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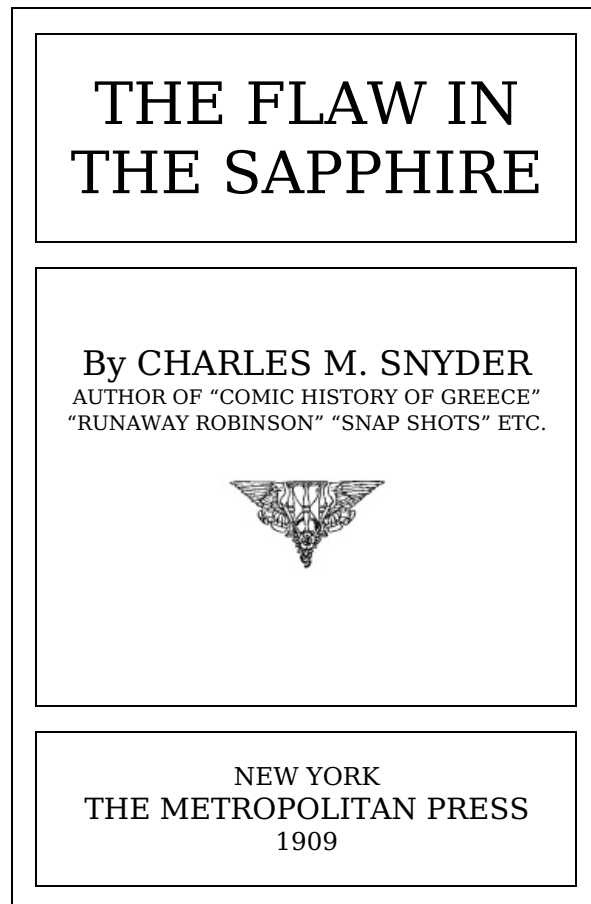
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FLAW IN THE SAPPHIRE ***



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Augustine E. McBee

A friend who stands since "Auld Lang Syne"
To all that's fine related;
To him, this little book of mine
Is duly dedicated.

—CHARLES M. SNYDER.

THE FLAW IN THE SAPPHIRE

CHAPTER I

Not long since there lived, in the city of Philadelphia, a young man of singular identity.

His only parallel was the comedian who is compelled to take himself seriously and make the most of it, or a tart plum that concludes in a mellow prune.

He was the affinity of two celebrated instances to the contrary.

To those who enjoy the whimsies of paradox he presented an astonishing resemblance, in countenance, to the late Benjamin Disraeli, and maintained in speech the unmistakable accent of O'Connell, the Hebrew statesman's Celtic antagonist.

For these reasons, until the nature of his business was discovered, he was regarded with interest by that class which is disposed to estimate the contents of a book by the character of the binding, or thinks it can measure a man's ability by the size of his hat.

On nearer acquaintance, he was relegated to the dubious distinction of an oddity to whom you would be pleased to introduce your friends if you had only a satisfactory account of his antecedents.

He was cheerful, startling, ready and adroit.

Until betrayed by his brief but effectual familiarities, it was a curious experience to remark the approach of this singular being and wonder at the appraising suggestion in his speculative glance.

Presently you decided that it was the intention of this young man to address you, and, unconsciously, you accorded him the opportunity, only to be scandalized the moment afterward by the query, altogether incongruous in such a promising aspect:

"Any old clothes to-day?"

And you passed on, chagrined and wondering.

For a number of years, while his auditors paused in an attempt to disentangle the Semite from the Celt, there was scarcely a day in which he had not subjected himself to the more or less pronounced hazards of rebuff incident to his invariable query, and there were few citizens of the sterner sex whom he had not thus addressed.

Apparently no consideration restrained him.

None was too dignified, none sufficiently austere to escape his solicitation; and while, as a rule, he waited until the object of his regard came to a standstill, he had been known to approach diagonally, and, at the point of incidence, presenting his query, pass on with a glance of impassive impersonality when it was evident that his overtures were futile or worse.

When successful in his forays, he would convey the results of his efforts to his father, who, after getting the garments thus secured in a condition of fictitious newness, displayed them in front of his establishment, marked with prices which, as he explained to those unwary enough to venture within the radius of his personality, brought him as near to nervous prostration as was possible for the parent of such inconsequent offspring.

However, no matter what the rewards of such industry, it must not be imagined that its disabilities did not insist upon due recognition and ugly ravel, and that such shred and fibre did not obtrude their unwelcome appeals for repair upon their central figure.

Shrewd, intelligent, persistent, he soon discovered that the very qualities which made him successful in his calling rendered him obnoxious to those who were unable to harmonize his promise with his condition.

However, like the majority of his countrymen, outside of those who constituted the Manhattan police force and provided the country with justices of the peace, this young man was a philosopher.

He could always provide a silver lining for a cloud as long as it was plausible to do so, and when he had exhausted his genial resources, he looked at facts squarely.

On this basis he decided, finally, that his was a case of "bricks without straw," enthusiasm minus its basis, an unhappy conclusion which was emphasized by his patient attempts to soften his angularities with the advantages provided by a night school.

Unfortunately, a business man, with an eye to the bizarre, to whom Dennis had presented some of his characteristic enterprises, had put the young Irishman in the way of securing a biography of the Hebrew premier, whom he provided with such an absurd travesty of likeness, and the "ole clo' merchant" was so impressed by the resolution and dexterity of the celebrated statesman, that he became, from that moment, the prey of a consuming ambition whose direction he could

not determine.

He grew positive daily, however, that, in view of these stimulating aspirations, he could no longer pursue his embarrassing avocation.

On the basis, therefore, that the greater the pent the more pronounced the explosion, the young merchant developed a dangerous readiness to embrace the first opportunity that presented herself in the hope that the caress would be returned.

Presently, the determination to exchange his present humiliations for future uncertainties advanced him to the point where he informed his father of his decision, and the latter immediately succumbed to a collapse which was Hebraic in its despair and entirely Celtic in its manifestation.

When this irate parent realized, at last, that this invaluable arm of his business could not be diverted from its purpose, with cruel celerity he cut off his son from all further consideration and forbade him the premises.

With the previous week's salary in his pocket, which, fortunately, had been undisturbed, Dennis Muldoon, on the day succeeding this unhappy interview with his sire, set out for New York City with his few belongings condensed, with campaigning foresight, in a satchel whose size and appearance would scarcely inspire the confidence man to claim previous acquaintance with its owner in order to investigate its contents later.

In this manner protected from the insinuating blandishments of the "buncoes," and guided by his native shrewdness, Dennis finally found accommodation for his meager impedimenta in an unassuming lodging-house called The Stag.

This establishment reflected, in a curious way, the demands of its patrons.

Almost the entire first floor was occupied by the glittering details of a seductive barroom, through which one was compelled to pass, challenged on every side by alluring labels, before reaching the restaurant immediately in the rear.

Above, the floors were divided into numerous sleeping-rooms barely large enough to accommodate a bed, washstand and one chair—a sordid ensemble, unrelieved by any other wall decoration than the inevitable announcement: "This way to the fire escape."

By a singular coincidence which would have aroused a lively emotion in the moralist, a Bible occupied a small shelf directly under the instructions quoted above.

Dennis, however, was too weary to recognize the grim association, and shortly after his arrival retired for the night to recuperate his energies for the uncertainties of the morrow.

Awakening at dawn with a sincere hope that his dreams of a succession of disasters were not prophetic, and, despite the appeals of the glitter and the labels in the bar, breakfasting with his customary abstemiousness, Dennis issued from The Stag with a determination to make the effort of his life to secure employment.

He had no definite plans other than a profound determination to resist the invitations of Baxter Street, a thoroughfare congested from end to end with innumerable shops devoted to the species of merchandizing from which he had so recently escaped.

Here his talents would have procured for him ready recognition, a condition which deepened his determination to avoid all possible contact with these solicitous sons of Shem.

Beyond a singular desire to enter a large publishing house, Dennis had no idea as to the direction of his efforts.

Aside from the fact that books held an unaccountable fascination for him, he could not explain this predilection, for their influence over him was in the aggregate.

He loved to wander, with aimless preoccupation, among closely-packed shelves, and in pursuance of this indirection was familiar with the interior of every library in the city of Philadelphia.

He appeared to have too much respect for the books to touch them, and was sufficiently in awe of their contents not to attempt to read them.

He was impressed by the volume of things, and had, unsuspected by himself, the capacity of the bibliophile to detect and enjoy the subtle aroma which emanates from leaves and binding.

In harmony, therefore, with the resolute quality which had secured to him what success he had enjoyed in his abandoned business, Dennis decided to exhaust the pleasing possibilities presented by this elevated industry before applying elsewhere.

The éclat of possible authorship did not influence him, despite the encouragement afforded him in the surprising efforts of his imagination displayed in achievements such as the following, with which he embellished the front of his father's establishment:

This Suit
was
\$50
and cheap at that
I'll let it go for
\$20

and so on indefinitely.

Urged, then, by the advantages which lubricate the lines of least resistance, and stimulated by that clarion phrase in his unfailing campaign document, his copy of Beaconsfield: "I have begun many things many times and have finally succeeded," Dennis presented himself, about ten o'clock, at one of the well-known publishing houses.

With all the alarm which affects the fair *débutante* at a court presentation, he beheld the confusing labyrinth of counters, department aisles and shelves, which combine in such a depressing suggestion of intellectual plethora and transient futility in this famous edifice.

Advised by his sensations, Dennis was quite ready to assure himself that he had entered at the wrong portal, and, returning to the street, he discovered that the building concluded upon a rearway congested with a disorderly array of drays, cases and porters. 11

Encouraged by the assurance of these more familiar surroundings, Dennis cast an anxious glance about him to discover one more in authority than the others.

His quest was given direction by a familiar accent.

"Wake up, ye lazy divils! It's dhramin' ye are this marnin'."

Guided by the sound, Dennis beheld a naturally cheerful Irishman occupied with the double task of assuming an austere demeanor, and quickening, with brisk orders, the movements of the porters under his direction.

His present difficulties mastered, this vivacious master of ceremonies turned to look, with an inquiring glance, upon Dennis, who had presented himself to the attention of the former with the unmistakable appeal of the candidate in his demeanor.

"I want a job," said Dennis simply.

"Phwat?" inquired the foreman sharply, staring at the mosaic of physiognomy and accent embodied in Dennis. 12

"I want a job," repeated Dennis. "I nade wurk."

There was no mistaking the peculiar burr in the utterance of the last two words, but the foreman continued to regard the speaker with suspicious amazement.

"Phwat are ye, annyway?" he said with guarded brusqueness.

"A poor man, sir; I nade wurk."

"Oi don't mane that," with less severity at this frank acknowledgment; "but where do yez hail from—Limerick or Jerusalem?"

At this pointed question, which promptly reminded Dennis of the singular contradiction he presented, he replied, with a genuine Celtic adroitness that had an immediate effect upon his hearer:

"Nayther; I got off at the midway junction."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the foreman, as he appreciated this clever explanation of the singular compromise presented by Dennis. "Shure, that's not bad. By the mug ye wear, I wud advise ye to go to Baxther Street, but by the sound av ye, Oi rickommind th' Broadway squad. Wurrk, is it? Why don't ye presint that face at th' front? I hear they're shy on editors." 13

"Shure!" said Dennis, who believed that he was progressing; "but the only things I iver wrote were store signs."

"Ah, ha!" replied the foreman, "so it's handy with th' brush ye are."

"Yes," answered Dennis.

"Wait a bit," said the foreman, and pointing to a marking-outfit he directed Dennis to display his name and address upon a smooth pine board which he provided for that purpose:

Dennis Muldoon,
The Stag Hotel,
Vesey St.,
N.Y.

"Ah, ha!" cried the foreman as he contrasted the name with the incongruous face of the young man before him, "ye don't have to play it on a flute, annyway; there's nothin' Sheeny about that." Then, directing his attention to the character of the work itself, he added: "That's not bad at all, at all. See here," he said abruptly, as he picked up the board which Dennis had decorated and fastened it to the warehouse wall with a nail, "Oi'll kape that for riferince. Oh, Oi mane it," he said with gruff assurance, as he noted the disappointment which shadowed the expressive face before him; "an' mebbe ye won't have to wait so long, nayther." 14

"I hope not," said Dennis frankly.

"Well, ye see," said the foreman, "the prisint incoombent has been mixin' too much red wid his paint, an' it don't wurrk."

"You mean he drinks?" asked Dennis with humorous inquiry.

"Oi do," replied the foreman; "an' now that we have inthroduced th' subject, excuse a personal quistion: Do ye wet yure whistle in business hours?"

"No," answered Dennis promptly, "nor out of them. Father attended to that part of the business." 15

"Well," replied the foreman, "Oi can't talk longer wid ye this marnin'. Come 'round be th' ind of the wake," and dismissing Dennis with a nod he withdrew into the warehouse.

The main feature of discouragement which presented itself to Dennis as he left this locality to ponder over its possibilities, was that the end of the week was five days off.

This was serious.

His rupture with Muldoon, senior, had left him but poorly provided with linen and lucre; and a campaign of assault upon the barricades of prejudice and suspicion, which was involved in the anxious solicitude of the man seeking employment, demanded every possible accessory of personal appearance and a reasonably equipped commissariat.

Anxious, therefore, to subject his meager resources to the least strain possible, Dennis at last succeeded in securing, in one of the more pretentious stores on Baxter Street, a contrivance for the relief of penury and threadbare gentility known at that time by the name of "dickey."

This convenience consisted in a series of three shirt bosoms made of paper to resemble the luxury of linen. 16

When the surface first exposed showed symptoms of soil or wear, its removal revealed a fresh bosom directly under.

Adjusted to his waistcoat, it was almost impossible to detect the agreeable sham, which, under favorable auspices, could be made to last for a week.

Thus equipped, Dennis proceeded to his hotel, where, after according the cheerful salutation of the industrious barkeeper the acknowledgment of a lively Irish nod, in which there was both fellowship and refusal, he proceeded to the rear, to banquet upon whatever offered the most for his money.

During the two days succeeding, Dennis, true to the apprehensive calculation natural to the unemployed, did not propose to rest upon the assurances of his Irish friend in the publishing house.

Anything untoward might occur.

In fact, he was familiar with this seamy side of Providence.

He had been so often misled by promises that it was only his wholesome Celtic faith and prompt capacity to rebound which kept him from becoming entirely blasé. 17

His experience, however, left him alert. So he applied industriously at various establishments for employment, and received his first lessons in the courteous duplicity which ostentatiously files the application for future reference, and the cruel kindness of frank rebuff.

On the morning of the third day of this futile foray, Dennis noticed that the exposed bosom of his dickey was not altogether presentable.

It appeared to have registered the record of his applications and failures, and, as such, was not a good campaign document, so to speak.

Having progressed in his simple toilet up to the point of embellishment, he proceeded to tear away the soiled surface, and in doing so discovered not only the clean bosom beneath, but that the rear of the one just detached was covered with a block of minute print.

Drawing the solitary chair close to the window, he read by the light of early dawn the following extraordinary compilation.

CHAPTER II 18

In the city of — there lived one Rodman Raikes, unpopularly known as the "Fist."

The title, however, was not in recognition of personal prowess, for no more cringing, evasive creature ever existed.

He was little in mind, little in body, and little in his dealings.

If a principle could ever be concrete, Raikes was the embodiment of the grasping and the uselessly abstemious.

He appeared to shun a generous sentiment as one would avoid an infected locality, and usually walked with head tilted and body bent as if engaged in following a clue or intent upon the search of some stray nickel.

He was thoroughly despised by all who knew him, a sentiment which he returned with vicious interest, and never neglected an opportunity of lodging some sneering shaft where it would cause the most irritation. 19

His character was so much in harmony with these generalizations that he had been described as dividing his laughter into chuckles—if the strident rasp which he indulged could be called by that name—in order that it might last the longer; and that he grinned in grudging instalments.

His obvious possession was an entire row of brick houses, in the most insignificant of which he dwelt.

Over this sparse domicile a spinster sister presided, who reflected, on compulsion, in the manner of a sickly moon, the attenuity and shrivel of her brother.

A nephew of Raikes' completed the circuit.

This young man intruded upon this strange household an aspect so curiously at variance with that of his rickety elders that he suggested to the fanciful the grim idea of having exhausted the contents of the larder and compelled the other two to shift for themselves.

He was, in the eyes of the disapproving Raikes, offensively plump; an example of incredible expenditure applied to personal gratification and gluttonous indulgence.

20

The miser behaved as if he appeared to consider it a mark of studied disrespect to be compelled to contrast his gaunt leanness with the young man's embonpoint, and was propitiated only by the reflection that he contributed in no way to his nephew's physical disproportion, since the latter was able to be at charges for his own welfare from resources derived from steady outside employment.

Adjoining the house occupied by Raikes, and connected with it by a doorway let into the wall, was a series of three dwellings used as a boarding-establishment by a widow who had seen better days and was tireless in alluding to them.

These buildings had been remodeled to communicate with each other, a continuity that concluded with the Raikes apartments.

For some reason this miserable man preferred to occupy the portion just indicated with no other tenants than his gaunt sister and the robust Robert.

This arrangement was all the more curious from the fact that Raikes made no attempt to dispose of, in fact, strangely resented any suggestion of letting, the lower floor of his end of the row.

21

That one of his avaricious disposition could thus forego such a prospect of advantage was the occasion of much speculation.

If Robert understood he gave no hint; and if the boarders on the other side of the partition indulged in curious comment they refrained from doing so in his presence.

The suggestion had been made that Raikes secreted something about that portion of the premises he occupied, but since none had the courage to investigate such a possibility, the problems it created were permitted to pass unsolved or serve to tantalize the imagination.

Regularly, at meal-time, the door leading from the Raikes apartment would open, and the mean figure of the miser, after presenting itself for one hesitating, suspicious moment, would slip silently through and subside into a near-by chair at one of the tables.

Directly after, the spinster would filter through with the mien of an apologetic phantom, and Raikes at once established the basis of indulgence by tentative nibbles of this and that, which were almost Barmecidian in their meagerness, and the sister, under his sordid supervision, followed his miserable example.

22

With singular perversity, in the midst of reasonable abundance, he forbore to accept the full measure of his privileges.

The discipline of denial was essential to the austere economies he practiced in all other directions, and his sister, rather than submit to the hardness of his rebukes, acquiesced with dismal resignation.

Robert was able to endure the table behavior of his uncle no more than the others, and so occupied a seat in the dining-room surrounded by more agreeable conditions.

If this course was intended as a diplomatic frankness to indicate to Raikes that his nephew did not expect a legacy to follow the demise of that austere relative, no one could determine.

The young man, however, continued to sit in whatever portion of the apartment he pleased and enjoy himself as much as the handicap of his relationship would permit.

23

On this basis, as if to manifest in himself the law of compensation, Robert grew vicariously robust, and accepted, with cynical good humor, the irritation of his uncle over his adipose.

Raikes and his sister had the table at which they sat entirely to themselves.

Only on the infrequent occasions of congestion had others been known to occupy seats at the same board.

It was more than hungry human nature, as embodied in most of the inmates, could stand to witness this exasperating refusal to accept a reasonable measure of what was set before them; a disability to which the scarcely concealed scowls of the exacting miser added the chill finishing touch.

One morning, however, a new boarder arrived.

Accommodations could not be found for him at the other tables, and, as was the custom of the widow under such circumstances, he was intruded upon the society of this morbid duet, after the manner of his predecessors.

24

If the usual rebellion matured at such association on the part of this recent guest, the landlady

expected to be assisted by one of those vacancies which occur with such incalculable irregularity, yet reasonable certainty, in establishments of this character.

At this a prompt transfer would be effected.

This, however, was an unusual boarder.

If his presence was obnoxious to Raikes, the latter refused to realize it; if the miser had his peculiarities, the newcomer did not see them.

He ate his meals in silence, with an abstemiousness that, unknown to himself, recommended him as cordially as any consideration might to his shriveled table companion; made friendly overtures, disguised in perfunctory courtesies, of passing the bread or the butter when either was beyond the nervous reach of the eccentric Raikes, and ventured an impassive suggestion or two as to the probable conduct of the weather.

In appearance the newcomer was startling.

His complexion was a berry-brown; his expression, aside from his eyes, was singularly composed. 25

These were uncommonly black and piercing, and peeped from receding sockets through heavy eyebrows, which hung like an ambush over their dart and gleam.

His nose was a decisive aquiline, beneath which his lips, at once firm and sensitive, pressed together changelessly.

His figure was tall and spare and usually clad in black, a habit which emphasized his already picturesque countenance.

There was an indescribable air about him which suggested event, transpired or about to transpire, which introduced a sort of eerie distinction to the commonplace surroundings in which he found himself, and invited many a glance of curious speculation in his direction.

All this was not without its effect upon Raikes, and it was remarked, with the astonishment the occasion justified, that the miser, in the ensuing days, emerged from his customary austerity to the extent of reciprocal amenities in the passage of bread and salt.

However, this was but the beginning. 26

Raikes discovered himself, at last, responding, with a degree of chill urbanity, to the advances of the stranger, and ere the week had concluded had assumed the initiative in conversation on more than one occasion.

By this time one of the inevitable vacancies had occurred at another table, and the widow, as usual, offered to translate this latest guest to the unoccupied seat.

The latter, however, for some strange reason, indicated a desire to remain in his present surroundings, and when this disposition was understood by Raikes, the conquest of the miser was complete.

As if to indorse the perverse aspect of inflexible things, it seemed, now that Raikes had ventured ever so little beyond his taciturn defenses, he was encouraged to further boldness.

The stranger exerted a fascination which, in others, Raikes would have considered dangerous and which he would have made his customary instinctive preparations to combat.

He could not recall a similar instance in all the years of his recent experience when he was constrained to recognize, nay, surrender to, a diffusive impulse such as this curious stranger awakened in his mind. 27

In yielding to its insinuations, even to the extent already recorded, he was agreeably conscious of a sort of guilty abandon which, at times, stupefies the moral qualities ere delivering them into the hands of a welcome invader.

For some time Robert, with the others, had enjoyed the entertainment offered by this transformation of Satyr to Faun, and the inversion advanced to still further degrees their curious regard of the "Sepoy," a picturesque description bestowed upon him by the blasé boarders.

Consequently, one evening, when, at the conclusion of the dinner, the "Sepoy," in response to the invitation of Raikes, was seen to disappear with the latter through the doorway which led to his apartments, Robert's interest in the spectacle changed to genuine alarm, until a moment's reflection upon his uncle's well-known ability to take care of himself reassured him.

Intruding the door between themselves and all further speculation, the strangely-assorted pair proceeded along a dimly-illumed hallway to a room in which Raikes usually secluded himself. 28

As the Sepoy advanced, he could see that, with the exception of two sleeping-chambers, revealed by their open doors, the apartment in which he found himself was the only one where any kind of accommodation could be found, as the balance of the house offered unmistakable evidences of being unoccupied.

