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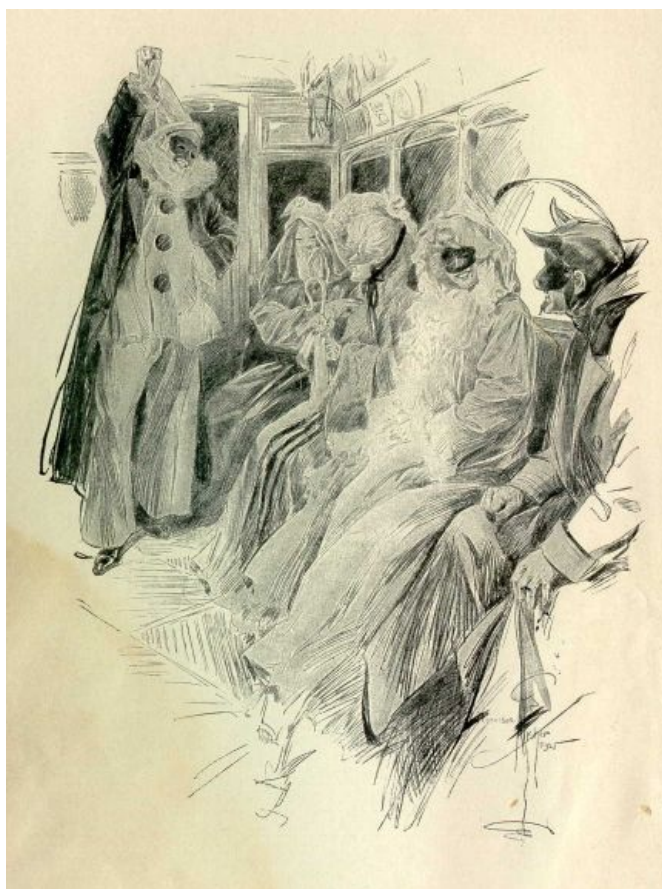
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[Frontispiece: Five people dressed for costume ball, four sitting, one standing.]

HEARTS AND MASKS

BY

HAROLD MACGRATH

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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TO MY WIFE

CONTENTS

Chapter I	Chapter IV	Chapter VII
Chapter II	Chapter V	Chapter VIII
Chapter III	Chapter VI	Chapter IX

List of Illustrations

Five people dressed for costume ball, four sitting, one standing *Frontispiece*

The handsomest girl I had set eyes upon in a month of moons.

"This is what I want. How much?" I inquired.

Turning, I beheld an exquisite Columbine.

I led her over to a secluded nook. We sat down.

And there we sat, calmly munching the apples.

"Madame, will you do me the honor to raise your mask?"

We watched the girl as she bathed and bandaged the wounded arm.

With a contented sigh she rested her blue-slippered feet on the brass fender.

HEARTS AND MASKS

I

It all depends upon the manner of your entrance to the Castle of Adventure. One does not have to scale its beetling parapets or assault its scarps and frowning bastions; neither is one obliged to force with clamor and blaring trumpets and glittering gorgets the drawbridge and portcullis. Rather the pathway lies through one of those many little doors, obscure, yet easily accessible, latchless and boltless, to which the average person gives no particular attention, and yet which invariably lead to the very heart of this Castle Delectable. The whimsical chatelaine of this enchanted keep is a shy goddess. Circumspection has no part in her affairs, nor caution, nor practicality; nor does her eye linger upon the dullard and the blunderer. Imagination solves the secret riddle, and wit is the guide that leads the seeker through the winding, bewildering labyrinths.

And there is something in being idle, too!

If I had not gone idly into Mouquin's cellar for dinner that night, I should have missed the most engaging adventure that ever fell to my lot. It is second nature for me to be guided by impulse rather than by reason; reason is always so square-toed and impulse is always so alluring. You will find that nearly all the great captains were and are creatures of impulse; nothing brilliant is ever achieved by calculation. All this is not to say that I am a great captain; it is offered only to inform you that I am often impulsive.

A *Times*, four days old; and if I hadn't fallen upon it to pass the twenty-odd minutes between my order and the service of it, I shouldn't have made the acquaintance of the police in that pretty little suburb over in New Jersey; nor should I have met the enchanting Blue Domino; nor would fate have written Kismet. The clairvoyant never has any fun in this cycle; he has no surprises.

I had been away from New York for several weeks, and had returned only that afternoon. Thus, the spirit of unrest acquired by travel was still upon me. It was nearing holiday week, and those congenial friends I might have called upon, to while away the evening, were either busily occupied with shopping or were out of town; and I determined not to go to the club and be bored by some indifferent billiard player. I would dine quietly, listen to some light music, and then go to the theater. I was searching the theatrical amusements, when the society column indifferently attacked my eye. I do not know why it is, but I have a wholesome contempt for the so-called society columns of the daily newspaper in New York. Mayhap, it is because I do not belong.

I read this paragraph with a shrug, and that one with a smirk. I was in no manner surprised at the announcement that Miss High-Culture was going to wed the Duke of Impecune; I had

always been certain this girl would do some such fool thing. That Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds was giving a farewell dinner at the Waldorf, prior to her departure to Europe, interested my curiosity not in the least degree. It would be all the same to me if she never came back. None of the wishy-washy tittle-tattle interested me, in fact. There was only one little six-line paragraph that really caught me. On Friday night (that is to say, the night of my adventures in Blankshire), the Hunt Club was to give a charity masquerade dance. This grasped my adventurous spirit by the throat and refused to let go.

The atmosphere surrounding the paragraph was spirituous with enchantment. There was a genuine novelty about this dance. Two packs of playing-cards had been sent out as tickets; one pack to the ladies and one to the gentlemen. Charming idea, wasn't it? These cards were to be shown at the door, together with ten dollars, but were to be retained by the recipients till two o'clock (supper-time), at which moment everybody was to unmask and take his partner, who held the corresponding card, in to supper. Its newness strongly appealed to me. I found myself reading the paragraph over and over.

By Jove, what an inspiration!

I knew the Blankshire Hunt Club, with its colonial architecture, its great ball-room, its quaint fireplaces, its stables and sheds, and the fame of its chef. It was one of those great country clubs that keep open house the year round. It stood back from the sea about four miles and was within five miles of the village. There was a fine course inland, a cross-country going of not less than twenty miles, a shooting-box, and excellent golf-links. In the winter it was cozy; in the summer it was ideal.

I was intimately acquainted with the club's M. F. H., Teddy Hamilton. We had done the Paris-Berlin run in my racing-car the summer before. If I hadn't known him so well, I might still have been in durance vile, next door to jail, or securely inside. I had frequently dined with him at the club during the summer, and he had offered to put me up; but as I knew no one intimately but himself, I explained the futility of such action. Besides, my horse wasn't a hunter; and I was riding him less and less. It is no pleasure to go "parking" along the bridle-paths of Central Park. For myself, I want a hill country and something like forty miles, straight away; that's riding.

The fact that I knew no one but Teddy added zest to the inspiration which had seized me. For I determined to attend that dance, happen what might. It would be vastly more entertaining than a possibly dull theatrical performance. (It was!)

I called for a messenger and despatched him to the nearest drug store for a pack of playing-cards; and while I waited for his return I casually glanced at the other diners. At my table—one of those long marble-topped affairs by the wall—there was an old man reading a paper, and the handsomest girl I had set eyes upon in a month of moons. Sometimes the word handsome seems an inferior adjective. She was beautiful, and her half-lidded eyes told me that she was anywhere but at Mouquin's. What a head of hair! Fine as a spider's web, and the dazzling yellow of a wheat-field in a sun-shower! The irregularity of her features made them all the more interesting. I was an artist in an amateur way, and I mentally painted in that head against a Rubens background. The return of the messenger brought me back to earth; for I confess that my imagination had already leaped far into the future, and this girl across the way was nebulously connected with it.

I took the pack of cards, ripped off the covering, tossed aside the joker (though, really, I ought to have retained it!) and began shuffling the shiny pasteboards. I dare say that those around me sat up and took notice. It was by no means a common sight to see a man gravely shuffling a pack of cards in a public restaurant. Nobody interfered, doubtless because nobody knew exactly what to do in the face of such an act, for which no adequate laws had been provided. A waiter stood solemnly at the end of the table, scratching his chin thoughtfully, wondering whether he should report this peculiarity of constitution and susceptibility occasioning certain peculiarities of effect from impress of extraneous influences (*vide* Webster), synonymous with idiocracy and known as idiosyncrasy. It was quite possible that I was the first man to establish such a precedent in Monsieur Mouquin's restaurant. Thus, I aroused only passive curiosity.

From the corner of my eye I observed the old gentleman opposite. He was peering over the top of his paper, and I could see by the glitter in his eye that he was a confirmed player of solitaire. The girl, however, still appeared to be in a dreaming state. I have no doubt every one who saw me thought that anarchy was abroad again, or that Sherlock Holmes had entered into his third incarnation.

Finally I squared the pack, took a long-breath, and cut. I turned up the card. It was the ten-spot of hearts. I considered this most propitious; hearts being my long suit in everything but love, —love having not yet crossed my path. I put the card in my wallet, and was about to toss the rest of the pack under the table, when, a woman's voice stayed my hand.

"Don't throw them away. Tell my fortune first."

I looked up, not a little surprised. It was the beautiful young girl who had spoken. She was leaning on her elbows, her chin propped in her palms, and the light in her grey *chatoyant* eyes was wholly innocent and mischievous. In Monsieur Mouquin's cellar people are rather Bohemian,

not to say friendly; for it is the rendezvous of artists, literary men and journalists,—a clan that holds formality in contempt.

"Tell your fortune?" I repeated parrot-like.

"Yes."

"Your mirror can tell you that more accurately than I can," I replied with a frank glance of admiration.

She drew her shoulders together and dropped them. "I spoke to you, sir, because I believed you wouldn't say anything so commonplace as that. When one sees a man soberly shuffling a pack of cards in a place like this, one naturally expects originality."

"Well, perhaps you caught me off my guard,"—humbly.

"I am original. Did you ever before witness this performance in a public restaurant?"—making the cards purr.

"I can not say I have,"—amused.

"Well, no more have I!"

"Why, then, do you do it?"—with renewed interest.

"Shall I tell your fortune?"

"Not now. I had much rather you would tell me the meaning of this play."

I leaned toward her and whispered mysteriously: "The truth is, I belong to a secret society, and I was cutting the cards to see whether or not I should blow up the post-office to-night or the police-station. You mustn't tell anybody."

"Oh!" She started back from the table. "You do not look it," she added suddenly.

"I know it; appearances are so deceptive," said I sadly.

Then the old man laughed, and the girl laughed, and I laughed; and I wasn't quite sure that the grave waiter did not crack the ghost of a smile—in relief.



[Illustration: The handsomest girl I had set eyes upon in a month of moons.]

"And what, may I ask, was the fatal card?" inquired the old man, folding his paper.

"The ace of spades; we always choose that gloomy card in secret societies. There is something deadly and suggestive about it," I answered morbidly.

"Indeed."

"Yes. Ah, if only you knew the terrible life we lead, we who conspire! Every day brings forth some galling disappointment. We push a king off into the dark, and another rises immediately in his place. Futility, futility everywhere! If only there were some way of dynamiting habit and custom! I am a Russian; all my family are perishing in Siberian mines,"—dismally.

"Fudge!" said the girl.

"Tommy-rot!" said the amiable old gentleman.

"Uncle, his hair is too short for an anarchist."

"And his collar too immaculate." (So the old gentleman was this charming creature's uncle!)

"We are obliged to disguise ourselves at times," I explained. "The police are always meddling. It is discouraging."

"You have some purpose, humorous or serious," said the girl shrewdly. "A man does not bring a pack of cards—"

"I didn't bring them; I sent out for them."

"—bring a pack of cards here simply to attract attention," she continued tranquilly.

"Perhaps I am a prestidigitator in a popular dime-museum," I suggested, willing to help her out, "and am doing a little advertising."

"Now, that has a plausible sound," she admitted, folding her hands under her chin. "It must be an interesting life. *Presto—change!* and all that."

"Oh, I find it rather monotonous in the winter; but in the summer it is fine. Then I wander about the summer resorts and give exhibitions."

"You will pardon my niece," interpolated the old gentleman, coughing a bit nervously. "If she annoys you—"

"Uncle!"—reproachfully.

"Heaven forfend!" I exclaimed eagerly. "There is a charm in doing unconventional things; and most people do not realize it, and are stupid."

"Thank you, sir," said the girl, smiling. She was evidently enjoying herself; so was I, for that matter. "Do a trick for me," she commanded presently.

I smiled weakly. I couldn't have done a trick with the cards,—not if my life had depended upon it. But I rather neatly extricated myself from the trap.

"I never do any tricks out of business hours."

"Uncle, give the gentleman ten cents; I want to see him do a sleight-of-hand trick."

Her uncle, readily entering into the spirit of the affair, dived into a pocket and produced the piece of silver. It looked as if I were caught.

"There! this may make it worth your while," the girl said, shoving the coin in my direction.

But again I managed to slide under; I was not to be caught.

"It is my regret to say,"—frowning slightly, "that regularity in my business is everything. It wants half an hour for my turn to come on. If I tried a trick out of turn, I might fizzle and lose prestige. And besides, I depend so much upon the professor and his introductory notes: 'Ladies and gents, permit me to introduce the world-renowned Signor Fantoccini, whose marvelous tricks have long puzzled all the crowned heads of Europe—'"

"Fantoccini,"—musingly. "That's Italian for puppet show."

"I know it, but the dime-museum visitors do not. It makes a fine impression."

She laughed and slid the dime back to her uncle.

"I'm afraid you are an impostor," she said.

"I'm afraid so, too," I confessed, laughing.

Then the comedy came to an end by the appearance of our separate orders. I threw aside the cards and proceeded to attack my dinner, for I was hungry. From time to time I caught vague fragments of conversation between the girl and her uncle.

"It's a fool idea," mumbled the old gentleman; "you will get into some trouble or other."

"That doesn't matter. It will be like a vacation,—a flash of old Rome, where I wish I were at this very moment. I am determined."

"This is what comes of reading romantic novels,"—with a kind of grumble.

