burning with fever he came to a fixed determination which can be expressed in one word:

Revenge!

»I'll get square with Ed Telford if it costs me my life!« he resolved. »We were chums and side-partners too long to have him treat me the way he did. I don't pretend to explain the mystery, but one thing is sure, Ed sold me out that night, and I'm going for him tooth and nail.«

Now right or wrong this was Harry Sproat's resolve.

One of the first acts of the boy after he began to mend was to beg for the newspapers of the past month.

They were brought to him and in them he read a strange story.

It told how a mysterious murder had been committed in Mr. Brickman's lodging-house on Van Dusen street; how the body of an unknown man had been found in one of the upper rooms occupied by two young men named Telford and Sproat, how said Telford and Sproat were missing, and were suspected of having enticed the unfortunate man into their room, and making way with him for the purposed robbery.

Mention also was made of Telford's connection with the disappearance of Ronald Howe, the ruined banker, but the police did not appear to have suspected that the murdered man was Mr. Howe.

In one of the papers Harry found an account of a missing Pinkerton detective named Philip Kline. He passed this over hastily, for right below it was something which interested him more, being, in fact, nothing less than the account of the finding of himself in Bellows Court.

»The young man appeared to be suffering from brain concussion,« the account stated. »Nothing whatever was found upon his person to identify him. From his dress it would seem that he might have been a respectable mechanic.«

Then Harry wondered at this, but when he came to see the clothes in which he had been brought to the hospital, he wondered no longer.

Not a single garment was his own.

No sooner was Harry clear of the hospital than he took the Belt line car and rode downtown as far as Houston street, changing there for the cross-town line.

It was four o'clock when he left the office at Bellevue; at quarter past five the boy rang Mrs. Brickman's bell, and he med to take up the thread of his strange adventure just where he had left it.

»All I want is today my hands on Ed Telford,« he muttered, with a bitter smile, »and by thunder, I mean to do it, too!«

»Mrs. Brickman in?« asked Harry of the careworn woman who opened the door.

She was a stranger to him, and he was a little taken aback, for he had fully expected to see his old landlady's familiar face.

»Mrs. Brickman gave up this house three weeks ago,« replied the woman.

»She did?«

»Yes.«

»That's too bad. I'm an old lodger of hers. I wanted to hire a room.«

»I'm renting rooms here now, sir, perhaps I could accommodate you.«

»Is your house full?«

»No, I—that is—well, I may as well own it is about vacant. You see, I've just started in.«

»I'd like my old room if I could have it.«

»Which is that?«

»Top floor—the three-cornered room looking out on the street.«

»That room is vacant, sir. What is the name?«

»Smith. What rent do you ask?«

»Well, you may have that room for a dollar a week, but I suppose I ought to tell you something about it first.«

»What is that?«

»There was a murder committed in that room a few weeks ago.«

Harry turned his head away.

»No matter. I'll take it,« he said. »Must I pay in advance?«

»It is my rule.«

»I'll pay you to-morrow. If you please I'll go up to it now.«

That night Harry Sproat tumbled into the old bed where he and Ed had slept for more than a year thoroughly tired out.

Not being burdened with sentiment, and having no superstitious fears, he was soon fast asleep.

»Give me a day or so to pull myself together and I'll find out the mystery of this place,« he muttered, just before he dropped off.

Now, Harry had not expected to go to sleep so suddenly, in fact, he did not know he was asleep until he was suddenly awakened by a familiar sound.

»Dong!«

It was the mysterious midnight bell sounding its solitary note.

For some unexplained reason Harry sprang up broad awake.

»Bother! It was that blamed old bell!« he muttered. »What the mischief! Was I dreaming? Ed! say, Ed?«

Surely he must have been dreaming then, for all memory of those weary weeks was forgotten.

He thought his old room mate was slumbering beside him—he put out his hand expecting to touch him, when suddenly a broad beam of light shot out of the darkness and lit upon his face.

»Hal! Hal!« shouted the old familiar voice.

What was this?



Following that beam of light Harry beheld Ed Telford flashing a dark lantern upon him through the half open door of that mysterious closet in which Etta Howe had so strangely disappeared.

Now suddenly memory came rushing back, and with it came the thirst for revenge.

»Confound you, Ed Telford! I'll make you sweat for what you've done!« cried Harry, leaping from the bed.

Instantly the light was extinguished and all was darkness and silence.

Springing to the mantel-piece where he had left matches, Harry struck one.

Mystery added to mystery!

The closet was secured on the outside—the key was in the lock just as he had left it.

Upon opening the door the interior was found to be vacant.

No trace of Harry Sproat's strange visitor could be found.

Chapter VII.

That mysterious closed.

»RAT, tat, tat! Rat, tat, tat!«

A sharp knocking, and a shrill voice calling: »Mr. Smith! Mr. Smith!«

It was a lucky thing for Harry Sproat that the intrusion came just as it did.

Harry's head was weak still. If he had stood much longer before that empty closet pondering on the mystery, there is no telling what the result might have been.

Less has driven many a man permanently insane.

»Rat, tat, tat! Rat, tat, tat! Mr. Smith! Mr. Smith!«

Outside the door the racket was still going on.

»It must be the landlady. It can't be any one else calling me by that name,« thought Harry.

The spell was broken and he opened the door. As he had expected, there stood the landlady, tall, gaunt and em, looking like an elderly ghost, as she held up the night-lamp, flashing it in Harry's face.

By her side was a pale, attenuated man, who looked a good deal as Harry looked himself-as thought just recovering from a severe fit of illness.

He was a keen-eyed fellow, too, and peered out from under his soft felt hat in a way which apes didn't altogether like.

»Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Smith, but would you mind letting this gentleman sleep with you till morning? He is going to take one of my rooms and has just arrived by late train. I knew you wouldn't mind an old woman like me arsking you. You see I haven't got another bed made up in the house.«

»And if you consent I will try to give you as little trouble as possible, sir,« said the stranger. »I know it's a nuisance, but it seems to be the best Mrs. Ryan can do.«

»You may come in,« said Harry. »I don't mind it for one night.«

Secretly he was relieved at the prospect of company.

»By the way, I left my grip downstairs. I'll go and get it,« said the stranger. »Just hold the door one moment and I'll be back again, Mr. Smith.«

»And ever so many thanks,« added Mrs. Ryan. 'I'm so sorry to disturb you, but it was the only thing I could do.«

Whereupon Mrs. Ryan followed the stranger down-stairs.

It was a singular proceeding altogether. »It did not make so much impression on Harry at the time, however, as it did afterward.

If he could have rendered himself invisible and followed Mrs. Ryan down-stairs he would have been in a hurry to leave the house.

»Is that one of them?« whispered the landlady, meeting the stranger at the foot of the stairs.

»I think it is. I have a most accurate description from Mr. Brickman of both those young men. That he is one of them I have hardly a doubt.«

»How did I manage?«

»You did first rate. Better than I expected. But I must not stop to talk, or he'll suspect.«

Whereupon the stranger picked up a little grip-sack which stood upon the hall table, and hurried up-stairs.

He found Harry in bed and the gas burning.

»It really is a downright shame to disturb you,« he said, as he closed the door and turned the key.

»Oh. that's all right. It's kind of lonely here, anyhow.«

»You are very kind,« replied the stranger, taking off his hat and coat, and dropping into a chair to pull off his shoes. »There ain't many fellows who would take it so easily. By the way, you never asked me my name.«

»No, what is it?«

»Jones.«

»Oh, it don't make any difference.«

»You are: one of the kind who take things coolly, Mr. Smith.«

»Well, there's no use in taking them any other way. The fact is I've been sick and don't feel like getting excited. I—hark! What was that?«

A distant rumbling was heard without.

»Thunder!« said Jones. »There's going to be a storm.«

He was partly undressed by this time and he now approached the gas as though to turn it out.

»Better leave that burning if there's going to be a thunder storm,« said Harry, »I'm a little nervous. I'd rather have a light in the room, if it's all the same to you.«

»All right; so would I,« replied the stranger. He climbed over Harry and lay down on the inside of the bed nearest the wall.

For a few moments there was silence. Then the stranger spoke:

»Do you know your face seems very familiar to me?«

»That so?«

»Yes.«

»I don't believe you've ever seen me before. I'm sure I've never seen you.«

»I think I have seen you.

»Let me see—didn't you used to room in this house when Mrs. Brickman had it?«

»Yes.«

»I knew I'd seen you somewhere. I used to visit a fellow at Mrs. Brickman's. He was clerk in Howe's bank—man who disappeared, you know. His name was Telford. I can't think of yours, but I'm sure it ain't Smith.«

It struck Harry all in a heap.

»This man never came to see Ed Telford,« he thought. »Who is he? Does he know me? What can be his game?«

»I think you are mistaken,« he said gruffly. »My name is Smith, as much as your's is Jones. I've nothing to do with Ed Telford at all.

»Certainly saw you in his room,« persisted the stranger. »By the way, where is Telford now—do you know?«

»No; I don't know anything at all about him, and if it's all the same to you I'm going to sleep,« replied Harry, so shortly that the stranger did not speak any more.

Just as Harry spoke a loud peal of thunder was heard without, following quick upon a lightning flash, which illuminated the whole

room.

It startled Harry horribly, for it reminded him of that ever memorable night which marked the beginning of his present misfortunes.

For some time he lay there perfectly quiet to all outward appearances, but inwardly so nervous that it was just as much as he could do to keep from jumping up and leaving the room.

The storm seemed to come on slowly.

Flash after flash of lightning was seen through the half closed blinds, the thunder crashed and muttered, but still there was no rain.

Like Harry, the stranger was also wakeful.

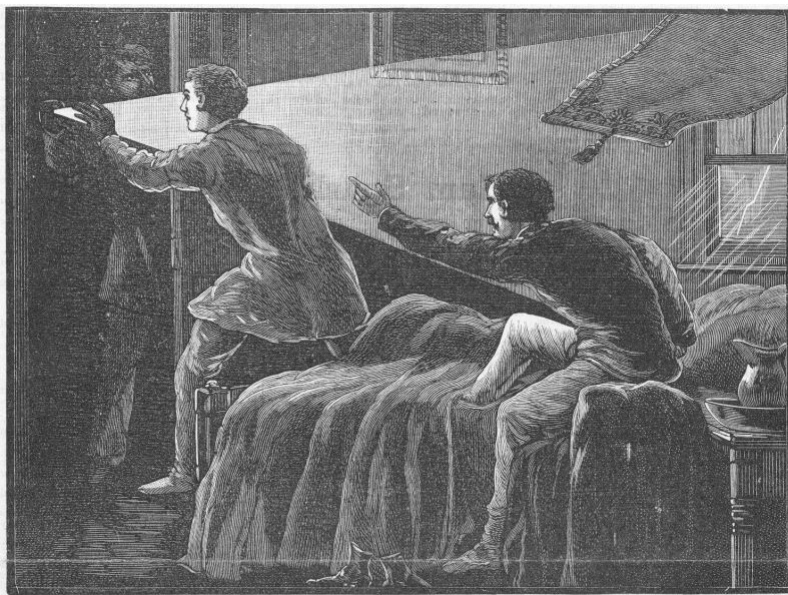
He lay with his back to his bedfellow making no attempt to close his eyes.

»I must make friends with this boy,« he thought at last. »What he knows I must know, for . . . ’

Right here his train of thought was interrupted by a brilliant flash of lightning followed almost instantly by a deafening thunder clap.

At the same moment there came a rush of wind which extinguished the gas, and a voice cried out of the darkness:

»Hal! Hal! Come to the closet, Hal!«



Harry Sproat bounced out of bed in a second—the stranger rolled over and sat bolt upright. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of a bright light through the open closet door, and to see his bedfellow rushing toward a young man who, lantern in hand peering out.

»The other one, by gracious!« he muttered, leaping from the bed.

»Hold on! Stand where you are! I'm a detective! I want you two fellows!« he shouted.

But it was one thing to want, another to have his wishes granted.

Bang went the closet door, and all was darkness and a strong smell of escaping gas.

»Thunder and Mars! What does this mean?« cried the stranger.

Another tremendous peal of thunder seemed to answer his exclamation; the rain came beating through the blinds in torrents as he struck a match and lit the gas, beholding to his amazement an empty room and a closed closet door.

With one bound the stranger gained the door and tried to open it.

It was securely locked on the outside.

So was the outer door locked, so were the blinds fastened, yet Harry Sproat had disappeared.

Shutting the window against the rain the stranger hastily unlocked the closet door and looked inside.

»This is amazing!« he muttered. »Positively amazing!«

It was so indeed, for the closet was quite empty.

Not a trace of his bedfellow could the stranger find.

Chapter VIII.

Mr. McGillicuddy hires a new man.

Mr. Peter McGillicuddy, the bird-stuffer on Bellows Court, kept one of the strangest looking stores in New York.

In the little show window there was a moth-eaten monkey, a disreputable eagle, a white owl and a two-legged calf, ordered by a bankrupt dime museum on the Bowery years before and left uncalled for for want of cash.

Now this show window of Mr. McGillicuddy's was an unfailing source of delight to all the children in the neighborhood, but the interior of the shop was unknown and mysterious ground.

Some venturesome boys and girls who had the courage to peep through the door—and they were but few, for Mr. McGillicuddy was a very cross old fellow and always drove them away as soon as he caught sight of them—were rewarded by seeing rows of jars on shelves containing snakes of various lengths and colors preserved in alcohol; an alligator suspended from the ceiling and an endless number of birds and beasts in various stages of preservation.

Why, it would have been just as good as going to a dime museum if Mr. McGillicuddy would only let them in, which he positively would not.