"Be seated, sir," croaked Raikes, with a voice strangely suggestive of a raven attempting the modulations of some canary it had swallowed. "I do not smoke myself, and, therefore, cannot provide you with that sort of entertainment; still, I have no objection to you enjoying yourself in that way if," with a cynical shrug of the shoulders by way of apology, "you have come prepared."

Accepting this frank inhospitality in the spirit of its announcement, the stranger, smiling with

his curious eyes, produced two cigars, one of which he offered to Raikes, and which was consistently and promptly refused.

29

"I can't afford it," expostulated the latter. "I never indulge myself even in temptation; the nearest I will approach to dissipation will be, with your permission, to enjoy the aroma. I do not propose to rebuke myself for that."

"As you please," returned the other as he replaced the weed in his pocket. "It is my one indulgence; in other respects I challenge any man to be more abstemious."

"I have had none," returned Raikes with a rasping lack of emotion, "for the last ten years. It is too late to begin to cultivate a disability now."

"You are wrong," replied the Sepoy. "One's attitude cannot be rigid at all points; that is bad management. The finest tragedy I ever witnessed was emphasized by the trivialities of the king's jester."

"However," he added, as if in support of his theory, "I can, at least, trouble you for a match."

While Raikes busied himself in an effort to show the hospitality of the service indicated, the Sepoy's busy, furtive eyes glanced here and there about the room with quick, inquiring glances.

30

At one end a bedstead stood, which an antiquarian would have accepted gladly as collateral for a loan.

Near-by a wardrobe, equally remote if more decrepit, leaned against the wall to maintain the balance jeopardized by a missing foot.

One chair, in addition to those occupied by Raikes and his companion, appeared to extend its worn arms with a weary insistence and dusty disapproval of their emptiness.

A table, large enough to accommodate a student's lamp, several account books and a blotting-pad, completed this uninviting galaxy.

To the walls, however, the Sepoy directed his closest scrutiny.

With an incredibly rapid glance he surveyed every possible inch of space, turning his head cautiously to enable his eyes to penetrate into the more distant portions.

Presently, after an amount of rummaging altogether disproportionate to the nature of his quest, Raikes succeeded in finding a lucifer, which flared with a reluctance characteristic of the surroundings.

31

The Sepoy, availing himself of its blaze, deposited the remainder of the stick, with elaborate carefulness, upon the table, as if urged by the thought that his companion might convert it to further uses.

As Raikes resumed his chair, the Sepoy, recalling his glances from their mysterious foray, directed them, with curious obliqueness, upon his companion.

In no instance that Raikes could recall had the Sepoy looked upon him directly save in fleeting flashes.

At such moments Raikes was conscious of a strange tremor, a vanishing fascination, that he vainly sought to duplicate by attracting the other's attention, in order to analyze its peculiar influence.

"May I ask," he ventured after a few inhalations of his vicarious smoke, "may I ask the nature of your business?"

"Surely," replied the other. "I am a collector."

32

"Of what?" inquired Raikes, dissatisfied with the ambiguity of the answer.

"Sapphires," said the Sepoy.

"Ah!" cried Raikes.

"Yes," continued the other, regarding the kindling glance of the avaricious Raikes with a quick, penetrating look that was not without its effect upon the latter; "yes, and I have had many beautiful specimens in my time."

"But where is your establishment?" asked Raikes.

"Wherever I chance to be," was the reply.

"Still," ventured Raikes, astonished at this curious rejoinder, "you have some safe depository for such valuables."

"Doubtless," replied the other drily; "but I have a few in my room now, and, by the way, they are pretty fair specimens."

"Ah!" cried Raikes. "May I see them?"

"Why not?" assented the Sepoy. "In the meantime," he continued, as he inserted his hand in his waistcoat pocket, "what do you think of this?" and describing a glittering semicircle in the air with some brilliant object he held in his grasp, he deposited upon the table a sapphire of such extraordinary size and beauty, that Raikes, able as he was to realize the great value of this gleaming condensation, stared stupidly at it for a moment, and then, with a cry of almost gibbering avarice, caught the gem in his trembling hands and burglarized it with his greedy eyes.

33

As Raikes, oblivious of all else, continued to gaze upon the brilliant with repulsive fascination, a peculiar change transformed the face of the Sepoy.

He directed upon the unconscious countenance of his companion a glance of terrible intensity, moving his hands the while in a weird, sinuous rhythm, until presently, satisfied with the vacant expression which had replaced the eager look of the moment before in the eyes of the tremulous Raikes, the Sepoy began, with an indescribably easy, somnolent modulation, the following strange recital:

(To be continued on Dickey No. 2.)

"Thunder and lightning!" cried Dennis as he reached the exasperating announcement in italics at the bottom of the dickey back:

"Continued on Dickey No. 2."

"What th' div—now, what do you think of that? An' it's me crazy to hear what that meerschaum-colored divil was a-goin' to say. 'Dickey No. 2.' Why, that's the one I have to wear to-day, an' to think the story's on the back of it."

Truly was Dennis harassed.

He had been in many a pickle before, but never in one quite so exasperating.

Tantalized, in the first place, by the uncertainty surrounding his prospective employment, he was now confronted by a predicament which threatened to jeopardize a vital adjunct to his personal appearance.

A native curiosity, to which this outrageous tale appealed so strenuously, prompted him to detach bosom No. 2 regardless.

An equally characteristic thrift warned him against such an inconsiderate procedure.

Finally his good judgment prevailed, and with desperate haste he adjusted the remaining bosoms of the dickey to his waistcoat, plunged into his coat, clapped his hat on his head and rushed from the room.

All that day Dennis continued to receive his instalments of that bitter instruction in the ways of heedless employers and suspicious subordinates which, eased by a native good humor, conclude in the philosopher, or, unrelieved by this genial mollient, develop the cynic.

By evening he was compelled to admit, as he retraced his steps to The Stag, that he had not advanced in any way.

As he was about to pass under one of the dripping extensions of the elevated, a great splotch of grease detached itself from the ironwork and struck, with unerring precision, directly in the center of dickey No. 2.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dennis as he realized the nature of his mishap, "that settles it; I'll know what the Sepoy said to-night." A remark which proved conclusively that the philosophical element was still uppermost in the mind of this young Irishman.

After a brief exchange of courtesies with his countryman behind the bar, and a dinner so modest in the rear room as to arouse the suspicion and encourage the displeasure of the waiter, Dennis hastened up the stairway, divested himself of his upper garments, ripped off dickey bosom No. 2, and began.

CHAPTER III

As the Sepoy proceeded, Raikes leaned forward in an attitude, the discomfort and unbalance of which he seemed to be entirely unaware.

His only means of maintaining his rigid poise was in the arm which lay, with tense unrest, upon the table.

From his hand, the fingers of which had released their clutch, the stone had rolled and gleamed an unregarded invitation into the eyes of the drawn face above it.

The sickly grin of a long-delayed relaxation beguiled the extremities of his mouth, the grim lips had relaxed their ugly partnership, and his entire figure seemed upon the verge of collapse.

Raikes was listening as never before.

The clink of coin, the dry rattle and abrasion of brilliants, the rustle of bank notes could not have fascinated him more than the even, somnolent modulations of the speaker.

Every word found easy lodgment in his consciousness. There was not a sound or motion to divert, and the tale was a strange one.

"Ram Lal," said the Sepoy, "was a native merchant, trading between Meerut and Delhi, who decided to sacrifice the dear considerations of caste for the grosser conditions of gain."

"From the performance of mean and illy-rewarded services to his patron, Prince Otondo, Ram Lal had developed, with the characteristic patience and dangerous silence of the true Oriental, to a figure of some importance, whom it was a satisfaction for the prince to contemplate with a view to future exaction and levy as occasion demanded.

"His royal master resided in the Kutub, a palace situated not far from Delhi on the road to Meerut.

"This pretentious edifice, which had been established in the thirteenth century and which still presented, in some of its unrepaired portions, curious features of the bizarre architecture of that period, had been the dwelling place of a long line of ancient moghuls.

39

"Its present incumbent, however, regarded with indifference the ravages of time and decay, and satisfied himself with the lavish furnishing of that considerable portion of the palace which he occupied with his dusky retainers.

"To be at charges for all this the princely revenues had been seriously depleted.

"Since he could not look to decrepit relatives in Delhi for further allowances, and as the British Government proved equally obdurate, the prince found it necessary to calculate upon all possible sources of income.

"In such speculations, therefore, the unhappy Ram Lal became an object of logical interest.

"Up to the present the merchant had been undisturbed in the security of his possessions, which were suspected to be enormous.

"His royal patron had contented himself with the avarice of calculation, and, in order that his depredations might be worthy his proposed brigandage, he provided Ram Lal with every opportunity to develop his hoard to a respectable figure.

40

"The prince, having enjoyed the advantages of association with sundry British officials, was entirely too sagacious and philosophical to discourage the industry of the merchant at the outset; and with the patience which is enabled to foresee the end from the beginning, he awaited developments.

"In consequence, the merchant attained to everything but the ostentation of his possessions, and only assumed the dignity of his riches in the less calculating confines of his household.

"Even here, however, the subsidy of his liege was active, for among the servants of the merchant were those whose appraising eyes followed every movement, and whose mercenary memories recorded every transaction.

"With all the concern of a silent partner Prince Otondo balanced, in his philosophical mind, the various enterprises of Ram Lal.

"If they met with his august approval, the merchant's traffic was singularly free from obstruction; if the element of uncertainty was too pronounced for the apprehensive potentate, the most surprising occasions for the abandonment of his projects were developed for Ram Lal, whose intelligent mind was inclined to suspect the identity of his providence.

41

"Prince Otondo did not propose to have his interests jeopardized by precipitation or undue hazard.

"But this unhappy merchant, with perverse and unaware industry, advanced still another claim to the covert regard of his calculating highness.

"Although a widower, there remained, to remind him of his departed blessedness, a daughter, who was, as reported by the mercenaries of the prince, beautiful beyond their limited means of expression.

"The unfortunate Ram Lal, therefore, commending himself to this elevated espionage, first by his 'ducats' and next his 'daughter,' was in the predicament of the missionary whose embonpoint endears him to his savage congregation and whose edibility is convincing enough to arouse the regret that he is not twins.

"Prince Otondo, whose imagination was stimulated by this vicarious contemplation of beauty, did not find it difficult to decide that the transits of Ram Lal to and from the British barracks were open to suspicion that demanded some biased investigation.

42

"Unfortunately, too, the colonel in charge of the British forces at Delhi was equally uneasy concerning the integrity of the merchant, a state of mind which had been judiciously aggravated by the emissaries of Prince Otondo.

"The officer in charge knew that the merchant, with his license of exit and entry, was in an exceptional position to acquaint himself with considerable merchandisable information.

"Ram Lal, therefore, in response to the pernicious industry of his evil genius, like an unstable pendulum, was in danger of detention at either extreme.

"The prince speculated like a Machiavelli upon the advantages of such action on the part of the colonel, and the latter looked to the former to relieve him of the responsibility.

"However, diligence, even when baneful, has its rewards, for one day, when Ram Lal arrived at the British horn of the dilemma, he was arrested upon a charge framed to suit the emergency and subjected to a military court of investigation.

43

"At the end of eight days the merchant was released, acquitted, and on the ninth he directed his

course homeward.

"The colonel, however, had provided the prince with his opportunity, for when the irritated merchant arrived at his dwelling, he was informed that sundry officials from the palace had searched the premises for evidence of sedition, and, failing in that, had decided to accept all of his portable chattels as a substitute.

"This was depressing enough, but still might have been accepted with the customary Oriental impassiveness had it not been for the fact that the marauders had added his daughter to the collection.

"At any rate, she could not be found, and as she had never ventured from the shelter of the paternal roof without the paternal consent, Ram Lal felt that his deductions as to her whereabouts were entitled to consideration.

"He was unable to get any indorsement of his unhappy logic, for the servants had all disappeared. 44

"He determined, however, to act in accordance with his assumption, and after taking an inventory of whatever had been overlooked in the foray, which was little else than the premises, he seated himself upon a mat beneath a banyan tree in the garden, which concluded the rear of his dwelling, and was presently ell-deep in a profound reflection, which was not only ominous in its outward calm, but curiously prolonged.

"The only evidence of mental disquiet which, it was natural to suspect, disturbed him, was a strange light which gleamed from his eyes at intervals with baleful significance.

"At the conclusion of two oblivious hours Ram Lal appeared to have arrived at some definite purpose.

"He rose to his feet and strode, with a marked degree of decision, to his dwelling, where he slept in apparent and paradoxical peace until morning.

"Ere the sky was red, or the dews, in harmony with this unhappy man's dilemma, had been appropriated by the sun from the tiara of dawn, Ram Lal set out for the palace of the Kutub, in which Prince Otondo was compelled to reside for the present for some very convincing reasons provided by the British Government. 45

"In a little while the merchant had traversed the short distance intervening and was admitted through the courtyard gates.

"The last of the kings of Delhi was a decrepit old man named Dahbur Dhu, whose sole object in life seemed to be an attempt to reanimate the pomp and pageantry of a dead dynasty.

"Pensioned by the British Government, which permitted him to continue this absurd travesty, if his feeble exasperation over his predicament and his silly ostentations could be called by that name, this realmless potentate occupied his waking hours in futile revilings of the hand that at once smote and sustained him.

"While not thus engaged, he would gravitate almost to the extreme of servility in his efforts to exact additional largess from the powers in control, to expend upon this senile attempt to augment the consideration of his pageant throne. 46

"Several efforts had already been made to remove the irritating presence of this royal household to Bengal, but the time had not yet arrived when the British could regard with indifference the native prejudice which would be aroused by such a procedure.

"The infirm moghul, therefore, continued his vaudeville, which was mainly confined within the palace walls at Delhi, and persisted in his endeavors to augment his revenues.

"However, to mitigate the nuisance as far as possible, the British Government consented to recognize his grandson, Prince Otondo, as the successor to the throne, and yield a degree to the exactions of the moghul if his young kinsman would agree to remove himself permanently from Delhi and reside in the Kutub.

"To this, for a reason which shortly transpired with almost laughable incongruity, Dahbur Dhu assented, and Prince Otondo established himself at this royal residence with an outward manifestation of satisfaction, at least. 47

"Despite the fact that the merchant was a familiar figure in this enclosure, he believed that he remarked an unusual degree of interest awakened by his presence, and was assured that he detected more than one sinister and smiling glance directed, with covert insinuation, upon his impassive countenance.

"An uneasy suggestion of conspiracy met him at every turn.

"With that gravid apprehension which creates in advance the very conditions one desires to combat, Ram Lal prepared himself for a series of events which made him shudder to contemplate.

"It seemed to him that the salutes of the swarthy satellites of the prince were a degree less considerate.

"He was convinced of a cynical estimation usually accorded to the destitute.

"The depression of disaster was upon him.

"He could only think in the direction of his forebodings, so when at last he arrived in the

familiar ante-chamber and announced himself, his voice reflected his trepidation and his demeanor had lost a palpable degree of its customary assurance.

48

"While the merchant awaited the response to his request for an audience with the prince, he made a sorry attempt to assume a cheerful aspect, with the success of one who is permitted to listen to the details of his own obsequies.

"When not thus engaged, he traversed the apartment with intermittent strides—another Chryses about to make a paternal plea to this Oriental Agamemnon.

"He had canvassed his demeanor, reviewed his cautious phrases, and had even provided a desperate denunciation, which, when he considered the privileged rascality of his royal auditor, he felt assured would at once conclude the interview and his liberty.

"As Ram Lal was about to end his fifth attempt to apprehend the result of this expected interview, the curtains parted and a stalwart attendant, impassive and silent, appeared.

"In response to the eloquent concern betrayed in the glance of the merchant, the other, holding the curtains aside, indicated, by an inclination of his turbaned head and a sweep of his hand, the dignity of which was intended to convey some intimation of the personality of his master and the proportions of the privileges accorded, that the merchant was expected to proceed, which he did with trembling precipitation.

49

"As Ram Lal entered the room, his alert glance discerned the figure of the prince extended, with unceremonious abandon, upon a divan.

"Advancing, he made profound obeisance to the reclining potentate, who acknowledged his presence with a spiritless motion of his hand not unsuggestive of the humiliating degree of his condescension.

"At this period of his career Prince Otondo presented, in his personality and surroundings, considerable of the picturesque magnificence with which the native rulers delighted to surround themselves.

"His presence, at once dignified and carelessly amiable, was not the least vital accessory to the sumptuous abundance, to which he added the last touch of distinction.

"A smiling cynicism, which was one of his most engaging characteristics and an invaluable masquerade for his genuine sentiments, lingered about his thin, patrician lips.

50

"His features balanced with cameo precision, and in his eyes, usually veiled by lashes effeminately long, the whole gamut of a passionate, intolerant nature was expressed.

"'Well, most ancient and honorable!' said the prince, with an exasperating suggestion in his manner of appreciation of the travesty of his words, as he gazed upon the merchant with a glance whose speculation the latter could not determine. 'Well, how speeds thy traffic and thrive thy caravans?'

"'Not well, my lord,' answered Ram Lal, 'not well.'

"'Ah, ha!' exclaimed the prince, with an indescribable insinuation of biased rebuke in the look with which he challenged further revelations from the speaker. 'That touches me nearly; this must not be; an industrious subject may not suffer while there is a remedy at hand.'

"'Tis on that head I would beseech your majesty!' exclaimed the merchant, seizing the opportunity provided, with such plausible ingenuousness, by the august speaker.

51

"'Proceed, Ram Lal,' urged the prince, with an amiability which the merchant had known to be a dangerous prelude in the past.

"'Great prince!' replied the merchant with the prompt obedience which contemplates a possible reversal of privilege.

"'Nine days from home I strayed.

"'On my return I find my house despoiled of all its store.

"'And with the rest, O prince, the priceless tokens of thy high regard.

"'Aside from these, I do not mourn my loss, for it may be repaired.

"'Nor will I question fate, whose ears are dull to hear, whose eyes refuse to see the victims of her spleen.

"'But hear, O prince—my one ewe lamb, my sole delight—my daughter greets me not.

"'The empty halls no more re-echo to her tread.

"'No more sweet mur——'

"'Enough, Ram Lal,' interrupted the prince. 'I have heard that a needle thrust into the eye of a bullfinch will make it sing, but I did not know that misery could transform a merchant to a bard.

52

"'Disjoint your phrases a degree. You say your daughter greets you not?'

"'Yes, O prince,' replied Ram Lal, abashed at this cynical embargo upon the melancholy luxury of his rhythms; 'yes, and it is of her I would speak.'

"'Speak,' urged his august hearer.

"After a moment's reflection, in the manner of the unwelcome envoy who has reached the acute juncture of his recital and is about to disembarrass himself of a dangerous climax, the merchant

continued in sordid Hindustani:

“As I have said, O prince, my daughter has been taken from me, and I come to you in my extremity.’

“‘And why to me, Ram Lal?’ demanded the prince, with a gleam in his glance which was directly responsible for the pacific presentation which followed.

“‘Because,’ replied the merchant with discerning irreverence, ‘if it so please your highness, your providence is practical, and the ways of Vishnu are tedious.’

“‘Ah!’ exclaimed the prince appreciatively; ‘that was not so bad for a merchant; but to the point.’

“‘Little can occur in this cantonment that is not known to your highness, or that cannot be determined if you so desire.

“‘I ask your august assistance, and I have, as you will see, observed the proprieties in making my request.

“‘It is a time-honored custom for the suppliant to signalize his appreciation of the importance of the favor he solicits, is it not so?’

“‘I did not know,’ replied the prince, ‘that commerce could develop such an oracle; it is a subtle sense of fitness you express. I am interested. Proceed.’

“‘I will, your highness,’ responded Ram Lal, as he inserted his hand in one of the folds of the sash which encircled his waist. ‘You recall the stone of Sardis?’

“‘Ah!’ exclaimed the prince, his cynical listlessness transformed at once into the abandon of eagerness. ‘What of it, O merchant?’

“‘This,’ replied the latter as he withdrew his hand from his sash, ‘if your highness will deign to examine it,’ and the speaker extended toward the incredulous prince a small box of shagreen, which the latter clutched with the grasp of avarice.

“‘Will his highness deign?’ repeated Ram Lal to himself with bitter irony as the prince pressed back the lid and exposed to view a magnificent sapphire, the gleam and the glitter of which affected him like an intoxication.

“As the prince, oblivious to all else, fixed his avid glance upon the scintillant stone, an astonishing change transformed the merchant from the suppliant to a being of marked dignity of bearing and carriage.

“His eyes, no longer obliquely observant, were directed with baleful purpose upon the half-closed lids of the fascinated potentate.

“His hand disengaged itself from the sash, where it had reposed with something of the suggestion of a guardian of the treasury, and was gradually extended with sinuous menace over the declining head of the prince.

“His long, lithe figure straightened from its servile stoop, and a palpable degree of the authority which appeared gradually to fade from the fine countenance before him found an equally congenial residence in the expression of the merchant.

“There was command in every feature.

“As for the prince, his figure appeared to decline in majesty in proportion to the access of dignity which had added its unwonted emphasis to the personality of Ram Lal.

“He leaned inertly forward, one hand resting upon his knee.

“In his slowly relaxing clutch the brilliant gleamed. His forehead was moist; his lips dry; his delicate nostrils were indrawn in harmony with the concentrating lines of his brow, and the next moment, as if in response to an insinuating pass of the merchant’s hand of cobra-like undulation, the rigid poise recoiled, he settled more easily upon the divan, and with eyes still fascinated by the entrancing bauble he listened, with anomalous impassiveness, to the weird proposal of Ram Lal.

“‘Hearken, O prince!

“‘My daughter has been taken from me by whom I shall not venture to inquire.

“‘If she is returned to me, I shall be satisfied.

“‘I am here therefore to beseech your highness to see that she is restored to me.

“‘To-day, as the sun declines, I shall expect her.

“‘If she does not come to me then, O prince, a heaping handful of the precious stones you hold so dearly will be missing, and in their stead will be as many pebbles from the fountain in the courtyard.

“‘The sapphire I leave with you as a witness of my plea.’

“And slowly the merchant retreated toward the door, his eyes fastened the while upon the prince.

“As he reached the threshold he paused, and with a voice that seemed to lodge in the consciousness of his inert auditor like the sigh of Auster over the daffodils and buttercups of a dream, he repeated:

“*To-day as the sun declines.*”

“And the next instant, with an abrupt motion of his hand strangely at variance with the placid gestures just preceding, the merchant disappeared through the curtains which screened the doorway. 57

“And now,” said the Sepoy abruptly, as he moved his chair with a sharp rasp over the bare floor and transferred his glance at the same time from the drawn countenance of his rapt auditor to the gleaming gem on the table, “and now—is it not a beauty?”

“Ah, ha!” murmured Raikes, disturbed by the abrupt cessation of the sedative tones of the Sepoy and the abrasion of the chair, “superb!” And that instant all his keen animation returned.