"I admit there never was a particle of romance on your side of the family," the girl retorted.

"Happily. There is peace in the house where I live."

"Do not argue with me."

"I am not arguing with you. I should only be wasting my time. I am simply warning you that you are about to commit a folly."

"I have made up my mind."

"Ah! In that case I have hopes," he returned. "When a woman makes up her mind to do one thing, she generally does another. Why can't you put aside this fool idea and go to the opera with me?"

"I have seen *Carmen* in Paris, Rome, London and New York," she replied.

(Evidently a traveled young person.)

"*Carmen* is your favorite opera, besides."

"Not to-night,"—whimsically.

"Go, then; but please recollect that if anything serious comes of your folly, I did my best to prevent it. It's a scatter-brained idea, and no good will come of it, mark me."

"I can take care of myself,"—truculently.

"So I have often been forced to observe,"—dryly.

(I wondered what it was all about.)

"But, uncle dear, I am becoming so dreadfully bored!"

"That sounds final," sighed the old man, helping himself to the *haricots verts*. (The girl ate positively nothing.) "But it seems odd that you can't go about your affairs after my own reasonable manner."

"I am only twenty."

The old man's shoulders rose and fell resignedly.

"No man has an answer for that."

"I promise to tell you everything that happens; by telegraph."

"That's small comfort. Imagine receiving a telegram early in the morning, when a man's brain is without invention or coherency of thought! I would that you were back home with your father. I might sleep o' nights, then."

"I have so little amusement!"

"You work three hours a day and earn more in a week than your father and I do in a month. Yours is a very unhappy lot."

"I hate the smell of paints; I hate the studio."

"And I suppose you hate your fame?" acridly.

"Bah! that is my card to a living. The people I meet bore me."

"Not satisfied with common folks, eh? Must have kings and queens to talk to?"

"I only want to live abroad, and you and father will not let me,"—petulantly.

The music started up, and I heard no more. Occasionally the girl glanced at me and smiled in a friendly fashion. She was evidently an artist's model; and when they have hair and color like this girl's, the pay is good. I found myself wondering why she was bored and why *Carmen* had so suddenly lost its charms.

It was seven o'clock when I pushed aside my plate and paid my check. I calculated that by hustling I could reach Blankshire either at ten or ten-thirty. That would be early enough for my needs. And now to route out a costumer. All I needed was a grey mask. I had in my apartments a

Capuchin's robe and cowl. I rose, lighting a cigarette.

The girl looked up from her coffee.

"Back to the dime-museum?"—banteringly.

"I have a few minutes to spare," said I.

"By the way, I forgot to ask you what card you drew."

"It was the ten of hearts."

"The ten of hearts?" Her amazement was not understandable.

"Yes, the ten of hearts; Cupid and all that."

She recovered her composure quickly.

"Then you will not blow up the post-office to-night?"

"No," I replied, "not to-night."

"You have really and truly aroused my curiosity. Tell me, what does the ten of hearts mean to you?"

I gazed thoughtfully down at her. Had I truly mystified her? There was some doubt in my mind.

"Frankly, I wish I might tell you. All I am at liberty to say is that I am about to set forth upon a desperate adventure, and I shall be very fortunate if I do not spend the night in the lock-up."

"You do not look desperate."

"Oh, I am not desperate; it is only the adventure that is desperate."

"Some princess in durance vile? Some villain to smite? Citadels to storm?" Her smile was enchantment itself.

I hesitated a moment. "What would you say if I told you that this adventure was merely to prove to myself what a consummate ass the average man can be upon occasions?"

"Why go to the trouble of proving it?"—drolly.

"I am conceited enough to have some doubts as to the degree."

"Consider it positive."

I laughed. "I am in hopes that I am neither a positive ass nor a superlative one, only comparative."

"But the adventure; that is the thing that mainly interests me."

"Oh, that is a secret which I should hesitate to tell even to the Sphinx."

"I see you are determined not to illuminate the darkness,"—and she turned carelessly toward her uncle, who was serenely contemplating the glowing end of a fat perfecto.

I bowed and passed out in Sixth Avenue, rather regretting that I had not the pleasure of the charming young person's acquaintance.

The ten-spot of hearts seemed to have startled her for some reason. I wondered why.

The snow blew about me, whirled, and swirled, and stung. Oddly enough I recalled the paragraph relative to Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds. By this time she was being very well tossed about in mid-ocean. As the old order of yarn-spinners used to say, little did I dream what was in store for me, or the influence the magic name of Hyphen-Bonds was to have upon my destiny.

Bismillah! (Whatever that means!)

II

After half an hour's wandering about I stumbled across a curio-shop, a weird, dim and dusty, musty old curio-shop, with stuffed peacocks hanging from the ceiling, and skulls, and bronzes

and marbles, paintings, tarnished jewelry and ancient armor, rare books in vellum, small arms, tapestry, pastimes, plaster masks, and musical instruments. I recalled to mind the shop of the dealer in antiquities in Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*, and glanced about (not without a shiver) for the fatal ass's skin. (I forgot that I was wearing it myself that night!) I was something of a collector of antiquities, of the inanimate kind, and for a time I became lost in speculation,—speculation rather agreeable of its kind, I liked to conjure up in fancy the various scenes through which these curiosities had drifted in their descent to this demi-pawnshop; the brave men and beautiful women, the clangor of tocsins, the haze of battles, the glitter of ball-rooms, epochs and ages. What romance lay behind yon satin slipper? What *grande dame* had smiled behind that ivory fan? What meant that tarnished silver mask?

The old French proprietor was evidently all things from a pawnbroker to an art collector; for most of the jewelry was in excellent order and the pictures possessed value far beyond the intrinsic. He was waiting upon a customer, and the dingy light that shone down on his bald bumpy head made it look for all the world like an ill-used billiard-ball. He was exhibiting revolvers.

From the shining metal of the small arms, my glance traveled to the face of the prospective buyer. It was an interesting face, clean-cut, beardless, energetic, but the mouth impressed me as being rather hard. Doubtless he felt the magnetism of my scrutiny, for he suddenly looked around. The expression on his face was not one to induce me to throw my arms around his neck and declare I should be glad to make his acquaintance. It was a scowl. He was in evening dress, and I could see that he knew very well how to wear it. All this was but momentary. He took up a revolver and balanced it on his palm.

By and by the proprietor came sidling along behind the cases, the slip-slip fashion of his approach informing me that he wore slippers.

"Do you keep costumes?" I asked.

"Anything you like, sir, from a crusader to a modern gentleman,"—with grim and appropriate irony. "What is it you are in search of—a masquerade costume?"

"Only a grey mask," I answered. "I am going to a masked ball to-night as a Grey Capuchin, and I want a mask that will match my robe."

"Your wants are simple."

From a shelf he brought down a box, took off the cover, and left me to make my selection. Soon I found what I desired and laid it aside, waiting for Monsieur Friard to return. Again I observed the other customer. There is always a mystery to be solved and a story to be told, when a man makes the purchase of a pistol in a pawnshop. A man who buys a pistol for the sake of protection does so in the light of day, and in the proper place, a gun-shop. He does not haunt the pawnbroker in the dusk of evening. Well, it was none of my business; doubtless he knew what he was doing. I coughed suggestively, and Friard came slipping in my direction again.

"This is what I want. How much?" I inquired.



[Illustration: "This is what I want. How much?" I inquired.]

"Fifty cents; it has never been worn."

I drew out my wallet. I had arrived in town too late to go to the bank, and I was carrying an uncomfortably large sum in gold-bills. As I opened the wallet to extract a small bill, I saw the stranger eying me quietly. Well, well, the dullest being brightens at the sight of money and its representatives. I drew out a small bill and handed it to the proprietor. He took it, together with the mask, and sidled over to the cash-register. The bell gave forth a muffled sound, not unlike that of a fire-bell in a snow-storm. As he was in the act of wrapping up my purchase, I observed the silent customer's approach. When he reached my side he stooped and picked up something from the floor. With a bow he presented it to me.

"I saw it drop from your pocket," he said; and then when he saw what it was, his jaw fell, and he sent me a hot, penetrating glance.

"The ten of hearts!" he exclaimed in amazement.

I laughed easily.

"The ten of hearts!" he repeated.

"Yes; four hearts on one side and four on the other, and two in the middle, which make ten in all,"—raillery in my tones. What the deuce was the matter with everybody to-night? "Marvelous card, isn't it?"

"Very strange!" he murmured, pulling at his lips.

"And in what way is it strange?" I asked, rather curious to learn the cause of his agitation.

"There are several reasons,"—briefly.

"Ah!"

"I have seen a man's hand pinned to that card; therefore it is gruesome."

"Some card-sharper?"

He nodded. "Then again, I lost a small fortune because of that card,"—diffidently.

"Poker?"

"Yes. Why will a man try to fill a royal flush? The man next to me drew the ten of hearts, the very card I needed. The sight of it always unnerves me. I beg your pardon."

"Oh, that's all right," said I, wondering how many more lies he had up his sleeve.

"And there's still another reason. I saw a man put six bullets into the two central spots, and an hour later the seventh bullet snuffed the candle of a friend of mine. I am from the West."

"I can sympathize with you," I returned. "After all that trouble, the sight of the card must have given you a shock."

Then I stowed away the fatal card and took up my bundle and change. I have in my own time tried to fill royal flushes, and the disappointment still lingers with a bitter taste.

"The element of chance is the most fascinating thing there is," the stranger from the West volunteered.

"So it is," I replied, suddenly recalling that I was soon to put my trust in the hands of that very fickle goddess.

He nodded and returned to his revolvers, while I went out of the shop, hailed a cab, and drove up-town to my apartments in Riverside. It was eight o'clock by my watch. I leaned back against the cushions, ruminating. There seemed to be something going on that night; the ten of hearts was acquiring a mystifying, not to say sinister, aspect. First it had alarmed the girl in Mouquin's, and now this stranger in the curio-shop. I was confident that the latter had lied in regard to his explanations. The card *had* startled him, but his reasons were altogether of transparent thinness. A man never likes to confess that he is unlucky at cards; there is a certain pride in lying about the enormous stakes you have won and the wonderful draws you have made. I frowned. It was not possible for me to figure out what his interest in the card was. If he was a Westerner, his buying a pistol in a pawnshop was at once disrobed of its mystery; but the inconsistent elegance of his evening clothes doubled my suspicions. Bah! What was the use of troubling myself with this stranger's affairs? He would never cross my path again.

In reasonable time the cab drew up in front of my apartments. I dressed, donned my Capuchin's robe and took a look at myself in the pier-glass. Then I unwrapped the package and put on the mask. The whole made a capital outfit, and I was vastly pleased with myself. This was going to be such an adventure as one reads about in the ancient numbers of *Blackwood's*. I slipped the robe and mask into my suit-case and lighted my pipe. During great moments like this, a man gathers courage and confidence from a pipeful of tobacco. I dropped into a comfortable Morris, touched the gas-logs, and fell into a pleasant dream. It was not necessary for me to start for the Twenty-third Street ferry till nine; so I had something like three-quarters of an hour to idle away.... What beautiful hair that girl had! It was like sunshine, the silk of corn, the yield of the harvest. And the marvelous abundance of it! It was true that she was an artist's model; it was equally true that she had committed a mild impropriety in addressing me as she had; but, for all I could see, she was a girl of delicate breeding, doubtless one of the many whose family fortunes, or misfortunes, force them to earn a living. And it is no disgrace these days to pose as an artist's model. The classic oils, nowadays, call only for exquisite creations in gowns and hats; mythology was exhausted by the old masters. Rome, Paris, London; possibly a bohemian existence in these cities accounted for her ease in striking up a conversation, harmless enough, with a total stranger. In Paris and Rome it was all very well; but it is a risky thing to do in unromantic New York and London. However, her uncle had been with her; a veritable fortress, had I over-stepped the bounds of politeness.

The smoke wavered and rolled about me. I took out the ten of hearts and studied it musingly. After all, should I go? Would it be wise? I confess I saw goblins' heads peering from the spots, and old Poe stories returned to me! Pshaw! It was only a frolic, no serious harm could possibly come of it. I would certainly go, now I had gone thus far. What fool idea the girl was bent on I hadn't the least idea; but I easily recognized the folly upon which I was about to set sail. Heigh-ho! What was a lonely young bachelor to do? At the most, they could only ask me to vacate the premises, should I be so unfortunate as to be discovered. In that event, Teddy Hamilton would come to my assistance.... She was really beautiful! And then I awoke to the alarming fact that the girl in Mouquin's was interesting me more than I liked to confess.

Presently, through the haze of smoke, I saw a patch of white paper on the rug in front of the pier-glass. I rose and picked it up.

NAME: *Hawthorne*
COSTUME: *Blue Domino*
TIME: *5:30 P. M.*
RETURNED:
ADDRESS: *West 87th Street*

FRIARD'S

I stared at the bit of pasteboard, fascinated. How the deuce had this got into my apartments? A Blue Domino? Ha! I had it! Old Friard had accidentally done up the ticket with my mask. A Blue

Domino; evidently I wasn't the only person who was going to a masquerade. Without doubt this fair demoiselle was about to join the festivities of some shop-girls' masquerade, where money and pedigree are inconsequent things, and where everybody is either a "loidy" or a "gent." Persons who went to my kind of masquerade did not rent their costumes; they laid out extravagant sums to the fashionable modiste and tailor, and had them made to order. A Blue Domino: humph!

It was too late to take the ticket back to Friard's; so I determined to mail it to him in the morning.

It was now high time for me to be off. I got into my coat and took down my opera hat. Outside the storm was still active; but the snow had a promising softness, and there were patches of stars to be seen here and there in the sky. By midnight there would be a full moon. I got to Jersey City without mishap; and when I took my seat in the smoker, I found I had ten minutes to spare. I bought a newspaper and settled down to read the day's news. It was fully half an hour between Jersey City and Blankshire; in that time I could begin and finish the paper.

There never was a newspaper those days that hadn't a war-map in some one of its columns; and when I had digested the latest phases of the war in the far East, I quite naturally turned to the sporting-page to learn what was going on among the other professional fighters. (Have I mentioned to you the fact that I was all through the Spanish War, the mix-up in China, and that I had resigned my commission to accept the post of traveling salesman for a famous motor-car company? If I have not, pardon me. You will now readily accept my recklessness of spirit as a matter of course.) I turned over another page; from this I learned that the fair sex was going back to puff-sleeves again. Many an old sleeve was going to be turned upside down.