Such was the opinion of Mr. McGillicuddy's store held by the small fry about Bellows Court, but with the rest of the population it was different.

To all others the man was a mystery, for not one customer a week on an average was seen to enter McGillicuddy's, and it had long been a problem how the old bird-stuffer managed to make his rent.

»Sure, he does no business at all,« said Mrs. Feeney, who kept the lodging-house on the corner of the court and Houston street, to a young man who, under pretense of looking for rooms, led the good woman into a conversation about the bird-stuffer's affairs.

»He must have money in bank or he couldn't stand it. I don't believe he sold tin dollars worth in tin years.«

Now this young man was the »Mr. Jones« whom Mrs. Ryan, of Van Dusen street, introduced into Harry Sproat's room at midnight.

This visit to Mrs. Feeney's was early in the afternoon of Harry's arrival at Mrs. Ryan's, by the way.

On the same afternoon the same young man visited various other lodging houses in the neighborhood, but he was never seen around Bellows Court after that.

Shortly after eight o'clock on the morning following the thunderstorm, Mrs. Ryan's front door opened and a very dilapidated specimen of humanity slipped out and hurried toward Houston street with the air of a man who did not care to be seen.

He wore a ragged pair of trousers, a shiny old black coat and a battered hat.

Certainly if he was a sample of Mrs. Ryan's lodgers the good woman's chances of making a fortune were rather slim.

Once on Houston street the man turned the point of the triangle and entered Bellows Court, keeping along on the right hand side of the way until he came to the bird-stuffer's, where he went shuffling in.

There was no one in the outer shop, but inside in the back room, which had no windows and was lighted by gas even in daytime, Mr. Peter McGillicuddy, a red-headed, snuffy old fellow, sat pouring over the morning paper, scarcely looking up until the stranger approached the dividing door.

»Well, what do you want?» he demanded, raising his eyes now and staring crossly. »If it's beggin' yer after yer needn't come in here, for I wouldn't give yer a red to kape yer from starving, so get out.«

The stranger paused. A look of discouragement overspread his thin, pale face.

»I was looking for work, mister,« he said. »I began to learn the taxidermist business once, and haven't quite forgotten it. Do you want a man?«

»No, get: out,« growled McGillicuddy, dropping his eyes upon the genes again.

»I'll come cheap. must have work or starve.«

»Wouldn't take yer at a dollar a year; git out.«

»You seem to be all alone here,« persisted the stranger. »Why not think about it then? I'm a stranger in New York, and to tell the truth, I've had a pretty hard rub of it the last few months.«

What was the matter with Mr. McGillicuddy?

At the mention of the word »stranger« he seemed to prick up his ears.

»Where are ye from?« he asked, looking up.

»New Orleans.«

»How long have you been here?«

»About a month, and I've had a tough time of it, | you bet. I'm just out of the hospital now.«

»You look it, sure. What was the matter? Anything ketching!«

»Starvation and weakness—that's all. They fed me there and now I'm on the street to starve again unless some one will lend me a helping hand.«

»Don't you know any one in the city?«

»Not a soul.«

Mr. McGillicuddy scratched his head and seemed to be thinking.

»Can you drive a horse?« he asked, at length.

»Yes—oh, yes! I'm very fond of horses.«

»Well, I might put you in the way of getting a job if you could keep a still tongue in your head,« said the bird-stuffer, musingly. »When could you go to work?«

»Now.«

»Don't want you now. Where's fifty cents. Eat two good square meals and come here just before midnight.«

»Just before midnight!«

»Ay. Are ye afraid?«

»On, no«

»It is a dangerous bizness I want ye for. Of course it's honest enough, but the only trouble is the cops don't think so—see?«

Here Mr. McGillicuddy winked one eye knowingly, at the same time screwing the other tight shut.

»Oh, I don't mind that—I'm used to it. Fact is, boss, I may as well tell yer—I've done time.«

»I thought so—where?«

»Joliet.«

»What for?«

»House-breaking.«

»Good enough. You're the man I want. What sent you here?«

»Luck, I guess,« replied the stranger. »I've tried being honest, but it don't pay. I'm ready for the old life again now.«

»Well, you be on hand, as I tell you, just before midnight, You can knock three times on the shutter. Fust once, then a wait, then twice together—understand?«

»You bet I do. I'll be here, boss.«

»Be off wid ye then afore somebody sees yez. Sure yer gruesome lookin' enough to make a fine figure on a hearse.«

There was nothing gruesome looking about the tramp when he was well out of sight of McGillicuddy's shop. On the contrary, his face was wreathed with smiles.

»So I would make a fine figure on a hearse, would I?« he muttered. »Phil Kline, you're in luck. As true as you live and breathe, you've been hired to drive the phantom hearse. If gon: gate hold your own this time you're a fool!

Whereupon the tramp boarded a Houston street car and was hurried away from the scene.

Was it really Phil Kline? Had the dead come to life again?

It was Phil and no one else, but his story must be reserved for another Chapter.

We must hasten on to the midnight hour when again we behold the detective leaving Mrs. Ryan's on Van Dusen street, and slipping around by way of Houston street into Bellows Court.

Not a soul was to be seen in the Court now.

In the boarding-houses a few lights twinkled.

McGillicuddy's was tight shut, and the monkey and the owl invisible.

Shuffling along until he reached the bird-stuffer's, the tramp paused for a moment, and then rapped on the shutter once, then a pause, then twice together.

One minute later and McGillicuddy's door might have been seen to open, and the tramp was visible on Bellows Court no more.

Slowly the moments crept on.

Midnight was now at hand.

Still the Court remained deserted; thus when the mysterious midnight bell suddenly sounded forth its single »dong!« there was no ear to hear.

Immediately the big gate of the factory opened noiselessly and out rolled the phantom hearse as usual.

On the box sat Detective Phil Kline, holding the reins as calmly as though he had been driving the strange vehicle for years.

He guided the horses along the court to Houston street, wheeled around the corner and disappeared.

Chapter IX.

Through the closed-where?

If any one fancies for a moment that Harry Sproat, in his full waking senses, rushed deliberately into the mysterious closet, whose dangers he knew so well, that person is mistaken, for such was not the case.

The fact is, Harry, in spite of his uneasiness and worry, had dropped off into a doze for the moment, and as luck should have it, that was the very moment in which the cry Hal! Hal!« came again.

Harry bounced out of bed, still half asleep.

Probably he was dreaming too, for the lapse of time and his rage against Ed Telford seemed to be forgotten.

He heard Ed's. voice calling and he obeyed him instinctively, never waking to a realizing sense of what he was about until he felt some one grab his arm and pull him forward.

This was just the moment the gas went out and the thunder and rush of wind came.

»Let go! Let go of me. What do you want, Ed Telford?« Harry choked, for the door had slammed behind him, and Ed, winding one arm about his neck, held him and covered his mouth in such a way that poor Harry could neither speak nor move.

»Hush! Hush, Hal! for Heaven's sake. Your life and mine depend upon your silence now.«

The words were whispered in a sad but kindly tone which sent all Harry's hard feeling toward his old friend flying to the four winds.

At the same instant a curious creaking sound was heard and the floor seemed to give way beneath their feet.

»Brace up, old man!« whispered Ed's voice out of the darkness, for the lantern had been shut off suddenly. »Brace up! It is only an elevator! We won't be a moment. We are down.«

The moving floor had stopped with a bang and again the lantern flashed.

Before Harry had time to pull himself together Ed dragged him through a door and into a little room which was lighted up as bright as

day.

It was only a little seven by nine affair and entirely bare of furniture! When Ed had shut the door the atmosphere was as hot as a baker's oven, for there was no sign of a window to be seen.

Harry, who had nothing on but his shirt, looked about in despair,

»For Heaven's sake, Ed, you don't . . .«

»Intend to hurt you? Never, Hal. Oh, what must you think of me?«

»Well, I don't think much of you, and that's a fact. Let me get out of here—show me the way back. There's a man up there who . . . '

»Hold up, Hal. I know. The man is a detective.«

»A detective?«

»Yes, a detective. Didn't you hear him holler?«

»No. I was asleep, I guess. I only heard you and-«

»And you came to me because you couldn't help it. Say, Hal, we are still friends?«

»Well, I don't know whether we are or not, Ed Telford. Where's that money? Where's Miss Etta Howe? Who slugged me and sent me to the hospital? Haven't I got just a few grievances against you—say?«

»I own it. Only give me a chance to explain.«

»You'd better give me a chance to put on my breeches. You've tried your old power over me, Ed Telford. You always could make me do whatever you wanted me to, but no matter; I'm onto you now, and you won't do it again.«

Ed gave an impatient exclamation.

»By gracious, Hal. Will you let me speak!« he breathed. » You don't give a chance for a feller to get in a word edgeways, and here you are wrong from the very start.«

»Nothing wrong about you stealing that money, I guess.«

»I didn't steal it.«

»I say you did. In ever would have thought it of you, Ed Telford. I . . .«

»If you don't give me a chance to speak, I'll fire you back into the room and let that detective nip you. I want you to understand, Harry, that you are in great danger. Once you get arrested, as you surely will

be, there are witnesses already paid to swear that you enticed Mr. Howe into the room that night and murdered him for his cash.«

»And you—how about you?«

»I've disappeared. They can say what they like about me, but they can't find me.«

»Ed, I never thought it of you.«

»Thought what?«

»That you were a skin and a crook.«

»Neither am I. You don't understand and you never will until you give me a show. Hal, I'm your friend—I always have been. Not for the world would I wrong my old comrade. It is to save you and help you that I have brought you here.«

It was the tone rather than the words which brought tears to Harry's eyes.

»I never could believe you'd go back on me, Ed.«

»I never did. I was forced into it, old boy.«

»Who forced you?«

»The man you saw me speaking to.«

»Who is he?«

»I can't tell you now. Hal, you've tumbled into a perfect nest of crooks. If we could only get the place to the police our fortune is made.«

»What is it? What is going on?«

»What ain't it rather!«

»Speak up, Ed. Tell a fellow straight.«

»Ain't got time now. Hal, the chance I've been waiting for has come.«

»Chance! For what?«

»To escape.«

»Have you been a prisoner?«

»Yes«

»But . . .«

»Hold on. There you go again. I could have escaped before only I couldn't leave Etta and . . .

»Is Etta here?«

»Yes?

»For heaven sake, Ed, lend a feller a pair of breeches.«

»Nonsense! You won't understand. Etta has got to go when I go, and you can help me. Come, will you do it, or shall I send you back up-stairs again?«

»Ed, I'm with you. I can't help but believe you when you say you never went back on me.«

»I swear I never did, Hal.«

»All right, then. I'm ready for anything that's honest. What's in the wind?«

»Come with me and I'll show you,« whispered Ed.

He moved over to the opposite side of the room, and, pressing what Speed to be just a black button nailed against the wall, the whole side of the room appeared to slide noiselessly to the right, revealing a long chamber, lighted quite as brilliantly as the one they had just left, which was now immediately cut off by the returning wall.

»What do you think of this, Hal? Look! did you ever see such wealth?' breathed Ed. »First of all help yourself to a suit of clothes—you need it. There's shoes and hats and every blessed thing you want—here. Pile in!«

It was a fact.

The place looked like the bargain counter of a Sixth avenue dry goods emporium.

Through the center of the room ran a long table piled high with ready made clothes, white goods, boots and shoes, hats, ladies' dresses, bolts of silk and cloth, and thousands of other articles too numerous to be told here.

Further on was a glass showcase, and inside of it were watches, jewelry, and diamonds.

Further still was a great pile of gold coins, another of silver and an immense number of copper coins, looking very green and old.

But before inspecting all this, Harry had taken Ed's advice and dressed himself from the piles of goods before him.

It was lucky he did so, as will be seen later on.

»We want to get to Etta and make a start, and then I'll tell you all about it,« said Ed. »Now you're in shape we'll go. This is the way. Oh, I've got so much to tell you, Hal!«

He opened a door near that part of the long table which bore the jewelry case.

Before they had time to cross the threshold into a dark passage beyond a startling cry rang out.

»Murder! Murder! Oh, help! He's killing me«

»Great heavens! It's Etta Howe!« gasped Ed Telford. »Help me, Hal! Help me! We must save her! Quick or it will be too late!«

Ed Telford dashed along the dark passage.

»Murder! Help! Save me!« rang out the cry again.

Chapter X.

Driving the phantom hearse.

It was a novel experience for Mr. Phil Kline, Pinkerton detective. He little expected when he started in the Howe disappearance case that it would end in his driving a hearse.

Yet here was Phil mounted upon the box of one of those somber vehicles rolling through the streets of New York at midnight, bound on an errand which he did not more than half comprehend.

When Phil knocked on the shutter of Mr. McGillicuddy's shop, he did not have to wait long for the old bird-stuffer to open the door.

It was opened in fact almost on the instant.

Out came McGillicuddy's fiery pate, and his hoarse voice whispered:

»In wid yez! Don't make no more noise than ye can help.

Phil, in his trampish disguise, slid through the door.

It was very dark in the shop, and he almost fell into the terrible jaws of the alligator.

»Look how ye go,« whispered McGillicuddy, lighting a lamp.

Phil saw the alligator, and starting back stepped on a turtle and tumbled over a huge wild cat which was being stuffed. for a neighboring saloon keeper to put 'behind his bar.

»Oh, murther! but ye'll have me whole stock in trade destroyed!« groaned McGillicuddy. »Howld up there, clumsy, till I can get to yez, Now, then, what's your name?«

»Jones.«

»Ye lie, but what's the odds? Come, Jonesy, I'll introjuce ye to the boss, and we'll see whether ye'll get the job or no.«

He led Phil into the back room, out into the hall, and thence into a narrow courtyard behind.