Apparently Raikes was not aware of any blanks in his scrutiny and resumed his regard of the tantalizing facets with knowing sagacity and an envy that affected him like a hurt.

“In all my years,” he creaked, as his long, prehensile fingers riveted like a setting to the fascinating bauble, “I have never seen such a gem.

“The cutting is exquisite; it is a study in intelligent execution; every facet here cost a pang; how vital it was not to waste an atom of this precious bulk. 58

“What a delicate adjustment of the lines of beauty to the material consideration; the balance is perfect.” And with this confusion of frank cupidity and rapacious regard, the miser, with a supreme effort, pushed the stone impatiently toward the Sepoy.

“Ah!” exclaimed the latter, “it is a pleasure to show the gem to one who is able to comprehend it.

“It is even finer than you have discerned. The lapidary was subtle; his work sustains closer analysis. Have you a stray glass?

“No? Well, I will send you mine and you can entertain yourself until I see you again.”

“What!” exclaimed Raikes, “you will leave this stone with me?”

“Why not?” returned the Sepoy evenly. “You have a due regard for property. I do not fear that this gem will meet with mishap in your possession. Besides, it will be a revelation to you under the glass,” and, arising, he stepped to the door, leaving the brilliant upon the table in the grasp of the astonished Raikes, who was unable to comprehend such confidence and unconcern. 59

Traversing the hallway, the pair reached the door which opened upon the apartments controlled by the widow.

As he paused on the threshold to make his adieux to Raikes, the Sepoy, looking at the former with a marvelously glowing glance, repeated, with an emphasis so eerie as to occasion a thrill of vague uneasiness in his companion, the concluding phrase of the singular tale he had related to Raikes:

“*To-day as the sun declines.*”

And the moment after he disappeared, leaving the startled miser to gaze, with greedy contemplation, upon the sapphire which he retained in his grasp.

(*To be continued on Dickey No. 3.*)

“Oh, ho!” exclaimed Dennis as the exasperating phrase in italics met his glance, “an’ it’s here you are again. Shure, a man would tear his shirt to tatters for a tale like that,” and with appreciative meditation over the vexatious quandary presented by the cunning of the bosom-maker in thus adding another ruinous possibility to the inevitable soil and wear, he added: 60

“Shure, the man who put that sthory on the dickey-back knew his business. Where the dirt laves off the guessin’ begins, and betwixt the two it’s another dickey I’ll be after—ah, ha, an’ it’s a fine thing to have brains like that.”

With this discerning tribute, Dennis turned the last dickey around and discovered that it was protected in the rear with a sort of oiled paper, through which the story shadowed dimly.

Here was the pinch of his dilemma.

His curiosity was sharpened and his judgment impaired.

In a variety of ways literature incapacitates a man for the exigencies of existence.

Dennis found himself visibly enervated. At last he remembered that the week had advanced only as far as Thursday. Between that time and the Fabian Saturday a number of untoward events might occur.

A more seasoned applicant might present himself to the foreman upon whom Dennis depended, or, equally grievous, the present bibulous incumbent might be alarmed into mending his ways. 61

Hitherto Dennis had resisted the temptation to present himself to the attention of the foreman in advance of the date appointed.

In order, therefore, to master the anxiety which might betray him into some overt importunity, he decided to devote the day to a persistent canvass of the possibilities offered by the various wholesale houses.

Unknown to himself, Dennis had learned that the secret of patience was doing something else in the meantime.

However, the practical at last was triumphant, and Dennis, with a resolution that demanded prompt execution for its continued existence, adjusted the remaining chapter to his waistcoat in the early morning and descended to the lower floor.

On this occasion his solicitous friend behind the bar insisted upon detaining the young Irishman, who, urged by his solitary predicament and a degree depressed by the series of rebuffs which by now had developed a malicious habit, proceeded to the counter and, resting one foot upon the rail near the floor with a redeeming unfamiliarity, responded to the inquiry of the barman by admitting that he felt a "wee bit blue."

This statement led to the revelation that the barman was similarly affected, and was engaged, at that moment, in the preparation of a famous antidote greatly in demand by sundry newsgatherers and night editors in Park Row.

Dennis watched him with interest and remarked that he set out two glasses, after the manner of those who are about to compound an effervescent.

Such, however, was not the case, and Dennis was startled presently to see the barman, after filling both glasses with a decoction which caught the light from a dozen merry angles, push one of them in his direction with the companionable suggestion: "Have one with me."

Only once before had Dennis indulged in anything of a stimulating nature, and the effect upon his head the next morning had been sufficient to discourage its repetition, and he informed the barman of this disagreeable feature.

"Oh!" protested that insinuating Mephisto as he held his glass to the light the better to concentrate its hypnotic gleam and sparkle upon the vacillating youth, "there is no headache in this; this is a man's medicine. Get it down; it will do you good."

Persuaded by the example before him, duped by his depressions, and weary of his loneliness, Dennis responded to the dubious suggestion with the guilty haste of one who has decided to let down the moral bars for a short but sufficient interval.

Palliated from its original rawness by the additions of the barman, the draught was without special bite or pungency in its passage down his throat, and Dennis was aware of his indiscretion only by an increasing glow in the pit of his stomach and a disposition to credit the barman with a degree of amiability beyond that ordinarily manifested by this functionary.

The potation, however, had done its work but partially; there remained the itch of something still to be desired, an elevation yet unattained, and Dennis saw no other way up the sheer height than by an appeal to the barman to duplicate his initial effort.

When this had joined its fluent fellows in their several midsts, Dennis was inexperienced enough to accept, as a matter of course, the genial disposition toward the world in general which replaced the depression of the morning.

A native eloquence, long disused, began to urge him to a sort of confused improvisation.

His data was no longer morose.

"Holdin' on cud do annything," he assured the barman.

"It isn't a bad wurld, at all, if wan looks at it through grane glasses.

"Shure, I'm in a bit av a hole at prisint, but not too dape to crawl out of."

Then after a pause, to enable himself to "shake hands," so to speak, with the suddenly developed genial aspect of affairs, he informed the barman, with the philosophy of his potations, that "A laugh will always mend a kick, providin' th' kick ain't too hard."

This pleased the barman, who responded in his characteristic fashion, and Dennis, in acknowledgment, substituted the price of breakfast as fitting return of civilities.

However, this was the climax.

Dennis could advance no farther. His bibulous friend, with apprehensive disapproval, offered a few diplomatic suggestions involving the retirement of the young man to his room, which the latter accepted with an unbalanced gravity that administered its reproof even through the callous epidermis of the barman.

Arrived at his room, Dennis, influenced by his accelerated circulation, was convinced that the apartment was oppressively warm, and divested himself of his coat and waistcoat.

In doing so he detached the dickey from his neck, and as it fell to the floor the curious tale contained in its predecessors appealed unmistakably to his enkindled imagination.

Oblivious of the campaign arranged for the day, heedless of the inner protest, Dennis, with all the abandon of his condition, hastened to remove the oil paper from the rear of the dickey, and began a race with his moral lapse in a feverish perusal of the following.

When Raikes returned to his room he seemed to himself like a sunset mocked by the adjacent horizon, with tantalizing suggestions for which it was reflectively responsible.

With the proper inspiration, there is a degree of poetry in the worst of us.

The knowledge that he would be compelled to restore the gem to its owner in the morning bestirred another comparison.

This time his idealism was not so elevated.

He likened it to a divorce from a vampire which had already digested his moral qualities.

The sapphire exhausted him.

The only parallel irritation was one which Raikes inflicted upon himself now and then.

This was on the occasions when he established himself in some unobtrusive portion of the bank and watched with greedy interest the impassive tellers handle immense sums of money with an impersonality which it was impossible for his avarice to comprehend.

The thievery of his thoughts and the ravin of his envy would have provided interesting bases of speculation for the reflective magistrate, since, if, according to the metaphysician, thoughts are things, he committed crimes daily.

Had the Sepoy, by entrusting the gem to the custody of this strange being, intended to harass his shriveled soul, he could not have adopted a more effective plan.

The certainty of the sharp bargain which Raikes could drive with such a commodity in certain localities, affected him with the exasperation which disturbs the lover who discovers in the eyes of his sweetheart the embrace to which he is welcome but from which he is restrained by the presence of her parent.

The many forms of value to which it could be transformed by the alchemy of intelligent barter made distracting appeals.

The facets danced their vivid vertigos into his brain.

At last, starting to his feet with impatient resolution, he hurried to a button in the wall, which controlled the radiator valves.

After a series of complicated movements, he succeeded in swinging aside the entire iron framework beneath it, revealing, directly in the rear, a considerable recess.

In the center of this space a knob protruded surrounded by a combination lock, which, under Raikes' familiar manipulation, disclosed a further cavity.

With an expression not unsuggestive of the mien of the disconsolate relict who has just made her melancholy deposit in the vault, Raikes placed the sapphire in this second recess, closed the combination door, replaced the swinging radiator, and prepared to retire for the remainder of the night.

When sleep, if that unrestful and populous trance to which he finally succumbed can be so designated, came to him, the disorders of his wakeful hours were emphasized in his dreams.

He had been haled to court; convicted without defense; sent headless to Charon, and was obliged, on that account, to make a ventriloquial request for a passage across the Styx; so that, in the morning, it was with genuine relief he returned the jewel to its owner and resumed his wonted meagerness of visage and useless deprivations.

As the Sepoy pocketed the gem he looked at Raikes with a glance at once searching and derisive as he asked:

"Was I not right in calling it a marvel?"

"Aye!" returned Raikes sourly, "marvel, indeed; but the miracle of it is that you have it back again. Your trust in human nature would be sublime were it not so unsupported; it needs the tonic of loss. I hope this is not habitual?"

"I will pay you the tribute of assuring you that it is not," replied the Sepoy.

"Ah, ha!" returned Raikes with a mirthless grin. "I am to accept the brief custody of this gem as a recognition of my personal integrity. I see, I see. Well, I would appreciate the courtesy more if I could indorse its incaution. However," he added abruptly, "why did you end that extraordinary tale so inconclusively? I could almost suspect you of a design to arouse my curiosity as to what is to follow."

"Ah, you remember, then?"

"Why not?" asked Raikes. "The narrative is singular enough, God knows, to make an impression, and sufficiently recent to be definite. I would not like to think that I could forget things so easily."

"Very well," said the Sepoy. "Come to my room at ten o'clock to-night; I am due elsewhere until then."

With a promptness that attested his interest, Raikes presented himself at the hour appointed, and his singular host again permitted him to enjoy a delegate smoke.

"Here!" he exclaimed abruptly, producing a strong magnifying glass, "here's a connoisseur whose revelations you may trust. Examine these facets with its help," and again the Sepoy placed the sapphire within reach of the covetous Raikes, who promptly availed himself of the

tantalizing privilege.

Waiting, apparently, until his auditor became absorbed in his contemplation of the gem, the Sepoy at last began with the same even modulations which characterized his narrative at the outset:

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"No sooner had Ram Lal disappeared through the curtains than the curious apathy of the prince vanished and was replaced by a demeanor of perplexed concentration in the direction pursued by the merchant.

"The prince had listened without comment or interruption during the recital of the narrator, his eyes fixed, the while, upon the brilliant.

"He did not know of the weird gestures of the speaker, nor had he seen the wonderful transformation of the man.

"Consequently he was startled for the moment to contemplate the blank so recently filled by Ram Lal.

"The sapphire, however, remained. That, at least, was real, and replacing it in the box, he proceeded, with a degree of absent preoccupation, to the courtyard, and presently found himself gazing aimlessly in the fountain basin.

"Curiously enough, it had not occurred to the prince to resent the assured attitude of the merchant, or to speculate upon the insinuating suggestions of complicity which the latter had managed to lodge in the consciousness of his august auditor.

72

"Nor did he feel outraged at the intrusion of the dangerous alternative proposed by the audacious Ram Lal.

"He appeared to be seduced by the sapphire and fascinated by the recital.

"Slowly he retraced the byways of the strange episode until he resumed, with singular precision of memory, the words of the merchant, which explained the presence of the gem:

"I have observed the proprieties in making my request. It is a time-honored custom for the suppliant to signalize his appreciation of the importance of the favor he solicits."

"Ah! a sudden illumination pervaded the mind of the prince.

"The sapphire was a royal subsidy.

"What favor could he grant in proportion to the value of such means of overture?

"The question established another point of association; unconsciously he quoted again:

"To-day at sundown I shall expect my daughter. If she does not come to me then, O prince, a heaping handful of the precious stones you hold so dearly will be missing, and in their stead will be as many pebbles from the fountain in the courtyard."

73

"Pebbles for diamonds!" he repeated, and yet the proposition did not appeal to his cynical humor. There was menace in the suggestion, but his intolerant spirit did not resent it.

"In a vague way he was more convinced than alarmed, and did not pause to puzzle over the anomaly, although reassured somewhat as he reflected upon the cunning safeguards to his treasury, whose solitary sesame was known to himself alone.

"Prince Otondo, like other native rulers at this period, frightened at the mercenary reforms of the British in other sections, and instructed by the unhappy comparisons, had concentrated the whole of his fortune and considerable of his current revenues in jewels.

"These were portable and could be concealed about his person in any emergency demanding a hasty abdication on his part.

"To the shrewd Ram Lal the prince had entrusted the purchase of nearly all of this costly collection, contenting himself, for the present, with intelligent calculations as to the percentage of profit which had accrued to the merchant in these transactions.

74

"Ah, well!" and with an impatient shrug of the shoulders, that was curiously devoid of its customary insolence, Prince Otondo dismissed these unfamiliar apprehensions and forbore to wonder at their strange intrusion upon his wonted complacency.

"Apparently, a more agreeable occasion of reflection presented itself, for a smile, half sinister, half genial, illumined the gloom of his fine countenance. As if in obedience to its suggestion, he turned abruptly from the fountain and re-entered the palace.

"Arrived at that portion of the structure set aside for his individual use, he hurried, with expectant, lithe agility, through an opening in the wall concealed hitherto by silken hangings, and entered upon a narrow passageway, which terminated in another undulating subterfuge of drapery.

"Pausing outside, the prince lightly touched a gong suspended from the ceiling and which replied with a solemn chime-like resonance.

75

"In response, the curtains parted, and a native woman, pathetically ugly and servile, appeared and prostrated herself in abject salutation.

"Following the direction of his hand the cringing creature arose and hurried along the passageway just traversed by the prince, who, satisfied as to her departure, parted the curtains and entered a small ante-chamber, beyond which a sumptuously-appointed apartment extended.

"At the extreme end, with a demeanor more suggestive of expectation than alarm or dejection, a young girl reclined upon a divan near the lattice-screened window.

"Advised of the approach of her distinguished visitor by an advance rendered as obvious as possible by the rustling sweep of the parted curtains and an unwonted emphasis of tread, which avoided the rugs and sought the tessellated floor for this purpose, the supple figure stood erect and in an attitude of questioning deference awaited whatever demonstration might follow this apparently not unexpected advent.

76

"As she stood thus in an unconscious pose of virginal dignity, the girl seemed to express a subtle majesty, in which, at the moment, the prince was manifestly deficient.

"A degree taller than her age would warrant, she appeared to the enamored gaze of the prince the ideal of symmetrical slenderness.

"Her figure, perfectly proportioned, and chastened, by the ardent rigors of the climate, of every fraction of superfluous flesh, appeared to bud and round for the sole purpose of concluding in exquisite tapers.

"Her eyes, large and luminous and harmoniously fringed with that placid length of lash usually associated with the sensuous, were saved from that suspicion by the innocent question and confiding abandon of her half-parted lips.

"Her hands, clasped at the moment before her, possessed the indescribable contour of refinement and high breeding, and manifested a degree of the tension of her present privileges by a closer interlace of the fingers than usual.

77

"A robe of white, confined loosely to her waist by a vari-colored sash, which drooped gracefully to catch up the folds in front, clung softly to her figure in sylphid revelation of the matchless proportions it could never conceal.

"'Lal Lu!' exclaimed the prince unevenly, his face reflecting the strife of deference and desire as he disengaged the clasped hands of the maiden and held them closely in his own, 'what is it to be, the Vale of Cashmere or the snows of Himalaya?'

"For a moment the girl gazed with disconcerting directness upon her ardent companion, as the warmth of his impulse deepened the dusk of his countenance and threaded the fine white of his eyes with ruddy suffusions.

"'O prince!' she replied, veiling her eyes the while with tantalizing lashes and reflecting, with exquisite duplication, a degree of the color which burned in the cheeks of her visitor, 'other answer have I none save that I gave thee yesterday.'

"With an impatient exclamation the prince released the hands he held in such vehement grasp, and stood, for a space, with his arms folded, directing upon the trembling beauty the while a gaze of vivid, glowing menace which was scarcely to be endured.

78

"'Ah!' he cried in a voice of husky contrast to his usual placid utterance, 'have you reflected, Lal Lu, how futile thy objections may be if I choose to make them so?'

"With surprising calmness and a sweet dignity, which was not without its effect upon the prince, although it sharpened to the refinement of torture the keenness of his infatuation, Lal Lu replied:

"'I have said, my lord.'

"At this reply the prince, exasperated beyond further control, with ruthless, fervent abandon, caught the trembling Lal Lu in his arms and held her, palpitating, reproachful, in his savage embrace.

"Bewildered at the quickness of his action, Lal Lu reposed inertly within the passionate restraint of his sinewy arms, but the next instant, transformed into an indignant goddess, struggled, with surprising strength, from his clasp and held the mortified prince in chafing repulse by the chaste challenge of her flaming eyes.

79

"'Hear me, Prince Otondo!' she cried with unmistakable candor and disturbing incisiveness of speech:

"'I love not save where I choose.

"'Of what avail is it to subdue this frail body? What is the joy of such a conquest? Where the pleasure in an empty casket?'

"Abashed, astounded, the prince retreated a space and looked, with savage intentness, upon the beautiful girl, superb in her denunciation, enchanting in the rebellious dishevel of her hair, the indignant rebuke of her eyes.

"Some reflection of contriteness must have beamed its acknowledgment of the justice of her virtuous outburst in the glance which held her in its ardent fascination, for Lal Lu resumed, in a voice sensibly modulated and with a demeanor curiously softened:

"'Long have I known of thee, O prince!

"'Before all others have I placed thee.

"'Wonder not, then, that I resent the ignoble assumption that my regard may be compelled.

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"'My love is as royal as thine.

"'I bestow it where I will; unasked, if its object pleaseth me.

“But I make no sign, O prince.

“In such a stress a maiden may not speak her mind.’

“Peace, Lal Lu!’ exclaimed the prince, who, during her initial reproaches and her subsequent explanations, had recovered his native dignity of carriage and elevation of demeanor; ‘peace! Never before have I hearkened to such speech as thine.

“All my life I have had but to ask, and what I craved was mine.

“My wish has been my command.

“Hear, then, Lal Lu: Henceforward thou art as safe with me as in thy father’s home.’

“Aye! what of him?’ interrupted the maiden; ‘what of my father, O prince?’

“All is well with him,’ replied the prince, manifestly chagrined at the incautious introduction of this disturbing name and the filial solicitude it awakened.

“He has been assured of thy safety; of him will I speak later. But now, Lal Lu——

“I acknowledge thy rebuke. I stand before thee, thy sovereign, thy suppliant.

“See!’ he exclaimed, ‘what I cannot demand, I entreat’; and with an indescribably fascinating tribute of surrender and yearning, this royal suitor awaited her reply.

“Leaning for support against a slender stand near-by, to which she communicated the trembling fervor which pulsed so warmly through every fiber of her being, the beautiful Lal Lu looked upon the fine countenance before her with a light in her eyes that dazzled with its subtle radiance.

“Oh, Lal Lu!’ cried the prince as he advanced toward the trembling maiden with eager precipitation.

“One moment, O prince!’ exclaimed Lal Lu, extending a restraining hand.

“I know not what to say to thee; yet will I meet thy candor with equal frankness. Yea, Prince Otondo, I love thee indeed. I feel no shame in the confession. I have loved thee always. I am——’

“But the prince, after the fashion of lovers, made further speech impossible; and Lal Lu, with all the exquisite charm of womanly capitulation, threw her dusky arms about his neck and held his lips to hers in the only kiss beside her father’s she had ever known.

“For one delirious moment, and then, releasing herself, she stood before the prince, a very blushing majesty of love, and said:

“And now, O prince, I have told thee my secret. Be thou equally generous and restore me to my father, and then come to me when thou desirest and I am thine.”

“Concealing his impatience at this last suggestion, the prince, with wily indirection, said:

“It is too late to-day, Lal Lu. Thy father will be here on the morrow; rest thyself until then,’ and fearful lest the maiden would penetrate his purpose, he added:

“Lal Lu, I am compelled to leave thee for a space; I will send thy woman to thee. Until tomorrow, then, adieu.’ And fixing upon her a glance so ardent that she almost followed him in its fascination, the prince withdrew from her presence with a reluctance which was duplicated in the bosom of the bewildered girl, if not so unmistakably evinced.

“As the prince retreated toward his apartments, the alarming alternative proposed by the merchant repeated itself with a sort of wordless insistence:

“Unless Lal Lu shall be returned, a handful of my precious stones shall be missing.

“Ah!

“In their place will be as many pebbles!

“Impossible!’

“And secure in his bedchamber, into which none might venture without ceremonious announcement, the prince hastened to a recess in the wall, where, in response to a pressure applied to a spot known only to himself, a cunningly devised panel shot back, revealing a gleaming, glittering mass of scintillating light and glamor.

“Ah, ha!’ he gloated, ‘no pebbles yet’; and plunging his hands into the costly heap, he withdrew a motley of diamonds, sapphires, rubies and opals, and held them, with grudging avarice, to the regard of the declining sun.

“No pebbles yet,’ he repeated, as he challenged the fires of the gems with the fever of his eyes, and sent mimic lightnings hither and thither by communicating the tremble of his hands and the incidence of the sunbeams to the glorious confusion of facet and hue; ‘no pebbles yet.’

“As Prince Otondo repeated this obvious reassurance, he replaced the gems, which seemed to quiver with lambent life, within the compartment, and withdrawing the shagreen case from his sash, he discharged the magnificent sapphire it contained upon the apex of the glittering heap, where it rested with a sort of insolent disproportion to the irradiant pyramid of brilliants beneath.

“Regarding the bewildering ensemble for a few moments of exulting ownership and familiar calculation, the prince closed the panel with the mien of Paris making restitution of Helen, and, turning aside, prepared to retire for the night.

"The ceremony was simple and so promptly observed that ere the radiance had ceased its revel in his mind the prince found himself reclining upon his couch, unusually ready to succumb to the sleep which he had so often sought in vain.

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"The night was hot and stifling, and yet it seemed to the prince that he had only retired to rise the moment after, so profound had been his slumber and so quickly had daybreak arrived.

"For a few moments he lay in that agreeable condition of semi-realization ere the visages of his wonted obligations had assumed the definition of their customary insistence, or the menace of a restrained remorse had reannounced itself, when suddenly, without introduction or sequence, the phrase 'pebbles for diamonds' slipped into his consciousness.