Fudge! The train was rattling through the yards. Another page crackled. Ha! Here was that unknown gentleman-thief again, up to his old tricks. It is remarkable how difficult it is to catch a thief who has good looks and shrewd brains. I had already written him down as a quasi-swell. For months the police had been finding clues, but they had never laid eyes on the rascal. The famous Haggerty of the New York detective force,—a man whom not a dozen New York policemen knew by sight and no criminals save those behind bars, earthly and eternal,—was now giving his whole attention to the affair. Some gaily-dressed lady at a ball would suddenly find she had lost some valuable gems; and that would be the end of the affair, for none ever recovered her gems.

The gentleman-thief was still at large, and had gathered to his account a comfortable fortune; that is, if he were not already rich and simply a kleptomaniac. No doubt he owned one of my racing-cars, and was clear of the delinquent lists at his clubs. I dismissed all thought of him, threw aside the paper, and mentally figured out my commissions on sales during the past month. It was a handsome figure, large enough for two. This pastime, too, soon failed to interest me. I gazed out of the window and watched the dark shapes as they sped past.

I saw the girl's face from time to time. What a fool I had been not to ask her name! She could easily have refused, and yet as easily have granted the request. At any rate, I had permitted the chance to slip out of my reach, which was exceedingly careless on my part. Perhaps they—she and her uncle—frequently dined at Mouquin's; I determined to haunt the place and learn. It would be easy enough to address her the next time we met. Besides, she would be curious to know all about the ten of hearts and the desperate adventure upon which I told her I was about to embark. Many a fine friendship has grown out of smaller things.

Next, turning from the window, I fell to examining my fellow passengers, in the hope of seeing some one I knew. Conversation on trains makes short journeys.... I sat up stiffly in my seat. Diagonally across the aisle sat the very chap I had met in the curio-shop! He was quietly reading a popular magazine, and occasionally a smile lightened his sardonic mouth. Funny that I should run across him twice in the same evening! Men who are contemplating suicide never smile in that fashion. He was smoking a small, well-colored meerschaum pipe with evident relish. Somehow, when a man clenches his teeth upon the mouth-piece of a respectable pipe, it seems impossible to associate that man with crime. But the fact that I had seen him selecting a pistol in a pawnshop rather neutralized the good opinion I was willing to form. I have already expressed my views upon the subject. The sight of him rather worried me, though I could not reason why. Whither was he bound? Had he finally taken one of Friard's pistols? For a moment I was on the point of speaking to him, if only to hear him tell more lies about the ten of hearts, but I wisely put aside the temptation. Besides, it might be possible that he would not be glad to see me. I always avoid the chance acquaintance, unless, of course, the said chance acquaintance is met under favorable circumstances—like the girl in Mouquin's, for instance! After all, it was only an incident; and, but for his picking up that card, I never should have remembered him.

Behind him sat a fellow with a countenance as red and round and complacent as an English butler's,—red hair and small twinkling eyes. Once he leaned over and spoke to my chance acquaintance, who, without turning his head, thrust a match over his shoulder. The man with the face of a butler lighted the most villainous pipe I ever beheld. I wondered if they knew each other. But, closely as I watched, I saw no sign from either. I turned my collar up and snuggled down. There was no need of his seeing *me*.

Then my thoughts reverted to the ten of hearts again. My ten of hearts! The wrinkle of a chill ran up and down my spine! My ten of hearts!

Hastily I took out the card and examined the *back* of it. It was an uncommonly handsome back, representing Diana, the moon, and the midnight sky. A horrible supposition came to me: supposing they looked at the back as well as at the face of the card? And again, supposing I was miles away from the requisite color and design? I was staggered. Here was a pretty fix! I had never even dreamed of such a contingency. Hang it! I now wished I had stuck to my original plan, and gone to the theater. Decidedly I was in for it; there was no backing down at this late hour, unless I took the return train for Jersey City; and I possessed too much stubbornness to surrender to any such weakness. Either I should pass the door-committee, or I shouldn't; of one thing I was certain—

"Blankshire!" bawled the trainman; then the train slowed down and finally came to a stop.

No turning back for me now. I picked up my suit-case and got out. On the platform I saw the curio-shop fellow again. Tramping on ahead, the smell from his villainous pipe assailing my nostrils, was the man who had asked for a match. The former stood undecided for a moment, and during this space of time he caught sight of me. He became erect, gave me a sudden sardonic laugh, and swiftly disappeared into the dark. All this was uncommonly disquieting; in vain I stared into the blackness that had swallowed him. What could he be doing here at Blankshire? I didn't like his laugh at all; there was at once a menace and a challenge in it.

"Any baggage, sir?" asked one of the station hands.

"No." But I asked him to direct me to a hotel. He did so.

I made my way down the street. The wind had veered around and was coming in from the sea, pure and cold. The storm-clouds were broken and scudding like dark ships, and at times there were flashes of radiant moonshine.

The fashionable hotel was full. So I plodded through the drifts to the unfashionable hotel. Here I found accommodation. I dressed, sometimes laughing, sometimes whistling, sometimes standing motionless in doubt. Bah! It was only a lark.... I thought of the girl in Mouquin's; how much better it would have been to spend the evening with her, exchanging badinage, and looking into each other's eyes! Pshaw! I covered my face with the grey mask and descended to the street.

The trolley ran within two miles of the Hunt Club. The car was crowded with masqueraders, and for the first time since I started out I felt comfortable. Everybody laughed and talked, though nobody knew who his neighbor was. I sat in a corner, silent and motionless as a sphinx. Once a pair of blue slippers attracted my eye, and again the flash of a lovely arm. At the end of the trolley line was a carryall which was to convey us to the club. We got into the conveyance, noisily and good-humoredly. The exclamations of the women were amusing.

"Good gracious!"

"Isn't it fun!"

"Lovely!" And all that. It must have been a novelty for some of these to act naturally for once. Nothing lasts so long as the natural instinct for play; and we always find ourselves coming back to it.

Standing some hundred yards back from the road was the famous Hollywood Inn, run by the genial Moriarty. Sometimes the members of the Hunt Club put up there for the night when there was to be a run the following morning. It was open all the year round.

We made the club at exactly ten-thirty. Fortune went with me; doubtless it was the crowd going in that saved me from close scrutiny. My spirits rose as I espied Teddy Hamilton at the door. He was on the committee, and was in plain evening clothes. It was good to see a familiar face. I shouldered toward him and passed out my ten dollars.

"Hello, Teddy, my son!" I cried out jovially.

"Hello!"—grinning. Teddy thought it was some one he knew; well, so it was. "What's your card?" he cried, as I pressed by him.

"The ten of hearts."

"The ten of hearts," repeated Teddy to a man who was keeping tally on a big cardboard.

This sight did not reassure me. If they were keeping tally of all the cards presented at the door, they would soon find out that there were too many tens of hearts, too many by one! Well, at any rate, I had for the time being escaped detection; now for the fun. It would be sport-royal while it lasted. What a tale to give out at the club of a Sunday night! I chuckled on the way to the ball-room: I had dispensed with going up to the dressing-room. My robe was a genuine one, heavy and warm; so I had no overcoat to check.

"Grave monk, your blessing!"

Turning, I beheld an exquisite Columbine.



[Illustration: Turning, I beheld an exquisite Columbine.]

"*Pax vobiscum!*" I replied solemnly.

"*Pax* ... What does that mean?"

"It means, do not believe all you see in the newspapers."

Columbine laughed gaily. "I did not know that you were a Latin scholar; and besides, you gave me to understand you were coming as a Jesuit, Billy."

Billy? Here was one who thought she knew me. I hastened to disillusion her.

"My dear Columbine, you do not know me, not the least bit. My name is not Billy, it is Dicky."

"Oh, you can not fool me," she returned. "I heard you call out to Teddy Hamilton that your card was the ten of hearts; and you wrote me, saying that would be your card."

Complications already, and I hadn't yet put a foot inside the ball-room!

"I am sorry," I said, "but you have made a mistake. Your Jesuit probably told you his card would be the nine, not the ten."

"I will wager—"

"Hush! This is a charity dance; no one makes wagers at such affairs."

"But—Why, my goodness! there's my Jesuit now!" And to my intense relief she dashed away.

I carefully observed the Jesuit, and made up my mind to keep an eye upon him. If he really possessed the ten of hearts, the man who kept tally on the cardboard was doing some tall thinking about this time. I glided away, into the gorgeous ball-room.

What a vision greeted my eye! The decorations were in red and yellow, and it seemed as though perpetual autumnal sunset lay over everything. At the far end of the room was a small stage hidden behind palms and giant ferns. The band was just striking up *A Summer Night in Munich*, and a wonderful kaleidoscope revolved around me. I saw Cavaliers and Roundheads, Puritans and Beelzebubs, Musketeers, fools, cowboys, Indians, kings and princes; queens and empresses, fairies and Quaker maids, white and black and red and green dominoes. Tom Fool's night, indeed!

Presently I saw the noble Doge of Venice coming my way. From his portly carriage I reasoned that if he wasn't in the gold-book of Venice he stood very well up in the gold-book of New York. He stopped at my side and struck an attitude.

"*Pax vobiscum!*" said I, bowing.

"Be at the Inquisition Chamber, directly the clock strikes the midnight hour," he said mysteriously.

"I shall be there to deliver the supreme interrogation," I replied.

"It is well." He drifted away like a stately ship.

Delightful foolery! I saw the Jesuit, and moved toward him.

"Disciple of Loyola, hast thou the ten of hearts?"

"My hearts number nine, for I have lost one to the gay Columbine."

"I breathe! Thou art not he whom I seek."

We separated. I was mortally glad that Columbine had made a mistake.

The women always seek the monk at a masquerade; they want absolution for the follies they are about to commit. A demure Quakeress touched my sleeve in passing.

"Tell me, grave monk, why did you seek the monastery?"

"My wife fell in love with me,"—gloomily.

"Then you have a skeleton in the clothes-press?"

"Do I look like a man who owned such a thing as a clothes-press, much less so fashionable a thing as a family skeleton?"

"Then what do you here?"

"I am mingling with fools as a penance."

A fool caught me by the sleeve and batted me gaily over the head with a bladder.

"Merry come up, why am I a fool?"

"It is the fashion," was my answer. This was like to gain me the reputation of being a wit. I must walk carefully, or these thoughtless ones would begin to suspect there was an impostor among them.

"Aha!" There was mine ancient friend Julius. "Hail Caesar!"

He stopped.

"Shall I beware the Ides of March?" I asked jovially.

"Nay, my good Cassius; rather beware of the ten of hearts," said Caesar in hollow tones, and he was gone.

The ten of hearts again! Hang the card! And then with a sigh of relief I recollected that in all probability he, like Columbine, had heard me call out the card to Hamilton. Still, the popularity of the card was very disquieting. I wished it had been seven or five; there's luck in odd numbers.... A Blue Domino! My heart leaped, and I thought of the little ticket in my waistcoat pocket. A Blue Domino! If, by chance, there should be a connection between her and the ticket!

She was sitting all alone in a corner near-by, partly screened by a pot of orange-trees. I crossed over and sat down by her side. This might prove an adventure worth while.

"What a beautiful night it is!" I said.

She turned, and I caught sight of a wisp of golden hair.

"That is very original," said she. "Who in the world would have thought of passing comments on the weather at a masque! Prior to this moment the men have been calling me all sorts of sentimental names."

"Oh, I am coming to that. I am even going to make love to you."

She folded her hands,—rather resignedly, I thought,—and the rollicking comedy began.

When they give you a mask at a ball they also give you the key to all manner of folly and impudence. Even stupid persons become witty, and the witty become correspondingly daring. For all I knew, the Blue Domino at my side might be Jones' wife, or Brown's, or Smith's, or even Green's; but so long as I was not certain, it mattered not in what direction my whimsical fancy took me. (It is true that ordinarily Jones and Brown and Smith and Green do not receive invitations to attend masquerades at fashionable hunt clubs; but somehow they seem to worry along without these equivocal honors, and prosper. Still, there are persons in the swim named Johnes and Smythe and Browne and Greene. Pardon this parenthesis!)

As I recollected the manner in which I had self-invited the pleasure of my company to this carnival at the Blankshire Hunt Club, I smiled behind my mask. Nerves! I ought to have been a professor of clinics instead of an automobile agent. But the whole affair appealed to me so strongly I could not resist it. I was drawn into the tangle by the very fascination of the scheme. I was an interloper, but nobody knew it. The ten of hearts in my pocket did not match the backs of those cards regularly issued. But what of that? Every one was ignorant of the fact. I was safe inside; and all that was romantic in my system was aroused. There are always some guests who can not avail themselves of their invitations; and upon this vague chance I had staked my play. Besides, I was determined to disappear before the hour of unmasking. I wasn't going to take any unnecessary risks. I was, then, fairly secure under my Capuchin's robe.

Out of my mind slipped the previous adventures of the evening. I forgot, temporarily, the beautiful unknown at Mouquin's. I forgot the sardonic-lipped stranger I had met in Friard's. I forgot everything save the little ticket that had accidentally slipped into my package, and which announced that some one had rented a blue domino.

And here was a Blue Domino at my side. Just simply dying to have me talk to her!

"I am madly in love with you," I began. "I have followed you often; I have seen you in your box at the opera; I have seen you whirl up Fifth Avenue in your fine barouche; and here at last I meet you!" I clasped my hands passionately.

"My beautiful barouche! My box at the opera!" the girl mimicked. "What a cheerful Ananias you are!"

"Thou art the most enchanting creature in all the universe. Thou art even as a turquoise, a patch of radiant summer sky, eyes of sapphire, lips—"

"Archaic, very archaic," she interrupted.

"Disillusioned in ten seconds!" I cried dismally. "How could you?"

She laughed.

"Have you no romance? Can you not see the fitness of things? If you have not a box at the opera, you ought at least to make believe you have. History walks about us, and you call the old style archaic! That hurts!"

"Methinks, Sir Monk—"

"There! That's more like it. By my halidom, that's the style!"