Here a brick wall rose before them, broken by a solitary door upon which McGillicuddy zapped three times.

The door was opened instantly and seemingly by invisible hands.

Following his conductor, Phil was led through a passage and another door into a larger courtyard, which, as nearly as he could make out, was surrounded by the old factory, but it was too dark to see much, and his attention was particularly attracted by a hearse with two horses hitched to it.

»By all that's lovely!« muttered Phil. »Here's the phantom hearse!«;

There were three men standing by the hearse talking in low tones. They separated at sight of Phil and his conductor. One moved to the horses' heads, the other two took their station by the hearse door.

McGillicuddy paused at the same place, nodded to the men and stood silent.

Moments passed and: no one moved or spoke.

All seemed to be waiting for something, and all eyes were fixed upon a certain door in the factory building above which hung a bell suspended from a heavy wooden frame.

»What are they waiting for?' thought Phil. »What can, it all mean?«;

But Phil Kline was in the race to stay and it mattered not to him how long they waited—he would wait too.

The fact is Phil's former experience in this hearse business had awakened in him a burning thirst for revenge.

And what wonder?

The night on which Phil was carted out of that stable yard, in Bank street in an unconscious condition, was perhaps the most memorable of his existence.

Not that the detective remembered much about it.

From the time he was pushed off of the roof until he found himself struggling in the chilly waters of the Hudson, Phil Kline knew nothing at all.

To be sure he escaped at last, but the result was an attack of pneumonia, and for days and days he lay too ill to recognize his best friends.

One took care of him who is the best friend to most men—his mother.

Upon his recovery, finding that he had been published as a missing man, Phil let it remain so. The Pinkertons alone knew the truth.

»Let me be dead to the world until I can solve this mystery, gentlemen,« said the detective, when talking the matter over with his employers.:

It was so agreed, and . . . Phil was hard at work trying to solve it now; as we said before, he was in the race to stay.

Moment after moment crept by, and still they waited.

»Suddenly the bell above the door rang out a single note:

»Dong!«

»The midnight bell!« thought Phil. »I've scored one point, for now I know what that is!«

Instantly the four men sprang to the door, which was opened before they reached it.

Phil saw no one inside, but what he did see was a heavy box, such as coffins are usually packed in, come rolling out.

McGillicuddy and the others raised the box between them.

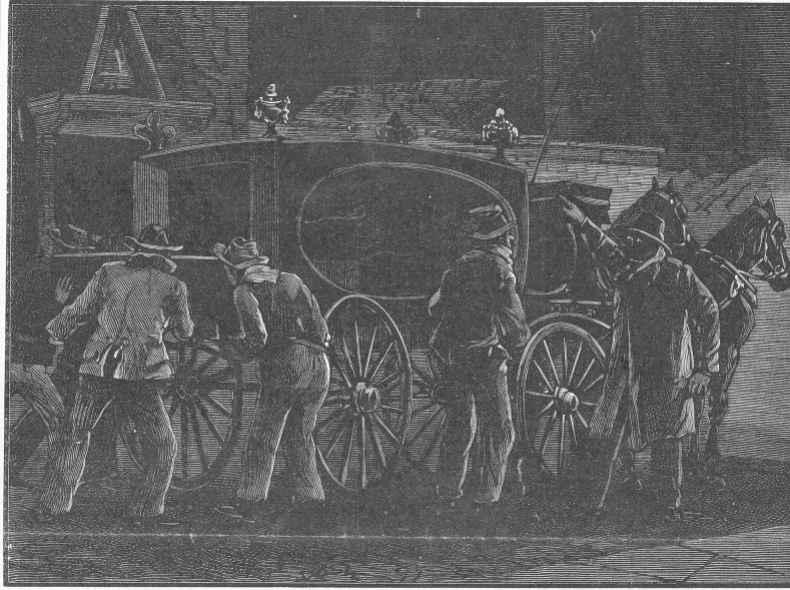
It appeared to be very heavy—in fact, they had all they could do to get it to the house.

With an idea of helping, Phil was about to open the hearse door, when, to his amazement, he saw standing behind him a man wearing a black mask over his face, whose hand was already on the silver knob.

»I'll attend to this,« he said in a low voice.

He opened the door and the box was pushed into the hearse by the four men.

»This is the feller I spoke to you about, boss,« said McGillicuddy in a low tone.



The masked man turned on Phil and for a few seconds regarded him in silence.

»Do you want to drive this hearse?« he said at length.

»Yes, if you pay good.«

»I pay according to the service I get,« said the mask. 'It's ten dollars a drive.

Hearse goes out about twice a week on the average. Sometimes it goes two or three nights in succession, at others only once in a week, but it's ten dollars every time.«

»Where am I to drive to?«

»Wherever I tell you. One thing you must understand, and that is if you breathe to a living soul what you are doing you are as good as a dead man. Lask no oath of secrecy, but I move promptly on traitors. Now then, young man, as your face suits me I am willing to give you atrial. Stick tome and I'll stick to you. All you are required to do is to report to Mr. McGillicuddy nightly and drive when we want you to drive. Is it a go?'

»It is,« replied Phil, promptly.

»Enough. Mount the box and drive to the White Star line pier. When you reach the pier back np to the gate and say to the watchman, »I've brought the stiff.« You will then help him to unload, and take the box that he gives you. Next drive to Moran's undertaker's shop in Abingdon Square and again unload. From Moran's you will drive to a stable in the rear of No. . . . Bank street. There you will be informed what to do next. Now start.«

Phil leaped upon the box and started forthwith.

He drove at a moderate pace to the pier as directed, and there everything transpired just as had been foretold.

The watchman met him at the gate and demanded his business.

Phil's reply was:

»I've brought the stiff.«

Then the box was unloaded, Phil and the watchman having all they could do to lift it.

»Here's the other,« said the watchman, pointing to a similar box which lay on the pier.

Phil lay hold of one end and the watchman took the other.

It was not as heavy as the first box and they placed it in the hearse without difficulty.

»All right,« said the watchman.

»Oh, he's left,« replied Phil, mounting the box. »Im a new man they've took on in his place.«

»You are, hey? Well, it's a risky business. I expect we'll all see the inside of the stone jug for it some day or other—good night.«

»Good night,« replied Phil and he drove away, where's the other feller?«

Not straight to Abingdon Square, however. The detective had other plans in view.

Turning into a side street just before he reached. Bank, he paused before the gate of a stable yard and whistled twice.

Presently the gate was opened and a man carrying a lantern looked out.

»That you, boss?« he asked.

»Yes; open the gate, quick!«

The gate swung open and Phil drove in.

He had arranged the little side issue during the afternoon, for Phil was determined to know what was inside the hearse.

»Quick! help me out with it. I haven't a moment to lose!« he whispered. »Have you the screw-driver ready? I may be followed, for all

I know.«

»Here it is!« answered the man, handing over the tool. »Ketch hold of the box, boss. I'll help you out with it. »I won't take two minutes to do the job.«

They placed the box upon the ground and had the lid off in a moment.

Inside was a coffin—a handsome coffin covered with black cloth, with silver handles and a plate bearing the inscription:

»Timothy Stevens. Born May 6, 1844. Died June 10th, 18—«

»Looks straight enough,« said the man.

»Well soon know,« replied the detective, attacking the silver-mounted screws.

In another moment the coffin lid was raised.

Phil drew back with an exclamation of horror.

»By heavens!« he muttered, »there's no mistake about it—it is a corpse!

Chapter XI.

Fighting with unknown foes.

»Hal!«

»What is it, Ed.«

»It is here. The last I saw of Etta Howe, she was behind that, door. Stand by me, old fellow. I'm going to make a rush, and remember this, we are fighting against unknown foes.«

Following Ed Telford, Harry Sproat found himself now standing before a door at the end of a long passage.

It was from behind that door that the cry of murder had proceeded, but now it came no more. Still they could hear voices talking inside the door; one a man's speaking loud and earnestly, the other seemed to be a woman's voice and came to the ears of the boys in low, pleading tones, but they could not distinguish words.

»He's in there! He's in there!« breathed Ed, whose face was livid. »He's in there, and I am going for him, Hal. I swore I'd rescue Etta to-night, and I'm going to do it, too. Poor girl! She was only frightened. I knew he wouldn't kill her, for to do that would spoil his plans. Hark! 'Can you make out what he's saying, Hal?'

»No; but he'll hear you, whoever he is, if you talk so loud.«

»Hold on! He's coming out! Now for a rush! Stand back in the shadow, Hal, and give him all you know.«

The words were scarcely spoken, when the door opened, and out stepped a stoutish man, with a bloated face, leading a girl, whom Harry at once recognized as Etta Howe.

The instant he appeared, Ed leaped upon him from one side of the passage, Harry from the other.

Whoever the man was he received a most unmerciful pummeling.

Meanwhile the girl fled back into the room, screaming, and slammed the door.

The struggle was a fierce one, but as brief as it was fierce.

Before the man could do more than strike one or two ineffectual blows and faintly call for help the boys had him down and unconscious.

»Great Heavens! You have killed him!« groaned Harry, as Ed stood up at last.

It looked very much like it.

The man lay upon the floor motionless, and to all appearance dead.

»No, no! He's only stunned. Quick, Hal! We must make Etta understand. We've not a moment to lose!«

He drew out the lantern which had been concealed in his coat pocket upon approaching the door and flashed it in the man's face.

»Know him, Hal?« he whispered.

»Great Scott! It's the tramp—it's Slyman!«

»You bet. I told you I'd get square. I owe him this and more. Wait!«

Ed leaped to the door and opened it.

In a moment he returned with Etta clinging to his arm.

As they passed out of the door Harry caught sight of a cell-like apartment within, but he could see no more, for Ed called to him to follow without an instant's delay.

»Oh, Mr. Telford! You have killed him!« moaned the girl as all three hurried off along the passage.

»No, he is only stunned. But even if I had, do you forget your father?«

»No, no!«

»What was he doing to you, Etta?«

»He came in just after you left—he tried to make me promise to marry him. Of course I refused, and we got into one of our usual arguments—at last he lost his temper and struck me—yes, actually struck me was dreadfully frightened and screamed. You see; I was expecting you back every minute, and . . .«

»And you knew I would come, Etta. Thank God, I was in time to save you. Now let us make all haste before we are attacked again by our unknown foes.«

»Where are we going?« asked Harry, who did not quite fancy being taken no notice of in this way.

»Going to get that money first, and then going out of this as quick as we can get out.«

»The money! Do you mean the money Mr. Howe . . .«

»Yes, yes. That is it, Mr. Sproat,« whispered Etta. »You must excuse me. I have not even spoken to you . . .«

»Hush! We'll talk no more,« interrupted Ed. 'Here we are, and whatever is to be done has got to be done quick, or we'll have our labor for our pains.«

All this time they had been returning along the passage, but now Ed paused before a door which he opened, showing an extremely narrow Staircase behind it.

»Slide up, Hal!« he whispered. »You go first, Etta next. I'll come behind and lock the door. We'll talk all this business over by and by.«

Harry sprang up the stairs, and of course was in the dark in a moment.

He could hear Etta's soft footsteps following, and then in a second he heard Ed slam the door.

»Go on, Hal! Go on to the very top!« called Ed. »Never mind how dark it is—you can't miss your way.

Harry darted on, but the stairs seemed interminable.

Up, up, up, and still up he went, until at last it suddenly began to dawn upon him that the only sounds he could hear were those of his own footsteps.

»Ed! Oh, Ed!« he called, pausing suddenly.

There was no answer.

»Ed! Ed!« repeated Harry, very much alarmed.

Still no answer. Harry listened, but there was only profound silence.

»Great heavens, Ed has deserted me!« thought Harry. »I was a fool to trust him—I might have known it after the trick he served me before!«

He started down the stairs again in a perfect agony of terror.

If he had been fighting unknown foes before, what was it now?

Presently he reached the door, but he could not open it.

A match would have been of priceless value, but he had not one about him.

»I must keep cool or I'm lost,« thought the boy. »If I can't get out one way I must try another. I'll keep on going up these stairs forever, but I'll find the top.«

Chapter XII.

Where is the Hearse?

»Ding-a-ling-a-ling! Ding-a-ling-a-ling!«

It was not the mysterious midnight bell this time, but the night bell attached to the door of Mr. Patrick Moran, funeral director, which rang forth its merry peal.

There was a hearse standing outside, and the driver was pulling the undertaker's bell impatiently, which was hardly to be wondered at, seeing that it was considerably after midnight, and there are such things as policemen to be found in New York streets occasionally, who would be very apt to make curious inquiries about a hearse.

Of course, the driver was Phil Kline, and it was not so much the dread of being interfered with by the police that disturbed him, as he thought that possibly he might have been followed from the stable yard where he had taken the liberty to examine his strange load.

Evidently nothing of the kind had occurred, however, and when the curtain in the undertaker's window was thrust aside, Phil felt safer; when the door was opened cautiously, and the great West Side funeral director appeared in person; he felt that all Bee had passed.

»Who are you?« demanded Moran, drawing back at the sight of a stranger.

»I've brought the stiff,« whispered Phil. »I'm anew man, boss. I've just come up from the White Star Line pier.«

»Oh! Why in thunder didn't some one tell me there was anew man going on? It gimme a cold chill when I seen you fust off. Where's tother feller gone?«

»Dunno. Never knowed him, boss.«

»Who picked you up?«

»Well I reckon it was Mr. McGillicuddy, but seein' as I was ordered not to talk I guess I'd better stick to it and keep mum. Going to give me a lift here to take off the stiff? Can't do it alone no way, boss, an' that's a fact.«

»Here! ell take it off now,« said the undertaker. »You're quite right not to. talk, young man.«

Phil stepped back, opened the hearse door, seized the box and pulled it forward.