"In a second he was alert and awake; the next instant he found himself at the panel, reaching tremulously for the concealed spring.

"At last he found it; the panel shot back, and the prince, after one searching glance, stood transfixed and uttered a cry of wondering despair.

"The gleaming hoard still shot its varied lightnings. The royal sapphire still crowned its priceless apex. To his starting eyes his treasure was not a whit diminished, but directly in front, and at the base of the precious heap, lay as many as would make a heaping handful of pebbles."

86

As the Sepoy reached this startling climax in his recital, the even modulations of his voice ceased abruptly.

Raikes, missing the somnolent monotone, looked up quickly.

The eyes of the Sepoy were fixed upon him with a gleam in his glance not unlike that of the sapphire upon which the miser had been engaged during the whole of this singular narrative.

"That is a weird tale," he said at last. "Why do you pause at such a point? What is the conclusion?"

"That is some distance away yet," replied the Sepoy. "If you care to continue, I will resume the thread at this time to-morrow evening."

"Very well," answered Raikes with some impatience, "I will be here. I must, at least, congratulate you upon your observance of the proprieties in tale-telling; you manage to pause at the proper places."

87

"You are curious, then, to hear the rest?"

"Naturally," replied Raikes, with the sour candor which distinguished him. "The situation you describe I can appreciate—the loser confronted with his loss—and I am to conjecture his attitude until to-morrow night. Very well, I bid you good evening," and Raikes, with a curt inclination of the head, which made a travesty of his intention to be courteous, vanished through the doorway.

(The continuation of this remarkable story will be found on Dickey Series B, which may be bought from almost any haberdasher.)

As Dennis reached this announcement his head throbbed violently.

He had raced so apace with the movement of the tale that he had not remarked, in his absorption, an unfamiliar congestion about the base of his brain.

Directly, however, he was convinced of its disagreeable presence when this abrupt conclusion, which he had come to expect at the end of each bosom, materialized to his irritated anticipation.

88

He was no longer inclined to admire the calculating genius of the italicized phrase.

A temperance lecture was aching its way through his head. His conscience seemed to have decided to reside in the pit of his stomach, and a sense of surrender and defeat humiliated him.

His room looked cell-like.

The arrow pointing to the fire-escape seemed full of menace.

His face, reflected from the dingy glass, had never appeared so ugly and reproachful.

He needed something to restore his confidence, but was happily unaware of the nature of the remedy his system demanded.

It was his first offense.

He raised the window for a breath of fresh air, and the roaring street called him.

There was mockery and invitation in its hubbub. Why not? A little exercise would bring him around to his point of moral departure.

89

So, hastily adjusting the third chapter to his waistcoat and donning the balance of his garments, he fitted his hat to his head with thoughtful caution and hurried to the bustling thoroughfare.

Preoccupied by his gradually lessening disabilities, Dennis did not remark that the course pursued by him had the house of the publisher as its terminus, until he stood directly before that august establishment.

As the young Irishman recognized his surroundings, it did not take him long to persuade himself, with native superstition, as he considered the unaware nature of his arrival, that Providence had directed his footsteps thither, and, with the species of courage that can come

from such a basis, he proceeded to the rearway, where he beheld the Celt in whom his hopes were centered, berating the porters, with a mien which offered anything but encouragement to the anxious young man.

However, he came forward tentatively, and found himself, presently, so much within the radius of the foreman's range of vision as to be compelled to accept, with enforced urbanity, the vituperation of the draymen, who objected to the amount of landscape he occupied with his bulk and eager personality.

At last, when the foreman had bullied his lusty understudies into a certain degree of sullen system, and the drays began to move away with their mysterious burdens, Dennis ventured to address him.

Greatly to his relief, the perturbed countenance of the latter softened perceptibly as he exclaimed:

"Ah, ha! an' it's there ye are?"

"Yes," replied Dennis with solicitous abnegation.

"Well," returned the other, "roll up yer sleeves; yer job's a-waitin' fur ye."

With an agility that betrayed the diplomacy of his countenance into ingenuous exultation, Dennis followed the foreman into the warehouse, and the latter at once began his instructions as to the system of marking, and Dennis mastered its simple mysteries with a quickness that was not only flattering to the discernment of his instructor but an indorsement of Celtic adjustability in general.

In the course of the morning Dennis discovered that his predecessor had put him under obligations by prolonging his debauch, and that his arrival upon the scene had been most opportune in consequence.

He was now assured of a position, whose only handicap was the prospect, delicately insinuated by the foreman for his consideration, of the possible state of mind of the previous incumbent when he realized that his niche had been filled, and it did not add to his cheerfulness when the foreman examined his biceps with an expert touch and remarked: "I guess that ye can take care of yerself."

There was nothing belligerent about Dennis, and he trusted that his predecessor would not regard him from that standpoint.

In the meantime Saturday arrived, and Dennis, in possession of his proportion of the week's pay, hurried to The Stag by way of Baxter Street.

In this locality he began a search for Series B of the dickies, and was finally successful, after a number of disappointments and a protracted hunt.

With the courage of his recently acquired situation, Dennis proposed to indulge in a little improvidence.

He decided that he would follow the singular recital on the dicky backs and rip off a chapter at a time.

After a night of fortifying slumber, Dennis arose, breakfasted, and boarded an elevated train, which presently conveyed him to the vicinity of Central Park.

Here, after securing a seat to his fancy, he withdrew Series B from the wrapper, detached bosom No. 1 and began.

CHAPTER V

When Raikes had parted from the Sepoy, a degree of his customary hardness and assurance was evident in his manner.

He had been able to comment sagaciously upon the extraordinary narrative, and had appropriated as much of the sapphire as his greedy glance and covetous memory could bear away; but now that he pursued his way along the dimly lighted hallway which led to his apartment, a singularly thoughtful mood oppressed him.

This phenomenon, due, in part, to the cessation of the drowsy cadences of the Sepoy and the absence of the fascination and gleam of the sapphire, was relegated by Raikes to the overtures of approaching drowsiness.

And yet the startling episode which confronted Prince Otondo in the evening's instalment of this Oriental complication recurred to his mind again and again.

Strangely, too, Raikes did not comment upon the singular fact of the narrative itself.

Why should the Sepoy take the trouble to relate it to him, and why should he, of all unconcerned and self-centered men, manifest such an unusual interest in a recital which lacked every practical feature and had nothing but the weird to commend it?

If he asked himself these questions, it was with the impersonality of lethargy, for they were dismissed as readily as they presented themselves.

With such sedative queries, which were gradually diminishing from fabric to ravel, Raikes finally reached his room and, securely bolting the door, began to prepare to retire.

This was not an elaborate proceeding.

His outer garments removed, he had only to seek the seclusion of the bedclothes, clad in the remainder of his attire.

In this manner he economized on the cost of a night-robe and the time it would consume to don and doff such a superfluity.

At all events, if such was not his sordid reasoning, the promptness with which he fell asleep indicated that he did not propose to squander useless time in wakeful speculation upon the intangible nothings to which his recollection of the narrative began to fade.

However, if Raikes had succeeded in passing the boundaries of slumber, he had admitted, at the same time, extravagances of which he would never have been guilty in his wakeful hours, for he found himself so engaged in all sorts of uneasy shiftlessness and inconsiderate expenditure that when morning came and he awoke, as usual, with the sunrise, he resumed his customary identity, peevish and unrefreshed.

For a moment he sat with his knees huddled to his chin, over which his eyes peered like vermin in the wainscoting, and then, urged by an impulse whose source he could not determine, he leaped with surprising agility to the floor and proceeded to the false radiator.

For a short space of inexplicable indecision he stood with his hands resting upon the button which released the fastenings in the rear, an uneasy thoughtfulness converging the ugly wrinkles downward to the root of his nose and contracting his eyebrows with senile apprehension.

Suddenly his wonted decision asserted itself. He pressed the button and the radiator swung toward him; a few moments later the inner compartments responded to his manipulation, and the last door opened.

Apparently everything was as he had left it.

To his rapid enumeration the quantity of the small bags, containing his beloved coin, remained undisturbed. But, upon nearer regard, one of them—that within easiest reach—seemed to betray, through its canvas sides, a variety of unusually sharp angles and definite lines.

With a suffocating sensation of impending disaster, Raikes grasped the bag.

It pended from his tense grip with a frightful lightness. He caught up its neighbor for further confirmation. It responded with reassuring bulk and weight. But this one from which all specific gravity seemed to have departed—what did it contain?

With trembling hands the terrified man unfastened the cord which bound it and inverted the bag over the table.

Instead of the sharp, musical collision and clink of metal, a sodden succession of thuds smote his ears.

With a shriek of utter wonderment and alarm, Raikes stood erect and petrified.

His hands fell, with inert palsies, to his sides. His eyes seemed about to start from his head, for, looming dully to his aching gaze, in place of the coin he had so confidently hidden away, was a rayless, squalid heap of small, black coals.

A moment he stood lean and limp; every particle of the fever which consumed him concentrated in his starting eyes, which turned, with savage inquiry, toward the fastenings of the door.

The next instant, with a leap like that of a wild beast, he reached the threshold, examined the bolt with vivid glance and searching fingers, then raised his hand to his forehead with a gesture of utter distraction.

Nothing had been disturbed.

Even the check-pin which he had inserted over the bar for additional security was in place.

The only other possible means of entrance was by a window at the other extreme of the room.

But this was not to be considered, for it opened, with sheer precipitation, upon the unrelieved front of the house.

The windows adjacent were removed at a distance which could afford no possible basis from which to reach the one from which Raikes glared so grimly.

Moreover, the shutters had been clasped and the inner sash secured.

The conclusion was inevitable.

No one had entered the room during the night. It was impossible for a stranger to have access to the apartment during the day unobserved, and the recess behind the radiator was known to himself alone.

Nevertheless there was the absurd substitution.

It was incredible!

The secret repository was of his own construction.

The room was secure against intrusion.

And opposed to all this the incontrovertible proof of his loss, a catastrophe all the more agonizing since the logic of the situation obliged him to eliminate any one from suspicion.

Raikes had always considered a loss of this character the climax of malignant fate. He had never been able to contemplate it without the mortal shudder which usually communicates its chill to a loving parent confronted with the prospect of the departure of a dear one.

The recess in the wall contained all that Raikes held dear in the world; every spasm of fear, each contraction of the heart, always began and concluded with the button which moved its protecting bolts.

But now a new element added its ugly emphasis; there was something supernatural about the episode.

Convinced of the impossibility of thievery in any of its ordinary forms, he was bewildered as to the inexplicable means of his present predicament.

His sense of security was shaken.

He promised himself to stand guard over his belongings jealously that day, and to make assurance doubly sure at night.

In the meantime Raikes decided to confide his misfortune to no one.

There was a meager possibility that the guilty one might be misled by his silence; he had heard of such cases; he had known of the culprit offering condolences to the silent victim on the assumption that the latter had discussed his mishap with others.

He would wait, and with Raikes to determine was to do.

With his obnoxious individuality rendered several degrees more unendurable by his catastrophe, if that was possible, Raikes, having assumed that portion of his attire in which he had not slept, double-locked the door of his room from the outside with a brace of keys that, in all likelihood, had not their duplicates in existence, and proceeded to the dining-room, whither he had been preceded by his parchment of a sister.

At once he began to rustle his exhausted sensibilities with an added menace, awakened by a manifest desire on the part of the famished woman to satisfy the cravings of an ungratified hunger with an extra help of bread and butter.

As he looked upon the attenuated creature, with a morose reflection of his loss, the latter, with a rebellion which she could not control, selected with trembling fortitude a thick slice of bread, which she buttered liberally and began to devour with pathetic haste, despite the rebuking gleam of the rat eyes opposite, an episode which, added to his already perturbed mind, exasperated his brutal temper to the point of snarling remonstrance, which was fortunately denied its utterance by the opportune arrival of the Sepoy, who smiled blandly upon the chill acknowledgment of the shriveled Raikes.

The Sepoy, at the conclusion of a hearty repast, which the spinster witnessed with famished envy and Raikes considered with ascetic disapproval, looked, with a scarcely concealed disdain, into the furtive, troubled eyes of the miser and said: "I will see you to-night?"

"Yes," replied Raikes promptly. "I will be there."

"Very well; I will not return until the time appointed," said the Sepoy. "I expect to show you a rarity."

"Another brilliant aggravation?" asked Raikes.

"Ah!" laughed the Sepoy, "is that your estimation of the sapphire?"

"Yes," returned Raikes with acid frankness. "To be permitted to appropriate the gleam and the radiance; to comprehend the cunning of the facets; to appraise its magnificent bulk intelligently, and witness the careless possession by another of all these beatitudes, I think that constitutes an aggravation."

"It has been known to degenerate into a temptation," continued the Sepoy, reflecting the cynical humor of the other.

"Aye!" admitted Raikes, "and has concluded in surrender."

With this the strangely assorted trio left the table directly, the Sepoy to his problematical business, the spinster to escape the reprimand foreshadowed in the eyes of her brother, and Raikes to keep his treasures under malicious surveillance.

All that day his diseased mind tortured itself with impossible theories and absurd speculations, until his attempts to explain the curious substitution degenerated into a perfect chaos of despair and bewilderment.

With an impatience he could not explain, Raikes at last presented himself at the apartment of the Sepoy as the hour of ten was striking.

He was greeted by the curious individual within with a demeanor which somehow offended Raikes with the impression that his prompt eagerness was the subject of amused calculation.

His irritation, however, was not permitted to develop, for no sooner had he seated himself in the

chair indicated by his host than the latter placed upon the table, within easy reach of his harassed visitor, a small box of leather and directed him to press the spring.

Anticipating something of the nature of the contents of the case from the material of which it was made, Raikes, forgetting for the moment the futility of the day's researches, pressed his bony thumb upon the spring, and at once the lid flew back like a protest, disclosing the most superb diamond it had ever been his misfortune to see and not possess.

"Ah!" he cried in an ecstasy of tantalized contemplation, "the glass, the glass! Anything so precious must have had commensurate treatment. What color, what clarity, what bulk!" and as the unhappy creature yielded to that species of intoxication which even the grace of God seems unable to ameliorate, the Sepoy, with the easy poise and balance of intonation and phrase which had served as such facile vehicles for the previous instalments, began:

"When the bewildered prince realized the meaning of the worthless heap in the recess, and calculated, with familiar appraisement, the immense loss represented by the senseless substitution, he stood for a moment destitute of all dignity and as impotent as the meanest of his household.

"His thin, fine lips, which usually held such firm partnership and divided his words with such cynical scission, relaxed separately into the inane lines of superstitious fear, and the luster of his restless eyes seemed to have degenerated into that surrounding dullness of sickly white which would have provided the impressionable Lal Lu with an easy fortitude to deny the approaches of this semi-potentate.

"The next instant, like the doubled blade of Toledo steel, the prince recoiled to his lithe stature, and the customary brightness of his eyes returned shadowed with a degree of crafty reflection.

"One by one, lest a stray gem might be collected with the worthless débris, like the crew of Ulysses clinging to the sheep of the Cyclops, Prince Otondo removed the pebbles which intruded their sordid presence in this scintillant treasure-trove like a motley of base subjects in an assemblage of the nobility.

"When the last of these worthless objects had been cleared from the recess, the prince closed the panel, and seating himself before the rayless heap, surrendered himself to moody reflection, like a disabled enthusiast confronted by his disillusionments.

"How did these pebbles reach this hiding place?"

"In asking himself the question, the prince had absolute assurance that it was impossible for any one to enter his sleeping-apartment without his knowledge.

"The puzzled man also recollected, with a shudder, which he alone could explain, that he had taken radical means of making it impossible for the artisan who had contrived the hidden treasury to reveal its existence.

"He was positive, too, when he had retired the night before, that his jewels were undisturbed.

"Why just this exchange of a handful?"

"For what reason had not double the quantity been removed? Nay, why not all, since it was possible to abstract a portion?"

"At this question the eerie iteration of the merchant returned to his mind:

"'Pebbles for diamonds!'"

"At once the distasteful alternative upon which it was based recurred to him.

"A quick radiation illumined his mind, and subsided to darkness as promptly.

"Ram Lal!"

"It was he who had indicated the substitution. But the merchant could no more enter the room in which the prince was seated at this moment than the most abject menial in the palace.

"Still, the merchant had been able to predict the disaster.

"Some sort of association existed, but what it was, considered with the impracticability of unobserved entrance and exit, was beyond his comprehension.

"The incredible condition existed.

"In the light of its outrageous improbability, and the insuperable obstacles in the way of its accomplishment, the prince found himself compelled to dismiss every hypothesis.

"Still, he could subject Ram Lal to an investigation that would, at least, extort a confession as to his ability to allude to the episode in advance.

"In the meantime, with true Oriental craft, the prince determined to say nothing of his loss, and present an impassive demeanor to those by whom he was surrounded.

"With this purpose the prince proceeded to the apartment beyond, and was about to strike the gong to summon the servant charged with the preparation of his morning repast, when his attention was attracted to a slip of folded paper fluttering from the edge of the table-top and held in place by a diminutive bronze Buddha.

"With the weird certainty that this beckoning paper was another unaccountable feature of the savage perplexity he was compelled to endure, the prince, approaching, grasped the folded sheet with eager, trembling hands and exposed its inner surface to his vivid glance.

“‘Ah!’ With a burning sensation about his eyes, a fever of harassed impatience in his brain, and a sense of suffocation and impotent rage, he read:

“‘Most Illustrious!

“‘Unless Lal Lu is returned to her father by nightfall, another handful of precious stones will be replaced by as many pebbles.

“‘And this to warn thee:

“‘The native troops at Meerut are in revolt.

“‘They have shot the regimental officers, and have put to death every European they could find.

“‘They are now on their way to Delhi to proclaim Dahbur Dhu, thy grandfather, sovereign of Hindustan.

“‘The Moghul is old.

“‘Thou art next in succession.’

“There was no signature.

“None was needed; the prince had preserved several specimens of that chirography at the bottom of various interesting bills of sale.

“As this bizarre scion of an incredibly ancient régime read this extraordinary missive, with its exasperating reference to the restitution of Lal Lu, and considered the prompt realization of the threatened reprisal which had followed his first failure to comply with the request of Ram Lal, a sense of fear and futility possessed him.

“With curious apathy, an unaccountable suggestion of impersonality, almost, he did not pause to consider the absence of the intolerant passion which his loss should have occasioned, or to wonder at his bewildered reception of this implication of further dispossession.

“The prince appeared to be moving as in a spell; but as he concluded the remainder of the missive and remembered, at its inspiration, that he was, indeed, the grandson of the Moghul and the heir-apparent of this pageant throne of Delhi, a sensible degree of his customary cynical assurance returned.

“Hastening to the ante-room, the prince, with alert reanimation, questioned the stalwart official who stood without.

“He indicated to his master that the missive had been left upon the outer sill of the threshold leading from the ante-room to the corridor which opened upon the courtyard.

“Beyond this nothing could be learned; but other and more absorbing information was conveyed to the prince.

“He learned that several bodies of Sepoys had already passed the palace, on the highway, in the direction of Delhi.

“Startled at this rapid confirmation of the statement conveyed in the strange communication which he had just read, the prince rapidly reviewed the singular cause of the mutiny.

“Great Britain had just supplied the native soldiery with the Enfield rifle.

“This weapon was rendered formidable by a new cartridge, which, in order that it might not bind in the barrel bore, was greased in England with the fat of beef or pork.

“With incredible indifference to the prejudices of the Sepoys, the military authorities at Calcutta ordered the low-caste Lascars to prepare the cartridges in a similar manner.

“To this direct invitation disaster was not slow to respond.

“The fat of pigs was sufficient to make a degenerate of a Mohammedan; and to devour the flesh of cows converted a Hindoo into a Mussulman.

“In this manner had Tippu Sultan enforced the faith of Islam on hordes of Brahmins, and with the abomination of pork had the Afghans prevailed upon the Hindoo Sepoys, captured in the Kabul war, to become Mohammedans.

“Exasperated by the unconcealed contempt of the Brahmins, the Lascars, with an easily understood rancor, managed to convey the startling information to their detested superiors that the cartridges they bit in loading the new rifles were greased with the fat of cows, and that they were, in consequence, defiled, and their boasted caste supremacy was destroyed.

“This revelation, so momentous to the Hindoo, found its way first to Barrackpore by reason of its nearness to Calcutta.

“At once an indescribable panic ensued, and in a marvelously short time every native regiment in Bengal was confronted with the possibility of lost caste, and terrified at the consequent belief that the British Government was making an attempt to Anglicize them with beef as they had already attempted to do with beer.

“The account of the greased cartridges, embellished as it speeded, traveled, with the rapidity which usually expedites evil rumor, along the Ganges and Jumna to Benares, Allahabad, Agra, Delhi and Meerut, and the British authorities were confronted with a revolt which was to cost thousands of men and countless treasure.

"As the prince reflected upon the fever of events, and calculated their possible consequence to himself, the ambition—often napping, seldom in slumber—which he secretly cherished, awoke to disturbing vividness.

"His allowance was ample; his retinue, all things considered, impressive; and the Kutub, although in a state of disrepair in certain portions, was still unmistakably a royal residence. But he was thoroughly weary of the massive pile, and increasingly exasperated at the interdict of Delhi.

"Certain salacious possibilities within its walls still made their insidious appeals to him, and he had not forgotten the ceremonious deference accorded him in the household of the Moghul. 114

"At the Kutub he had to contrive his own dissipations and excesses.

"There was no need to be clandestine.

"The very frankness of his privileges discouraged his imagination. There was no spice of jeopardy in them; no preludes of intrigue.

"To relieve this surfeit, which is the worst of monotonies, eagerly would the prince have joined the revolting troops, detachments of which he could perceive from the walls of the Kutub hastening along the sun-scorched highway to Delhi.

"But his semi-majesty was cautious.

"It was characteristic of him that his mature reflections should frequently place his impulse under obligations; a condition that had resulted in many a salutary compromise with some proposed moral abandon.

"Should he show the slightest countenance to the native troops in the present emergency, the record of such an attitude would constitute anything but a passport to the continued consideration of the British Government, upon whose sufferance he not only enjoyed his present magnificent residence, but the acknowledgment of his right of succession as well. 115

"The prince was not yet inclined to believe that the Sepoys could make headway against his detested patrons.

"However, with his mind stimulated by the hazard of the prospect, this picturesque heir-apparent, who had assured himself, since his perusal of the unaccountably delivered missive, that Ram Lal had no intention of making his appearance that day, at least, returned to the apartment where his morning repast awaited him, which he dispatched with the preoccupied impersonality of a savant who consults his timepiece in order to determine the temperature.