"Odds bodkins, you don't tell me!" There was a second ripple of laughter from behind the mask. It was rare music.

"I *could* fall in love with you!"

"There once was a Frenchman who said that as nothing is impossible, let us believe in the absurd. I might be old enough to be your grandmother,"—lightly.

"Perish the thought!"

"Perish it, indeed!"

"The mask is the thing!" I cried enthusiastically. "You can make love to another man's wife—"

"Or to your own, and nobody is the wiser,"—cynically.

"We are getting on."

"Yes, we are getting on, both in years and in folly. What are you doing in a monk's robe? Where is your motley, gay fool?"

"I have laid it aside for the night. On such occasions as this, fools dress as wise men, and wise men as fools; everybody goes about in disguise."

"How would you go about to pick out the fools?"—curiously.

"Beginning with myself—"

"Thy name is also Candor!"

"Look at yonder Cavalier. He wabbles like a ship in distress, in the wild effort to keep his feet untangled from his rapier. I'll wager he's a wealthy plumber on week-days. Observe Anne of Austria! What arms! I'll lay odds that her great-grandmother took in washing. There's Romeo, now, with a pair of legs like an old apple tree. The freedom of criticism is mine to-night! Did you ever see such ridiculous ideas of costume? For my part, the robe and the domino for me. All lines are destroyed; nothing is recognizable. My, my! There's Harlequin, too, walking on parentheses."

The Blue Domino laughed again.

"You talk as if you had no friends here,"—shrewdly.

"But which is my friend and which is the man to whom I owe money?"

"What! Is your tailor here then?"

"Heaven forbid! Strange, isn't it, when a fellow starts in to pay up his bills, that the tailor and the undertaker have to wait till the last."

"The subject is outside my understanding."

"But you have dressmakers."

"I seldom pay dressmakers."

"Ah! Then you belong to the most exclusive set!"

"Or perhaps I make my own dresses—"

"Sh! Not so loud. Supposing some one should overhear you?"

"It was a slip of the tongue. And yet, you should be lenient to all."

"Kind heart! Ah, I wonder what all those interrogation points mean—the black domino there?"

"Possibly she represents Scandal."

"Scandal, then, is symbolized by the interrogation point?"

"Yes. Whoever heard of scandal coming to a full stop, that is to say, a period."

"I learn something every minute. A hundred years ago you would have been a cousin to Mademoiselle de Necker."

"Or Madame de Staël."

"Oh, if you are married—"

"I shall have ceased to interest you?"

"On the contrary. Only, marriage would account for the bitterness of your tone. What does the Blue Domino represent?"

"The needle of the compass." She stretched a sleeve out toward me and I observed for the first time the miniature compasses woven in the cloth. Surely, one does not rent a costume like this.

"I understand now why you attracted me. Whither will you guide me?"—sentimentally.

"Through dark channels and stormy seas, over tropic waters, 'into the haven under the hill.'"

"Oh, if you go to quoting Tennyson, it's all up with me. *Are you married?*"

"One can easily see that at any rate *you* are not."

"Explain."

"Your voice lacks the proper and requisite anxiety. It is always the married woman who enjoys the mask with thoroughness. She knows her husband will be watching her; and jealousy is a good sign."

"You are a philosopher. Certainly you must be married."

"Well, one does become philosophical—after marriage."

"But are you married?"

"I do not say so."

"Would you like to be?"

"I have my share of feminine curiosity. But I wonder,"—ruminating, "why they do not give masquerades oftener."

"That is easily explained. Most of us live masquerades day by day, and there might be too much of a good thing."

"That is a bit of philosophy that goes well with your robe. Indeed, what better mask is there than the human countenance?"

"If we become serious, we shall put folly out of joint," said I, rising. "And besides, we shall miss the best part of this dance."

She did not hesitate an instant. I led her to the floor, and we joined the dancers. She was as light as a feather, a leaf, the down of the thistle; mysterious as the Cumaean Sibyl; and I wondered who she might be. The hand that lay on my sleeve was as white as milk, and the filbert-shaped horn of the finger-tips was the tint of rose leaves. *Was* she connected with the ticket in my pocket? I tried to look into her eyes, but in vain; nothing could I see but that wisp of golden hair which occasionally brushed my chin as with a surreptitious caress. If only I dared remain till the unmasking! I pressed her hand. There was an answering pressure, but its tenderness was destroyed by the low laughter that accompanied it.

"Don't be silly!" she whispered.

"How can I help it?"

"True; I forgot you were a fool in disguise."

"What has Romance done to you that you should turn on her with the stuffed-club, Practicality?"

"She has never paid any particular attention to me; perhaps that is the reason."

As we neared a corner I saw the Honorable Julius again. He stretched forth his death's-head mask.

"Beware the ten of hearts!" he croaked.

Hang his impudence! ... The Blue Domino turned her head with a jerk; and instantly I felt a shiver run through her body. For a moment she lost step. I was filled with wonder. In what manner could the ten of hearts disturb *her*? I made up my mind to seek out the noble Roman and learn just how much he knew about that disquieting card.

The music ceased.

"Now, run away with your benedictions," said the Blue Domino breathlessly.

"Shall I see you again?"—eagerly.

"If you seek diligently." She paused for a moment, like a bird about to take flight. "Positive, fool; comparative, fooler; superlative, foollest!"

And I was left standing alone: What the deuce did she mean by that?

After all, there might be any number of blue dominoes in the land; and it seemed scarcely credible that a guest at the Hunt Club would go to a costumer's for an outfit. (I had gone to a costumer's, but my case was altogether different. I was an impostor.) I hunted up *Imperator Rex*. It was not long ere we came face to face, or, to speak correctly, mask to mask.

"What do you know about the ten of hearts?" I began with directness.

"I am a shade; all things are known to me."

"You may be a lamp-shade, for all I care. What do you know about the ten of hearts?"

"Beware of it,"—hollowly. From under his toga he produced a ten of hearts!

My knees wobbled, and there was a sense of looseness about my collar. The fellow *knew* I was an impostor. Why didn't he denounce me?

"Is the back of your card anything like this one?"—ironically. "I dare say it isn't. But have your good time, grave monk; doubtless you are willing that the fiddlers shall be paid." And wrapping his toga about him majestically, he stalked away, leaving me staring dumfoundedly after his receding form.

Discovered!

The deuce! Had I been attired like yon Romeo, I certainly should have taken to my heels; but

a fellow can not run in a Capuchin's gown, and retain any dignity. I would much rather be arrested than laughed at. I stood irresolute. What was to be done? How much did he know? Did he know who I was? And what was his object in letting me run my course? I was all at sea.... Hang the grisly old Roman! I shut my teeth; I would see the comedy to its end, no matter what befell. If worst came to worst, there was always Teddy Hamilton to fall back on.

I made off toward the smoking-room, rumbling imprecations against the gods for having given me the idea of attending this masquerade, when it would have been cheaper and far more comfortable to go to the theater.

But as soon as I entered the smoking-room, I laughed. It was a droll scene. Here we were, all of us, trying savagely to smoke a cigar or cigarette through the flabby aperture designated in a mask as the mouth. It was a hopeless job; for myself, I gave it up in disgust.

Nobody dared talk naturally for fear of being identified. When a man did open his mouth it was only to commit some banal idiocy, for which, during office hours, he would have been haled to the nearest insane asylum and labeled incurable. Added to this was a heat matching Sahara's and the oppressive odor of weltering paint.

By Jove! Only one man knew that the back of my card was unlike the others: the man who had picked it up in old Friard's curio-shop, the man who had come to Blankshire with me! I knew now. He had been there buying a costume like myself. He had seen me on the train, and had guessed the secret. I elbowed my way out of the smoking-room. It wouldn't do me a bit of harm to ask a few polite questions of Mr. Caesar of the sardonic laugh.

But I had lost the golden opportunity. Caesar had gone to join the shades of other noble Romans; in vain I searched high and low for him. Once I ran into Hamilton. His face was pale and disturbed and anxious.

"What's the trouble, Hamilton?" I asked, with forced gaiety.

He favored me with a penetrating glance.

"The very devil is the trouble," he growled. "Several of the ladies have begun to miss valuable jewels. Anne of Austria has lost her necklace and Queen Elizabeth is without a priceless comb; altogether, about ten thousand dollars."

"Robbery?" I looked at him aghast.

"That's the word. Curse the luck! There is always something of this sort happening to spoil the fun. But whoever has the jewels will not get away with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have already sent for the village police. Now I shall lock all the doors and make every man and woman produce cards for identification,"—abruptly leaving me.

Thunderbolts out of heaven! My knees and collar bothered me again; the first attack was trifling compared to this second seizure. How the devil was I to get out?

"Are you searching for me?" inquired a soft voice at my elbow.

I turned instantly. The Blue Domino had come back to me.

"I have been searching for you everywhere," I said gallantly.

"Oh! but that is a black one. Never mind; the fib was well meant."

I led her over to a secluded nook, within a few feet of the door which gave entrance to the club cellars. This door I had been bearing in mind for some time. It is well to know your topography. The door was at the left of the band platform. There was a twin-door on the other side. We sat down.



[Illustration: I led her over to a secluded nook. We sat down.]

"Have you heard the news?" I asked.

"No. Has some one been discovered making love to his own wife by mistake?"

"It's serious. Anne of Austria and Queen Elizabeth have been robbed of some jewels."

"A thief among us?"

"A regular Galloping Dick. I'm a thief myself, for that matter."

"You?" she drew away from me a bit.

"Yes. My name is Procrastination."

"Ah, my grave Capuchin, we do not steal time; we merely waste it. But is what you tell me true?"

"I am very sorry to say it is. The jewels were worth something like ten thousand dollars."

"Merciful heavens!"

"It is true, infernally true,"—looking around to see if by chance Caesar had reappeared on the scene. (How was I to manage my escape? It is true I might hie me to the cellars; but how to get out of the cellars!) "Have you seen Julius Caesar?" I asked.

"Caesar?"

"Yes, Miss Hawthorne—"

The Blue Domino swung about and leaned toward me, her hands tense upon the sides of her chair.

"What name did you say?"—a strained note in her voice.

"Hawthorne," I answered, taking out the slip of pasteboard. "See! it says that one blue domino was rented of Monsieur Friard at five-thirty this afternoon."

"How did you come by that ticket?" she demanded.

"It was a miracle. I purchased a mask there, and this ticket was wrapped up in my bundle by mistake."

"It is a curious coincidence,"—her voice normal and unagitated.

I was confused. "Then I am mistaken?"—my chagrin evident. (All this while, mind you, I was

wondering if that cellar-door was unlocked, and how long it would take me to reach it before the dénouement!)

"One way or the other, it does not matter," said she.

"Yet, if I could reach the cellars,"—absently. Then I bit my tongue.

"Cellars? Who said anything about cellars? I meant that this is not the hour for unmasking or disclosing one's identity,"—coldly.

"And yet, when Caesar whispered 'Beware the ten of hearts' you turned and shuddered. What have you to offer in defense?"

"It was the horrid mask he wore."

"Well, it wasn't handsome of him."

"What did you mean by cellars?"—suddenly becoming the inquisitor in her turn.

"I? Oh, I was thinking what I should do in case of fire,"—nimply.

"That is not the truth."

"Well, no, it isn't. Can you keep a secret?" I whispered.

"If it isn't a terrible one."

"Well, I have no earthly business here. I am an impostor."

"An impostor!"

"Yes. And for the past few minutes, since I heard of the robbery, I've been thinking how I could get out of here upon the slightest notice." While the reckless spirit was upon me, I produced the fatal card and showed the back to her. "You will find that yours is of a different color. But *I* am not the Galloping Dick; it was only a hare-brained lark on my part, and I had no idea it would turn out serious like this. I was going to disappear before they unmasked. What would you advise me to do?"

She took the card, studied it, and finally returned it. There followed an interval of silence.

"I have known the imposition from the first," she said.

"What!"

She touched the signet-ring on my little finger. "I have seen that once before to-night. No," she mused, "you will not blow up the post-office to-night, nor the police-station."

She lifted the corner of her mask, and I beheld the girl I had met in Mouquin's!

"You?"

"Silence! So this is the meaning of your shuffling those cards? Oh, it is certainly droll!" She laughed.

"And are you Miss Hawthorne?"

"I am still in the mask, sir; I shall answer none of your questions."

"This is the finest romance in the world!" I cried.

"You were talking about getting out," she said. "Shall I lend you my domino? But that would be useless. Such a prestidigitator as Signor Fantoccini has only to say—Presto! and disappear at once."

"I assure you, it is no laughing matter."

"I see it from a different angle."

An artist's model, and yet a guest at this exclusive function?

A commotion around the stage distracted us. Presently we saw Teddy Hamilton mount the stage and hold up his hands.

"Attention, ladies and gentlemen!" he called.

Silence gradually fell upon the motley groups of masqueraders.

"A thief is among us. I have had all the exits closed. Everybody will be so kind as to present cards at the main entrance. Three ten-spots of hearts have been tallied on the comparing lists. We have been imposed upon. The police are on the way. Very sorry to cause you this annoyance.

The identity of the holders of the cards will be known only to those of us on the committee."

Silence and then a murmur which soon became a fuzzing like that of many bees.

The Blue Domino suddenly clutched my arm.

"Please take me away, take me away at once! I'm an impostor, too!"

Two of us!

This was disaster. I give you my solemn word, there was nothing I regretted so much as the fact that I hadn't gone to the theater.

But I am a man of quick thought and resource. In the inelegant phrasing of the day, me for the cellars!

"Come," said I to the girl; "There's only one chance in a hundred, but we'll take it together."

"Together? Where?"

"Why, to the cellars. I've a pocketful of matches. We can make a try. For, if there's a thief around, and we are caught and proved impostors—Well, I leave you to imagine!"

"I will go with you," she replied resolutely.

The gods were with us. The door leading to the cellars was not locked. I opened it, passed the girl before me, and closed the door.

"I am frightened!" she whispered.

"So am I," I offered, to reassure her. "You are not afraid of rats, are you?"

"No-o!"

"Bully!" I cried. Then I laughed.

"How *can* you laugh? It is horrible!" she protested.