Mr. Moran lent a hand, and although the weight was great they managed to get it into the shop together.

»I usually have a feller on hand to help!« said the undertaker apologetically, »but he's been off on a tear the last day or two. Can't depend upon these fellers for a cent.«

»That's a fact. She's all right, is she?«

»What do you mean by she?«

»The box.«

»It might be a he for all you. know, young man.«

Phil did not like the way Mr. Moran looked at him. He felt as though he had made a bad slip.

»Of course I don't know whether it's a he or a she,« he said quickly, »how should I since nobody told me? There mayn't be a stiff in it at all.«

»And that's a fact. »Twouldn't pay you to know too much, young man.

»I know if I don't get round to the stable, the boss. will bounce me. I'm off.«

»Don't you think the boss is a mighty good looking fellow?« asked the undertaker, planting himself between the detective and the door.

Here was a test question.

Phil Kline saw through it at a glance.

»Say, how can a feller decide whether another feller is good looking or not when he ain't never seen the other feller's face?«

»Ha, ha, ha! You'll do I see,« chuckled the undertaker. »Young man, I predict that you'll make the best driver we've had in some time.«

Whereupon, having uttered this flattering sentiment, Mr. Moran closed the door of his funeral establishment and Phil Kline mounted the box of the hearse, drove around into Bank street and stopped before that well remembered gate.

»Now comes the tug of war,« he muttered. »Will they recognize me here—that's the question? These fellows are too sharp for a cent. If I

succeed in pulling the wool over their eyes I rather guess I am fixed as the driver of the phantom hearse for some time to come.«

He sprang off the box and rapped on the gate.

After a moment's wait a man appeared, opening it.

He was a rough looking fellow and in no way resembled either of the men Phil had seen before.

»Hello!« whispered the detective. »I was told to come here with this stiff cart. I'm a new man,I am. The boss said I'd be told what to do in here.«

»Kerect,« replied the man with the red shirt. Run 'em in.«

Phil took the horses by the bridle and led them into the yard.

The man closed the gate behind him and came around in front of the hearse by the stable door.

»I'm all alone here, cully,« he said, »but I guess we Can manage it between us. We've gotter anyhow, coz yer late an' I want to go to bed.«

»What's to be done?«

»Didn't the boss tell you nothing about it?«

»Not a blame thing. Said I'd find out here.«

That's 'coz he didn't know's you'd ever git here. Course you might have got nipped on the road, an' he didn't want to give away no more of his secrets than was necessary—see?«

»I see. What's to be did first off?«

Take them hosses out and put 'em in the stable. You'll find a couple of empty stalls down at the further end. I'll come in an' give 'em a feed of oats in a minute after we git through. Needn't on harness entirely. Jest chuck back the headstall and loosen the belly band, so s they won't bust when the oats swells pes of 'em. When you've done that come here.«

Phil obeyed these directions implicitly, and without comment.

When he got back, to his intense astonishment, the hearse had vanished, and in its place stood an undertaker's black wagon, with a lead-colored ice tub in it.

Yet Phil saw that the wagon occupied precisely the same position as the hearse, for he had taken particular note of that before he went into

the stable with the horses, so that he might know if the strange vehicle had been moved.

»Where's the hearse?« he asked.

»There,« replied the man in the red shirt, pointing to the wagon.

»What do you mean?«

»What I say. Hearse has turned into a wagon—that's all. Now then, do you know what you've got to do?«

»Don't know nothing at all about it.«

»Soon's ever them hosses is fed you are to drive that wagon to the stable, No . . . Houston street. Knock on the door three times; fust onct, then twict together. A feller will come and open the door and all you've got to do is to say 'Moran.' After that your i is done, and if you'll drop round to McGillcuddys in the morning you'll get your pay.«

Things were going swimmingly, only Phil could not understand how the hearse had been transformed into the wagon.

The mention of the stable on Houston street, however, gave him an important clew.

For days and, days, and nights and nights, Phil Kline had watched that factory gate on Bellows court.

He had seen the phantom hearse go out more than once, but he had failed to see it come in again.

Now, as he came to think of the Houston street stable on the other side of the triangle, he began to understand.

At last the horses were through eating, and Phil helped to harness them.

»I'll open the gate,« said the man, »so you can drive right out without stopping.«

Phil leaped on the box and was just picking up the reins, when a low whistle was heard outside.

»There's some of 'em now,« growled the man. »Won't they never give a feller a rest? Hold up till he drives in.«

He threw open the gate and a buggy came whirling into the yard in which sat two men.

Phil's heart gave a great bound, for he recognized in one of them the man in the rubber coat.

»Good-night. I'm off,« he whispered, giving the horses the whip.

At that very instant the man in the buggy turned.

»Holy smoke, that detective on our wagon!« he yelled.

Crack! crack!

It was Phil's whip upon the horses' backs.

»Stop him! Shut the gate!« roared the man in the buggy.

The hostler sprang for the gate, but too late to prevent Phil's horses' from making it.

Crack! Crack!

No whip this time.

Two shots went whistling past Phil Kline's head.

Once out of the yard Phil gave the horses a furious cut, and dropping back in the wagon crawled out by the tailboard, and ran down Bank street at the top of his speed, while the undertaker's wagon went rushing off in the opposite direction pursued by the buggy, which came dashing out of the yard just too late to see the detective's move.

Chapter XIII.

At the bottom of a well.

To be lost on a staircase seemed at once ridiculous and absurd.

Such was the situation of Harry Sproat, however.

He could not find the means of opening the door at the bottom of the stairs; in fact he could not find the door even—only a solid impenetrable wall, and now after traveling up-stairs in the darkness long enough to have reached to the top of the Produce Exchange tower, Harry began to wonder if there ever was going to be any end.

Of course it was very mysterious, but so was everything else connected with this strange affair.

Could it be a trick staircase?

Harry thought of it and sat down on one of the steps in order that he might detect any movement in it more plainly.

This was after he was tired of calling Ed, and was just a little bit cooled down.

There was no movement about the stairs—they seemed as firm as a rock.

»There must be an end somewhere, and, by heavens, I must find it!« murmured the boy. »It drives me mad to think of the way Ed has acted. I can't stay quiet, a second—oh, gee! Now that hurt!«

Pushing up-stairs, he had scarcely gone two steps when he suddenly gave his head a tremendous bang.

»Guess I've found the top at last,« muttered Harry. 'Perhaps I could better say it had found me.«

He drew back carefully and felt above him.

Yes, the stairs had come to an end, and the oddest part of it was they ended right up against a rough board ceiling.

Yet Harry could discover no trace of a trapdoor by feeling, which he did until he grew tired.

Then he sat down upon the stairs in despair.

»What the mischief shall I do?» he muttered. »There don't seem to be any use going down, and I can't get any higher up. Wonder if . . . Hello! I'm in for it now. No; guess it's only rats!«

A curious scratching sound had made itself heard on his right, a little lower down.

Harry listened with his heart in his throat, for who is not afraid of rats, especially in; the dark?

The sounds would continue for a few moments, and then suddenly cease. Beginning again, a steady grind—grind—grind would follow, then another pause, and so on for fully ten minutes, and yet for all that Harry could not quite make up his mind that it was rats.

»Don't sound like 'em,« he muttered. »Sounds to me more like some one working on wood with a jack-knife. It beats me anyhow, and—by George! here she comes!«

He started to his feet in terror, for at the same moment a sudden »'plunk« was heard, mingled with a cashing of wood, and a light blazed, upon the darkness, startling the boy tremendously.

It proceeded from the partition on the right, shining through a hole burst in the rough boarding.

»Crack! Crack! Crack!»

Stranger sounds still followed. It was the boards being pushed outward now.

Soon appeared a hand holding a lantern, following which came a head, and presently a man was crawling through the opening thus formed.

He caught sight of Harry instantly and started back in terror.

»Who are you?« he demanded, seizing one of the broken pieces of board and brandishing it threateningly. »Don't you touch me! Don't you dare to interfere! I—I—I'm a desperate man. I mean to defend myself to the last! I mone stay in this place any longer! Id rather die!«

Each sentence was spoken in a sharp, shrill voice.

It was easy to see that the man was by far the worst frightened of the two.

»Mr. Howe!« spoke Harry, with a calmness which astonished even himself. »I know you, Mr. Howe!«

‘Who are you?’ demanded the man. »Of course you know me! Why shouldn't you know me? Speak! Who are you?«

»No one you know. I'm in the same fix as yourself. I want to get out!«

»Another prisoner?«

»Yes, You ain't dead after all, it seems?«

»Dead—no! I wish I was. I'm ruined for life. I might better be dead.«

»Yet I saw you dead, or thought I did, on the night you put that \$10,000 in Ed Telford's charge.«

»Ha! I recollect you now. You are Telford's room-mate. In Heaven's name, young man, what brings you into the hidden house?«

»The hidden house!«:

»You heard me.«

»Well, Ed Telford brought me here, if you call this the hidden house—you ought to know more about this business than I do.«

»I know enough—too much. The one thing I don't know is how to get out.«

»Just what I want to do—that and to get square with Ed Telford.«

»Young man, you are surely laboring under some fatal mistake. Ed Telford is a noble fellow. He is one in a thousand! Oh, if I had only listened to him I might, but no matter. We both want the same thing, let us see what can be done.«

Harry was too much perplexed to resist, and he allowed Mr. Howe to push past him, and throw the lantern's light upon the boards above.

How it happened that the man believed to be dead still lived he postponed thinking about until some future time.

»This seems to be the end,« he said.

»End of what?«

»The stairs.«

»If they have any end to them. They wind in and around the walls of this crib so that you can't tell anything about them. What I'm looking for is some hidden spring, and I believe I've found it. Yes! There it goes.«

There was a snapping sound, and suddenly a square section of the boarding was raised, and Harry caught the sight of the moon shining through the opening.

It seemed glorious to see it.

Harry pressed on after Mr. Howe through the scuttle—for such the opening was—and in a moment stood upon the tin roof.

‘Thank Heaven, we are out!« he exclaimed. ‘»Now we're all right. We'll manage to get down somehow.«

He gave the scuttle a push and it closed with a slam.

»What did you want to do that for?« cried Mr. Howe angrily. » Are you mad? Don't you see?«

Yes, Harry did see, now that it was too late.

The roof upon which they stood was circular and inclosed on all sides by a brick wall rising a good twenty feet above their heads without a break.

»We must go back!« cried Mr. Howe. »We must open that thing and retreat instantly! We can never get out of here.«

He turned to look for the scuttle, but it had vanished.

The roof now presented a perfectly smooth appearance every where.

They had gone out of the hidden house, it is true, but they were prisoners at the bottom of a well.

Chapter XIV.

Did Mr. Slyman swallow the bait?

»I WANT to see Mr. Slyman.«

»Mr. Slyman is busy. He can't see any one,« replied the nifty clerk behind the brass railing at the 29th National Bank, looking out at the foreign gentleman who had made the request.

»But my business is very important.«

»You'll have to send in your name then.«

»He does not know my name.«

»He won't see you then, It's no use talking,« replied the clerk.

The foreign gentleman—a dark, stylishly dressed person who seemed to be suffering from an overdose of whiskers—turned away to the customer's desk and hastily scribbled on the back of a check these words:

»Mr. Mosenheim of London would like to have a few moments' private conversation with Mr. Slyman. Mr. Mosenheim has an invoice of valuable diamonds to dispose of cheap, and has been recommended to Mr. Slyman. Mr. Mosenheim is accustomed to confidential dealings. As he had a cash offer for these stones from another party, he would ask the privilege of seeing Mr. Slyman immediately. Mr. Mosenheim will call for an answer at 12 o'clock.«

»Be good enough to hand this note to Mr. Slyman,« said the stranger, sealing the missive and passing it through the rail to the clerk.

Whereupon Mr. Mosenheim left the Bank, and after several turns by way of Beaver street. Hanover street, and Exchange Place, found himself on Broadway alongside the Mining Exchange, where he paused for a considerable time looking this way and that.

»Safe!« he muttered at last. »I have not been followed. That's sure. Will my fish swallow the bait, though? We shall see.«

Whereupon Mr. Mosenheim ascended into the office of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and in a moment or two found himself closeted with one of the members of that noted firm.

»Did you see him, Phil?« asked Pinkerton.

»No; I left a note.«

»When is your appointment?«

»I put it at twelve o'clock.«

»Good. If he swallows that bait we have him. Now then I can listen to the story you have to tell me. I was positively too busy when you were in before.«

»Phil Kline—for it was no one else—dropped into one chair, Mr. Pinkerton into another.

»I'm just about used up for wait of sleep,« he grumbled, »but all the same I want you to know.«

»I must know. This is a most important case, and if mieten go for anything we are closing in on this gang. I predict it will prove one of the most important hauls we ever made.«

»Hope so,« replied Phil. »Let's see, where did I leave off?«

»You had just jumped off the hearse and skedadled when you found yourself recognized by the man in the rubber coat.«

»Aye. Well, upon my word there ain't much more of it. I gave em the slip and went back to my boarding house in Van Dusen street. The rest of the night I spent examining that trick closet.«

»What did you find?«

»Nothing.«

»It beats all.«

»I'll beat it yet.«

»When do you suppose the hearse will go out again?«

»Oh, when the next steamer sails, most likely.