"Advised of the fact that he had finished by a disposition to ignore his remaining privileges, the prince, as if to pursue the direction of the unseeing gaze which he projected into space, rose slowly, and with that moody deliberation which is so often the outward manifestation of an ignoble as well as an elevated determination, proceeded to the silken arras and disappeared from view between the folds. 116

"Quickly he traversed the passageway leading to the apartments of Lal Lu; and in response to a light touch upon the gong the same servile apparition emerged and vanished, with cringing obedience, down the passage.

"With a gleam in his eyes, which might have caused a magistrate to reflect or a moralist to anticipate, that was both sinister and engaging, eager and speculative, the prince, with a gesture that was not without its impatient majesty and lithe impressiveness, swept aside the curtains which guarded the entrance to the small ante-room and stepped within."

As the Sepoy reached this point of the narrative, arranged, perhaps, with shrewd malice to tantalize his eager listener, an expression of libidinous expectation and depraved absorption deepened upon the countenance of the latter, who, like an animal deprived of its prey, looked up suddenly as the narrator paused, with an exasperation which he made little attempt to conceal. 117

"Hell!" he muttered, "why do you pause? It is not late. This is an irritating trick of yours to leave off at the crucial juncture."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Sepoy mirthlessly. "You have attended me, then? Well, I can't admit you with the prince until to-morrow evening. I have much to do ere I retire."

"This is my dismissal, I presume," responded Raikes sourly as he replaced the gem, from which he seemed unable to remove his thieving eyes.

"Here, take this damned thing; it has demoralized me," and placing the shagreen case, with its priceless contents, in the hands of the evilly-smiling Sepoy, he disappeared through the doorway.

Arrived at the door which opened upon his room, Raikes was assured, by the familiar response of the locks to the pressure of his extraordinary keys, that his precautions of a few hours before had been undisturbed.

Moreover, his sister, seated in her room in a chair so placed as to command a view of the doorway opposite, and looking more effaced than ever from the weary vigil which her heartless brother had imposed upon her during his absence, advised him of the customary isolation and depression which distinguished this barren household. 118

Within, Raikes began to make himself secure for the night.

He double-locked the door, placed the heavy bar in the iron shoulders, over which he inserted a stout iron pin.

A brief investigation convinced him that it was out of the question to open the shutters from without.

Satisfied upon these points, Raikes proceeded to the radiator, which for a trembling space of apprehension he forbore to open.

However, since it was certainty he wanted, the valves shortly swung toward him, the inner door responded to the sesame of his touch, and the recess containing the tenets of his religion was exposed to view.

With trembling hands, which indicated the latent fear which unnerved him, and eyes aching with anxiety, the wretched man examined bag after bag of his precious coin with the solicitude one sees manifested by parents whose children are rendered doubly dear by the taking away of one of their number.

119

"Ah!" With a sigh, the relief of which almost concluded in physical collapse, Raikes was able to assure himself that his rapid inventory revealed no further loss.

Replacing his treasure with the indisposition he usually manifested to leave the vicinity of his hoard, the miser closed the various compartments with more than his accustomed certitude and began to prepare to respond to the lassitude of sleep which, for some unaccountable reason, was unusually insistent.

With the easy partition of attire already noted, Raikes presently found himself ready to tuck himself away for the night, which he did after rolling his bedstead directly in front of the false radiator.

This unusual measure of precaution consummated, Raikes, with the first sense of security he had felt for the last twenty-four hours, presently succumbed to a sleep remarkable for its quick approach and its subsequent soundness.

Until early dawn, with the relaxation which is commonly the reward of innocence, Raikes slept away in unconscious travesty.

120

And when at last he opened his eyes he was as alertly awake as he had been profoundly asleep.

With a promptness due to his retiring forebodings, his habitual unrest and suspicion returned to him.

He was as vitally alive to the disturbing conditions of the day before as if they had been the subjects of an all-night meditation.

But the confidence of his bolts and bars, the recollection of his unusual measures of safety, reassured him somewhat.

It was, therefore, with a degree of composure he approached the door and satisfied himself that the bar and the locks had been undisturbed.

With equal assurance he rolled the bedstead from the radiator and pressed the button which operated the concealed spring, with a deliberation in which no suggestion of uneasiness appeared.

A quick revolution or so and the inner recess was revealed.

121

To his rapid accounting the quantity of bags was the same, and their relative positions, which he had so carefully arranged the night before, were undisturbed—but this one, that within easiest reach! What was it caused those sharp suggestions in its accustomed rotundity—those angular points?

In a quiver the man was transformed.

With a cry such as must have been forced from the Jew of old, compelled by the rough levies of his time to part at once with his teeth and his treasure, Raikes grasped the bag, which came away in his clutch with the agonizing lightness that had preceded his first loss.

Quickly he unfastened the mouth of the fateful packet and inverted it over the table.

The next instant there rattled to view a soulless, sodden shower of lack-luster, heart-breaking coals.

(To be continued on Dickey No. 2, Series B.)

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed Dennis, "an' it's there ye are again," as the familiar phrase at the bottom of bosom No. 1 met his glance.

122

But it did not exasperate him on this occasion, for the young man, true to his determination to be liberal with himself, had still bosoms No. 2 and No. 3 at his disposal.

As he was about to separate No. 2 from its duplicate, his eyes, glancing aimlessly about for the moment, caught sight of a trim female figure sitting not far away on a bench diagonally opposite.

Hovering near her, a man, of a species Dennis had not seen before on the street corners of New York, seemed determined to intrude upon her attention.

Convinced of his purpose, the lady, for such she unmistakably appeared, rose from the seat as the fellow was about to raise his hat as a preliminary to further overtures, and sought another

bench directly opposite the one from which Dennis had been a witness to her apparent persecution.

The intruder, however, refusing evidently to believe that the action of the lady had a personal application, deliberately walked past this new resting place and surveyed its occupant with insolent estimation.

123

A short distance away his pace slackened; he was about to return.

With genuine Irish impulse, Dennis, rising hurriedly, proceeded to the bench occupied by the disturbed lady, and, with a bow that was not deficient in grace and evident good intention, said:

"Excuse me, but say the wurrd, madam, and I'll see that you are troubled no more with that loafer."

For an instant, with an expression of countenance that suggested a fear that the flight from one intrusion was but the introduction to another, the lady looked upon Dennis with an astonishment that was partly the result of his picturesque contrasts of voice and visage.

Then, with fine intuition realizing, in the ingenuous face of the young Irishman, the unmistakable evidence of kindly impulse, she said, with a modulation in which Dennis was able to detect the accent of good breeding:

"I thank you, sir; I am tired; that man annoys me; but I would rather move on than be the cause of a disturbance."

"If you will permit me," responded Dennis promptly, "I will sit beside you long enough to indicate that you have met a friend; then I think that he will move off."

124

The lady looked at Dennis with an uncertain smile, in which there was just enough restraint to urge the young man to add hastily: "An' when he is gone for good, I will go too."

"Oh, I was not thinking of that, I assure you!" the lady hastened to say. "That would be rather ungrateful on my part. I accept your suggestion. May I ask you to be seated?" and Dennis promptly complied.

As he had predicted, the fellow, who had witnessed the conversation, was compelled to accept its ostensible suggestion, and departed finally with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders and a Tammany tilt of his hat over his eyebrows.

In yielding to his gallant impulse, Dennis was unaware of the fact that he held, with not exactly picturesque abandon, bosom No. 1 in his right hand and the other two in his left, which gave him the appearance of having disposed, in some violent way, of the remainder of several shirts.

125

Awakened by the puzzled amusement depicted in the curious gaze with which the lady surveyed the various bosoms which he held, and encouraged by the impromptu nature of the entire episode, Dennis, as he realized the spectacle which he presented, indulged himself in a frank laugh, in which his companion seemed inclined to join.

The next moment he apologized, and, yielding to the obligation enforced by the situation, explained his possession of the dickey bosoms and the curious story which had gone before.

As he proceeded with the candor of genuine enthusiasm, and related the incredible narrative in his rich, Irish brogue, which affected his hearer, as it did every one else, with such singular sentiments in contrast with his remarkable countenance, all traces of punctilious restraint and artificial reticence vanished, and with the mien of one who proposes to extract all the entertainment possible from an undreamed-of experience, the lady urged Dennis to continue.

"I can't do that unless I read the balance from the dickey," said Dennis. "Would you mind?"

126

"I should like it very much," replied the lady with gratifying readiness.

"Well, then," said Dennis, "here goes," and with his musical voice, which was one of his most inviting characteristics, the young man, on the basis of all that had preceded the bosom from which he was about to read, and which he had narrated to his auditor with refreshing *verve* and an ingenuousness whose vitalizing effect upon her sensibilities he was far from suspecting, began.

CHAPTER VI

127

Whoever has witnessed Kean's superb delineation of the ruthless Richard in the scene where, in the illusion of his dying agony, swordless, he continues to lunge and feint, may comprehend the frightful mental overturn which prompted Raikes to sink inertly into a chair near the table, and with foam-flecked lips fall to counting, one by one, the miserable coals in the dull heap before him.

A silly smile overspread his sharp features like an apologetic sunbeam intruding upon a bleak landscape.

A gleam of shrewd transaction shone in his eyes.

The clutch of unwonted acquisition contracted his hands.

Slowly he made partition of the large from the small coals; regretfully he acknowledged the presence of the lesser bits as, with a chuckle of greedy appreciation, he grouped the relative piles.

128

"Ha, ha! ha, ha! ha, ha!" What a laugh! What a frightful mockery of mirth! "Ha, ha! ha, ha!" and raising both hands above his head he brought them down upon the table with the lax inertia of utter collapse, and fell forward upon his extended arms, his face buried in the squalid heap beneath.

For a dreary hour he lay there without the twitch of a muscle, the well of a sigh.

Like a Cyclop's eye the button at the bottom of the concave in the wall seemed to stare with wonder upon this unfamiliar Raikes, who could thus permit the radiator to swing open so heedlessly, and the inner recess to expose its golden glut.

Suddenly there came a sharp rap upon the door, then a pause; but its quick reverberations were unheeded by the prostrate man.

Again the thuds were administered to the echoing panels, and still no response.

"Uncle, I say, uncle!" cried a man's voice. "Uncle!" and the shout was followed by a vigorous kick upon the woodwork; "Uncle! Uncle!"

129

At this last appeal Raikes stirred uneasily, and as the assault was continued with still greater stress, he managed finally to stagger uncertainly to his feet.

As he raised his head to listen to the clamor without, the meanness of his face, emphasized by the smudges of the coal in which it had so recently reposed, presented itself to the scandalized eye in the wall.

The miserable creature depicted the last degree of absurdity, and yet the ugly pathos of it all would have moved to pity.

"Uncle, I say!" and at the sound of the voice, which he recognized as that of his lusty nephew, Raikes, with a return of his accustomed intelligence, which had received its kindly repairs at the hands of nature during his brief coma, cried sharply: "Well, well!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the voice outside with an unmistakable accent of relief in its tone as it added, with unlettered eagerness: "It's me—Bob!"

However, if his reawakened animation had revived his deadened spirit, it also restored the appreciation of his disaster, as, with a glance of vivid comprehension, he looked from the coal heap to the register, toward which he leaped with astonishing agility.

130

In an instant the inner recess was secure; in another the radiator was replaced, and Raikes, proceeding to the door, raised the bar, unlocked the catches and exclaimed, "Enter!"

As the breezy Bob crossed the threshold, the question of his eyes was instantly transformed to an expression of utter astonishment as he beheld the extraordinary blend of soil and pallor upon the countenance of his uncle.

"For the Lord's sake!" he cried, "what ails your face?" and strongly tempted to laugh at the absurd spectacle, and as urgently impelled to restrain himself by the glittering eyes of the raging Raikes, he added, by way of apology for his noisy intrusion:

"We knew that you were in here, but could not make you hear us. You are almost two hours beyond your usual time."

Directly in the rear of the young man stood the spinster, who gazed with widened eyes and parted lips upon her brother's soiled visage.

131

"Well," snarled Raikes, "I am all right, you see; now leave me until I get myself in shape to make an appearance."

As the door closed behind the pair, Raikes hurried to the mirror, and above the crack which extended, like a spasm, diagonally across its surface he beheld his bloodless cheeks and forehead, and below, the dry slit of his mouth and his chin spattered with black and white.

As he witnessed the sorry sight, the unhappy man, unable for the moment to account for his plight, stood aghast, until his gaze, penetrating to the rear of his smudged physiognomy, beheld the reflection of the coal heaps upon the table.

At once a savage grin distorted his features into the degree of ugliness not already accomplished by its dusky resting place of the hour previous. A grin that was scarcely human and almost diabolical, as if the miserable creature had caught sight of the shriveled soul peering through the chinks which imprisoned his rat eyes and found a malignant enjoyment in the contemplation of its contemptible littleness.

132

From this debasing inspection Raikes turned slowly to the washstand to remove the grime from his face, with an impersonal deliberation that was not only unnatural under the circumstances, but which awakened the eerie suggestion that he was expending his effort upon another than himself.

From this moment he became strangely calm; the sharp decision of his lips was never so pronounced.

A baleful, unwavering gleam distinguished his glance. He had evidently arrived at some

determination, one that levied upon the last limit of his endurance.

All that day the unhappy man sat in his room, sullen and pondering.

The timid offers of nourishment made by his sister were either ignored or refused with such an ill grace that she finally forbore further overtures and left him to his morose reflections, to improve her opportunities of enjoying, unrebuked, the privileges of the table, until, by nightfall, an indigestion, which she welcomed on account of its occasion, disturbed her with its unfamiliar pangs.

133

In response to his nephew's concern as to his condition Raikes replied by saying: "I may have something to tell you by eleven o'clock to-night; will you be on hand?"

"Sure!" answered Bob with breezy goodwill.

From time to time Raikes glanced at the clock.

His last scrutiny had revealed the hour of nine. Sixty interminable minutes more remained ere he could see the Sepoy.

Slowly the leaden hands crawled over the indifferent face.

At last the half hour struck.

A strange impatience possessed him.

Perhaps the Sepoy might begin a little earlier than usual. He could, at least, suggest such a courtesy by his precipitation; it was far better than this unendurable wait.

With this anticipation he decided to proceed to the apartment of this singular narrator.

After taking his usual precautions, which seemed more or less of a mockery in view of the succession of disasters which had overtaken him, and again establishing the spinster in a position where she could maintain an unobstructed view of the entrance to his room, Raikes proceeded hurriedly along the various passageways, which finally concluded in his point of destination.

134

He rapped gently upon the door, which he discovered to be slightly ajar.

There was no response.

His second attempt to attract attention was pronounced enough to urge the door aside and enable him to make a comprehensive survey of the interior.

It was unoccupied; and of his last assault upon the panel the only recognition was a sullen echo in the hallway.

About to retire, his glance fell upon the table in the center of the room.

At once a sudden trembling seized him.

A burning fever surged through his veins; an irresistible impulse overwhelmed; for there, in inconceivable negligence, lay the shagreen case which he had so reluctantly returned to its owner only the night before.

135

And then—the malign agreement of his outward husk with his inner degradation was revealed.

His eyes, already criminal, reflected the kaleidoscopic succession of temptation and surrender; desire and thievery.

He scanned the passageway without in either direction.

No one was in sight.

A silence of respectable retirement prevailed that enabled him to hear his heartbeats almost, which surged along his veins to his ears and stifled the final gasp of the still, small voice within.

The next instant, with a lithe animal leap of astonishing quickness, Raikes, darting into the apartment, grasped the precious case and retreated as rapidly over the threshold.

Scarcely had the stealthy rogue vanished from the room when the door of a closet in the rear opened softly and revealed the Sepoy.

Upon his face a smile, surely evil, otherwise inscrutable, appeared, as he proceeded to the chair by the table, turned down the light in the lamp a trifle, and abstracted from his waistcoat pocket a small red case, the contents of which he examined with absorbed attention.

136

Arrived at his room, Raikes was elated to discover that he was not due at the Sepoy's apartment until twenty minutes later.

"What a providence!" he murmured.

He would arrive late; he would make his approach as ostensible as possible; he would apologize for his tardiness.

His alibi would be perfect.

During these proposed depravities Raikes had closed and fastened the door, seated himself at the table, and pressed the spring which detained the lid of the shagreen case.

In a dazzling instant it flew open.

"Ah!" A very riot of irradiation and gleam met his eyes.

Here was rehabilitation! Here was amendment!

The diamond was a liberal equivalent for his losses.

Another glance at the clock revealed to him that he had exhausted ten minutes in his exultation.

137

This left a balance of ten minutes for a compunction or two.

Apparently he did not realize his opportunity, for half of the remaining time was consumed in the intoxication of the facets and the glamor, the thrill of intelligent valuation; and the other half to a grim calculation as to the usury that might accrue after the account with his losses was balanced.

These perjured figures were scarcely arranged to his satisfaction when the clock struck ten.

The strokes seemed like as many separate accusations.

"Bah! what are they to me?" he asked himself. He had been robbed; he had found a way to restitution; a man's providence must measure to his necessities.

To arrive at these conclusions put him five minutes in arrears. Five more for a leisurely arrival would be ten; enough to apologize for; sufficient for his purposes.

He consumed as much time as possible secreting the stone in the recess. That accomplished, Raikes emerged from his room and proceeded down the hallway.

138

When he reached the apartment occupied by the Sepoy he breathed a sigh of relief.

The door was closed.

In response to his rap upon the panel, a voice which he recognized as that of the Sepoy cried: "Come in!"

With a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, where, with him, the only conscience he had was located, Raikes complied with these instructions, and, closing the door softly, established himself, in his customary expectant attitude, in the chair indicated by his host.

"I have been told," began the latter abruptly, "that there is a flaw in the sapphire."

"What!" exclaimed Raikes with genuine concern. Two things he could comprehend: a loss and the abuse of property. The announcement of the Sepoy awakened the same misgiving which commonly affected his mind at a suggestion of defective title.

"Yes," continued the Sepoy; "it was pointed out to me. But I am not convinced, or it may be that I refuse to be. A man often elects to be blind when confronted with a suggestion of disaster. I want to be candid with myself. I require your assistance. While I continue the narrative, kindly see if you can discover any sign of blemish."

139

Raikes, only too willing to engage himself upon anything which would assist his attempt at outward poise, seized the glass offered him and began a close inspection of the gem, as the Sepoy, with an indescribably insinuating modulation, resumed:

"As the prince advanced, Lal Lu, advised of his approach by the hasty exit of the waiting-woman and the soft alarm of the gong in the passageway, stood ready to receive him.

"A slight flush suffused her cheeks, a brighter luster beamed from her eyes.

"With a fervor which was evidently unembarrassed by any anticipation of denial, the prince approached the trembling Lal Lu, who seemed to his enamored glance unspeakably bewitching in the graceful attitude, of which she was thoroughly unconscious, which she had naturally assumed, and which gave unmistakable expression to the hope, trepidation and regard awakened by his presence.

140

"And yet his eagerness was not reflected.

"There was little in the demeanor of the beautiful girl that was responsive; no indication of the sweet surrender that doubly endears, and which makes such irresistible appeals for protection and sensitive understanding to a man worthy of the name; and what evidences of confusion she betrayed were rather those which commonly prelude the execution of unwelcome resolution; a suggestion of a lurking disposition to readmit the Peri into Paradise, restrained by a knowledge of conditions unfulfilled.

"With the rapid interchange and subtle apprehension characteristic of a passion which has no definite assurances as to its right to monopolize the regard of the object of jealous consideration, the prince was compelled to acknowledge, in these vague suggestions, an intangible but no less real succession of barriers opposed to his ardent advances, and with a scarcely concealed and certainly undiplomatic irritation he paused before Lal Lu and demanded:

141

"What is it, Lal Lu? Thou art not glad to see me. I expected a reception other than this.'

"My father?' demanded Lal Lu, ignoring the question and the yearning intonation of his address, each word of which was like a caress; 'my father, what of him?'

"Ah!' muttered the prince with deepening choler at the disturbing conditions introduced by the name, and a gleam strangely suggestive of menace. 'Why speak of him now? Is not the present enough?'

"Lal Lu gazed upon the speaker with astonishment. How could he so easily forget what he had said the day before? And with a scarcely perceptible tightening of her beautiful lips, she said:

"Dost remember thy promise to give me news of him to-day?'

"I do," replied the prince. "I received word that he will not be here to-day."

"Who told thee so?" demanded Lal Lu.

"A writing so informed me."

"Is it with thee?"

"No," replied the prince. "It is in my cabinet. Is not my word sufficient?"

"To this Lal Lu did not reply, but searched his countenance with a scrutiny which he found it difficult to endure, as he cried with renewed animation:

"Oh, Lal Lu, be not so cold! Harken! The native regiments of Meerut are in revolt and on their way to Delhi.

"It is their purpose to re-establish Dahbur Dhu, my grandfather, upon the throne of the moghuls.

"As thou knowest, I am next in succession, and Dahbur Dhu is feeble and decrepit.

"The British are not in sufficient force to withstand a combined attack.

"See, then, Lal Lu, what this means for me; what it means for thee."

"Oh!" repeated the girl with curious emphasis, "what it means for thee, I know; but what it means for me"—and she paused with disconcerting deliberation as she added—"thou hast not said."

"Everything, my own!" exclaimed the prince with generous ardor—"everything! Thou hast but to command and thy will is done."

"Everything?" re-echoed Lal Lu with a questioning stress which the prince could not ignore—"everything?"

"I have said," replied the prince.

"Am I then to be thy queen?"

"For a moment, a vital moment, the prince hesitated, but brief as the pause, scarcely the duration of an eye-flash, Lal Lu saw it, and gazed upon the prince with a disconcerting directness as he added, with the haste we note in the accused who attempt to distract suspicion by the utterance of glib generalities:

"My queen! Thou art always that!"

"Hold, Prince Otondo!" exclaimed Lal Lu as the prince seemed about to surrender to an impulse to clasp her in his arms—"hold! Thy answers suit me not. Reply, then, to this: Thy wife—am I to be thy wedded wife?"

"An expression like that of a peevish child tantalized by obstacles intruded to enhance its appreciation of favor withheld brightened his eyes and sent sullen lines converging in his forehead.

"His hands clenched and opened; a faint suggestion of disdain curled his thin lips; the amiable inclination of his figure was transformed to an erect intolerance—and Lal Lu was answered.

"When the unfortunate girl could no longer doubt the unlovely evidence provided by the prince, and apprehended the humiliating significance of his hesitation, a majesty surer than his own, a presence superb in its elevation, encompassed her, and she gazed upon the perturbed man with an expression from which every trace of tenderness appeared to have vanished.

"With an angry sweep of his arm, as if to banish with a peremptory gesture the kneeling envoys of compunction, manliness and nobility, the prince stepped forward.

"What is that?" At this moment the gong in the passageway responded to three measured strokes.

"Confusion!" muttered the prince. "What does this mean?" and turning abruptly, he hastened to the doorway, swept aside the curtains, and revealed the trembling figure of the wrinkled crone who had quitted the apartment at his entrance.

"What now?" cried the exasperated prince as he fixed his eyes, vivid with rage at the unwelcome interruption, upon the miserable creature.