"You would come, though I heard your uncle warn you. Look at it the way I do. It's a huge joke, and years from now you'll have great fun telling it to your grandchildren."

"I wish, at this moment, I could see so far ahead—What was that?"—seizing my arm.

Click!

Somebody had locked the door behind us!

IV

In other words, we had departed the scene of festivities none too soon. I could readily understand why the door had been locked: it was not to keep us in the cellars; rather it was to prevent any one from leaving the ball-room by that route. Evidently our absence had not been noticed, nor had any seen our precipitate flight. I sighed gratefully.

For several minutes we stood silent and motionless on the landing. At length I boldly struck a match. The first thing that greeted my blinded gaze was the welcome vision of a little shelf lined with steward's candles. One of these I lighted, and two others I stuffed into the pocket of my Capuchin's gown. Then we tiptoed softly down the stairs, the girl tugging fearfully at my sleeve.

There was an earthy smell. It was damp and cold. Miles and miles away (so it seemed) the pale moonshine filtered through a cobwebbed window, It was ghostly; but so far as I was concerned, I was honestly enjoying myself, strange as this statement may seem. Here was I, setting forth upon an adventure with the handsomest, wittiest girl I had ever laid eyes upon. If I extricated her neatly, she would always be in my debt; and the thought of this was mighty pleasant to contemplate.

"Do you know the way out?"

I confessed that, so far as I knew, we were in one of the fabled labyrinths of mythology.

"Go ahead," she said bravely.

"I ask only to die in your Highness' service,"—soberly.

"But I do not want you to die; I want you to get me out of this cellar; and quickly, too."

"I'll live or die in the attempt!"

"I see nothing funny in our predicament,"—icily.

"A few moments ago you said that our angles of vision were not the same; I begin to believe it. As for me, I think it's simply immense to find myself in the same boat with you."

"I wish you *had* been an anarchist, or a performer in a dime-museum."

"You might now be alone here. But, pardon me; surely you do not lack the full allotment of the adventurous spirit! It was all amusing enough to come here under false pretenses."

"But I had not reckoned on any one's losing jewels."

"No more had I."

"Proceed. I have the courage to trust to your guidance."

"I would that it might be always!"—with a burst of sentiment that was not wholly feigned.

"Let us be on,"—imperatively. "I shall not only catch my death of cold, but I shall be horribly compromised."

"My dear young lady, on the word of a gentleman, I will do the best I can to get you out of this cellar. If I have jested a little, it was only in the effort to give you courage; for I haven't the slightest idea how we are going to get out of this dismal hole."

We went on. We couldn't see half a dozen feet in front of us. The gloom beyond the dozen feet was Stygian and menacing. And the great grim shadows that crept behind us as we proceeded! Once the girl stumbled and fell against me.

"What's the matter?" I asked, startled.

"I stepped on something that—that moved!"—plaintively.

"Possibly it was a potato; there's a bin of them over there. Where the deuce are we?"

"If you swear, I shall certainly scream!" she warned.

"But I can swear in the most elegant and approved fashion."

"I am not inclined to have you demonstrate your talents."

"Aha! Here is the coal-bin. Perhaps the window may be open. If so, we are saved. Will you hold the candle for a moment?"

Have you ever witnessed a cat footing it across the snow? If you have, picture me imitating her. Cautiously I took one step, then another; and then that mountain of coal turned into a roaring tread-mill. Sssssh! Rrrrr! In a moment I was buried to the knees and nearly suffocated. I became angry. I would reach that window—

"Hush! Hush! The noise, the noise!" whispered the girl, waving the candle frantically.

But I was determined. Again I tried. This time I slipped and fell on my hands. As I strove to get up, the cord of my gown became tangled about my feet. The girl choked; whether with coal-dust or with laughter I could not say, as she still had on her cambric-mask.

"Forgive me," she said. And then I knew it was not the coal-dust.

"I'll forgive you, but I will not promise to forget."

"Merciful heavens! you must not try that again. Think of the noise!"

"Was I making any noise?"—rubbing the perspiration from my forehead. (I had taken off my mask.)

"Noise? The trump of Judgment Day will be feeble compared to it. Surely some one has heard you. Why not lay that board on top of the coal?"

A good idea. I made use of it at once. The window was unlatched, but there was a heavy wire-screen nailed to the sills outside. There was no getting out that way. The gods were evidently busy elsewhere.

"Nothing doing," I murmured, a bit discouraged.

"And even if there was, you really could not expect me to risk my neck and dignity by climbing through a window like that. Let us give up the idea of windows and seek the cellar-

doors, those that give to the grounds. I declare I shall leave by no other exit."

"It was very kind of you to let me make an ass of myself like that. Why didn't you tell me beforehand?"

"Perhaps it's the angle of vision again. I can see that we shall never agree. Seriously, I thought that if you got out that way, you might find the other exit for me. I am sorry if my laughter annoyed you."

"Not at all, not at all. But wouldn't it be wise to save a little laughter to make merry with when we get out?"

I stepped out of the bin and relieved her of the candle; and we went on.

"You did look funny," she said.

"Please don't!" I begged.

Soon we came to a bin of cabbages. I peered in philosophically.

"I might find a better head in there than mine," I suggested.

"Now you are trying to be sarcastic," said the girl.

We went on.

"Wait a moment!" she cried. "Here's a bin of nice apples."

Apples! Well, my word, she was a cool one! I picked up one, polished it on my sleeve, and gave it to her.

"I'm hungry," she said apologetically.

"And plucky, too," I supplemented admiringly. "Most women would be in a weeping state by this time."

"Perhaps I am waiting till it is all over."

"You had better take off your mask." In fact I felt positive that the sight of her exquisite face would act like a tonic upon my nerves.

"I am doing very well with it on. I can at least keep my face clean." She raised the curtain and took a liberal bite of the apple—so nonchalantly that I was forced to smile.

"Here's a box," said I; "let's sit down while we eat. We are safe enough. If any one had heard the racket in the coal-bin, the cellar would have been full of police by this time."

And there we sat, calmly munching the apples, for all the world as if the iron hand of the law wasn't within a thousand miles of us. It was all very amusing.



[Illustration: And there we sat, calmly munching the apples.]

"Are—*are* you the man they are hunting for?" she asked abruptly.

"I never stole anything more terrible than green apples—and ripe ones"—with a nod toward the apple-bin.

"Pardon me! I feel very guilty in asking you such a question. You haven't told me your name."

"Haven't I? My name is Richard Comstalk. My friends call me Dickey."

"Dickey," she murmured. "It's a nice name."

"Won't you have another apple?" I asked impulsively.

"My appetite is appeased, thank you."

An idea came to me. "Hamilton said there were three tens of hearts. That meant that only one was out of order. Where did you get your card?"

"That I shall tell you—later."

"But are you really an impostor?"

"I should not be in this cellar else."

"You are very mystifying."

"For the present I prefer to remain so."

We tossed aside the apple-cores, rose, and went on. It was the longest cellar *I* ever saw. There seemed absolutely no end to it. The wine-cellar was walled apart from the main cellar, and had the semblance of a huge cistern with a door opening into it. As we passed it, the vague perfume of the grape drifted out to us.

"Let's have a bottle," I began.

"Mr. Comstalk!"

"By absent-treatment!" I hastened to add.

"You will make a capital comrade—if we ever get out of this cellar."

"Trust me for that!" I replied gaily. "Be careful; there's a pile of empty bottles, yearning to be filled with tomato-catsup. Give me your hand."

But the moment the little digits closed over mine, a thrill seized me, and I quickly bent my head and kissed the hand. It was wrong, but I could not help it. She neither spoke nor withdrew her hand; and my fear that she might really be offended vanished.

"We are nearly out of it," I said exultantly. "I see the cellar-stairs on ahead. If only those doors are open!"

"Heaven is merciful to the fool, and we are a pair," she replied, sighing gratefully. "It seems strange that nobody should be in the cellar on a night like this. Hark! They are playing again up stairs in the ball-room."

"And wondering a whole lot where that third ten of hearts has gone."

"But, listen. How are we to get back to the trolley? We certainly can not walk the distance in these clothes."

"Oh, that carryall will come to our rescue. We are weary and are leaving early, don't you know? That part is simple; the complicated thing is to shake the dust of this cellar."

"What a big furnace!" she exclaimed, as we came into view of the huge heating apparatus. "And there's more coal."

A man stepped out from behind the furnace, and confronted us. A red bandana covered the lower part of his face and his hat was pulled down over his eyes. But I recognized him instantly. It was the fellow with the villainous pipe! Something glittered ominously at the end of his outstretched arm.

"If you make any noise, sir, I'll have to plug you, sir," he said in polite but muffled tones.

The candle slipped from my fingers, and the three of us stood in darkness!

V

There was a clicking sound, and the glare of a dark-lantern struck my blinking eyes.

"Pick up the candle, sir," said the tranquil voice from behind the light.

I obeyed readily enough. Fate was downright cruel to us. Not a dozen feet away was liberty; and now we were back at the beginning again, with the end nowhere in sight.

"Shall I light it, sir?" I asked, not to be outdone in the matter of formal politeness.

"Yes, sir, doubtless you will need it."

I struck a match and touched the candle-wick.

"Burglar?" said I. (For all my apparent coolness, my heart-beats were away up in the eighties!)

The girl snuggled close to my side. I could feel her heart beating even faster than mine.

"Burglar?" I repeated.

"Indeed, no, sir,"—reproachfully. "Mine is a political job."

"A political job?"—thunderstruck.

"Yes, sir; I am an inspector of cellars,"—grimly. "I couldn't get around to this here cellar earlier in the day, sir, and a fellow's work *must* be done."

Here was a burglar with the sense of humor.

"What can I do for you?" I asked blandly.

"Firstly, as they say, you might tell me what you and this lady *are* doing in this lonesome cellar."

"Say 'sir,' when you address me."

"Yes, sir."

"The lady and I were playing hide-and-peek."

"Nice game, sir,"—grinning. "Were you trying to hide under the coal?"

"Oh, no; I was merely exploring it."

"Say 'sir,' when you address me."

"Sir."

"You're a cool hand, sir."

"I am gratified to learn that our admiration is mutual. But what are *you* doing here?"

"I was ascertaining if the law was properly observed, sir," shaking with silent laughter.

"But what puzzles me," I went on, "is the fact that you could gather the gems in that garb." For I was positive that this was the Galloping Dick every one was looking for.

"I don't understand a word you say, sir. I'm an inspector of cellars, sir, not a jeweler. So you and the lady was playing hide-and-peek? Come, now, *what* is your graft? Is *all* the push here to-night?"

"That depends,"—cursing under my breath that I wore a gown which hampered my movements. For, truth to tell, I was watching him as a cat watches a mouse.

"Well, sir, we of the profession never interferes with gentlemanly jobs, sir. All I want of you is to help me out of here."

"I am not a burglar."

"Oh, I understand, sir; I understand completely. A gentleman is always a gentleman, sir. Now, you can return to that coal-bin. I was just about to make for it when you lit that candle."

"Why not leave by the cellar-doors?"

"I have my reasons, sir; most satisfactory reasons, sir. *I* prefer the window. Get along!"—his tones suddenly hardening.

I got along.

"The lady may sit down, sir," he said courteously.

"Thank you, I will," replied the girl, plumping down on an empty winecase. (She afterward confessed that if she had not sat down on the box, she would have sat down on the cellar-floor, as a sort of paralysis had seized her knees.)

I stepped into the coal-bin, and rested the candle on the little shelf for that purpose. I was downright anxious to see the fellow safely away. There wasn't room in that cellar for the three of us. His presence doubly endangered us and multiplied the complications. I was in no position to force the gems from him. A man who has ten thousand dollars' worth of jewels on his person doesn't stop at shooting; and I possessed a healthy regard for my skin. I opened the window and caught it to the ceiling by a hook I found there.

"There is a stout screen, my man."

"Take this, sir, and cut it out,"—handing me a pair of wire-clippers, holding his lantern under his arm meanwhile. The muzzle of the revolver, during all this time, never wavered in its aim at my head.

I went to work at the screen, and presently it fell inward.

"Is that satisfactory?"—with impressive irony.

"You are the most *perfect* gentleman that *I* ever see, sir!"

The girl laughed hysterically.

"Now what?" The fun was beginning to pall on me.

"Step out of the bin and stand aside. Sit down by the lady. Maybe she's a bit frightened."

I obeyed him to the letter.

"Thanks!" With the agility of a cat he leaped up and wriggled through the window. He turned. "Good night, sir. Sometime maybe I'll do the same for you, sir."

"Go to the devil!" I snarled.

"My, my! What a temper, sir! I wouldn't have thought it of you, and a nice lady in speaking distance!"

He disappeared.

The girl laid a hand on my arm.

"You have acted very sensibly, Mr. Comstalk. If you had not, it is quite certain he would have shot you."

"It would have been a good thing for me if he had. He has gone, and the jewels have gone with him. I hadn't the least chance; the wretch! He probably came disguised as a plumber, and nobody suspected him."

"But if he possessed the ten of hearts, why should he have left this way?"

"Possibly my idea was only an imitation of his. There must have been at least a dozen tens of hearts. My dear young lady, I would give a good deal if you were well out of this. I believed my plan was for the best, and instead I have simply blackened the case against us. I have been too adventurous. The situation looks very serious just now. Of course, in the long run, we shall clear ourselves; but it will take some fine arguing to do it, and possibly half a dozen lawyers."

"It is a terribly embarrassing predicament; but since we started out together, we'll hang together." She held out her hand to me. "It will be fun to extricate ourselves with full honors."

"You're a brick!" And I pressed her hand tightly.

"Now, I wonder why the burglar didn't try those cellar-doors?" she murmured.

"By Jove, I'll soon find out! Come on. There's hope yet."

This time we reached the stone steps without interference. I gave the candle to the girl, cautiously put a shoulder against one of the doors, and gave a gentle heave. It was not locked. Through the thin crack I looked out upon the bright world of moonshine and crystal. Instantly I permitted the door to settle into its accustomed place. I readily understood the burglar's reasons. Seated upon a box, less than a dozen feet away, and blissfully smoking one of the club's cigars,

sat a burly policeman. So *they* had arrived upon the scene!

"What is it?" asked the girl, as I motioned her to retreat.