»I shall be on hand. The late Mr. Stevens will never cross the ocean again. Ha! Ha! We'll take care of his corpse!«

»You don't approve of my idea of putting one man in the undertaker's and another in the Houston street livery stable?«

»Too risky! Is that all you have to tell?«

»About all.«

»Very good. I suppose you are anxious to be off?«

»I'm anxious to try the success of my experiment.«

»And you shall. Here are the diamonds, Phil. You are the only man connected with this office whom I would trust with them. Remember, I have hired them from a John street jeweler for this very purpose. Risk nothing. Whatever you do, I want those diamonds back intact.«

Thus saying, Mr. Pinkerton handed Phil Kline a small package, and the detective hastily withdrew.

At precisely twelve o'clock »Mr. Mosenheim« was at the Twenty-ninth National Bank again.

»Can I see Mr. Slyman now?« he asked.

»Walk into the private office,« replied the clerk. »I handed in your note. He is waiting for you now.«

In a moment Phil and the man he had shadowed were face to face. ‘

For a moment Mr. Slyman surveyed his visitor attentively, merely nodding as he entered.

Though inwardly shaking lest he should be recognized, Phil commenced on the weather, etc., talking in that rapid self-confident way which belongs emphatically to an English Jew.

»Sit down,« said Mr. Slyman.

Mr. Mosenheim took a chair.

»Who sent you to me?« asked the banker.

Mr. Mosenheim named a noted »fence« in London, in a highly confidential tone.

»Humph! That man is a receiver of stolen goods—don't you know it?«

Mr. Mosenheim shrugged his shoulders and threw up his hands.

»Vell, vat den? It's all in de business,« he replied, with a strong trace of the Hebrew accent.

»What do you mean?«

»If you do not know, I waste my time—I vill go. I was sent here by dot party. Perhaps it was all a mistake!«

»Have you the diamonds with you?« asked the new president of the 29th, dropping the other matter abruptly.

»I haf a few as a sample.«

»Can I see them?«

»Surely.«

Mr. Mosenheim drew a paper parcel from his breast pocket, and after removing several wrappings came to a box out of which he took a blue paper and proceeded to unroll it.

»Look dere!« he exclaimed, laying the paper open upon Mr. Slyman's desk.

»Humph! Are they all like these?' asked the banker, carelessly picking up stone after stone from the magnificent display of flashing diamonds which lay before him.

»Dey run vewy even,« replied Mr. Mosenheim, his eye following each stone as it was raised and put back.

»How many did you say you had?«

»Nearly half a million by regular carat weight.«

»And your price?«

»For spot cash to-night 50 per cent of Bandel, & Bellows', price per carat for unflamed goods«

»Very well,« replied the banker quietly. »I think I will take them. Wehre where they stolen?«

»Ah, so! Now we begin to understand one anudder. Dese sparklers come from St. Petersburg. Dey not vas all von haul, oddervise dey would have been sold in Europe, and not so scheap.«

»I was going to ask you that! What is the trouble with them?«

»Dey belonged to a diamond cutter. He cut all be en in a peels way. They would surely be recognize the regular trade.«

»That's bad!«

»Dat's vy dey are scheap.«

»Very well. It is not necessary to talk any more..You can deliver these goods to-night?«

»Vy, certainly.«

»Do you know where Bellows Court is?«

»I know how to find out.«

»Very good. Find out. Be at Bellows' Court at midnight. There you will see a sign »McGillicuddy—Birdstuffer.« Tap on the shutter and I shall be

on hand. If you trade with me it will be spot cash.«

»All ride, I be dere,« replied Mr. Mosenheim, folding up his paper of diamonds.

»He has swallowed the bait,« was his thought when he found himself on Wall street a moment later on.

That night just before 12 o'clock Mr. Mosenheim and his whiskers might have been seen meandering down Bellows' Court toward Houston street,

Just as he reached McGillicuddy's the midnight bell sounded its single:

»Hello!« thought Phil, »the hearse is going out. This is anticipating things. What's this?«

The bell again!

Never had such a thing been known.

»Dong! Dong! Dong!«

Three times the midnight bell rang out its dismal note.

»Something wrong!« muttered Phil.

»That bell ain't ringing four times for nothing.

He retreated into the shadow and waited, with his eyes fixed upon the factory gate.

Moment succeeded moment.

The gate did not open, the phantom hearse failed to appear.

Chapter XV.

A big scheme.

»Wait a moment, Mr. Telford—I have dropped something. I shall have to go back.«

This was what. Etta Howe said to Ed Telford before they had proceeded three steps up the mysterious stairs.

Harry Sproat meanwhile had gone too far to catch the exclamation.

It would have saved some trouble, perhaps, if he had heard.

»Forgotten something!« answered Ed. »For Heaven's sake! Etta—Miss Howe—you can't return now!«

»Call me Etta. You have eared the right, Mr. Telford.«

»If you are Etta, then I am Ed. But what have you left? Can't I go back? Think of the risk.«

»It is my diamond bracelet. I left it on the shelf in my room. It is the only thing I have left in the world of any value, and now my poor father is gone I may have to sell it to live on once I get out. I must have that bracelet at any cost, Ed.«

»Then I must get it for you, Etta; and you will have to remain alone in the dark.

»All right. I don't mind«

»Call to Harry to hold on, will you?«

»Certainly.«

»I won't be a moment. I don't believe he has come to his senses again. If he has, though, and he tries to tackle me there'll be another fight.«

Thus saying, Ed hurried back down-stairs, and passing through the door which Harry a little later sought in vain, returned on his steps to the room from which he had secured Etta Howe.

Naturally, he expected to find the man he and Harry had put upon the floor so effectually still lying where they had left him, but he was not.

The man had vanished.

So had Etta's diamond bracelet from the shelf in the little room; so had Etta herself when Ed returned to look for her; so even had the stairs'

door, which he could not find, try as he would.

At first Ed could not realize it.

Where was the door? Had he taken the wrong turning? Of course the passages were rather complicated, for several crossed and recrossed each other.

Ed pushed about from one to another wildly, until presently he grew so mixed up that he could not tell in which passage the door ought to be.

Just at that moment who should he see coming toward him but the very man he had beaten.

He was carrying a lantern in one hand while in the other he clutched a cocked revolver.

Coming suddenly around the corner at one of the cross passages as the man did, there was positively no time to escape.

»Great heavens! I'm lost!« thought the bank clerk, backing up against the wall.

Everything suddenly began swimming about him, until suddenly he heard his own name pronounced.

»That you, Ed Telford?«

»Yes—yes!« gasped Ed.

»Did you see a couple of young fellows run this way? They've almost murdered me. Great Scott! There'll be a funeral if I find them. What the mischief are you doing here?«

He had the muzzle of the revolver in Ed's face before the boy knew it.

»Get back to your work,« he hissed fiercely. »What do you mean by prowling about without permission?' There's a traitor in the camp somewhere and he'll be a dead one before I get through!«

Thus shouting the man suddenly clutched Ed's throat and opening a door behind the boy, thrust him through.

»Stay there till you are called!« he hissed.

Then bang went the door shut, and all Ed's efforts were entirely unavailing to open it from the inside.

»Oh, God! Is it all over? What will become of Etta? What will happen to poor Harry?« moaned Ed.

He knew the room well and realized the impossibility of leaving it without help from outside.

»Heaven help me! Have I risked so much to gain so little?« he groaned.

It did seem hard.

Evidently Mr. Slyman never suspected that Ed Telford was one of the two who had drowned him.

»I've got to begin all over again,« muttered the boy wearily. »He'll recapture Etta, and I shall have to try it again. Meanwhile, I must pretend and keep on pretending as I have been doing all these weary days. It's terrible! Terrible! Poor Etta—poor Hal!«.

He glanced about him.

This room was round, and like the one into which Harry Sproat had been introduced, was packed full of goods of every sort.

Ed felt faint and staggered over to a table at the other side of the apartment, which was loaded down with bottles bearing the labels of some of the most expensive French wines.

»I-I must have something to keep me together, or I shall collapse,« he muttered.

Seizing one of the bottles in which the cork was unwired, he drew it hastily and pressed the bottle to his lips.

»How funny that stuff tastes, and yet I had some of it yesterday,« muttered Ed, sinking down upon a pile of coats.

He bent forward and buried his face in his hands.

What ailed the boy?

Hours passed and Ed Telford never moved.

The matter was that the wine had been drugged—not for Ed's benefit, but for other purposes—since he drank it before.

It was only accident which brought about this new calamity; but was it accident which landed Ed in front of the Twenty-ninth National Bank at eleven o'clock next evening?

Hardly could it be called accident, but Ed was there.

At precisely eleven o'clock he passed through the big door of the bank accompanied by Mr. Slyman.

They had alighted from a handsome coupe, and both were dressed in the height of fashion.

Mr. Slyman carried a large alligator skin grip; Ed seemed to have all he could do to carry himself.

»Hal Michael!« cried the banker. »It is only I, and this is my nephew, Mr. Reed. We are about going on a journey. I have to take some papers from the vault first. You need not wait, Michael. You are a faithful fellow, Michael, and work too hard. There is a five for you. You needn't wait, my man. I've a big scheme on hand.' Loads of money in it, Michael. Ha! ha! Tell the Bank Examiner when he calls to-morrow that I am out of town and will meet him here next day.«

Whereupon Mr. Slyman, having opened the vault door, lit the gas and walked in, the watchman retreating outside.

What was the banker's big scheme?

Had it anything to do with his appointment with Mr. Mosenheim?

If so, then Mr. Slyman has need to hurry.

It is after eleven now, and his engagement was to meet Mr. Mosenheim at McGillicuddy's at a few minutes before twelve.

Chapter XVI.

A bold crime foiled.

It was a rather singular proceeding on the part of the bank president to visit his vault at eleven o'clock at night.

At least it would have been regarded so with any other bank president, but in Mr. Slyman's case it was different, perhaps.

For Mr. Slyman had been in the habit of doing this very thing almost every night since he had succeeded Mr. Howe.

Thus the watchman had no reason to be surprised at seeing him—rather should he have been pleased, in fact, for it always meant something extra when the boss came round at night.

The faithful Michael passed into the outer banking office and left Mr. Slyman and his young companion to himself.

»Ed!« whispered the banker as soon as he was out of hearing. »Ed Telford! Are you asleep or awake?«

»Oh, I'm awake,« replied Ed in strange, hard tones, entirely unlike his own.

»Try and pull yourself together. You will soon work off the influence of that drug if you will only make an effort. Come now, brace up. The moment to carry out my big scheme has come!«

Ed rubbed his eyes sleepily, acting very much like a drunken man in fact.

The wine of which he had partaken the day before was heavily loaded with a preparation most lasting in its effects.

Ed had done nothing but sleep ever since he drank it.

Etta was forgotten, Harry ditto; he was in fact half asleep even now.

Mr. Slyman, seizing him by the coat lapels, gave him a shake.

»Come, brace up young fellow! brace up!« he whispered. »I haven't been feeding you for the last three weeks for nothing.—Now is the time for you to work. I expect you to pay for your keep.

»All right! all right!« muttered Ed. 'I'm ready for whatever you want.' Was he?

Well, hardly!

Ed Telford was honest in spite of appearances. He had never suspected Mr. Slyman's motive in bringing him to the bank; in fact, he did not even know he was being taken to the bank until the coupe stopped before it.

Mr. Slyman now turned up the gas and closed the door of the vault.

Stooping down he pushed away a pile of specie boxes which were placed against the wall, revealing behind them a hole just about big enough for a boy of Ed's size to crawl through.

»Do you see that?« he whispered.

»Yes,« gasped Ed, aroused to consciousness of his surroundings at last.

»Say, that will take me into the Eagle bank's main vault?«

»Of course. Your memory is all right.«

»What does this mean?«

»It means that the president of the Eagle and your humble servant met the other day and made arrangements to make our vault one and have it steel lined instead of bricks, as at present. The cutting of this hole is the first step.«

»What do you want me to do?«

»Go through there. You had better be quick. I shall lose my Meat soon.«

»And tien what?«

»Obey!«

Suddenly Mr. Slyman drew a revolver and thrust it in Ed's face.

»God help me! I'm caught in a trap!« groaned the boy, inwardly. »So much for pretending to be like this wretch!«

»Go through!« breathed Slyman. »Why, do you hesitate? Go through!«

»I can't.«

»You can.«

»I sha'n't! Let me out—take that revolver away!«

»You shall!. Do it before I count three, or I leave a dead boy in this vault! Now then, one—two . . .«

The cold muzzle of the revolver was against Ed Telford's forehead in an instant.

It was too much for the boy to stand.

He dropped on his knees and crawled through the hole without another word.

»Light the gas!« called Slyman.

In a moment the gas flare.

»Now, then, pass me out three bundles of foreign securities which you will find on the middle shelf to the right of the door. They are only worth three millions. I shan't bother with anything else.«

A steal of three millions!

This, then, was Mr. Slyman's big scheme!

»Never!« cried Ed. »Im no thief! I won't do it.«

»But you will, though!« answered Slyman, who was on his hands and knees with the revolver thrust through the hole. »I have you covered. I give you just one second to think about it.«

»Och, murder! thaves! robbery! murder!« yelled a voice behind him just at this instant.

It was the watchman, and he had ruined a well-laid plan.

Slyman started back with a horrible imprecation.

There was Michael dashing through the office toward the door.

»Stop!« he shouted. »Stop!«

»Niver! I'm an honest man! I niver suspected what you were at. Now I know, an' be hivens, I'll frustrate your scheme!«

Crack! Crack!

Twice Slyman fired, but the shots were badly aimed.

Before the third could be sent the watchman had gained the street.

»Great guns! I supposed the fool understood!« hissed Slyman. »I must get out of this at once.«

He retreated to the vault, and kneeling down before the hole, called hurriedly:

»Hello, there! Hello!«

There was no answer.