"In reply the woman raised her shriveled hand, with a gesture that was not without its weird impressiveness, and pointed to his apartments.

"Speak!" he demanded with a modification of his intensity, which he perceived deprived the waiting-woman of the power of speech.

"A messenger," she croaked, "from the palace of the moghul; he must speak with thee at once."

"With one long glance of such concentrated determination that it caused the beautiful girl to tremble anew, the prince vanished through the portal and hastened along the passageway.

"Scarcely had he departed when the demeanor of the waiting-woman underwent a startling transformation.

"An incredible degree of energy quickened in the recoil of her bent form to a disproportionate erectness of stature.

"Beneath level, unwavering lids, her eyes emitted gleams which had pierced the retreating

figure with deadly viciousness had they been poniards.

"The servile vanished, the abject; and she stood, the silent embodiment of evil, restrained purpose.

"The next instant, with an angry gesture that was vaguely significant of future requital and present impotence, the vindictive creature swept aside the curtains and re-entered the room leading to the apartment occupied by Lal Lu.

"As she approached the disturbed beauty, the tension in her mien relaxed, and she regarded the *distract* countenance before her with a glance that was anything but unfriendly, in so far as it was possible to determine the nature of the sentiment in hiding behind that austere visage.

"Directly she stood by the table which Lal Lu had interposed as a sort of barricade against advances of her impetuous lover, and with an attempt at a smile, which could as readily find acceptance as a repentant scowl, this singular being inserted her hand in the folds of the tunic which defended her parchment bosom, and produced from that barren demesne a folded missive, which she placed in the hands of the astonished Lal Lu.

"With trembling haste she exposed the inner surface of the paper, and with a glad heart and filial trust read:

"'Be not afraid; relief is at hand.'

"There was no signature; none was needed.

"In a moment Lal Lu recognized her father's familiar chirography, and as she reflected upon his well-known sagacity and resourceful boldness, her hope and courage renewed their belated assurances.

"'Who gave you this?' she asked.

"The waiting-woman, after a brief hesitation, in which inclination and restraint left their disturbing traces, replied:

"'That I must not reveal.'

"'At least,' insisted Lal Lu, whose quick glance had detected the irresolution of the instant preceding, 'at least, tell me this: Was it my father?'

"'No,' replied the other promptly. With a barely perceptible grin of amusement at this ingenuous betrayal of the author of the few words which had awakened such animation, she added:

"'One sent by him, it may be.'

"'True,' assented the girl.

"'And now,' exclaimed the woman with a return of her vindictive aspect, which the harassed beauty, unaware of its inspiration, witnessed with vague misgiving and a futile attempt to associate herself with its ugly manifestation; 'and now, I would ask a question of you.'

"'Yes?' responded Lal Lu, perplexed at the baleful emphasis which preceded this announcement.

"'Well, then,' continued the woman with startling and uncompromising abruptness, 'am I wrong in thinking that you would defend your honor with your life?'

"Before the astonished Lal Lu could reply, or encouraged, it may be, by some subtle confirmation in the look which shot from the distended eyes of the young girl, the eccentric speaker, again inserting her hands in the folds of her tunic, withdrew a short, slender poniard, at sight of which Lal Lu recoiled.

"'Ha, ha!' laughed the withered creature mirthlessly as she gazed with unsmiling eyes upon the shrinking beauty. 'Be not afraid; this weapon is intended for you, but not to your hurt.'

"'What, then?' asked Lal Lu breathlessly, unable to adjust the peaceful assurance of the grim-visaged woman with the menace of the glittering blade.

"'Listen!' exclaimed the woman impressively: 'I know Prince Otondo of old; he meditates no good for you. Were I in your place, I would receive his detested advances upon the point of this blade. Your protestations he will not heed, but this'—and the speaker advanced the dagger with a savage gesture which caused a shudder to pervade the trembling frame of Lal Lu—'this is an argument he can understand.'

"'Oh,' cried the terrified girl, 'I could not!'

"'You could not?' repeated the other with chilling emphasis. 'Ha, ha! you could not! But you will submit to the advances of this monster!'

"'Believe me, you are not the sole object of his regard.'

"'There have been others caged within these walls who have been less obdurate than you, or whose resistance has availed them nothing.'

"'Alas!' exclaimed Lal Lu with an inexpressibly melancholy accent, as she considered the empty pedestal from which her ideal had fallen, and recalled with a shudder the caress which she had permitted and bestowed in that fervid interview with the prince. 'Can this be true?'

"'Aye!' exclaimed the woman with savage affirmation. 'Do not doubt it. Sooner than submit to the embraces of that wretch I would turn that weapon against myself.'

"'Oh!' exclaimed Lal Lu with a superb gesture and the light of unmistakable resolution in her

eyes, 'that I can do; but the other——' And the poor girl trembled at the spectacle pictured in her mind.

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"'Well,' exclaimed the woman, 'I will leave this dagger here; do as you will; I have done for you what I could,' and she turned to depart, unmindful, apparently, of Lal Lu's tremulous 'And I am grateful to you.'

"When the prince arrived at the apartment in which he accorded his audiences, if the attention he bestowed upon the meager assemblages which presented themselves occasionally can be dignified by that description, he found awaiting him a Hindoo, whom he recognized at once, and whose presence invariably preceded the recital of important information.

"To the degree that Prince Otondo had reason to suspect that his grandfather had certain of his servants subsidized at the Kutub, he measured secretly by similar secret embassies at the Delhi palace.

"The egotistical old mogul, with a vanity which even his anomalous situation with the British had not impaired, wished to assure himself that he would be worthily succeeded, and the prince was equally solicitous concerning the advancing senility of the mogul.

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"In such bloodless intrigues this picturesque pair kept their servants engaged, until this germ of mutual distrust infected every dependent in the two households with that singular propensity to conspire which the studious historian of this mysterious country cannot have failed to record.

"On this basis certain shrewd spirits among the British intruders at this period were able to discover more of the character of the people under their unwelcome rule, in a single establishment of native servants, than in the general observations of a hundred English households.

"Awaiting, therefore, the conclusion of the ceremonies of approach, upon which he always insisted and which were shortly to be rendered so absurd, the prince at last, calling the Hindoo by name, demanded the occasion of his presence.

"'It is an ill service, O prince,' replied the Hindoo, 'which I am about to render you.'

"'What, then?' exclaimed the prince. 'To the point, to the point!'

"'Your grandfather——'

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"'Is dead?' inquired the prince with badly disguised eagerness.

"'Nay; worse.'

"'Proceed!' demanded the prince. 'What can be worse?'

"'Your grandfather,' replied the messenger, in evident haste to conclude a disagreeable task, 'has taken to himself a young wife.'

"'Ah!' cried the prince, startled into a degrading abandonment of his customary elevation of demeanor. 'The dotard, the imbecile! Married? To whom?'

"'A daughter of the house of Nadis Shah, Rani Rue.'

"'I know her!' cried the prince savagely. 'Implacable, ambitious, unscrupulous. What will she not attempt with that old driveller?' Then, evidently impressed by something shadowed in the expression of his ill-omened Mercury, he exclaimed: 'You have more to tell me?'

"The Hindoo bowed his head in perturbed affirmation.

"'Quickly, then!' demanded his august listener.

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"'The British forces have concentrated at the cantonment without the walls of Delhi; a detachment is even now on the way to your palace, which they propose to seize and garrison.'

"'Ah!' murmured the prince, 'the freshet is turning to a deluge. Is there more?'

"'Yes, O prince,' returned the Hindoo; 'the British intend to hold you as a hostage for the safety of the English resident, who is a prisoner at the palace in Delhi.'

"'So!' exclaimed this royal reprobate as he reflected upon the picturesque possibilities to himself, in view of the sanguinary temptation which the helpless resident would present to the ambitious Queen Rani Rue. 'How far in advance of the detachment are you?'

"'About one hour's march.'

"'This is short reckoning. You have hastened with leaden feet.'

"'Nay, your highness,' cried the Hindoo, 'I came the instant I heard. There is still time to escape, and the way is known to you alone.'

"'So be it,' returned the prince as an expression of savage determination compressed his thin lips and ignited baleful fires in his restless eyes. 'Await me without; I will join you presently.'

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"As the Hindoo turned to obey, the prince darted, with lithe haste, into the inner room and pressed the spring in the wall.

"Slowly the panel rolled aside and revealed the glittering pyramid of gems within.

"From the depths, just in the rear of the priceless heap, he withdrew a sort of jacket, separated upon its upper edge into a series of openings similar to the partitions of a cartridge-belt.

"Into these, with a sort of clumsy trepidation, he began to pack the almost elusive portions of

the gleaming mass of brilliants from the recess.

"At the conclusion of fifteen vital minutes the prince had deposited the last of the gems in the receptacles of this curious jacket, and, if the reports of the Hindoo were to be credited, the advancing British were that much nearer the Kutub.

"With desperate rapidity he disengaged the folds of the delicate cambric which covered the upper portion of his body, inserting the precious jacket beneath, and after adjusting it to his figure, strapped it securely in place and rearranged his attire into non-committal contours.

"'And now,' he cried with an expression of savage determination, 'and now for the rarest gem of all!' and darting through the silken hangings which concealed his extreme of the passageway leading to the apartments of Lal Lu, he hastened along that dingy bypath and presently reached the threshold from which he had issued but a short time before with such little credit to himself.

"Without pausing to announce himself or consider the impropriety of his abrupt intrusion and its possible influence upon Lal Lu, the impetuous heir-apparent swept aside the curtains and rushed into the room.

"Startled at the rattling rings which held the hangings in place, and the impetuous swish of its folds, Lal Lu sprang to her feet and gazed with indignant rebuke upon the inconsiderate prince.

"Heedless of the unconcealed disdain of her glance and ignoring the presence of the furtive-eyed waiting-woman, he cried:

"'Lal Lu, the time for further parley is past. The Kutub is shortly to be attacked by the British. We must fly—come!' and the speaker advanced with unreflective haste to the side of the palpitating girl.

"In an instant, however, his headlong progress was checked as Lal Lu, with a superb gesture, raised the gleaming dagger above her head and cried, encouraged by the lowering eyes of the evilly-expectant waiting-woman: 'With thee—never! I will die first!'

"As the prince recoiled a step at sight of the flashing blade, Lal Lu, with contemptuous emphasis, exclaimed: 'Be not afraid, Prince Otondo, this is not for thee. Advance but a step and it will be but an empty casket that awaits thee!'

"Never had Lal Lu appeared so desirable in the eyes of this royal rogue, and never had he been more resolute to possess her.

"With misleading quiet, therefore, he gazed upon the upraised hand which menaced the one unattained object of his desire. Quickly he measured the distance between them. Slowly he removed one foot behind the other. Lightly he pressed the slipper's point upon the tessellated floor, and then with a leap of incredible quickness, he darted forward, caught the descending arm of Lal Lu in his grasp, and, with his disengaged hand, wrenched the dagger from her and threw it away from him into the center of the apartment.

"But as rapidly as he had moved, the prince had not been able to prevent the incision which the dagger's point made in his wrist and from which a thin stream of blood issued.

"'Ah, ha, my beauty!' he cried as he released the struggling girl and retreated a step, the better to enjoy her discomfiture; 'ah, ha! I like thy spirit. I would not have thee mar the lovely casket which contains it. Here!' he called to the waiting-woman, who had witnessed the episode and into whose quick eyes, which had detected the slight wound upon the wrist of the prince, there crept a strange, inexplicable expression of leering triumph, 'here, guard this maiden for a space. Your life shall pay the penalty if aught befalls her in my absence.

"'I shall return presently with the help I need to overcome such elevated objection'; and turning abruptly, the prince hastened toward the doorway, pausing a second to regain possession of the dagger which he had cast from him during the brief struggle.

"'Alas!' cried the unhappy girl, 'what shall I do? He has gone to get some of his creatures to help him in his evil purposes.'

"For a moment a tense silence prevailed.

"The next instant, with eerie, jubilant interruption, the waiting-woman made the very air shudder with a laugh of such shrill exultation and riotous abandon that Lal Lu, for a moment forgetful of her own extremity, gazed with unconcealed amazement and alarm upon the almost hysterical creature.

"'Ha, ha!' she raved; 'be not afraid, Lal Lu. This royal pest, this insolent prince, will trouble you no more; you will never see him again.'

"'Ha!' exclaimed Lal Lu. 'You seem strangely positive. What do you mean?'

"'Did you see that scratch which the point of your dagger made upon the wrist of the prince?'

"'No,' replied Lal Lu, shrinking from the picture presented to her mind.

"'Well,' returned the grim-visaged woman with a return to her customary austerity, 'I did. The wound was slight; only a few easily subdued drops of blood followed; but, believe me, maiden, it will be sufficient.'

"'What do you mean?' demanded Lal Lu.

"'This,' returned the weird creature with repulsive, evil joy, which she made no attempt to disguise: 'The point of that dagger was steeped in the most deadly poison known in India. In

twenty minutes, ha, ha! it is the prince who will be the empty casket.”

As the Sepoy reached this point in his narrative he paused with startling abruptness.

Raikes, no longer under the influence of the seductive cadences, looked up sharply.

“Well?” inquired the Sepoy as he met the inquiring glance of his furtive auditor, “what of the flaw in the sapphire? Can you trace the blemish?”

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“Devil seize me!” exclaimed Raikes, as he offered, by this apostrophe, an invitation which was certain, at no distant date, to be accepted.

“Devil seize me if I have thought of the sapphire!” and he began at once an apologetic inspection of the brilliant with the magnifying glass.

“Ha, ha!” laughed the Sepoy. “I must congratulate myself upon my powers of narration.”

“Aye!” replied Raikes, as he continued his examination of the flaming bauble, “and also upon your irritating habit of concluding at the anxious moment. But see here,” and he held the sapphire up to view; “I can see nothing wrong; possibly the light is bad. The searching glare of day is required to discover a blemish such as you speak of.”

“Suppose you return to-morrow, then, directly after breakfast?” suggested the Sepoy.

“I want your judgment. I dare not trust my own; my blindness may be voluntary.”

“Very well, then,” assented Raikes, who, now that he had nothing upon which to fasten his eyes, felt an easily comprehended uneasiness to leave the Sepoy. “I will be here at that time”; and with his customary emotionless adieux the guilty creature slipped through the doorway and speeded like a shriveled shadow along the various passages.

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As he was about to enter his room he was hailed by his nephew.

“Uncle, you wanted to see me.”

“True,” replied Raikes, with a start of recollection, “I do; but suppose we postpone the interview until to-morrow.”

“Very well,” replied the young man easily, and Raikes, entering his room, fastened the door with his usual elaborate precaution.

His first movement was to disclose the interior of the recess containing his coin and his conscience.

A rapid examination convinced him that no further depredations had been committed upon the former, and the latter he secreted in the pocket of his waistcoat along with the diamond, which flashed its unregarded rebuke into his eager eyes.

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At this juncture the singular drowsiness which had overtaken him so persistently in the past few days began to steep his dulling senses.

Warned by its approach, Raikes began to put into execution a newly conceived plan of retiring for the night and effective vigil over his treasure-trove.

Hastily drawing a chair before the radiator, and placing directly in front of that the table, from which with a savage sweep of the arm he swept the dull heap of coals rattling to the floor, Raikes established himself in the seat so provided and, leaning forward, awaited the final blandishments of the drowsiness which was not long in lulling him into that profound degree of slumber which is commonly supposed to be the reward of sound morals and Christian resignation.

(To be continued on Dickey No. 3, Series B.)

During the reading of this impossible helter-skelter of unrestrained imagination and composite style, the expression in the countenance of the listening woman had developed from its original sadness to an unmistakable geniality.

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The pensive droop of her lips, little by little, nestled away into a smiling seriousness, and when Dennis, confronted with the habitual conclusion in italics, looked up with a grimace of recognition, his glance was met by a pair of kindly blue eyes, in which he believed he traced a charming suggestion of unaffected good fellowship.

Altogether unsuspected by himself, Dennis, with his intent, intelligent countenance, and the contrasting vivacity of his rich, Irish accent, had awakened an interest in the mind of his companion which months of adroit approach could not have achieved.

His genuineness was unquestionable.

His entire absorption in the story, his delightful and unconscious elimination of self, supplied this tired woman with elements of mental refreshment and genuine enjoyment which circumstances had compelled her to decide no longer existed.

Encouraged, therefore, by this unmistakable interest and the amiable attitude of attention which Dennis, with characteristic ingenuousness, accepted as a tribute to the narrative, he exclaimed:

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“An’ isn’t it great, now? Did you ever hear such a tale as that?”

“I never did,” was the smiling reply.

"An' wasn't that Raikes a div—a tight one, I mean?"

"He was, indeed," assented the lady, as she reviewed this sordid character and the incidents surrounding him, and contrasted the tumult of phrase and situation with her genial Addison and her placid Irving.

"An' would you like to hear the rest?" asked Dennis, as he produced the remaining bosom of Series B.

"Yes," replied the lady, "I believe I would. But just a moment before you begin," and regarding this oblivious young man with an expression in which a degree of speculation still lingered to tantalize its suggestion of frank indorsement, she hazarded:

"You have not lived in New York long?"

Wondering at the acuteness of this observation, Dennis responded by according to her the exact time of his brief residence. 166

"Ah!" exclaimed the lady, "I thought so."

"May I ask," inquired Dennis, wondering if, like the visitor from the bucolic district, he supplied unconscious data in his appearance for classification, "may I ask how you are able to tell that I'm here for a short time only?"

"Well," returned his companion with a degree of hesitation exquisitely refined as it shadowed through her fine countenance, and which she presently conquered as she replied to his question with that shade of frankness which, in the well-bred, can never be mistaken for anything else: "It requires about a year's residence in this bedlam to replace the genuine with the artificial; I see no evidence of such an unhappy transformation in you."

"Oh, I see," responded Dennis. "An' you never will, either."

"I am almost prepared to believe that," answered the lady with a reassuring cordiality which somehow indicated to this young man that she had already become convinced of more than she was willing to acknowledge. 167

"You may do so entirely," said Dennis simply.

"Now, one question more," continued his companion, "and do not consider me inquisitive, since I may have something to suggest to your advantage if your reply is satisfactory. What is your business?"

Dennis blushed.

"My business?" he repeated with a droll accent and an amusing grimace; and then, encouraged by the friendly invitation and subtle encouragement in the manner of his sweet-faced listener, with a straightforward recital which the lady had expected from him, and which advanced him several leagues in her estimation, Dennis recounted his experiences from the time of his arrival up to the present moment.

"It isn't much," he concluded apologetically, "not anywhere as interesting as the dickey back; but it's all there is, an' it's true, every word."

"It is more than you suspect," dissented his hearer. "You have enabled me to come to a decision, at least, and may help me to solve a vexed problem. In the meantime, let us finish the story. While you are reading my mind will clear; I will make my suggestion when you conclude." 168

Wondering, and yet with a prompt confidence which conveyed an agreeable flattery which the cleverest diplomacy could not have achieved, Dennis, holding his absurd medium at a level which permitted him to receive the stimulation of a sympathetic glance now and then, began.

CHAPTER VII

169

Considering the unaccustomed position in which Raikes had placed himself in arranging to retire the night before, he awoke with considerable astonishment to the realization that he had passed a night of undisturbed slumber.

Aside from a slight disposition to stretch his lean limbs unduly, and a feeling of insecurity attending his first efforts to stand, he was not aware of any inconvenience from his singular siesta.

At last, after having re-established his creaking equilibrium and resumed his accustomed furtive regard of things, he was suddenly reminded by the shifted position of the furniture of the purpose of this makeshift barricade.

At once the shuddering dread which had attended his recent visits to the secret recess returned with numbing chills and sinking spirit. 170

He advanced his bony hand, gnarled and mean with useless abstemiousness and miserable abnegations, and revolved the button in the concave. In response, the false register swung back; in another tense moment the inner space was revealed, and his treasury laid bare.

For an instant, in the manner of an apprehensive child who postpones as long as possible some unwelcome confirmation, Raikes closed his eyes, and when he opened them again they rested, with unerring precision, upon a bag somewhat detached from the others, which protruded at its sides with those frightful points and angles with which he had become so unhappily familiar of late.

With a smothered cry he sprang forward, gripped the bag in a trembling, faltering clutch, and dropped it with a groan to the floor, where it fell with a heart-breaking, distracting lightness, which, nevertheless, smote like a mighty weight upon his bursting heart.

"My God!" he cried, "this is incredible!" and the miserable creature stood for a moment with an appalling vacancy shadowing in his countenance, which was illumed for one fitful moment with a ray of hope as he inserted his hand in his waistcoat pocket to assure himself that the diamond which he had placed in that receptacle the night before at least was safe.

The diamond—ah, yes!

There was still some consolation in that.

Its value still maintained a close proportion to his loss. If there was no gain there was, at least, a sort of evil restitution.

But his exploring fingers found only an empty pocket.

In a palsy of fear, and with the demeanor of one who feels the first twinge of a mortal affliction and awaits in fearful silence the grewsome confirmation of another, he stood without sound or motion, his set, staring eyes directed with unseeing intensity upon the vacant air.

The next instant, with feverish animation and impotent apprehension, five writhing fingers leaped from their futile search, like scotched reptiles, into the opposite pocket and withdrew the two useless keys with which he fastened his abortive latch on the door.

And then, with a frightful glitter in his eyes, an ugly ooze about his bloodless lips, a flickering effort of his shriveled fingers to adjust themselves to some ribald rhythm, Raikes began to sing, with the dry rasp and ancient husk of a galvanized sphinx:

"And her name it was Dinah,
Scarce sixteen years old;
She'd a very large fortune
In greenbacks and gold.
Sing turi-li-luri—"

Ha, ha! ha, ha!" and supporting himself along the wall he made his way slowly to the threshold, unfastened the locks, removed the heavy bar, opened the door, and cried out in a voice that was not human, that shuddered its way along the chill passage through the shrinking air:

"Robert—Robert!" and then, reeling, stumbling toward a near-by chair, he fell ere he could reach it, in utter collapse to the floor, and lay there—shriveled, grotesque, in no way pathetic, in all points contemptible, as his nephew, in response to his uncle's unearthly summons, rushed into the room, followed by the wide-eyed spinster.

For three days during the week that followed Raikes lay oblivious to the considerations of loss or gain.

The utmost of the young medical attendant, who had been selected on the basis of the small charges incident to a beginning practice, had failed to restore the emaciated man to his suspended consciousness, until, toward the morning of the fourth day, the spinster, who sat near-by in weary vigil, was startled to behold the dull eyes of her brother fastened upon her with the faraway, questioning look of one returning from the confines of the nether to the sharp realities of existence.

"Rodman?" she inquired with anxious interrogation.

In response the thin lips of the sufferer moved slowly.

Approaching the bed, his sister, leaning over the unfortunate Raikes, heard him articulate with difficulty "Water!"