"The worst has come: the police!" dramatically.

"Gracious heavens, *this* is frightful! We shall never get out now. Oh dear! Why did I ever come? It will be in the papers, with horrid pictures. We ought not to have left the ball-room. Our very actions will tell heavily against us. Awful!"

"Now, don't you worry. They will not take any notice of you, once they set eyes upon me. *Homo sum!* They are looking for *me*. There's only one superfluous ten of hearts. I have it."

"But I shall be found with you, and the stupid police will swear I am an accomplice." She wrung her hands.

"But no jewels will be found upon us," I argued half-heartedly.

"They will say we have already disposed of them."

"But the real burglar—"

"They will say that he came into the cellar at our bidding."

This girl was terribly reasonable and direct.

"Hang it! I know Teddy Hamilton, the M. F. H. He'll go my bail, and yours, too, for that matter. Come, let's not give up. There *must* be some other way out."

"I wish I might believe it. Why *did* I come?"—a bit of a wail stealing into the anger in her voice.

"This is Tom Fool's Night, and no mistake," I assented ruefully.

"But I am a bigger fool than you are; I had an alibi, and a good one."

"An alibi? Why on earth, then, did you follow me? What is your alibi?"

"Never mind now. We should still be in this miserable cellar,"—briefly. "What a night! I am so ashamed! I shall be horribly compromised."

"I'll take the brunt of it all. I'm sorry; but, for the love of Heaven, don't cry, or I shall lose what little nerve I have left."

"I am not crying!" she denied emphatically. "My inclination is to shriek with laughter. I'm hysterical. And who wouldn't be, with police officers and cells staring one in the face? Let us be going. That policeman outside will presently hear us whispering if we stand here much longer."

There was wisdom in this. So, once again I took the candle, and we marched back. There wasn't a single jest left in my whole system, and it didn't look as if there was ever going to be another supply. We took the other side of the furnace, and at length came to a flight of wooden stairs, leading somewhere into the club. It was our last chance, or we should indeed be obliged to stay all night in some bin; for it would not be long before they searched the cellars. If this flight led into the kitchen, we were saved, for I could bluff the servants. We paused. Presently we ascended, side by side, with light but firm step. We reached the landing in front of the door without mishap. From somewhere came a puff of air which blew out the candle. I struck a match viciously against the wall—and blundered into a string of cooking-pans! It was all over, the agony of suspense!

Blang! Rumpity-bumpity-blang-blang!

I have heard many stage thunders in my time, but that racket beat anything and everything this side of siege-guns.

Instantly the door opened and a policeman poked his head in. Before I had time to move, he grabbed me by the arm and yanked me—into the ballroom! The girl and I had made a complete circuit of the cellars, and had stumbled into the ball-room again by the flight opposite to that by which we left it. Cheerful prospect, wasn't it? The adventure had ceased to have any droll side to it.

"Aha!" cried the base minion of the law. "*Here* you are, then! Hello, everybody! Hello!" he bawled.

Caught! Here we were, the Blue Domino and myself, the Grey Capuchin, both of us in a fine fix. Discovery and ejection I could have stood with fortitude and equanimity; but there was bad business afoot. There wasn't any doubt in my mind what was going to happen. As the girl said, there would be flaring head-lines and horrid pictures. We were like to be the newspaper sensation of the day. Arrested and lodged in jail! What would my rich, doting old uncle say to

that, who had threatened to disinherit me for lesser things! I felt terribly sorry for the girl, but it was now utterly impossible to help her, for I couldn't help myself.

And behold! The mysterious stranger I had met in the curio-shop, the fellow who had virtually haunted me for six hours, the fellow who had masqueraded as Caesar, suddenly loomed up before me, still wearing his sardonic smile. At his side were two more policemen. He had thrown aside his toga and was in evening dress. His keen glance rested on me.

"Here he is, Mr. Haggerty!" cried the policeman cheerfully, swinging me around.

A detective! And Heaven help me, he believed me to be the thief! Oh, for Aladdin's lamp!

VI

I stood with folded arms, awaiting his approach. Nonchalance is always respected by the police. I must have presented a likely picture, however—my face blackened with coal-dust, cobwebs stringing down over my eyes, my Capuchin gown soiled and rent. The girl quietly took her place beside me.

"So you took a chance at the cellars, eh?" inquired the detective urbanely. "Well, you look it. Will you go with us quietly, or shall we have to use force?"

"In the first place, what do you and your police want of *me*?" I returned coolly.

He exhibited his star of authority.

"I am Haggerty of the Central Office. I want you for several things."

Several things? I stared at him stupidly. Several things? Then it came to me, with a jar like an earthquake. The story in the newspaper returned to my vision. Oh, this was too much, altogether too much! He took me to be the fashionable thief for whom half the New York police force were hunting. My sight swam for a moment in a blur.

"What is it you think I have done?" I demanded.

"You have, or have had, several thousand dollars' worth of gems on your person to-night."

I shrugged. The accusation was so impossible that my confidence returned.

"Mr. Haggerty, you are making a stupid mistake. You are losing time, besides. I am not the man for whom you are hunting. My name is Richard Comstalk."

"One name or another, it does not matter."

"Plenty of gall," murmured one of the minions of the law, whom I afterward learned was the chief of the village police.

"The card by which you gained admittance here," demanded the great Haggerty truculently.

I surrendered it. A crowd had by this time collected curiously about us. I could see the musicians on the stage peering over the plants.

"The thief you are looking for has gone," said I. "He escaped by the coal-window." By this statement, my feet sank deeper still.

"What did I tell you?" cried Haggerty, turning to his men. "They had an accomplice hidden in the cellars."

"I beg to inform you that you are making a mistake that will presently cost you dear,"—thinking of the political pull my uncle had in New York. "I am the nephew of Daniel Witherspoon."

"Worse and worse!" said the chief of police.

"We shall discuss the mistake later and at length. Of course you can easily explain how you came to impose upon these people,"—ironically. "Bah! the game is up. When you dropped that card in Friard's and said you were going to a masquerade, I knew your game in a minute, and laid eyes upon you for the first time since I began the chase. I've been after you for weeks. Your society dodge has worked out, and I'll land you behind the bars for some time to come, my gay boy. Come,"—roughly.

"I request Mr. Hamilton to be called. He will prove to you that you are greatly mistaken." Everything looked pretty black, I can tell you.

"You will see whom you please, but only after you are safely landed in the lockup. Now, Madame,"—turning swiftly upon the Blue Domino, "what is your part in this fine business?"

"It certainly has no part in yours,"—icily.

Haggerty smiled. "My skin is very thick. Do you know this fellow?"

She shook her head. He stood undecided for a space.

"Let me see your card."

"I decline to produce it,"—haughtily.

Haggerty seemed staggered for a moment. "I am sorry to annoy you, but you must be identified at once."

"And why?"—proudly. "Was it forbidden to go into the club cellars for such harmless things as apples?"

Apples! I looked at her admiringly.

"Apples?" repeated Haggerty. "Couldn't you have sent a servant for them?"

She did not reply.

"You were with this clever gentleman in the cellars. You may or may not be acquainted with him. I do not wish to do anything hasty in regard to yourself, but your position is rather equivocal. Produce your card and be identified—if you really can."

"I refuse!"

"Then I shall ask you to accompany us to the room up stairs till the police-patrol arrives."

"I will go,"—quietly.

"Nonsense!" I objected. "On my word of honor, I do not know this lady. Our presence in the cellar was perfectly harmless. There is no valid reason for detaining her. It is an outrage!"

"I am not going to stand here arguing with you," said Haggerty. "Let the lady produce her card; let her disclose her identity. That is simple enough."

"I have already given you my determination on that subject," replied the girl. "I can very well explain my presence here, but I absolutely decline to explain it to the police."

I didn't understand her at all. She had said that she possessed an alibi. Why didn't she produce it?

So the two of us left the gorgeous ball-room. Every one moved aside for us, and quickly, too, as if we had had the plague. I looked in vain for Hamilton. He was a friend in need. We were taken into the steward's office and the door was shut and locked. The band in the ball-room went galloping through a two-step, and the gaiety was in full swing again. The thief had been rounded up! How the deuce was it going to end?

"I can not tell you how sorry I am to have mixed you up in this," I said to the girl.

"You are in no manner to blame. Think of what *might* have happened had you blown up the post-office!"

She certainly was the least embarrassed of the two of us. I addressed my next remarks to the great Haggerty.

"Did you find a suitable pistol in Friard's?"

"A man in my business," said Haggerty mildly, "is often found in such places. There are various things to be recovered in pawnshops. The gentlemen of this club sent *me* the original ten of hearts, my presence being necessary at such big entertainments. And when I saw that card of yours, I was so happy that I nearly put you on your guard. Lord, how long I've been looking for you! I give you credit for being a clever rascal. You have fooled us all nicely. Not a soul among us knew your name, nor what you looked like. And but for that card, you might still be at large. Until the lady submits to the simple process of identification, I shall be compelled to look upon her and treat her as an accomplice. She has refused the offer I have made her, and she can not blame me if I am suspicious, when to be suspicious is a part of my business." He was reasonable enough in regard to the girl.

He turned to the chief of the village police, who was sitting at the desk ordinarily used by the club's steward.

"No reporters, mind you."

"Yes, sir. We'll see that no reporter gets wind of the capture."

The telephone bell rang. One of the police answered it.

"For you, Mr. Haggerty," he said.

Haggerty sprang to the telephone and placed the receiver to his ear.

"What?" we heard him exclaim. "You have got the other fellow? A horse and carriage at once!"

"Take mine," said the chief excitedly. "What is it?"

"My subordinate at the railway station has just landed the fellow with the jewels. Mighty quick work. I must hustle into town at once. There'll be plenty of time to attend to these persons. Bring them to town the moment the patrol arrives. The gems are the most important things just now."

"Yes, sir. You can rely upon us, Mr. Haggerty. Billy, go down with Mr. Haggerty and show him my rig."

"Good!" said Haggerty. "It's been a fine night's work, my lads, a fine night's work. I'll see that all get some credit. Permit no one to approach the prisoners without proper authority."

"Your orders shall be obeyed to the letter," said the chief importantly. He already saw his name figuring in the New York papers as having assisted in the capture of a great thief.

I cursed under my breath. If it hadn't been for the girl, I am ashamed to confess, I should have cursed out loud. She sat rigid and motionless. It must have been a cruel ordeal for her. But what was puzzling me was the fact that she made not the slightest effort to spring her alibi. If I had had one! Where was Hamilton? I scarcely inclined to the idea of sleeping in jail in a dress-suit.

Haggerty departed. A silence settled gloomily down on us. Quarter of an hour passed. The grim-visaged police watched us vigilantly. Half an hour, three-quarters, an hour. Far away we heard the whistle of an out-going train. Would I had been on it! From time to time we heard faint music. At length there was a noise outside the door, and a moment later Hamilton and two others came in. When he saw me, he stopped, his eyes bulging and his mouth agape.

"Dicky Comstalk?" he cried helplessly. "What the devil does this mean?"—turning to the police.

"Do you know this fellow, Mr. Hamilton?" asked the chief.

"Know him? Of course I know him," answered Teddy; "and I'll stake my last dollar on his honesty."

(Thanks, Teddy!) I began to breathe.

"But—" began the chief, seized with sudden misgivings.

"It is impossible, I tell you," interrupted Hamilton. "I know this gentleman is incapable of the theft. There is some frightful mistake. How the dickens did you get here, Dicky?"

And briefly I told him my story, my ass's ears growing inch by inch as I went along. Hamilton didn't know whether to swear or to laugh; finally he laughed.

"If you wanted to come, why didn't you write me for an invitation?"

"I shouldn't have come to your old ball, had I been invited. It was just the idea of the lark."

"We shall have to hold him, nevertheless," said the chief, "till everything is cleared up. The girl—"

Hamilton looked at the Blue Domino.

"Madame, will you do me the honor to raise your mask?"



[Illustration: "Madame, will you do me the honor to raise your mask?"]

She did so; and I saw Hamilton draw in his breath. Her beauty was certainly of an exquisite pattern. He frowned anxiously.

"I never saw this young woman before," he admitted slowly.

"Ha!" cried the chief, glad to find some one culpable.

"Did you receive your invitation through the proper channels?" asked Hamilton.

"I came here to-night,"—coldly, "on the invitation of Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds, who sailed for Europe Wednesday."

Here was an alibi that was an alibi! I was all at sea. Hamilton bowed; the chief coughed worriedly behind his hand. The girl had told me she was an impostor like myself, that her ten of hearts was as dark-stained as my own. I could not make head or tail to it. Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds! She was a law in the land, especially in Blankshire, the larger part of which she owned. What did it all mean? And what was her idea in posing as an impostor?

The door opened again.

"The patrol has come," said the officer who entered.

"Let it wait," growled the chief. "Haggerty has evidently got us all balled up. I don't believe his fashionable thief has materialized at all; just a common crook. Well, he's got him, at any rate, and the gems."

"You have, of course, the general invitation?" said Hamilton.

"Here it is,"—and she passed the engraved card to him.

"I beg a thousand pardons!" said Hamilton humbly. "Everything seems to have gone wrong."

"Will you guarantee this man?" asked the chief of Hamilton, nodding toward me.

"I have said so. Mr. Comstalk is very well known to me. He is a retired army officer, and to my knowledge a man with an income sufficient to put him far beyond want."

"What is your name?" asked the chief of the girl, scowling. It was quite evident he couldn't understand her actions any better than I.

"Alice Hawthorne," with an oblique glance at me.

I had been right!

"What is your occupation? I am obliged to ask these questions, Miss."

"I am a miniature painter,"—briefly,

Hamilton came forward. "Alice Hawthorne? Pardon me, but are you the artist who recently completed the miniatures of the Emperor of Germany, the Princess of Hesse, and Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds?"

"I am. I believe there is no further reason for detaining me."

"Emperor of Germany?" echoed the now bewildered chief. "Why didn't you tell all this to Mr. Haggerty?"

"I had my reasons."

Once again the door opened. A burly man in a dark business-suit entered. His face ruddy and his little grey eyes sparkled with suppressed ire. He reminded me of Vautrin, the only difference being that Vautrin was French while this man was distinctly Irish. His massive shoulders betrayed tremendous strength. He was vastly angry about something. He went to the chief's desk and rested his hands upon it.