»By heavens, he's fainted!« muttered the banker. »Everything is upset. I must be off without an instant's delay.«

Mr. Slyman was as pale as death when he reached the front office and peered into the street.

There was the coupe standing calmly by the curb, but could he gain it?

Certainly not an instant was to be lost.

Summoning all his courage, the man made a dash down the steps.

»Hold on, there! We want: you, cap!« cried two men in citizen's dress, suddenly springing upon him.

But the banker saw them coming, and was ready.

He thrust his revolver into the face of the nearest, and fired.

»Great God! I'm shot!« yelled the fellow, falling back.

This was the banker's chance, and he lost no time in embracing it.

Abandoning all idea of reaching the hack, he dashed down Wall street at the top of his speed.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Shot after shot rang after him.

A whistle blew—a club rapped on the pavement. The stillness of the deserted thoroughfare was ray broken by the cry:

»Stop, thief! Stop thief!«

»They are on to me! I am lost!« groaned Slyman as he ran.

He felt that he would be headed off in an instant unless something was done. And he boldly leaped the rail before a basement store, crouching beneath the steps when he struck the area.

He had staked his all on this ruse, and he won.

In a moment footsteps dashed past.

Slyman waited a few seconds and then on his hands and knees crawled up the steps.

No one was in sight and he made a dash for Pearl street, gaining its shadows unseen.

»A close shave,« he muttered, as he ran along under the shadow of the elevated road. »Who could have betrayed me, or was it all the doings of

that stupid watchman? Whichever way it is, 'm finished at the bank. I'll get back to the roost, collar those diamonds and skip.«

He did not understand the matter, however, as he would have done had he been able to look into the counting room of the Eagle bank. There the vault door stood open and Ed Telford stood in the midst of three men with trembling limbs and pallid face.

The president of the bank was one, Mr. Mosenheim the diamond dealer was another, while the third was the particular Pinkerton with whom the detective had that morning discussed his plans.

»You see, I was right,« cried Phil. »When I caught sight of that hole in the wall this morning, I knew there was some scheme on foot.

»I never would have believed it!« answered the bank president. »Slyman was so plausible. Will they catch him, think?«

»Bound to,« said Pinkerton. »He has wounded one of my men out there, but the others will surely overhaul him. Phil Kline, what is to be done with this fellow? You, I suppose, have other fish to fry?«

»I have to keep my diamond appointment if he is not caught!«

»He will be caught. Look here a moment, I want to speak a word to you.«

He drew Phil Kline aside, but before he could utter a word the loud banging of the vault door, followed by a cry from the president of the Eagle Bank, caused both to start back.

»Thunder! The boy has given us the slip?« roared Phil.

It was so.

Ed Telford, who from the moment of his capture stood silent among them, had made one sudden dive into the vault, pulling the door shut.

Phil Kline seized the knob and tried to open it.

»No use!« exclaimed the bank president, »It takes time to open that door.«

»To the street!« cried Phil. »He'll crawl through the hole and try to core that way.«

»The watchman is there—he'll stop him!« said Mr. Pinkerton, as they hurried out.

They were mistaken, however.

Bounding up the steps of the 29th National, Phil Kline encountered the watchman just picking himself up off the floor.

»The boy! Where is he?« shouted Phil, ashamed of himself for his want of care.

»Sure he hit me wan clip an' down I wint,« stammered the watchman.
»He vamoosed troo de door.«

Phil was out again in a moment.

He was too late, though.

Then Mr. Pinkerton swore, and the bank president looked foolish.

A job well begun had been badly butchered at the ending.

No trace of Ed Telford could be found.

Chapter XVII.

Phil Kline foiled.

Phil KLINE, the detective, felt rather cheap when he entered Bellows Court just in time to hear the repeated ringing of the midnight bell.

The fact is Phil scarcely expected to be there.

When, after discovering the hole in the vault he reported the matter to Mr. Pinkerton, and in company with that gentleman visited the president of the Eagle Bank, they all three talked it over and came to the conclusion that a watch must be put on Slyman's movements at once.

Strangely enough the Eagle's president had not interested himself sufficiently in the affairs of his next door neighbor to have any idea of the man's character.

He knew now, though, and Phil and Mr. Pinkerton knew that just a little more care could have thrown the game into their hands.

»The next throw will finish it,« muttered the detective, as he crossed the court and rapped on the shutter which concealed the window of McGillicuddy's shop.

The midnight bell had ceased ringing, and all was deathly still.

Phil Kline felt no fear, for he was a man who had the utmost confidence in himself, and he knew, moreover, that there were those at hand who would help him in case of need.

Nevertheless, it was a dangerous undertaking.

»It's make or break,« muttered Phil, as he rapped again.

Still there was no answer, and Phil began to wonder.

»Perhaps he has not come back after all,« he thought, »and yet I'd like to bet on it. Here goes for the last try. If it fails, nothing remains but a regular raid by the police, which will be sure to result in nothing, and—hush! Some one's coming at last.«

The door of the bird-stuffer's had opened softly, and Mr. Peter McGillicuddy's shock-head was thrust out.

»An' phwat d'ye want?«;

»I wants Meester Slyman,« replied the whiskered Mosenheim, in a confidential tone.

»Slyman!«

»Yes.«

»Sure, me name is McGillicuddy, Yer in the wrong shop.«

»No, dot is ride. I am Meester Mosenheim. I come vit dose diamonds—go tell him dat.«

»Tell who?«

»Slyman.«

»To old Nick with your Slyman! sich body here!«

Thus saying, McGillicuddy slammed the door suddenly, and could be heard bolting it.

Poor Phil was thoroughly discouraged now.

»By thunder! everything seems to go against me to-night,« he murmured. »If I slip up on this case I'm ruined. Even the fact of my having prevented the Eagle bank from being cleaned out won't save me. I—hello! here's McGilly again.«

The door had suddenly opened, and out came the old bird-stuffer's head once more.

»Hist! Hist!« he breathed. »Say, mister?«

»Vat is it?«

»He's here. He'll see you.«

»Who—Slyman?«

»Yes.«

»So you found him?«

»Yes. I made a mistake. Come in.«

The door was opened further and Phil stepped in.

»Don't lock that door,« he said, seeing that the place was dark.

»Why not?«

»I von't trade if you do—dat's all.«

»Leave the door unlocked and light up,« spoke a voice out of the darkness.

McGillicuddy complied, grumblingly.

As the light flared up there was the turtle, the alligator, and all the rest of the taxidermist's stock in trade; and there in the midst of them stood Mr. Slyman as cool and collected as if nothing had occurred.

»Have you brought the sparklers?» he whispered.

Mr. Mosenheim chuckled.

»Vell, hardly. I'm no fool like dot. You a haf dem for de money but dey are not here.«

»What do you mean? Are you making a fool of me?«

»No, no. You know I haf de diamonds.«

»Then why not bring them according to agreement?«

»Drust myself at midnight alone vith dose diamonds here? No, no. Dey are close by. If you vant dem come mit me.«

»Come where?«

»I haf taken a room round the corner in Van Dusen street. De diamonds are dere.«

»And you expect me to go there?«

»If you vant de diamonds?«

»That is not your agreement. I'll have no business with you that way. Mac, shut the door! Weill see.«

»Mac, leave that door open!« shouted Phil, suddenly displaying a cocked revolver in each hand. »I want you, Slyman. I am a detective. Up hands, man, or . . .«

A startled cry and an exclamation of horror finished the sentence.

One shot rang out, then McGillicuddy and Slyman found themselves alone, bending over an open trap.

»Told you so,« breathed the bird »Know'd blame well he was disguised.«

»But he had the diamonds this morning, for I saw 'em.«

»Then, faith, if he has em now he won't have 'em long. Let's hurry down. Every mother's son of the gang is drunk to-night but me boss, and—holy murther!«

McGillicuddy had shut the trap and was in the act of unbolting a side door when he suddenly exclaimed.

»What now!« demanded Slyman, greatly agitated.

»It's myself that's done it. Sure I lift the dure open below, what leads into the hidden house!«

Slyman uttered a fierce imprecation.

»Man, you don't understand our danger!« he exclaimed. We are standing on a volcano. I tell you, Mac, if we've been fooled about those diamonds, we want to grab all we can and get out of here, for it's my honest opinion this is the last night the hidden house will see me. Howe has escaped, the boy is in the hands of the police. We must do up this detective and make off with the girl and all the swag we can freeze to without an instant's delay.«

By this time they had the door open, and together they went dashing down a flight of stairs, entering one of the secret passages which seemed to be so abundant. beneath the hidden house.

They had but a step to go before they brought up in a narrow vault immediately under the bird-stuffer's shop.

»Empty, by the powers!« cried Mac. »His legs is left anyhow. After him, boss! He can't escape!«

»Hark! I hear him running now!« echoed Slyman. »He's making for the elevator, as true as you live.«

»Sure he'll never tumble to it?«

»Won't he, though? These detectives are sharper than you think for! There! He's on it now!«

The rattling of a chain was heard further along the passage, followed by a creaking sound.

Was it Phil on the elevator?

It was nothing less.

Fortunately for Phil he struck square on his feet, and found himself in the vault below McGillicuddy, unharmed.

»Great Heaven! They've trapped me!« was his thought. »Is there to be no end to my blundering to-night?«

Out came a dark lantern and with one flash of the light Phil Kline sprang through the open door thus revealed.

In a moment he had sped: the length of the passage and found himself facing another door which proved to be unlocked.

Phil jerked the door open and stepped inside what he took to be a closet.

»Can't get. out this way,« he muttered.

He was in the very act of springing out when suddenly to his horror, he felt the floor rising beneath his feet.

»What's this? What's this?' cried Phil.

The instant of hesitation was fatal.

Phil tried to jump but he did not dare.

While a moment before he had fallen with a descending trap, he now found himself being shot upward on an ascending one into regions unknown above.

Chapter XVIII.

Lost on a roof.

»Do you give it up?«

»You might try once-or twice more. One good one, say. If you give it up, I shall give up too. I don't believe I can endure very much more.«

»I'll do it to oblige.«

»I wish you would.«

»Twon't be of any use though. Well, here goes!«

Harry Sproat, who was the speaker, backed up against the brick wall, made one quick dash over the roof and leaped high in the air, coming down upon the tin with a thud.

He was trying to catch a small iron rod which projected from the wall, he had tried it before and as before he failed.

»No use,« he sighed. »I shan't try again.«

Mr. Howe groaned deeply.

»I'm afraid we are likely to stay here till we starve, then,« he replied. »Dear me! Dear me! I thought I was badly off, shut up in that room there, where I have been for weeks; but this is worse. There is no use mincing matters, young man. We two are going through a most singular experience—we are lost on a roof!«

It was a fact, just as Mr. Howe stated it.

Morning had dawned, and the former president of the Twenty-ninth National found himself most emphatically lost on the roof.

It was impossible to find the secret scuttle; there was no use thinking about scaling the high walls.

The roof was round, and as we have said before, it was precisely like being at the bottom of a well.

Lost they were, and most effectually, since there appeared to be no possible chance of getting away.

When the morning light came, Harry discovered that the roof, instead of being covered with tin as he at first supposed, was laid over with

plates of iron. One of these plates, movable from beneath, formed the scuttle—but There was the rub.

A good hour was spent in an unavailing search for it; as much more in pounding on the iron and shouting for help.

This was all to no purpose, just as was Harry's attempt to scale the walls.

The day passed, night came and darkness settled down upon them.

There, at the bottom of the well, were those two half-starved wretches still.

Their cries had been unheard, their efforts unavailing, Not a soul had come to their aid.

»What does it all mean? What sort of a place is this?« were Harry's first questions that morning, when wearied at last by their unavailing efforts, he and Mr. Howe sank down to rest.

»Don't you know?« asked the banker. »Haven't you found out yet?«

»No.«

»How came you in here? First answer me that; then you shall hear what I have to say.«

Harry once started, related all that had happened to him from the time of Mr. Howe's visit to the room in Mrs. Brickman's house.

»Well, well! You have had a hard time of it!« exclaimed the banker. »Certainly you are entitled to an explanation. Listen, young man, and you shall have it now. First and foremost, this is the Hidden House we are standing on. For years it has been a den of thieves.«

»I can easy believe that.«

»My twin brother built it—he was until the night of my visit to you the head thief of this gang.

»Your brother?«

»Yes.«

»He is dead! It was his corpse we found in the closet.«

»Exactly. He was at once a very wicked and a very eccentric man, yet I was extremely fond of him, and I tried to take him back into the paths of virtue. I might as well have spared myself the pains, for I only ruined myself by the attempt.«

»I don't understand.«

»No—nor shall I explain. It is enough for you to know that this man Slyman, whom you mentioned just now, was once my clerk. My brother was once my partner. Between them, they dragged me into a great crime. I committed forgery. For years they held this over my head, dragging me down until at last, in a moment of desperation, I consented to join them, and—and—oh, I am ashamed to tell it, but confession will do me good—I assigned my interest in the bank to Slyman, took all the money I could lay my hands on, and came here.«

»What, did you come here of your own free will?« demanded Harry, in amazement, »Every one thought . . .«

»Every one thought that I was carried off by Slyman, who personated a tramp. I know it, but it was not so. We quarreled about my daughter, but in the end I yielded. It was very weak of me, and most bitterly have I been punished for it since. Young man, as soon as I was here, they made me a prisoner, but I got hold of some of the stolen money and escaped. I knew where Ed Telford, my former clerk, lived, and I determined to carry the money to him, and then return for more. You see my brother died that night, and Slyman had seized the place. Everything was confusion. I thought I knew what I was about—I thought I could enter the place and leave it again in safety.