Supporting his head with one hand, the spinster supplied his feebly-sighed request, and when the last difficult swallow conveyed the refreshing draught along his fevered throat, she restored his head to the pillow and awaited developments.

As she sat at the bedside in an attitude of fearful expectation, it was evident that some transformation, more wholesome than subtle, had manifested itself in the mien and physique of his nurse.

A large degree of her pitiful attenuity had vanished; a legible vestige of placid well-being seemed to have replaced the hunger of her eyes; there was a vague, unsubstantial promise of possible comeliness in the restoration of her cheeks.

Aware of these changes herself, and fearful lest her brother's sharp eyes would discover them, the spinster recalled, with a sort of troubled gratification, the occasion of the improvement.

Undisturbed by the rebuking glances of the abstemious Raikes, and secretly abetted by the amused Sepoy, the poor woman had enjoyed the privileges of the table with a relish and surrender which had begun to result in the manner indicated.

For several days previous to the catastrophe which had concluded in the prostration of her

brother, the spinster had supplied the cravings of her appetite with a gusto that was a revelation to her, and which would have evoked a profound rebuke from the wretched creature on the bed.

It was therefore with secret misgiving and a qualified delight she heard her brother at last call feebly: "Sarah!"

In answer to the exhausted interrogation in his utterance of the name, his sister hastened to recount to him the incident of his collapse and his subsequent unconsciousness.

Little by little his intelligence began to resume its abandoned functions, and at last he recalled the whole evil situation.

"Where's Robert?" he said. "I want him."

"I will send him to you," exclaimed his sister, and she hastened from the room.

"Well, uncle!" exclaimed Robert as he entered with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling as he witnessed that emaciated countenance; "better, I see."

"I congratulate you upon your imagination," replied Raikes, with a feeble attempt at his customary incivility; "but lock the door and listen to me carefully."

These instructions complied with, Robert seated himself in the chair just vacated by the spinster, which provided his uncle an unobstructed view of the embonpoint and general aspect of well-being which were so obnoxious to the singular man on the bed.

"In the first place," resumed Raikes weakly, "move the bed around so that I can see the register in the wall."

The wondering Robert did as he was ordered.

"Take hold of the button that moves the valves and pull it toward you."

Robert followed these instructions minutely, and to his astonishment and the miser's consternation the radiator itself swung away from the wall.

"What!" cried the startled invalid as he beheld this confirmation of his fear that he had neglected to spring the catch that held the radiator on the occasion of the mishap which resulted in his confinement to the bed, "Look within. Is the inner compartment closed?"

"No!" replied Robert.

"My God!" groaned Raikes as he realized that his treasury had been thus unguarded during his illness. "Tell me how many bags there are."

Robert removed them one by one, and deposited them on the table.

As the miser followed the movements of his nephew with anxious notation, a sigh of unutterable relief welled from the innermost depths of his bosom.

The bags had been untouched!

There was no further loss, and the clinking weight assured him that his nocturnal visitor had made no more of his gross substitutions.

"Listen, Robert," said Raikes with laborious amiability, as his astonished nephew seated himself near the bedside, "it has been my purpose to conceal this hiding place from any living soul, but I find that I have not succeeded."

"Some one has made three visits to that recess and helped himself to as many bags of coin."

Robert, remembering his uncle's well-known secrecy and the unusual precautions taken by him to secure his room from intrusion, looked his incredulity, which stimulated Raikes into exclaiming:

"Ah, but you do not know how incredible it is. Wait until you hear all. You will wonder what human agency could penetrate these locks, open the doors of this hiding place, extract the plunder, restore the locks to their original condition, and re-issue into the passageway without disturbing the latches or the crossbar. My losses are supernatural. Now follow me carefully and confess that you have not heard anything so ghastly, so unreal as what I am about to relate."

As Raikes proceeded in his narrative, his nephew was at first inclined to receive these weird confidences as features of the unhappy man's condition, but as the latter progressed, with a constantly increasing degree of his customary emotionless lucidity, his sincerity became apparent.

"And now," concluded Raikes, "what have you to say to all this? Is it not worthy of a Poe or a Maupassant? I tell you, I must have some explanation of this mystery or I shall go mad."

During this singular recital the young man's mind, stimulated by the eerie perplexities and the unhappy dénouement, had been busy.

It was not difficult to convince himself of the futility of any of his own speculations; the nearness of the calamity affected him, in a degree, as it did the withered invalid.

He had a sound brain, nourished by a well sustained body; his intelligence was apt and rapid, but these unheard-of complications demanded a morbid analysis of which he was incapable.

On this basis, however, as his uncle had proceeded, Robert had been able to develop a suggestion; he could offer that, at least.

In reply, therefore, to the feverish questions of his uncle, the young man said:

"In so far as I am able to see, your disasters have narrowed your range of discernment. They are too recent; they affect you too nearly. Under such conditions we take counsel of our prejudices instead of our judgment. Your thoughts are apt to return to the central feature of your loss. It is not natural to expect one to dismiss such a consideration in order to make way for others which might help you in your search.

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"On my part, the incident is new and stimulating, but the ideas it awakens lead to nothing. However, I should not regard the case as impossible until I had tried at least one means of solution."

"What is that?" demanded Raikes, diverted, if not convinced, by the sensible observations of his nephew.

"You have heard of Gratz?" inquired Robert.

"Of the secret service?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" cried the old man; "to submit the case to him means another in the secret, with little prospect of advantage."

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"I am not so sure about that," returned Robert. "Do you recall the Dupont mystery?"

Raikes nodded.

"Well," continued Robert, "you must also remember the Belmont scandal. Gratz certainly let daylight into that."

"Ah," cried Raikes, "I do not like your suggestions; they encourage me and alarm me at the same time. Think of the cost."

Irritated at the intrusion of this frugal proviso at this juncture, Robert exclaimed with some warmth: "Yes, but think, also, how insignificant that would be if he discovered the thief and recovered the money."

"If—if——" repeated Raikes with impatience.

"And I can say this," continued Robert: "It is the ambition of Gratz to be appointed chief of the bureau to which he belongs. Whatever can be placed to his credit in the meantime will serve as an additional reason for his advancement.

"I believe that he would be more persuaded to undertake the case with this prospect in view than for a mercenary reason."

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"But," interrupted Raikes, "can you get him?"

"I think I can answer for that," replied Robert. "I know him very well. If you will consent to leave the matter in my hands, I will attend to Gratz."

"Well," exclaimed Raikes, as Robert concluded, "have it your own way; anything is better than this killing suspense. I do not believe that I could endure a repetition of the incidents of the last few nights. But return the bags before you go, and shut the radiator; it will lock in closing."

When Robert at last reached the dining-room he discovered his aunt at the table, seated opposite the Sepoy.

Instructing the spinster to resume her vigil until his return, Robert proceeded to his own table, and from that point of observation occupied himself, during the next twenty minutes, partly with his breakfast and partly in regarding this illy-assorted duet.

The Sepoy was as gravely urbane as ever; his browns and blacks intermingled harmoniously; his eyes were bright; his teeth still suggestive of restrained sarcasm in their dull, red sheaths, as, with grave courtesy, he made himself agreeable to his companion by abetting her newly-awakened appetite with recommendations of the steak and eulogies of the butter.

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The spinster was no longer ravenous; the advantages she had enjoyed during the absence of her domestic Argus had made her cravings more equable, and she accepted the edible suggestions of the Sepoy with an approach to placid satisfaction that hinted at the imminence of repletion.

This disposition to make the most of her privileges, with what composure she could assume, would have added the basis of a serious relapse on the part of the invalid could he have witnessed the phenomenon.

It was remarkable how promptly the poor creature evinced the effects of her nourishment.

Beginning, as already indicated, with a logical indigestion, she progressed to the point of a possible filling out of the crevices of her countenance, and her eyes certainly had lost the expression of appeal characteristic of the mendicant in the doorway.

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All this, minutely noted by her watchful nephew, was thoroughly enjoyed with a sort of chuckling collusion and vicarious gratification.

On her return to the invalid she was requested by him to provide whatever nourishment was needed, and then to leave him alone for a couple of hours.

These instructions fulfilled, the spinster sought the retirement of her room, surrendered herself to the enjoyment of reminiscent digestion, and Raikes began to pull himself together.

His method was characteristic.

On the basis that he could not afford to enjoy himself like any normally constituted being, he assured his mind that he could not submit to the expense of illness.

According to his rigid logic, sickness was more the result of indulgence than self-denial.

He proposed to have the credit of his abnegations.

Therefore he directed his perverse will to the contemplation of the rational aspect of his condition, and presently had managed to convince himself that if he did not entertain the belief of suffering, this untoward condition would cease to exist.

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As this singular being combatted all that was unwelcome to this point of view, the grim lines tightened about the corners of his mouth, the deep fissures in his forehead established a communication with the obstinate wrinkles at the root of his nose, and by noon he was well on his way to the mastery of his indisposition, and by nightfall he scandalized the young medical attendant by standing up to receive him.

Extending to himself a chuckling tribute of his resolution, he received the incredulity of his nephew as additional indorsement when the latter made his appearance that evening, accompanied by the colorless negation of a man whom he could scarcely persuade himself to believe was the celebrated Gratz.

However, no more ideal countenance could have been created for the purposes to which it was applied by its owner.

Pallid, expressionless, vacant, it was as nearly a canvas upon which to delineate almost anything in the range of emotion as it was possible for a visage of flesh and blood to be.

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As to the details of features, these were altogether subordinate, and as devoid of physiognomical meaning as the dull integument which encompassed them.

It had about the same amount of character as a bald baby.

One received the impression that a seismic disturbance might awaken some show of emotion, but design—never.

And yet, behind that pale disguise, between sleepy, level lids, two points of concentrated fire and ceaseless animation gleamed their startling significance to any one able to comprehend.

In stature he was adjusted to his visage.

His frame was lean enough to repudiate the incredible agility and recuperative strength it housed, and his carriage was consistently "out of plumb."

Altogether it was an identity that would have been overlooked in any gathering, and was almost nondescript enough to establish an eligibility to the most exclusive function.

This unpromising ensemble, however, was not misleading to Raikes, who had looked up quickly at the first appearance of the detective, and had seen the sharp, penetrating glance with which Gratz had for an instant surveyed the apartment.

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Moreover, the very leanness of the famous official appealed to him.

Here, at least, were none of the obnoxious evidences of repletion which he viewed with such disapprobation in his sturdier nephew.

The man's attire, too, commended him to the starved graces of his spare host. It was as characterless as it was possible for fabric to be, and considered with his meager physique and vacant physiognomy, was a fitting complement to both; an adjustment of component detail too consistent to have been the needless aspect it was designed to present.

With a voice in which the character had been trained away as surely as the charity from the opinions of the social élite, this descendant of Lecocq accosted his patron, and with business-like brevity indicated that he was already familiar with the situation as outlined by Robert, and if Mr. Raikes would consent to reply to a few questions it would facilitate matters.

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His hearer indicated that he was entirely at the disposal of the detective.

With characteristic concentration, therefore, Gratz began:

"Do you suspect anybody in particular?"

"No."

"That is singular," commented Gratz. "May I ask why? Under such circumstances the mind generally proceeds in some unhappy direction."

"Not in this instance," returned Raikes. "Before I suspect any one, I must assign to him supernatural powers, almost. I will have to explain how it is possible for any one to enter this room, penetrate that recess, make the substitution, and retire, leaving the door in the same condition, precisely as left by me the night before."

"That is the point," replied Gratz. Then, after a moment's reflection, he inquired: "Am I at liberty to nose around this room?"

"Help yourself," answered Raikes.

With this assent, Gratz hurried to the window, examined the sash, considered the sheer depths immediately below, its lack of vicinity to other windows, and last, the strong fastenings, to

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disturb which would involve a degree of rasp and wrench sufficient to disturb the slumbers of a Rip Van Winkle.

With a countenance as impassive as ever, he returned to Raikes and said:

"Now for the hiding place."

With a grimace of reluctant acquiescence, Raikes, closely regarded by the detective, proceeded to the button in the concave, which he moved with slow manipulation for the edification of the alert watcher, who witnessed, without comment, the displacement of the register and the subsequent revelation of the inner compartment.

"Remove the bags."

At the conclusion of this labor, this impenetrable being produced a small rod of steel from one of his pockets, one end of which concluded in a round knob.

With this he proceeded to rap the walls of the inner recess, a proceeding of which Raikes inquired the purpose.

"I want to ascertain," replied Gratz, "if there is any vacancy on the other side."

"I could have saved you all that trouble," replied Raikes. "This is a false radiator, the real flue is on the other side of the room."

"The rear of this small safe backs up against nearly two feet of solid brickwork.

"Exactly behind that is a room occupied by one no more burglarious than a dressmaker's apprentice."

"Thank you," replied Gratz. "Your information is helpful, but I am never satisfied to rely upon description when investigation is possible."

"Whatever deductions I make from this examination I do not want disturbed, so all the doubts they dissipate are not likely to intrude upon my calculations again."

After a few further taps, in which Raikes could see no better purpose than to retire from an embarrassing position with some show of satisfied motive, Gratz directed that the bags be returned.

For the next few minutes he busied himself with the locks, upon which he experimented with the extraordinary keys which Raikes had given him. He shot the bolts backward and forward; noted the stout bar and the precautions for keeping it in place, and then resumed the seat near the table.

After a few moments he said:

"Tell me what has occurred to you between sunrise and sunset during the last three days."

Raikes recounted his usual round of petty detail, which had no possible bearing upon the problem.

When he had concluded this meager résumé, Gratz continued:

"Now tell me about the nights."

Raikes complied with a statement of his careful precautions; the watch of his sister upon the doorway during his absence, and his visits to the room of the Sepoy.

"The Sepoy?" inquired Gratz. "Why do you call him that?"

"On account of his swarthy complexion, his bright eyes, and his general alien aspect," replied Robert.

"Describe him to me as carefully as you can," said Gratz.

When Robert had concluded his brief delineation, Raikes hastened to inquire: "Why do you ask about him so particularly? He could no more enter my room, under the conditions I have described to you, than you could."

"I realize that," admitted the detective, "but I gather from what you have just said that you visit this Sepoy, as you call him, with some degree of regularity. May I ask if you have business transactions with him?"

"I have not," replied Raikes.

Then, in response to the unchanging look of inquiry in the countenance of the detective, he added:

"The Sepoy has been telling me an extraordinary story. It has been too elaborate to confine to one sitting, and my purpose in re-visiting him was to get at the conclusion. It is most interesting, and apparently interminable."

"Would you object to relating it to me?" inquired Gratz.

"Heavens!" cried Raikes, aghast at the prospect of the extended effort which this would impose upon him. "Is it necessary?"

"I would not be surprised," replied Gratz. "At any rate, if your story is more mysterious than the predicament which confronts us, it must be worth hearing."

With an ill grace, after making the elaborate arrangements which usually precede a protracted campaign, Raikes hastened to comply with the request of the detective.

As he proceeded, he was startled to note, now that he made his first conscious effort to review the weird recital of the Sepoy, just how vividly the incidents presented themselves.

Aside from the phraseology, he recounted, in precise order, the incredible incidents, and by the time he had reached the climax in the first division of his effort his hearers were interested enough to hasten through a light meal, which, at the suggestion of Gratz, had been sent to the room they occupied.

With something of the calculation of the Sepoy, or remembering, perhaps, the effect which his abrupt terminations had upon him, Raikes contrived his irritating pauses with remorseless enjoyment and the ostensible purpose of stimulating his sorely taxed energies with draughts of brandy and water.

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In this way Raikes consumed the time until the hour of eleven, which enabled him to develop the narrative to the point at which the Sepoy had concluded.

"And now," exclaimed Raikes with unmistakable relief, as he signified that his hearers were in possession of all he knew, "and now will you kindly tell me what you expect to gain by this tedious task you have imposed upon me?"

Gratz did not reply at once, but after a few moments of reflection, he asked, apparently ignoring the question of the narrator: "Will you give me the keys of this building you occupy, and indicate to me the means of rummaging about the other building on the opposite side of the wall?"

"If it is necessary," replied Raikes with grudging assent.

"Why else should I make the request?" suggested Gratz with emotionless directness of speech and a momentary gleam of the eyes.

"True!" responded Raikes.

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"Now," exclaimed Gratz, when the various keys were placed in his hand, "you can sleep in peace to-night, and bolt your doors with all the assurance in the world, for I guarantee that your property will be undisturbed."

Then turning to Robert, he said: "I want you to guide me for a short while, and as soon as I get my bearings you can retire."

At this the two bade the thoroughly exhausted Raikes good-night and departed from the room, which the miser hastily secured with his usual precautions.

Without, Robert soon discovered that his services were no longer required, and at the suggestion of the detective he retired, after indicating to this curious official that when he had concluded his investigations he would find a cot in his room which he was at liberty to occupy.

As dawn began to make its appearance on the ensuing morning, Robert was disturbed by a curious dream.

He appeared to be alone upon a fragile raft in the midst of a destructive sea.

Bit by bit the hastily joined structure upon which he rode the waters so insecurely began to disintegrate, until but one scarcely sufficing plank remained.

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To this, however, he clung with rapidly failing strength, shouting at intervals with what vim remained, in an attempt to attract the attention of the keepers of the light, not far away.

But with devilish perversity, an immense fog-horn sent forth a heavy blast seaward precisely at the moments he raised his voice.

No matter how far apart or how near he planned the intervals, he was bound to coincide with the deafening horn.

At last in despair he desisted in his efforts, and the monster horn, with hoarse mockery, continued its grewsome noises at dismal intervals, until one, more stentorian than the others, caused the very tempest to hush, and Robert awoke to discover Gratz the cause of his fictitious misery, sleeping upon the cot near the foot of his bed, emitting a series of snores which had managed to communicate their odious telepathy to his slumbering consciousness.

As this singular being lay there in the relaxation and undisguise to which the most diplomatic must submit at times, his countenance, so impassive in his wakeful hours, depicted singular lines of determination.

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An expression of tense anxiety contracted his features; resolution held the thin lips in rigid partnership; there was a hint of purpose in the solitary wrinkle which corrugated his forehead; the general aspect was impressive, its suggestion indefatigable.

In this paradoxical fashion, the emotions, concealed during the day, revealed themselves at night.

What in others would have concluded in a vacant mien and colorless repose, in him expressed all that he was so sedulous to conceal.

Scarcely had Robert placed his feet upon the floor when Gratz opened his eyes, awakened partly by the sounds of rising and partly by his tumult of snores, and in an instant the flaccid mask descended over his face, and Gratz was his apathetic self again.

"Well?" inquired Robert.

"You have said it," replied Gratz; "it is well."

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"You have succeeded, then?" demanded Robert breathlessly.

"I believe so; but do not question me further just now. I want to see your uncle before I go."

A few moments later the two presented themselves before the closed door leading to the apartment occupied by Raikes, whom they fancied they could hear stirring about within.

In answer to their raps, he opened the door and they entered.

"What news?" demanded Raikes.

"The best, I hope; but I will not communicate it to you until to-morrow morning."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raikes with manifest disappointment.

"But," continued Gratz, as he noted the expression on the face of the other, "at that time I fancy that I shall not only have solved the mystery but I will also secure the thief."

"Do you know him, then?" asked Raikes.

"You are wrong," replied Gratz. "Unless I am seriously mistaken, there are two."

"Two!" repeated Raikes incredulously.

"Yes—but listen: I am anxious to hear the conclusion of that remarkable story you began last night." 199

"But," objected Raikes, "I have already told you all I know."

"I am aware of that," answered the detective, "but your friend, the Sepoy, will doubtless oblige you with the balance. Arrange with him at breakfast-time for a continuation. I will return either to-night or to-morrow morning to hear it."

"But—" began Raikes.

"Do not refuse to do as I ask," urged Gratz impressively. "It may be useful; I'm inclined to think it will."

"Very well," answered Raikes. "I will do as you suggest."

"And," continued Gratz, "I need not assure you that if a living soul learns of my presence here last night, I can do nothing for you."

"I understand," said Raikes.

"And I," added Robert.

With this Gratz departed, and Raikes prepared to make his appearance in the dining-room.

Advised of the intention of her brother to breakfast at the table, the spinster had hastened to precede him, and by the time Raikes presented himself she had managed to bestow a couple of furtive biscuits in her pocket, and had devoured another couple, lavishly buttered, accompanied by a fairly liberal cut of beefsteak. 200

Consequently, when Raikes conveyed his customary intimation that she was at liberty to begin, the spinster obediently proceeded to add a moderate breakfast to the one she had already enjoyed.

Trembling lest her brother would remark the developing suggestions of well-being which had resulted from her recent regimen, she welcomed with genuine relief the advent of the Sepoy, to whom Raikes transferred his speculative glance.

"Well!" exclaimed the Sepoy, "you have had quite a siege, I hear."

"I have," replied Raikes shortly; then added with a sort of grim humor: "My physician has recommended a little diversion, and I have just thought of a simple way of following his advice." 201

"What is that?" asked the Sepoy.

"I would like to present myself at the usual hour and hear the conclusion of the story, for I judge, from the predicament of Prince Otondo, that the end is not far off."

"Ah, you remember?" exclaimed the Sepoy.

"Decidedly!" replied Raikes.

"Very well, then," returned the other. "Come at ten and I will gather the tangled threads together."

During the balance of that day Raikes devoted his powers of concentration to the consummation of the treatment to which he had subjected himself, and this, together with the prospect of the recovery of his property, resulted in a condition which made the visits of the astonished physician no longer necessary.

With an eagerness intensified to a childish impatience, almost, by the vague suggestions of Gratz that the story would be personally interesting, and exhausting his mind with futile speculations as to the manner of its application to the unnatural conditions which distressed him so, Raikes at last concluded his contemplation of the clock, and promptly upon the stroke of ten, hastened from his room and hurried to the apartment occupied by the Sepoy. 202

Seating himself in the chair indicated by his host, he shortly found that he was unable to avoid recalling his recent guilty appropriation of the diamond, and a degree of confusion, which he could not entirely disguise, manifested itself in his difficulty of adjusting his eyes to the inscrutable gaze of the Sepoy.

On this occasion the narrator, as hitherto, did not provide his auditor with a brilliant to look upon during the progress of the story—an omission that was radiantly repaired by the two lambent gems in the eyes of the former.

Upon these the shifting gaze of the restless listener finally fastened itself with a fascination which he found it impossible to resist, and the Sepoy, with all the modulated lights and shadows of ardor, animation, lethargy, somnolence, peace, with which he complemented his sedative phrases, began:

(The conclusion of this interesting tale will be found on Bosom No. 1, Dickey Series C.)

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As Dennis looked up from his reading, a pair of eyes of unclouded blue, vivid with interest and altogether friendly, met his animated glance.

With alert intuition his sweet-faced auditor believed that she discovered a shadow of vexation in the ingenuous countenance of the reader.

“What is it?” she asked.