"You are a nice specimen for a chief of police, you are!" he began.

"And who the devil are *you*?" bawled the chief, his choler rising.

"I'll tell you who I am presently."

We all eyed him in wonder. What was going to happen now?

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Hamilton?" asked the new-comer gruffly.

Hamilton signified that he was the gentleman by that name.

"Some ladies at your ball have been robbed of their diamonds, I understand?"

"About ten thousand dollars' worth."

"Look here, sir," cried the chief, standing up and balling his fist, "I want you to explain yourself, and mighty quick. You can't come into my presence in this manner."

"Bah! You have just permitted the cleverest rascal in the state to slip through your butterfingers. *I* am Haggerty."

The chief of police sat down suddenly.

VII

The consummate daring of it! Why, the rascal ought to have been in command of an army. On the Board of Strategy he would have been incomparable!

There followed a tableau that I shall not soon forget. We all stared at the real Haggerty much after the fashion of Medusa's victims. Presently the tension relaxed, and we all sighed. I sighed because the thought of jail for the night in a dress-suit dwindled in perspective; the girl sighed for the same reason and one or two other things; the chief of the village police and his officers sighed because darkness had suddenly swooped down on them; and Hamilton sighed because there were no gems. Haggerty was the one among us who didn't sigh. He scowled blackly.

This big athlete looked like a detective, and the abrupt authority of his tones convinced me that he was. Haggerty was celebrated in the annals of police affairs; he had handled all sorts of criminals, from titled impostors down to petty thieves. He was not a man to trifle with, mentally or physically, and for this reason we were all shaking in our boots. He owned to a keen but brutal wit; to him there was no such thing as sex among criminals, and he had the tenacity of purpose that has given the bulldog considerable note in the pit. But it was quite plain that for once he had met his match.

"I don't see how you can blame me," mumbled the chief. "None of us was familiar with your looks, and he showed us his star of authority, and went to work in a business-like way—By George! and he has run away with my horse and carriage!"—starting from his chair.

"Never mind the horse. You'll find it safe at the railway station," snarled Haggerty. "Now, then, tell me everything that has happened, from beginning to end."

And the chief recounted the adventure briefly. Haggerty looked coldly at me and shrugged his broad shoulders. As for the girl, he never gave her so much as a single glance. He knew a gentlewoman without looking at her twice.

"Humph! Isn't he a clever one, though?" cried Haggerty, in a burst of admiration. "Clever is no name for it. I'd give a year of my life to come face to face with him. It would be an interesting encounter. Hunted him for weeks, and to-day laid eyes on him for the first time. Had my clumsy paws on him this very afternoon. He seemed so willing to be locked up that I grew careless. Biff! and he and his accomplice, an erstwhile valet, had me trussed like a chicken and bundled into the clothes-press. Took my star, credentials, playing-card, and invitation. It was near eleven o'clock when I roused the housekeeper. I telegraphed two hours ago."

"Telegraphed!" exclaimed the chief, rousing himself out of a melancholy dream. (There would be no mention of him in the morrow's papers.)

"Yes, telegraphed. The despatch lay unopened on your office-desk. You're a good watch-dog—for a hen-coop!" growled Haggerty. "Ten thousand in gems to-night, and by this time he is safe in New York. You are all a pack of blockheads."

"Used the telephone, did he? Told you to hold these innocent persons till he went somewhere to land the accomplice, eh? The whistle of the train meant nothing to you. Well, that whistle ought to have told you that there might be a mistake. A good officer never quits his prisoners. If there is an accomplice in toils elsewhere, he makes them bring him in, he does not go *out* for him. And now I've got to start all over again, and he in New York, a bigger catacomb than Rome ever boasted of. He's not a common thief; nobody knows who he is or what his haunts are. But I have seen his face; I'll never forget him."

The chief tore his hair, while his subordinates shuffled their feet uneasily. Then they all started in to explain their theories. But the detective silenced them with a wave of his huge hand.

"I don't want to hear any explanations. Let these persons go," he commanded, with a jerk of his head in our direction. "You can all return to town but one officer. I may need a single man," Haggerty added thoughtfully.

"What are you going to do?" asked the chief.

"Never you mind. I have an idea; it may be a good one. If it is, I'll telephone you all about it when the time comes."

He stepped over to the telephone and called up central. He spoke so low that none of us overheard what he said; but he hung up the receiver, a satisfied smile on his face.

The girl and I were free to go whither we listed, and we listed to return at once to New York. Hamilton, however, begged us to remain, to dance and eat, as a compensation for what we had gone through; but Miss Hawthorne resolutely shook her head; and as there was nothing in the world that would have induced me to stay without her, I shook my head, too. It seemed to me I had known this girl all my life, so closely does misfortune link one life to another. I had seen her for the first time less than eight hours before; and yet I was confident that as many years, under ordinary circumstances, would not have taught me her real worth.

"Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds will never forgive me," said Hamilton dismally, "if she hears that I've been the cause, indirectly and innocently, of turning you away."

"Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds need never know," replied the girl, smiling inscrutably. "In fact, it would be perfectly satisfactory and agreeable to me if she never heard at all."

"I will call a conveyance for you," said the defeated M. F. H. "I shall never forgive you, Dicky."

"Yes, you will, Teddy. A loving-cup, the next time we meet at the club, will mellow everything."

Quarter of an hour later Miss Hawthorne and I, wrapped in buffalo-ropes, our feet snugly stowed away in straw, slid away, to the jangle and quarrel of sleighbells, toward Moriarty's Hollywood Inn. The moon shone; not a cloud darkened her serene and lovely countenance. The pearly whiteness of the world would have aroused the poetry in the most sordid soul; and far, far away to the east the black, tossing line of the sea was visible.

"What a beautiful night!" I volunteered.

"The beginning of the end."

"The beginning of the end? What does that mean?"

"Why, when you first spoke to me, it was about the weather."

"Oh, but this isn't going to be the end; this is the true beginning of all things."

"I wish I could see it in that light; but we can not see beauty in anything when hunger lies

back of the eyes. I haven't had anything to eat, save that single apple, for hours and hours. I was so excited at Mouquin's that I ate almost nothing."

"You are hungry? Well, we'll fix that when we get to Moriarty's. I'll find a way of waking him up, in case he's asleep, which I doubt. There will be cold chicken and ham and hot coffee."

"Lovely!"

"And we shall dine with the gods. And now it is all over and done, it *was* funny, wasn't it?"

"Terribly funny!"—with a shade of irony. "It would have been funnier still if the real Haggerty hadn't turned up. The patrol had arrived."

"But it didn't happen. I shall never forget this night,"—romantically.

"I should be inordinately glad to forget it completely,"—decidedly.

"Where's your romance?" I asked.

"I'd rather have it served to me between book-covers. As I grow older my love of repose increases."

"Do you know," I began boldly, "it seems that I have known you all my life."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Why, I might really have known you all my life, and still not have known you as well as I do this very minute,—and less than a dozen hours between this and our first meeting. You are as brave as a paladin, wise as a serpent, cool, witty—and beautiful!"

"Shall I ask the driver to let me out?" Then she laughed, a rollicking, joyous laugh.

"What is so funny?"

"I was thinking of that coal-bin."

"Well, I didn't permit a lonely potato to frighten me," I retorted.

"No, you were brave enough—among the potatoes."

"You *are* beautiful!"

"I am hungry."

"You are the most beautiful girl—"

"I want something to eat."

"—I ever saw! Do you think it possible for a man to fall in love at first sight?"

"Oh, nothing is impossible on Tom Fool's night. Positive, fool; comparative, fooler; superlative, fooliest. You are marching on with your degrees, Mr. Comstalk."

"You might call me Dicky," I said in an aggrieved tone.

"Dicky? Never! I should always be thinking of paper collars."

"I wish *I* were witty like that!"

She snuggled down beneath the robes.

An artist's model, thought I. Never in this world. I now understood the drift of her uncle's remark about her earning capacity. The Alice Hawthorne miniatures brought fabulous prices. And here I was, sitting so close to her that our shoulders touched: and she a girl who knew intimately emperors and princesses and dukes, not to mention the worldly-rich. I admit that for a moment I was touched with awe. And it was beginning to get serious. This girl interested me marvelously. I summoned up all my courage.

"Are—are you married?"

"No-o."

"Nor engaged to be married?"

"No-o. But you mustn't ask all these questions."

"How would you like to ride around in a first-class motor-car the rest of your days?"

She laughed merrily. Possibly it *was* funny.

"Are you always amusing like this?"

"Supposing I were serious?"

"In that case I should say you had not yet slipped off your fool's motley."

This directness was discouraging.

"I wonder if the ten of hearts is lucky, after all," I mused.

"We are not in jail. I consider that the best of good fortune."

"Give me your card," said I.

She gave me the card, and I put it with mine.

"Why do you do that?"

"Perhaps I want to bring about an enchantment,"—soberly.

"As Signor Fantoccini, or as Mr. Comstalk?"

"I have long since resigned my position in the museum; it was too exciting."

She made no rejoinder; and for some time there was no sound but the music of the bells.

Finally we drew up under the colonial portè-cochere of Hollywood Inn and were welcomed by the genial Moriarty himself, his Celtic countenance a mirror of smiles.

"Anything in the house to eat?" I cried, shaking the robes from me.

"Anything ye like, if you like cowl'd things. I can hate ye a pot of coffee on the gasolene-burner, and there's many a vintage in the cillars."

"That will be plenty!"—joyfully, helping Miss Hawthorne to alight.

"Sure, and ye are from the Hunt Club!"—noting our costumes. "Well, well! They niver have anny too much grub. Now, I'll putt ye in a little room all be yersilves, with a windy and a log-fire; cozy as ye plaze. Ye'll have nearly two hours to wait for the car-r from the village."

We entered the general assembly-room. It was roomy and quaint, and somewhere above us was the inevitable room in which George Washington had slept. The great hooded fireplace was merry with crackling logs. Casually I observed that we were not alone. Over yonder, in a shadowed corner, sat two men, very well bundled up, and, to all appearances, fast asleep. Moriarty lighted a four-branched candelabrum and showed us the way to the little private dining-room, took our orders, and left us.

"This is romance," said I. "They used to do these things hundreds of years ago, and everybody had a good time."

"It is now all very wicked and improper," murmured the girl, laying aside her domino for the first time; "but delightful! I now find I haven't the least bit of remorse for what I have done."

In that dark evening gown she was very beautiful. Her arms and shoulders were tinted like Carrara marble; and I knew instantly that I was never going to recover. I drew two chairs close to the grate. I sat down in one and she in the other. With a contented sigh she rested her blue-slipped feet on the brass fender.



[Illustration: With a contented sigh she rested her blue-slipped feet on the brass fender.]

"My one regret is that I haven't any shoes. What an adventure!"

"It's fine!" Two hours in the society of this enchanting creature! It was almost too good to be true. Ah, if it might always be like this—to return home from the day's work, to be greeted warmly by a woman as beautiful as this one! I sighed loudly.

Moriarty came with the chicken and ham and coffee.

"If ye would like, it won't be a bit of trouble to show ye George Washington's room; or"—with inimitable Irish drollery—"I can tell ye that he dined in this very room."

"That will serve," smiled the girl; and Moriarty bowed himself out.

His departure was followed by the clatter of silver upon porcelain. Of a truth, both of us were hungry.

"I was simply ravenous," the girl confessed.

"And as for me, I never dreamt I could be so unromantic. Now," said I, pushing aside my plate, and dropping sugar into my coffee, and vainly hunting in my pockets for a cigar, "there remains only one mystery to be cleared up."

"And what might this mystery be?" she asked. "The whereabouts of the bogus Haggerty?"

"The bogus Haggerty will never cross our paths again. He has skipped by the light of the moon. No, that's not the mystery. Why did you tell me you were an impostor; why did you go to the cellars with me, when all the while you were at the ball on Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds' invitation?"

She leaned on her elbows and smiled at me humorously.

"Would you really like to know, Signor? Well, I was an impostor." She sat with her back to the fire, and a weird halo of light seemed to surround her and frame her. "Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds accidentally dropped that invitation in my studio, a few days before she sailed for Europe. I simply could not resist the temptation. That is all the mystery there is."

"And they still think you were there rightfully!"

"You are no longer mystified?"

"Yes; there is yet another mystery to solve: myself." I knew it. Without rhyme or reason, I was in love; and without rhyme or reason, I was glad of it.

"Shall you ever be able to solve such a mystery?"—quizzically.

"It all depends upon you."

"Mr. Comstalk, you will not mar the exquisite humor of our adventure by causing me any annoyance. I am sure that some day we shall be very good friends. But one does not talk of love on eight hours' acquaintance. Besides, you would be taking advantage of my helplessness; for I really depend upon you to see me safe back to New York. It is only the romance, the adventure; and such moonlight nights often superinduce sentimentality. What do you know of me? Nothing. What do I know of you? Nothing, save that there is a kindred spirit which is always likely to lead us into trouble. Down in your heart you know you are only temporarily affected by moonshine. Come, make me a toast!"—lifting her cup.

"You are right," said I. "I am a gentleman. But it was only consistent that, having been the fool, I should now play the ass. Here's!"—and I held up my cup.

But neither of us drank; there wasn't time.

For the door opened quietly, and in walked the two men we had seen upon entering the Inn. One of them gently closed the door and locked it. One was in soiled every-day clothes, the other in immaculate evening dress. The latter doffed his opera hat with the most engaging smile imaginable. The girl and I looked up at him in blank bewilderment, and set our cups down so mechanically that the warm amber liquid splattered on the table-cloth.

Galloping Dick and the affable inspector of the cellars stood before us!

VIII

"The unexpected always happens," began the pseudo-detective, closing his hat, drawing off his gloves and stuffing them into a pocket. "As a friend of mine used to say, it is the unexpected that always surprises us. We never expected to see these charming masqueraders again, did we, William?"

"No, sir," said William, grinning affably, "we didn't. The gentleman was very nice and obliging to me, sir, when I was in the cellars."