»Thus, when I met Ed Telford in the street, I persuaded him to go back with me. I was driven to this, when I heard about Etta, for then I knew that she had been captured by Slyman. Oh, dear me! my head aches. I don't want to think of these things any more.«

»Then it was you Ed met in the street?« demanded Harry, too full of amazement to refrain from questioning the banker.

»Yes. We went into this den together and were captured. I have been kept a close prisoner ever since.«

»And how about Ed?«

»He is a noble fellow. He has done everything to rescue Etta and myself. Why, he pretended to join the gang and made friends with that rascal.«

»It was your brother's body in the closet, I suppose?«

»It must have been. Slyman wanted to make the world believe I was certainly dead. Of course, I did not see it myself.«

»But what is going on in here? Even now I don't understand that.«

»You don't?«

»No.«

»Why, it's very simple. Young man, this is the Hidden House. It is one of the most notorious fences in America. All kinds of stolen goods are brought here and shipped to Europe to be disposed of; while goods stolen abroad are sent here to be sold. My brother carried on this business for years. This house is a perfect labyrinth of secret passages. It was originally built by my brother for a factory. He changed it into what you see it now.«

This much and more concerning the Hidden House was poured into the ears of Harry Sproat.

It was not very comforting, and the more the boy thought of it, the less so it grew.

Now midnight was at hand again.

The prisoners on the roof were still struggling to escape.

Again and again Harry had tried to grasp the iron bar which they had discovered almost at the start projecting from the wall about half way between the roof and the coping.

In this attempt he had failed so often that it seemed scarcely worth while to try it again.

»Just once more!« pleaded Mr. Howe. »Positively I will not ask it again. If you will only try it once more I have a strong idea that you may succeed. I am sure you can gain the street if you can only pull yourself up on the roof. I have every reason to believe that these roofs are connected all around the block, for the whole triangle was originally one building, even the house in which you lodged.«

»Which accounts for the elevator in the closet,« suggested Harry.

»Certainly. Now do make another attempt.«

Thus urged, Harry made another dash.

Had practice helped him?

It is hard to tell, but one thing is certain, this time he succeeded in catching the bar, which was a flat piece of iron about an inch wide and nearly two feet in length.

»Thank heavens! You have done it!« cried Mr. Howe. 'Hold on, boy! Be brave! Pull yourself up if you possibly can.«

It was an exciting moment, but Harry was a little athlete if ever there was one; moreover, he knew what he was about.

Half way between the bar and the roof there was a brick out of the wall.

Had it been purposely left so?

Possibly. At all events, Harry's foot went into the opening.

Higher up there was another brick out—above the bar there were others still.

In fact there is scarcely a doubt that the whole thing had been arranged for just the use Harry was putting it to now.

Up he went—slowly, carefully, surely.

Above the first bar was a second, above the second was the upper roof, and in a moment the brave boy stood upon it, waving his hat.

»Hooray! It's all right, Mr. Howe. Here's a ladder!« he shouted down.

»Thank God!« echoed the banker, as following the shout, the ladder came down into the well.

Mr. Howe hastened to ascend.

Scarce had he reached the roof when the midnight bell sounded.

Not once only, as usual, but again and again.

»Heavens!« whispered Mr. Howe. »Something is wrong. Let me look down into the yard.«

He hurried Harry along the roof a distance and both bent over the cornice.

There below was the inclosure into which Phil Kline had penetrated. There stood the phantom hearse ready harnessed, and there was a man evidently much intoxicated staggering about with a big club in his hand with which he struck every now and again he would strike the bell.

After a moment the man made a dive through a door in the factory and disappeared.

»Drunk,« muttered Mr. Howe. »The cat must be away since the mice play. Boy, I see our chance.«

»What is it?« is it?« asked Harry, eagerly.

»Do you see that fire escape leading down the side of the factory?«

»Yes, yes! I didn't see it before, but I do now; still it will only take us to the yard.«

»No matter. I know the secret fastening of the great gate. Do you see that hearse?«

»Certainly. I am wondering about it.«

»A good many besides you have wondered about that hearse young man, but let me tell you it may be the means of saving us to night.

»I don't see how.«

»You don't?«

»No.«

»Then I will tell you. We go down the fire-escape, you spring on the hearse, I open the gate and leap on after you. We drive then to the nearest police station for all we are worth.«

»And you—you will be arrested.«

»Let it come. It would have saved me much misery if I had given myself up to the law long ago. Come, my boy, let us make the trial while the coast is clear.«

They started down the fire-escape, Harry leading, and in a moment stood in the yard before the Hidden House.

Chapter XIX.

Up the elevator and down.

Was Ed Telford mad?

Reader, he was very near it on that night when breaking away from his captors in the Eagle bank, he darted into the vault and slammed the door behind him.

Suppose the door of the 29th National vault should prove to be closed also?

Here was something Ed never thought of.

He had lost all power to think, apparently since Pinkerton and the others suddenly burst upon him and calling him: »thief,« »burglar,« and other cheerful names, dragged him out of the vault.

With just enough sense left to impel him forward, Ed crawled through the hole into the other vault.

Fortunately the door was open, but then there was the watchman, who had been taken into the confidence of the detectives, lurking behind it.

Ed knocked down the watchman and fled and from the moment he struck the sidewalk knew no more until he suddenly came to his senses to find himself lying on a bed.

Such is the insidious influence of the particular drug with which Slyman had doctored the wine.

It was intended for Mr. Howe's benefit, but Ed knew nothing of that.

He sprang up and stared about curiously, memory coming back with a rush.

»Why, it's the old room!« he exclaimed. »How came there? Heavens and earth! Am I going mad?«

Yes it was the old room in which he and Harry had spent so many happy hours, and it looked very much as when he had left it.

Half crazed, and wholly unconscious of what he was doing, Ed had walked straight to Van Dusen street, opened the door with his old latch key® and gone up-stairs and to bed.

No one heard him, no one had seen him. But all this was not for Ed to know.

»Etta—Harry!« he muttered. »I must save them. Slyman may not have returned, now is my time!'

It was always others he thought of—never himself.

During the days of his imprisonment when he made Slyman believe that he was his willing tool, Ed had been instructed in the secret workings of the closet: thus when he opened the door he knew just what to do.

Reaching up against the wall he pulled hard at one of the clothes hooks.

Immediately a little panel slid to one side, disclosing a chain.

Ed laid hold of the chain and pulled with all his might, at the same time springing back into the room.

The result was peculiar.

Immediately a rattling sound was heard and the closet floor fell down. Then almost in an instant another floor precisely similar came flying up into its place, bringing with it the very last person Ed had expected or wanted to see.

It was Phil Kline the detective, in his Jewish disguise.

»Great Scott!« ejaculated Phil, leaping off the strange elevator, which operated by heavy weights, had come up with a rush.

»Thunderation!« echoed Ed, »The man from the bank!«

Of course he was a fool to say it, but he did say it, and then right on top of it he was guilty of another piece of folly—he started for the door.

Phil sprang after him and grabbed him by the collar.

»Hold on, there, young fellow! What are you doing in this house?« he cried.

Ed struggled feebly.

»Oh, don't stop me! Don't!« he pleaded. »I don't care what you do with me but there are others down below there who need help. Let me go to them—let me go!«

»You young rascal! You are Slyman's accomplice.«

»No, no! It looks so, I know, but I ain't!«

»Who are you then? Speak up, now. I am a police detective. I've got you fast this time for sure.«

»A detective!«

»Yes.«

»Thank God!«

»What! What!«

»I say thank God, and I mean what I say. Is Slyman caught?«

»No, but he soon will be.«

»Are the police in the Hidden House?«

»The Hidden House! I see you are just the fellow I want to meet. You know Slyman's secrets—I don't. Again I ask your name?«

»My name—oh, I'm Ed Telford.«

»Telford!« exclaimed Phil. »Well, well. So you are the other one. Well, this is luck. Young man, the very best thing you can do is to confess.«

»Confess!« cried Ed. »Thank God I've nothing to confess that 'm ashamed of. Slyman stole Etta Howe, the girl I love, out of this room, and I've been trying to rescue her. That's all there is to it, and a sweet old time I've had too.«

»Is this the truth, young man?«

»It is

»Tell me all.«

Ed told him all in as few words as possible—told him how Etta Howe came into the room that stormy night seeking protection; how her father appeared, and all about the money; how Etta disappeared and the dead body of Mr. Howe's brother was found in the closet in her place; how going out he had met Mr. Howe on the corner of Van Dusen street and Bellows Court. How he told him of Etta's danger, and how they went into the Hidden House together. All this he told him and more, never pausing until Phil Kline understood the situation as perfectly as himself.

»Young man!« cried Phil, »I have wronged you — certainly. You are a brave fellow, though your judgment is decidedly poor.«

»Then you believe me?«

»Every word you have said I believe. What you ought to have done was to have made your escape by way of the elevator, and . . .«

»And informed the police, you are going to say. It would have been no use. Slyman had the police fixed.«

»Tut—tut! All police officials are not dishonest. Come, we must go back, That unfortunate girl must be rescued at all hazards. Do you gens taking the elevator down?«

»Oh, yes.«

»Do it then. I suppose Mr. Howe and your friend Sproat are still there?«

»You know as much about it as I do.«

»We will soon know all, but we may have to fight for it. You are not afraid?«

»No, no!«

»Are you armed?«

»No.«

»Take this revolver then, and on a pinch don't be afraid to use it. Do you think there is any chance of our being able to wander about the Hidden House without meeting Slyman?«

»I think there is every chance. He will never dream that you escaped by the elevator.«

»I'm not so sure of that, but I hope you are right. I had planned to take this man to-night at all hazards, but if it is going to interfere, with rescuing your friends I shall let it go.«

»Come! Come! Don't let us lose an instant,« cried Kd, springing into the closet.

Phil Kline followed.

Ed put his hand up behind the panel and pulled the chain.

Immediately the elevator began sinking, running with wonderful smoothness.

»Do you know who built this and why?« asked Phil.

But before Ed could answer a peculiar sound was heard below.

»We are lost!« cried Ed, seizing the chain.

Too late!

Phil could only guess at what had happened.

With lightning speed the elevator went flying down.

Chapter XX.

Closing in.

»Now, be the jumping Judas, it strikes me there's going to be fun!«

It was Peter McGillicuddy, bird stuffer, who spoke thus emphatically.

But if there was any fuss in prospect, Peter was not in it, as will soon be seen.

Mac and Slyman had followed after Phil Kline to the elevator, arriving there just in time to be too late.

Slyman swore horribly.

It did no good, however. Who was ever helped out of a difficulty by swearing about it?

McGillicuddy was more philosophical and quite cool.

»I say, boss.«

»What is it?«

»Things are getting kind o' tight. Here's this detective escaped us, here is every blessed feller about the place drunk but you an' me, an' nary a mon to take the hearse out, and that wid as foine a lot of joolery an' diamonds as ever went inside of Timothy, so there is.«

»Well, well! Don't. I know all this?«

»Why are you wastin' time sayin' yer prayers backward then? Swearers work cheap, for they don't get nothin' for their pains. We want to act, not talk. What have you been doing to bring all this about?«

Bee Only a little stroke of outside business, Mac.«

»And it failed?«

»Well, rather. I was chased by Pinkerton's men, and was lucky to get back here safe.«

»Blamed if I don't think this detective fellow is one of Pinkerton's men. Dan at the stable swears that driver was the same detective what he chucked into the river three weeks ago; an' Moran was in tellin' that he was dead sure the fellow wasn't straight. This man is about his size.«

»Bother all that! Don't I know it already? Thought you were going to tell me what to do?«

»I'll tell you this much, you don't manage biz in the Hidden House like Old Poppy Howe uster. Them was the days!«

»Shut up. Who got all the boys drunk just when they are needed the most?«

»Not I, faith—I'm not to blame if they stale a bar'l of me alcohol, an' make gin out of it. Wisht I could slug ivery mother's son of 'em as I slugged that young lad the night we captured Ronald Howe and the Telford boy, so I do.«

This was an allusion to Harry Sproat, evidently.

Then McGillicuddy was responsible for Harry's hospital experience it seemed.

»I tell you what it is, Mac,« said Slyman, peering up the elevator shaft. »We must do something. You go load the hearse with the very best there is. Take all the jewelry, all those old coins—the gold and silver ones I mean—and everything else that is small and valuable, and we'll drive up to Trenton Hall at Inwood-Howe's old place, you know, and store them there.«

»And the gal.«

»That's so. I forgot. Well, you shall drive the hearse and I'll take the girl up in a hack. No, we can't do that though. She'll make a thunderin' row, and—oh, I'm all mixed up. Get the hearse ready anyhow, mac, and we'll take care of that first. I'll come back and get the girl later on, if it's all safe.«

»We'll try it, faith. An' we must be quick. Mebbe it's only a scare, but mebbe the detective may pounce down upon us at any minute.«

»We'll be prepared by saving what is most valuable. Go now, Mac. Meanwhile I must see the girl a moment. Would you pull the elevator down or not?«

»Not. I'll fix it so that it'll do up any detective who tries to use it—that's the best plan.«

Thus saying, McGillicuddy slipped under the elevator an began »fussing« with the weights which were now down within reach.

»That's the idea. I never thought of that!« exclaimed Slyman.

»Didn't yez? Well, I did. Old Pop Howe had 'em made that way on purpose. Whoever tries to run her down now, will drop ina hurry. Bad luck to this weight. Why won't it unscrew?«

Evidently Mr. Peter McGillicuddy had lost his temper over the weight which revenged itself by suddenly dropping from its fastenings and falling upon the head of that old scoundrel with a sickening thud.

With a groan the bird-stuffer fell on his face under the elevator and lay perfectly still.

»Mac! Mac! Are you hurt?« cried Slyman springing to his assistance.

There was no answer.

Slyman seized him and dragged him out. Bending down he flashed the lantern in his face.

»Great Heavens!« he cried, drawing back with a shudder. »His skull is crushed—Mac is dead!«

Was it so?

Certainly it seemed so, for the old bird-stuffer showed no sign of life.

»I must have help here,« muttered Slyman. »I can't leave poor Mac to die if there's a chance. Oh, this is horrible! Everything is coming upon me all at once!«

He rushed away and striking a cross passage hurried through it, ascended some steps, opened a door and found himself in the yard before the Hidden House.

Scarcely was Slyman's back turned when a rattling sound broke the stillness, and the elevator came flying down with a crash.

It was terribly startling, but it failed to arouse the old bird-stuffer.

Silent and motionless he remained on the spot where Slyman had dragged him, as out from the elevator two badly scared men came crawling on their hands and knees.

They were Ed Telford and Phil Kline, terribly shaken up by their fall but otherwise unharmed.

»Great Scott!« cried Phil, »I came down a deuced sight faster than I went up! Are you hurt, young man, are ne hurt?«

»Not a bit,« gasped Ed. »I've lost my breath—that's all.«

»It was a narrow escape. Some one has been fooling with this machine. Hello! who have we here?«

Phil had brought out his dark lantern, and its rays fell on the body of the bird-stuffer which lay stretched almost at his feet.

»Why, it's old man McGillicuddy, and he's dead!« cried Phil. »What's all this? What's all this?«

»His skull seems to have been crushed in.«

»Yes, and here is the weight that did it. Was. he murdered, or was it an accident? That's the question before the house.«

»Oh, don't let's stop! Don't let's waste a moment!« breathed Ed. »Im just crazy about Etta, Mr. Kline.«

»Do you know where she is?«

»Unless the room in which Slyman kept her confined has been changed—yes.«

»Lead the way there. We will lose no time.«

»I'm afraid the door is locked.«

»Then we will break it down—that is, unless we can open it with my skeleton keys, which are warranted to open almost anything there is going.

They started off through the passages together, Phil's lantern lighting the way.

In a few moments they were back again. Phil came first. Ed followed with Etta, looking very pale and disturbed, leaning on his arm.

»Courage, Etta! Courage!« Ed was whispering.

»That's the talk, miss! Have courage! We are bound to rescue you this time.«

»Oh, Ed, you will not go and leave my poor father!« Etta moaned.

A shudder passed over her as her eyes rested upon the corpse of the old bird-stuffer on the floor.

»Etta, we must think of ourselves first,« replied Ed. »There is poor Harry too, you know. Mr. Kline has a plan if we can only get out of this place, which will set your father free in a few minutes' time.«

»He speaks the truth, miss,« added Phil. »If I had done what I ought to have done in the first place things wouldn't have gone this way; but I

was so anxious to secure evidence that would convict that rascal, Slyman, beyond all question that I've got-a little mixed up. It will come all right, however. I promise you that.«

And they hurried on through the, passage which Slyman had traversed before them.

»Pity we can't go by the elevator,« said Phil. »It would be such an easy way out of our difficulties. You are sure this will take us to the yard?«

»Yes, indeed, but what we shall do there, God knows,« answered Ed. »Go straight ahead till a come to the steps—the door is just beyond.«

»Oh, Ed! I was afraid he had killed you,« breathed Etta, as they hurried on.

»No, no! I had trouble enough, but that is nothing. Worrying about you was the worst.«

»You needn't have done that. I have only seen Slyman once since. I came back to loo for you—he captured me and locked me up in my prison again. He declared that he would force me to marry him . . .«

»He never shall!«

»Never! I will die first.«

»If you had said yes tome instead of no, Etta, it might have been different,« whispered Ed, and his arm stole about the girl's waist.

Etta blushed.

»Whatever is worth having is worth asking for twice,« she said, faintly.

»Just you wait till we get out of this scrape,« answered Ed.

He might have said more, but just then they reached the stairs.

Phil Kline sprang up and opened the door leading into the yard.

Loud voices were heard talking, and suddenly a shot was fired and a boy went bounding by.

It was Harry Sproat.

»Hal! Hall« called Ed.

»Stand back!« shouted the voice of Slyman. »Advance and you die!«

The bogus banker stood facing them, pistol in hand.

On his return he had encountered Mr. Howe and Harry as they came down from the roof.

Chapter XXI.

Conclusion.

Putt Kline, Ed and Etta were almost as much surprised at the suddenness of the attack as had been Mr. Howe and Harry when Slyman came dashing upon them a few moments before.

»Stand back! You shall never take me!« roared the banker. '»I know you now. You are a Pinkerton man.«

He fired and the ball went whistling past Etta's head, burying itself in the woodwork above the door.

»Father! Oh there is father!« shrieked Etta. Heedless of danger the girl dashed over toward the hearse which stood in the middle of the yard with horses all harnessed ready for instant use.

She had caught sight of the form of Ronald Howe lying upon the ground.

»Rush! Rush! Rush!« yelled Phil darting forward.

Ed and Harry were with him. Harry had paused in his flight as Ed called his name.

»Bang!«

»Crack!«

»Bang«

Never was there wilder shooting.

But Slyman fled and very naturally against such odds.

»Burn you! I'll get square!« he yelled, as he darted through a little door leading into the factory. »You think you have made a hit, Mr. Detective, but you'll never escape!«

The door slammed, and Phil gave an exclamation of disgust.

»I'm no good where that fellow is concerned,« he muttered. 'I miss every time.«

Etta meanwhile was assisting her father to rise.

Ed and Harry were at the hearse, and Phil sprang to their side.

»He's gone for the gang!« he cried. »We'd better skip. I say, miss, is the old man hurt?«

»He shot me in the thigh,« groaned the banker. »Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Leave me! Leave me! Take my daughter out of this den of thieves! Never mind me!«

»We'll leave nobody!« cried Phil. »All we want is one moment. Young man,«—this to Harry—»jump on the box; be ready to drive like the mischief when I open the gate.«

»Is it all right, Ed?« asked Harry. »Upon my word, I'm so mixed up that I don't know who is for us and who ain't.«

»Do as he tells you!« cried Ed.

He was at the back of the hearse, where Phil had already called him, wrenching open the door even as he spoke.

»Help me take this thing out!« he exclaimed. »Quick! Quick!«

The thing was a coffin. There was no box covering it this time, nor was the lid tightly fastened. Everything seemed to be wrong that night.

Phil seized the coffin and pulled it forward, Ed lending a hand.

»Timothy Stevens is badly packed to-night,« muttered the detective, sarcastically, and the word was scarcely spoken, when the coffin, which was much heavier than usual, turned suddenly, wrenching itself from Ed's hands, and went falling to the ground a hopeless wreck.

The lid flew off, the sides came apart, and out rolled a wax image of a man's head and bust, amid a pile of old coins and articles of jewelry.

»Thunder! What did you do that for?« cried Phil. »Poor Timothy Stevens, has had a fall.«

»I couldn't help it. The thing was top heavy. What difference as long as it's out?«

»Not a bit. Help the old man in. You and the girl can ride with him. I'll attend to the gate. I want this hearse as evidence. Looks as though we were going to get out with no trouble at all.«

They raised Mr. Howe between them and lifted him into the hearse.

»Oh, this is horrible!« groaned Etta. She might have refused to enter but for her father, but as it was she suffered Ed to help her in.

»Now for the gate!« cried Phil. »Look out for her, Ed.«

He dashed away but before Ed could answer, a wild shout filled the yard.

Through the little door in the factory Slyman, followed by half a dozen reeling fellows, came bursting.

It had been hard work to awake these drunkards and claim their help, but the man had succeeded at last.

»Stop 'em, stop 'em!«, shouted Slyman! »Shoot 'em down like dogs!«

»Drive! Drive like the mischief!« roared Phil's voice.

Phil had just succeeded in opening the big gate on Bellows Court.

But instead of springing to the rescue, he dashed through and disappeared even as the row began.

»Touch those reins and you are a dead man! shouted Slyman. »Pull him off the box, boys. Quick, shut the gate!«

Cooler than one might have expected, Ed drew his revolver and leaped upon the box, firing as he went.

»Give 'em the whip, Hal! You attend to the horses. I'll do the rest.«

Crack! crack! went the whip, and the horses leaped toward the gate.

Crack! crack! went Slyman's revolver, and two shots came singing past Ed's ear.'

»Oh, Ed! Ed! I'm shot!«

Harry fell backward. Ed just caught him in time.

Bang! went the gate in the very teeth of the horses, who began to rear and plunge.

»Ha! ha! we've got 'em, boys—we've got 'em!« cried Slyman, making for the hearse.

Hampered as he was by Harry, poor Ed could do nothing.

His heart failed him, for, to crown all, came Etta's screams.

»It's all up!« he faltered, when suddenly the big gate flew open again, pushed inward, driving the horses back.

»Cover 'em, boys! Don't let one escape!« shouted a voice.

»Holy Cesar! What's this!« yelled Slyman, leaping back in despair.

It was only Phil Kline, at the head of a dozen Pinkerton detectives.

With cocked revolvers covering Slyman and his gang, they poured into the yard!

» »
»

»So you thought I had deserted, did you?« asked Phil Kline, when bright and early next morning he found himself sitting opposite Ed Telford and Harry Sproat at the breakfast table of a small but respectable hotel in the neighborhood of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Harry was very pale, and carried his arm in a sling, but seemed full of spirits for all that.

»You can't blame me for thinking so, when I saw you bolt through the gate and I in that dreadful fix.«

»That's a fact, I don't blame you. No, young man, I never yet deserted a friend. I had those fellows stationed in the basement of a house opposite. All they wanted was the signal. I went to give that and it brought the end of the great Howe disappearance case, which is by long odds the most mysterious I ever handled since I began detective work.«

Phil Kline was quite right.

The missing banker had been found, the hidden house—certainly, in its day New York's most noted »fence«—had been thrown open to the world; where upon the police suddenly discovering that such a place existed, descended upon it and thoroughly cleaned it out.

So with Moran's undertaking shop in Abingdon Square; so also with the stable in Bank street.

The newspapers told the story of police vigilance and gave diagrams of the hidden house and its mysteries, picturing also Timothy Stevens and several other wax dummies, and the phantom hearse which folded up and in a moment could be transformed into a harmless looking undertaker's wagon.

In short the police received full credit for what they did not do, while Phil Kline and the Pinkerton agency were scarcely mentioned at all.

But Phil didn't care, and as for the Pinkertons they were well used to that sort of thing.

Phil had the satisfaction of capturing Slyman personally, and lodging him in the Tombs on a charge of attempting to rob the Eagle Bank, just

for a starter—there were twenty other charges brought against him after that.

Not one of the band escaped—most of them were too drunk to try.

Phil, after caring for Mr. Howe and Etta, drove the phantom hearse to the station in triumph and lodged his complaints before the police ever made a move.

Such is the truth about the well remembered sensation of the Hidden House.

We thought we might as well state it, that honor may be given where honor is due.

Thus ended one of the most peculiar schemes for handling stolen goods recorded in the annals of the New York police.

How many times »Timothy Stevens« and the other wax dummies crossed the ocean no one will ever know.

Certain it is that five of them arrived on as many separate steamers after the exposure, all of which fell into the hands of the police.

Several years have passed since that memorable night and the situations of our friends have materially changed.

Mr. Howe recovered from his wound, resides still at Treverton Hall, Inwood, in comfortable circumstances, with all his debts paid but by no means rich.

With him lives Ed Telford and Mrs. Ed, once Miss Etta.

Probably no act of Mr. Howe's life has been so deeply regretted as the kicking of Ed Telford from the conservatory on the night when the young bank clerk proposed for his daughter's hand.

But whence this fortune?

It is easily explained.

William Howe, the banker's brother, proprietor of that notorious fence, the »Hidden House,« died—to put it in legal phraseology—seized of considerable real estate.

Beside being an utter scoundrel the man was a perfect miser.

Thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of stolen goods purchased abroad he never sold, and in addition he owned the triangle

formed by Houston street, Bellows Court and Van Dusen street free and clear.

At first it was rumored that this strange man was murdered, but the testimony of Ronald Howe proved the contrary.

He died in his bed, and the instant he expired Slyman seized control of his affairs and spirited the body away.

Just as well for this minor scoundrel would it have been if he hadn't done this; for he brought the business of the Hidden House gang to ruin, and in the end was sent to Sing Sing, where he still remains.

After a long legal wrangle and a short term of imprisonment pending a settlement of the affair of the Twenty-ninth National bank, Ronald Howe inherited his brother's estate, and paid the bank in full, dollar for dollar.

Now he dwells in retirement and is comparatively poor, but he has the satisfaction of feeling that he has done his best to atone for his misdeeds, and is square with the world.

Ed is back in the bank, and Harry, still his firm friend, has a fine position there too, for Mr. Howe still controls the stock, though pride and shame prevents him from taking a personal management of its affairs.

We may as well mention that the gripsack containing the \$10,000 was found in Slyman's private room intact.

On the day that the friends of Peter McGillicuddy, bird-stuffer, followed his corpse to at this money was handed back to the bank.

Moran went to the Tombs, but owing to political »pull,« afterward escaped.

As for the gang none were convicted, as no evidence could be brought to show what they did in the Hidden House.

Phil Kline still flourishes.

Of course the Hagle bank rewarded him handsomely.

Phil still remains a Pinkerton man also, and since then has handled many mysterious cases, but none so mysterious—so the detective positively declares—as that of the Hidden House.

[THE END.]

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