"So I understand. Now," continued the late Mr. Haggerty, with the deadly affability of a Macaire, "I beg of you, Mr. Comstalk, I beg of you not to move or to become unduly excited. Physicians tell us that excitement wastes the red corpuscles, that is to say, the life of the blood."

"Your blood, sir, must be very thin," I returned coolly. But I cursed him soundly in my mind. William's bulging side-pocket convinced me that any undue excitement on my part would be exceedingly dangerous.

"William, you can always tell a gentleman," said the chief rogue admiringly. "A gentleman always recognizes his opportunities, and never loses his sense of the balance of things."

"And he is usually witty, too, sir," William assented.

The girl sat pale and rigid in her chair.

"What do you want?" I demanded savagely.

"For one thing, I should like to question the propriety of a gentleman's sitting down to dine with a lady without having washed his face. The coal-dust does not add to your manly beauty. You haven't a cake of soap about you, William, have you?"

"No, sir." William's face expressed indescribable enjoyment of the scene.

The girl's mouth stiffened. She was struggling to repress the almost irresistible smile that tickled her lips.

"In times like these," said I, determined not to be outdone, "we are often thoughtless in regard to our personal appearances. I apologize to the lady."

"Fine, fine! I sincerely admire you, Mr. Comstalk. You have the true spirit of adventure. Hasn't he, William?"

"He certainly has, sir."

"Comes to a private ball without an invitation, and has a merry time of it indeed. To have the perfect sense of humor—that is what makes the world go round."

"Aren't you taking extra risk in offering me these pleasantries?" I asked.

"Risks? In what manner?"

"The man you so cleverly impersonated is at the club." I do not know what prompted me to put him on his guard.

The rogue laughed lightly. "I know Mr. Haggerty's habits. He is hustling back to New York as fast as he can. He passed here ten minutes ago in the patrol, lickety-clip! He wishes to warn all pawnbrokers and jewelers to be on the lookout for me to-morrow. Ten thousand in a night!"—jovially.

"A *very* tidy sum, sir," said William.

"A fourth of which goes to you, my good and faithful friend."

"Thank you, sir," replied William.

Two cooler rogues I never wish to meet!

"But wouldn't it be well, sir, to hasten?" asked William.

"We have plenty of time now, my son."

"You have not entered this room," said the girl, her terror slipping from her, "simply to offer these banalities. What do you wish?"

"What perspicacity, William!" cried the rogue, taking out a cigarette case.

"I don't know what that word means, sir, but as you do, it seems to fit the occasion proper enough."

"It means, William, that this charming young lady scents our visit from afar."

"I had a suspicion, sir, that it might mean that." William leaned against the wall, his beady eyes twinkling merrily.

The master rogue lighted a cigarette at one of the candles.

"Pardon me," he said, "but will you join me?"—proffering the handsome gold case.

I took a cigarette and fired it. (I really wanted it.) I would show up well before this girl if I died for it. I blew a cloud of smoke at the candle-flame. There *was* a sparkle of admiration in the girl's eyes.

"Mr. Comstalk, my respect for you increases each moment." The rogue sat down.

"And to whom might this handsome case belong?" I asked, examining it closely.

"Oh, that has always been mine. There was a time,"—blowing rings at the candelabrum,— "when I was respected like yourself, rich, sought after. A woman and a trusted friend: how these often tumble down our beautiful edifices! Yes, I am a scamp, a thief, a rogue; but not because I need the money. No,"—with retrospective eyes—"I need excitement, tremendous and continuous,—excitement to keep my vigilance and invention active day and night, excitement to obliterate memory.

"But we can't do it, my friend, we can't do it. Memory is always with us. She is an impartial Nemesis; she dogs the steps of the righteous and the unrighteous. To obliterate memory, that is it! And where might I find this obliteration, save in this life? Drugs? Pah! Oh, I have given Haggerty a royal chase. It has been meat and drink to me to fool the cleverest policeman in New York. Till yesterday my face, as a criminal, was unknown to any man or woman, save William here, who was my valet in the old days. I have gone to my clubs, dined, played billiards; a fine comedy, a fine comedy! To-morrow William and I sail for Europe. Miss Hawthorne, you wear one of the most exquisite rubies I have ever seen. Permit me to examine it."

The girl tore the ring from her finger and flung it on the table. I made a move as though to push back my chair.

"I wouldn't do it, sir," warned William quietly.

My muscles relaxed.

"Do not commit any rash action, Mr. Comstalk," said the girl, smiling bravely into my eyes. "This gentleman would not appreciate it."

The master rogue picked up the ring and rolled it lovingly about his palms.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he murmured. "Finest pigeon-blood, too. It is easily worth a thousand. Shall I give you my note of exchange for it?"—humorously. The girl scorned to reply. He took out a little chamois bag and emptied its contents on the table. How they sparkled, scintillated, glowed; thousands in the whitest of stones! How he ever had got his fingers on them is something

I shall never learn. "Aren't they just beautiful?" he asked naïvely. "Can you blame me for coveting them?" He set the ruby on top of the glittering heap. It lay there like a drop of blood. Presently he caught it up and—presented it to the girl, who eyed him in astonishment. "I only wanted to look at it," he said courteously. "I like your grit as much as I admire your beauty. Keep the ring."

She slipped it mechanically over her finger.

"But you, my dear Mr. Comstalk!" he cried, turning his shining eyes upon me, while his fingers deftly replaced the gems in the bag.

"I have no jewelry," I replied, tossing aside the cigarette.

"But you have something infinitely better. I am rather observant. In Friard's curio-shop you carelessly exhibited a wallet that was simply choking to death with long yellow-boys. You have it still. Will you do me the honor?"—stretching out his slim white hand.

I looked at William; he nodded. There wasn't the slightest chance for me to argue. So I drew out my wallet. I extracted the gold-bills and made a neat little packet of them. It hurt, hurt like the deuce, to part with them. But—!

"Game, William, isn't he? Most men would have flung the wallet at my head."

"Oh, he is game, sir; never you doubt it, sir," said the amiable William.

"I have some silver in change," I suggested with some bitterness.

"Far be it that I should touch silver," he said generously, did this rogue. "Besides, you will need something to pay for this little supper and the fare back to New York." My bills disappeared into his pocket. "You will observe that I trust you implicitly. I haven't even counted the money."

William sniggered.

"And is there anything further?" I inquired. The comedy was beginning to weary me, it was so one-sided.

"I am in no particular hurry," the rogue answered, his sardonic smile returning. "It is so long since I have chatted with people of my kind."

I scowled.

"Pardon me, I meant from a social point of view only. I admit we would not be equals in the eye of the Presbyter."

And then followed a scene that reminds me to this day of some broken, fantastic dream, a fragment from some bewildering nightmare.

IX

For suddenly I saw his eyes widen and flash with anger and apprehension. Quick as a passing sunshadow, his hand swept the candelabrum from the table. He made a swift backward spring toward the door, but he was a little too late. The darkness he had created was not intense enough, for there was still the ruddy glow from the logs; and the bosom of his dress-shirt made a fine target. Besides, the eyes that had peered into the window were accustomed to the night.

Blang! The glass of the window shivered and jingled to the floor, and a sharp report followed. The rogue cried out in fierce anguish, and reeled against the wall. William whipped out his revolver, but, even from his favorable angle, he was not quick enough. The hand that had directed the first bullet was ready to direct the second.

All this took place within the count of ten. The girl and I sat stiffly in our chairs, as if petrified, it was all so swiftly accomplished.

"Drop it!" said a cold, authoritative voice, and I saw the vague outlines of Haggerty's face beyond the broken window-pane.

William knew better than to hesitate. His revolver struck the floor dully, and a curse rolled from his lips. Immediately a heavy body precipitated itself against the door, which crashed inward, and an officer fearlessly entered, a revolver in each hand. This tableau, which lasted fully a minute, was finally disturbed by the entrance of Haggerty himself.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss," he said heartily; "it's all over, I'm sorry for the bullet, but it had to be done. The rascal has nothing more serious than a splintered bone, I am a dead shot. A fine

night!"—triumphantly. "It's been a long chase, and I never was sure of the finish. You're the cleverest rogue it has been my good fortune to meet this many a day. I don't even know who you are yet. Well, well! we'll round that up in time."

Not till the candles again sputtered with light, and William was securely handcuffed and disarmed, did I recollect that I possessed the sense of motion. The smoke of powder drifted across the flickering candles, and there was a salty taste on my tongue.

"Horrible!" cried the girl, covering her eyes.

The master rogue and his valet were led out into the assembly-room, and we reluctantly followed. I saw it all now. When Haggerty called up central at the club, he ascertained where the last call had been from, and, learning that it came from Hollywood Inn, he took his chance. The room was soon filled with servants and stable-hands, the pistol-shot having lured them from their beds. The wounded man was very pale. He sat with his uninjured hand tightly clasped above the ragged wound, and a little pool of blood slowly formed at his side on the floor. But his eyes shone brightly.

"A basin of water and some linen!" cried the girl to Moriarty. "And send all these people away."

"To yer rooms, ivery one of ye!" snapped Moriarty, sweeping his hands. "'Tis no place for ye, be off!" He hurried the servants out of the room, and presently returned with a basin of water, some linen and balm.

We watched the girl as she bathed and bandaged the wounded arm; and once or twice the patient smiled. Haggerty looked on approvingly, and in William's eyes there beamed the gentle light of reverence. It was a picture to see this lovely creature playing the part of the good Samaritan, moving here and there in her exquisite gown. Ah, the tender mercy! I knew that, come what might, I had strangely found the right woman, the one woman.



[Illustration: We watched the girl as she bathed and bandaged the wounded arm.]

"You're a good little woman," said the rogue, his face softening; "and a good woman is the finest thing God ever placed upon earth. Had I only found one!" He turned whimsically toward me. "Are you engaged to marry this little woman?"

"No."

"Surely you love her!"

"Surely I do!" I looked bravely at the girl as I spoke.

But she never gave any sign that she heard. She pinned the ends of the bandages carefully.

"And what brought you to this?" asked Haggerty, looking down at his prisoner.

The prisoner shrugged.

"You've the making of a fine man in you," went on Haggerty generously. "What caused you to slip up?"

"That subject is taboo," replied the thief. "But I want to beg your pardon for underestimating your cunning."

"It was all due to a chance shot at the telephone."

"I kept you guessing."

"Merrily, too. My admiration is wholly yours, sir," returned Haggerty, picking up the telephone exchange-book. He rang and placed his lips to the transmitter, calling a number. "Hello! Is this the chief of the Blankshire police? Yes? Well, this is Haggerty. That idea I hinted to you was a mighty good one. Prepare two strong cells and have a doctor on hand. What? Oh, you will find your horse and carriage at Moriarty's. Good-by!"

My money was handed over to me. I returned it to my wallet, but without any particular enthusiasm.

"It's a bad business, William," said I.

"It's all in the game, sir,"—with a look at Haggerty that expressed infinite hatred. "In our business we can't afford to be careless."

"Or to talk too much," supplemented his master, smiling. "Talk, my friend, rounds me up with a bullet in the arm, and a long sojourn behind stone walls. Never talk. Thank you, Miss Hawthorne, and you, too, Mr. Comstalk, for the saving grace of humor. If it were possible, I should like to give Miss Hawthorne the pick of the jewels. This is a sordid world."

"Ye'er car-r is coming!" shouted Moriarty, running to the window.

So the girl and I passed out of Hollywood Inn, leaving Haggerty with his mysterious prisoners. I can't reason it out, even to this day, but I was genuinely sorry that Haggerty had arrived upon the scene. For one thing, he had spoiled the glamour of the adventure by tingeing it with blood. And on the way to the car I wondered what had been the rogue's past, what had turned him into this hardy, perilous path. He had spoken of a woman; perhaps that was it. They are always behind good actions and bad. Heigh-ho!

Once we were seated in the lonely car, the girl broke down and cried as if her heart would break. It was only the general reaction, but the sight of her tears unnerved me.

"Don't cry, girl; don't!" I whispered, taking her hand in mine. She made no effort to repulse me. "I am sorry. The rascal was a gallant beggar, and I for one shouldn't have been sorry to see him get away. There, there! You're the bravest, tenderest girl in all this world; and when I told him I loved you, God knows I meant it! It is one of those inexplicable things. You say I have known you only eight hours? I have known you always, only I had not met you. What are eight hours? What is convention, formality? We two have lived a lifetime in these eight hours. Can't you see that we have?"

"To shoot a human being!" she sobbed. Her head fell against my shoulder. I do not believe she was conscious of the fact. And I did not care a hang for the conductor.

I patted her hand encouragingly. "It had to be done. He was in a desperate predicament, and he would have shot Haggerty had the detective been careless in his turn; and he wouldn't have aimed to maim, either."

"What a horrible night! It will haunt me as long as I live!"

I said nothing; and we did not speak again till the first of the Blankshire lights flashed by us. By this time her sobs had ceased.

"I know I haven't done anything especially gallant to-night; no fighting, no rescuing, and all that. They just moved *me* around like a piece of stage scenery."

A smile flashed and was gone. It was a hopeful sign.

"But the results are the same. You have admitted to me that you are neither engaged nor married. Won't you take me on—on approval?"

"Mr. Comstalk, it all seems so like a horrid dream. You *are* a brave man, and what is better, a sensible one, for you submitted to the inevitable with the best possible grace. But you talk of love as readily as a hero in a popular novel."

"I never go back," said I. "It seems incredible, doesn't it, that I should declare myself in this

fashion? Listen. For my part, I believe that all this was written,—my Tom-foolery in Mouquin's, my imposture and yours, the two identical cards,—the adventure from beginning to end."

Silence.

"Suppose I should say," the girl began, looking out of the window, "that in the restaurant you aroused my curiosity, that in the cellars my admiration was stirred, that the frank manner in which you expressed your regard for me to—to the burglar—awakened—"

"What?" I cried eagerly.

"Nothing. It was merely a supposition."

"Hang it; I *do* love you!"

"Are you still the Capuchin, or simply Mr. Comstalk?"

"I have laid aside all masks, even that which hides the heart."

She turned and looked me steadily in the eyes.

"Well?" said I.

"If I took you on—on approval, what in the world should I do with you in case you should not suit my needs?"

"You could return me," said I laughing.

But she didn't.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HEARTS AND MASKS ***

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