To Dennis, in his absorption, it seemed impossible that the question could refer to anything else than the habitual disability at the end of each chapter, and he answered promptly:

“’Tis the way the dickey ends—to be concluded in Series C—an’ it’s me here an’ Series C in Baxter Street, so I can’t read the rest; it’s too bad, so it is.”

“So it is,” repeated the lady softly, with a dexterous parody of his concluding words, but with a subtle intimation in her manner that she did not consider the inconvenient termination such a misfortune, after all, and that it somehow suggested an alternative that was not displeasing.

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“Do you want to hear the rest?” asked Dennis frankly.

“I do, indeed,” replied his companion with an adroitly conveyed insinuation of disappointed expectation that seemed to place the responsibility of measuring to this agreeable emergency entirely upon Dennis.

The same degree of sensitiveness which leaves an Irishman so open to offense, enables him, with equal celerity, to comprehend a hint, and Dennis, when he realized that the lady understood that the continuation of the tale involved a subsequent reading, exclaimed, with a delicious paraphrase of Sancho Panza: “God bless the man who first invented ‘*Continued in our next!*’”

Presently the one certain that her telepathy had not miscarried, and the other equally convinced that his reception of the message was accredited to him, the conversation was given an abrupt direction by an apparently alien question:

“Do you know anything about flowers?” asked his companion.

“Only the difference between a rose and a cauliflower,” replied Dennis with a twinkle in his eye, to which the lady responded with a shade of disappointment.

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“An’ why flowers?” asked Dennis.

“Listen!” answered the lady with a slight return of her original sadness.

“Eleven months ago I was left a widow.

“My husband’s estate consisted of a moderate amount of life insurance, a prosperous business, and no debts.

“He was a florist.

“The establishment is located in the heart of a very fashionable district.

“There has scarcely been a function of the élite in this section which my husband has not supplied with floral decorations.

“His taste was exquisite, and his taste was his undoing, for he added refinement to refinement until he began to lose sight of the practical side of existence.

“By degrees he became as attenuated as some of the tendrils he cultivated with such absorption, and as frail as an orchid.

“The intrusion of a pronounced scent was sufficient to induce a serious nervous disturbance, and he could no more endure disproportionate and sharp distinctions of color than a lapidary could tolerate a serious unevenness of facets.

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“I was compelled to paper his room with a delicate shade of lavender.

“The furniture was stained a light buff, and the upholstery was a delicate cretonne livened by exquisite tracings of wisteria.

“The carpet was light blue, surrounded by a border of deeper blue, lightly emphasized by suggestions of trailing arbutus.

“Despite all this,” continued the lady sadly as she paused to enjoy an intentness of interest on the part of the bewildered Dennis, so profound that the dickey backs had been permitted to fall unregarded to the ground, and their printed extravagances, by contrast with this unusual recital, relegated to the most prosaic of occurrences, “despite all these precautions, the most carefully guarded recesses are not entirely secure.

“For one day an elaborately protected package arrived during my absence, and my husband

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opened it.

"At once a pungent, overpowering sweetness filled the air, and the very surfeit of its fragrance threw my husband into a convulsion of delight which ended in a stupor so replete that we were able only to restore the poor man to consciousness by hypodermics of—what was to him a most violent stimulant—Cambric Tea."

Dennis looked his astonishment at these accumulating refinements, and in the pause that followed the narration of this last episode he inquired, with the appreciative hesitation of one who is reluctant to advance lest he destroy the dew-gemmed tracery of a fragile spider's web.

"An' what kind of flowers did all this?"

"Cape Jessamine," replied the lady; "and we were never able to discover who sent them."

"His physicians claimed that his disorder was paralleled by similar disturbances instanced in pathological records, but that the contributing causes were different and that my husband's particular debility was not induced by his devotion to flowers but aggravated by it."

"To further complicate matters, the physician assured me that to deprive the invalid of his floral diversions would be to remove his remaining impulse to continued existence."

"He went on to say that he had reached the limit of his skill, and that nothing further was to be done than to surround the sufferer with placid considerations and neutral odors, and intimated that he disliked to contemplate the possible result of a second contact with Cape Jessamine."

"In a short time it became evident that I possessed merely the essence of a husband, and one day, as he wafted—that's the word, for his step seemed to be almost devoid of specific gravity—so I repeat, one day, as he wafted to the room in which he usually experimented with his floral attenuations, I happened to be engaged in the dwelling adjoining the conservatory and into which it opened."

"Presently, my duties concluded, I proceeded in the direction taken by my husband."

"As I advanced I grew momentarily conscious of a ravishing fragrance which seemed to pervade and invite the consciousness to all varieties of agreeable surrender."

"Ah!—in a moment I recognized this pungent delight: Cape Jessamine!"

"Aware of the consequences to him should he inhale anything so transporting, I hastened forward."

"The fragrance grew stronger as I hurried on. It seemed to envelop every delicate, fainting scent in the conservatory, and as I placed my hand upon the door-latch leading to the section where I was positive my husband would be found, I knew that I had traced the occasion to its source."

"In another second I had opened the door, and there, a few feet away, lay my unfortunate husband."

"I hurried to his side."

"His countenance, which exhibited that singular placidity which sometimes comes with death, was as serene as a lily, and gave no evidence of the convulsion that must have ensued."

"He was dead."

"All about him, distributed with devilish malignity and criminal intent, were various clusters of the flowers that had transported him, literally."

"My God!" exclaimed Dennis. "What a situation!"

"Wasn't it?" exclaimed the widow. "It almost equals the story on the dickeys."

"Equals!" exclaimed Dennis with profound conviction. "I don't know that I care to read the balance of the story after this. Do you know the guilty party?"

"I think so," answered the widow; "but you can judge for yourself as I proceed."

"Now follow me closely."

There was no need of this advice, for Dennis would not have missed a word for the world, and gazed upon the sweet-faced narrator with a sort of superstitious admiration as she continued:

"Since his death the patronage is larger than ever."

"I now find myself confronted with what is equivalent to an embarrassment of riches on the one hand, and a famine of intelligent help on the other."

At this statement Dennis attempted not to appear too deeply interested.

"I employ a manager, the one we have always had, who desires to become a partner in the business; but his proposition is handicapped by the character of the consideration he is willing to offer for such an interest."

"In other words, he considers that a proposal of marriage is an equivalent for any financial objection I may suggest."

Despite his efforts, Dennis looked troubled.

The lady smiled and continued:

"I received this proposition two months since. Its suddenness surprised a plan which I have

been perfecting for a long time.

"In order to avoid any interruption to my purposes, I permitted the manager to believe that I was impressed with his offer, but desired a little time for consideration."

"An' true, now," asked Dennis with genuine Irish impulse, "an' true, now, were you?"

The lady smiled again. "Wait," she urged, "you shall see.

"I have never trusted this man. He is not only personally obnoxious to me, but I fear that I cannot rely upon his business integrity.

"Little by little, I have gathered together the threads of the business, and I now have a strong legal grip upon the situation, which enables me to decline this alliance with no possible jeopardy to the property.

"But one consideration restrains me: I need a man of enterprise and address to succeed him. And now," she added with a simple, business-like directness, "I have a suggestion to offer:

"You ransack Baxter Street to-morrow for Dickey Series C, and come with it to this address," and she placed a small card in his hand.

"We can reach the end of the story, in which I am exceedingly interested, and when we have set our minds at rest on that point, I will give myself the pleasure of listening to whatever recommendations you may offer as to your fitness to take the place of the retiring management."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dennis as he went through an absurd pantomime of punching himself, "an' is it awake you are, Dennis Muldoon?"

At this the lady, with a cordial smile, indicated that the interview was at an end, and as she turned to depart, said: "You will come, then, to-morrow night?"

And Dennis, hat in hand, with an unmistakable deference of attitude and demeanor, cheerily responded with a query that required no further answer than a rosy acknowledgment:

"Will a duck swim?"

CHAPTER VIII

On the succeeding morning it seemed to the foreman of the shipping department of the publishers that his new marker did not manifest the same enthusiasm for his work which had distinguished his earlier efforts.

It looked to him as if Dennis handled his paint-brush with the mien of one who considered his occupation a diversion rather than a means of livelihood.

As the day advanced and Dennis located an "e" in the spot designed for an "i," and concluded an address with Detroit in place of Duluth, the foreman was more than ever convinced that something was wrong, and asked the young man if he was not feeling well.

"Sure!" exclaimed Dennis, a degree too cheerily, the foreman thought, in view of his delinquencies with the brush, "sure; but why do you ask?"

"Well," returned the foreman, "iv'ry thing's wid you this mornin' but yure head," and he pointed out several blunders which Dennis had made.

"Sure, an' I'm sorry for that," he said with blushing contriteness; "it will not happen again."

The foreman, however, had told the truth only in part, for Dennis had left not only his head behind him, but a considerable portion of his heart.

All day he continued to think about the sweet-faced woman who had listened with such gratifying attention to the story, and more than once, in his agreeable preoccupation, had he noted an impulse to substitute the address she had provided for the one demanded by the shipping invoices.

"To-night at eight," he repeated to himself over and over, like the refrain of a popular ballad, invariably concluding, by way of chorus: "Oh, I'll be there; oh, I'll be there."

Therefore, as soon as his day's duties were over, Dennis speeded to Baxter Street in search of Dickey Series C.

After a foray in a half dozen separate establishments, where neckties, collars and all the accessories were offered in place of what he required, he succeeded at last in securing the missing series.

At The Stag he was so full of emotion and anticipation that there was little room for such a substantial consideration as supper, so, dismissing that he proceeded to his room, and after indulging in the luxury of one of the few genuine shirts which remained to him, he anticipated his appointment a half hour by boarding the elevated, which carried him shortly to a point within three blocks of his destination.

In order that he might not appear too anxious or come into a premature collision with social usage, Dennis obliged himself to walk slowly in the vicinity indicated by the address.

The general aspect of his immediate surroundings looked promising and offered a comfortable assurance that his visit would not introduce him to a disappointment.

At last, from the opposite side of the street, he was able to measure, with an approving glance, a prepossessing dwelling of four stories and a mansard. 217

The front was of brown stone and differed but little from its neighbors, but to Dennis it seemed that it possessed an identity which was largely the recollection of the lingering presence of its owner.

Directly alongside, a large conservatory extended rearward an indefinite length.

The glittering front was picturesque with clusters of ingeniously disposed electric lights within, which revealed to advantage a mass of varied plants and flowers in prosperous abundance.

Charmed by the glow and color, and stimulated by the dancing lights, Dennis presented himself "on the minute" before the door of the adjacent dwelling.

In response to his ring, a trim, bright-eyed maid appeared, who, accepting his name in place of his card with an amiable lack of surprise, instructed him to enter, which he did, with alert, observing eyes.

Although Dennis was not much of a judge of the elaborate surroundings in which he found himself, he figured it out that the business of a florist must be a profitable one, and speculated, with wondering calculation, upon the length of time and the degree of application demanded to enable him to possess similar advantages. 218

Acting upon the parting instructions of the widow, Dennis had already canvassed his eligible points and was prepared to give an account of himself that was little short of eulogy.

At this juncture in his reflections the hangings at the parlor entrance parted with a musical swish that was suggestive of feminine approach, and the widow advanced into the room, with one slender hand extended in cordial informality.

If this woman had seemed charming to him in the park, she was certainly bewitching now.

The street costume in which she had first appeared was replaced by a gown of some clinging white fabric, which shimmered the light with a thousand blending radiations and fitted to every movement and contour like an embrace conscious of its privileges.

A delicate collar of filmy lace surrounded her neck like the intricate etchings of frost upon frost, and this was fastened with a solitary pearl as chaste as the exquisite skin with which it managed to offer only the faintest contrast. 219

Her head, crowned with a wavy nimbus of Titian auburn, was superbly set upon her fine, symmetrical shoulders.

As she flashed upon the vision of this palpitating young man through the parting curtains, like a dramatic climax or the goddess of reward, or denunciation, she seemed to Dennis, whose mythology was centralized from that moment, like another Aphrodite churned into lovely being by the sea.

At the entrance of this beautiful woman Dennis had risen to his feet, and stood for a moment, offering, with his helpless silence, a compliment whose genuineness she thoroughly enjoyed.

When at last his tongue resumed its function, Dennis, like many another with even more self-possession and experience, uttered just the words which were intended for concealment, as he stammered:

"An' it's no wonder, at all, at all." 220

The exclamation, however, was barely above a whisper, and it was only by following the motion of his lips and a shrewd intuition as to the rest which enabled the widow to realize what he had uttered, as she asked, smiling to note that the young man had neglected to release her hand:

"And what is it that is no wonder?"

At this question, Dennis, deserted for the moment by his customary adroitness, was unable to do anything else than respond, without evasion or subterfuge:

"Well, I was thinkin' it's no wonder the manager wanted to go into the business."

"Ah!" laughed the widow with genuine enjoyment and a sensible realization of the spirit which urged his exclamation and its explanation, "that is Irish, I am sure"; and with that Dennis began to feel more at home, although still subdued by the accumulation of practical beatitudes.

"Tell me," he said, when each was agreeably established, Dennis upon a comfortable divan and his listener in a chair which supplied its fascinating occupant with a sort of solicitous support, which Dennis assured himself would be poetry realized if he could be permitted to share, "tell me, shall I recite my abilities first or read the story?" 221

"Suppose," suggested his hearer, "we hear the story first and reserve your catalogue as a climax, like the dessert after the banquet."

"All right!" assented Dennis, as he produced a circular bundle, from which he extracted his absurd medium.

"One moment," suggested his hearer, as she arranged an electric cluster in a manner that enabled her to witness every alternation of expression in that mobile countenance—"now."

Withdrawing his gaze from the sweet face of his auditor with a reluctance sufficiently marked to advance him several leagues further in her good graces, Dennis, directing his attention to the closely-printed dickey, began, with racy Irish emphasis, as follows:

"With a bound the prince swept aside the curtains and reached his room.

"Advancing to the gong, which was suspended by silken cords near the divan, he struck it sharply several times. 222

"There was no response.

"He repeated his summons with the added vigor of his irritation at the delay.

"Only the sullen echo answered.

"With impatient incredulity the prince was about to hasten to the ante-room in which his faithful Sepoy had always been found, when a strange trembling seized his limbs.

"A confusion obscured his mind; his sight grew dim.

"Alarmed at this unusual sensation, the prince asserted himself against its depressing influence with all his customary resolution, and was finally able to reach the ante-room.

"It was deserted!

"He hastened to the passageway outside.

"Not a soul was visible; an unearthly stillness prevailed.

"'Ah!' he cried with sudden realization, 'my messenger has been too liberal with his news; they have heard of the British advance.'

"Thirty vital minutes had passed, and away in the dim distance an animated spot of red and gleam began to emerge. 223

"Again that inexplicable numbness and alarming physical weakness.

"With trembling hands he supported himself along the walls and finally reached the apartment in which he held his mimic court.

"A burning thirst began to parch his lips and throat; he hastened to the carafe in which the water for his use was usually held.

"It was empty.

"'Ah!' the prince groaned aloud; the veins of his forehead knotted; a sharp, strained look appeared in his eyes, and he shivered with a mortal chill.

"A stinging, sharp surge attracted his attention to his right wrist.

"It was swollen beyond its usual size, and a bluish discoloration surrounded the livid line where the dagger point had penetrated.

"He placed his hands together and noted their disproportion, considered the wounded arm, and then—he remembered.

"'The dagger!' he gasped, and a new horror charged his bloodshot eyes as he recalled the devilish craft employed by the natives to envenom their weapons. 224

"'Poisoned! and by Lal Lu!'

"At this thought the malignant light of a fearful determination illumed his features and revealed their frightful distortion.

"'I shall not—go—alone!' he sighed, and repossessing himself of the fatal dagger, which he had cast upon the table on entering the room, he rose from the chair, looked with fearful purpose upon the curtains which disguised the entrance to the secret passageway from which he had emerged but a short time before, took one step forward, and then fell inertly on to the couch from which he had risen in the excitement of his malignant impulse.

"'Ha!' The faint sound of an alien air smote his ears.

"'The bagpipes!' he muttered; 'the Scots, the hellish Highlanders.'

"Nearer and nearer the lively air was borne to him.

"His raging pulse thrummed through his palpitating veins a rhythmic, mocking accompaniment to the swelling music. 225

"His frame stiffened and stretched as though subjected to the distortion of the ancient rack.

"The agony was unendurable. With a final conscious effort he reached for the poisoned weapon to bring his sufferings to a summary conclusion, but his failing will could no longer vitalize his palsied arm, and with a gasp that seemed to rend his tortured body, to the weird orchestration of that refrain which was destined in the near future to herald such joy at Lucknow, 'The Campbells Are Coming, Hi-ay, Hi-ay!' the spirit of Prince Otondo returned to Him who gave it, to be put into what repair was possible for such a proposition.

"As the last writhing rigor ceased to convulse his frame, the prince lurched forward, and his body collapsed into an attitude not unlike that of one engaged in some dejecting reflection.

"By a singular nervous caprice he had raised his hands to his face, which he had clutched in his agony, and his elbows rested upon the table in grewsome support of his head.

"This ghastly calm, however, of which he was the center, was to be interrupted.

"A trumpet blast sounded without the gate; a clamor of voices filled the air.

"The bagpipes, in anticipation of some show of resistance, had ceased their stirring strains; within, the silence of an ambuscade prevailed.

"Suddenly, through the unguarded entrance rushed a body of red-coated soldiers; but their advance was unopposed; the courtyard was abandoned.

"One danger alone remained—an attack from within. But there was none to receive the detested intruders but the pulseless master, from whom all majesty had departed.

"Over the grounds they swarmed, through the doors, along the passageways.

"Abreast of the leading officer appeared the turbaned head and white-robed figure of Ram Lal.

"As the two entered the apartment and gazed upon its silent occupant, with the same impulse both came to a standstill, impressed by the unnatural attitude and the chill undemonstration of the richly-clad figure.

"'It is the prince!' cried Ram Lal.

"At once the officer turned to command the curious detachment which had followed them to remain without, and placing a sergeant on guard in the ante-room, he resumed his investigation of the dead man.

"He had not seen the quick approach of Ram Lal, nor the rapid movement of his searching hand.

"It was over in an instant, but in that instant Ram Lal had assured himself of the presence of the precious jacket beneath the cambric folds.

"'He is dead!' he cried to the officer, as the latter approached to discover some reason for this shocking sight.

"'He is still warm,' exclaimed the other, as he placed his hand, with careless familiarity, upon the cheek of the prince.

"'Let us see,' he continued, 'if his heart still beats.'

"As the officer knelt in order to accommodate his head to the leaning position of the body, Ram Lal stood as one transfixed.

"His hand crept slowly to the dagger upon the table, which he grasped with an expression of desperate determination as the officer placed his ear close to the riches concealed beneath the tunic of the prince.

"Kneeling thus, with scarcely a hand-breadth between him and wealth such as he had never dared to dream of, with the menacing figure of the merchant directly above him, prepared to strike at the least indication of suspicion of the jacket and its priceless contents, the pair presented a striking tableau of the sardonic jest in which fate sometimes indulges in providing such nearness of opportunity and such a threat to its embrace.

"'There is something thick about the body!' exclaimed the kneeling officer.

"Ram Lal crept nearer.

"'Yes,' he replied with a stifled voice, as he shot a quick glance toward the curtained doorway, on the other side of which the sergeant was posted, 'yes, the prince was of a phthisical tendency.

"'He was compelled to protect himself against inequalities of temperature.'

"At this instant the quick eye of the merchant detected the livid scratch on the dead man's arm. 'Ha!' he cried, with an intonation which caused the officer to forego his examination for the moment and regard the merchant attentively.

"'Here!' cried the latter, pointing to the discolored and swollen wrist, 'here! There is no need to look for further sign of life; his heart will beat no more. This dagger has been inserted in the poison sac of the cobra—and here is the result!'

"As the officer rose to regard the wound, and understood its significance, he shuddered and looked upon the hapless heir-apparent with a sort of bluff compassion, but he made no further attempt to pursue his investigations, and Ram Lal was spared one sanguinary entry upon the book of his recording angel.

"'At least,' said the officer, as if in continuation of some unexpressed idea, 'let us do ourselves the honor of disposing the prince upon his bed'; and Ram Lal supporting the head and shoulders and the officer grasping the feet, they carried the stiffened form to the bed.

"'May I ask the privilege,' said Ram Lal, 'of composing the features and the body of the prince?'

"'Surely,' replied the officer, as he bestowed a departing glance upon this last descendant of the long line of moghuls with a degree of deference that was the result of his military training and his own subjection to discipline, 'surely he is sadly in need of such a service.'

"For his arms, although disengaged somewhat by their efforts, and the clutch of the distorted fingers, though not so distended, still pointed upward in a sort of eerie, rigid salutation to the

subdued watchers.

"The eyes, too, which but a short time before had been so vivid with the contentions of restraint and desire, stared with a ghastly lack of speculation.

"As the officer turned to leave Ram Lal undisturbed in the performance of this last duty to the dead, the merchant, presently assured that he would be free from intrusion for a time sufficient for his ostensible purposes, approached the body, tore aside the delicate fabric, which covered the breast, and with surprising dexterity released the fastenings which held the jacket to the body, wrenched it away with desperate haste, and in an incredibly short time had secured this treasure-trove around his own loins beneath the folds of his linen.

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"Then, with a grin of malignant triumph, he murmured: 'This is more speedy, O prince, than pebbles for diamonds—and now for Lal Lu.'

"With this the merchant darted to the hangings from which the prince had issued with such desperate purpose, cast them ruthlessly aside, hurried along the passageway, shouting as he speeded: 'Lal Lu—Lal Lu!'

"A joyful cry responded.

"'Here, father, here!' and Lal Lu, who had recognized her father's call, rushed toward the entrance just as the merchant crossed its threshold, and in a moment she was enfolded in his protecting embrace."

"Is that all?" asked Raikes as the Sepoy paused.

"Isn't it enough?" laughed the narrator. "The villain punished, the righteous rewarded, the maiden rescued. It seems to me that all the proprieties are preserved."

"True," assented Raikes. "You are to be congratulated upon your consistency. But as usual your art is a bit too refined. You still discontinue with a question unsolved."

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"Name it," replied the Sepoy; "perhaps I can clear up the difficulty at once."

"Well," returned Raikes, "there is all that wealth concealed about the person of Ram Lal; I am interested to know if he retained it, to what use he put it. If it is inconsistent in your narrative to reply to these questions, waive your formalities for once."

"Why not?" laughed the Sepoy. "Still, I can only approximate to your request. There was a report that Ram Lal and his daughter disappeared shortly after the raid upon the Kutub.

"It is also said that a dealer in precious stones opened an establishment on the Strand in London, and that his description corresponded in so many points with that of Ram Lal that it is safe to infer that the twain are identical."

"That is better," sighed Raikes. "I will assume that the report is correct since it relieves my mind on one point, at any rate. However, there is one question more: Can you tell me how that substitution was made?"

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"Pebbles for diamonds?"

"Yes."

"To do so requires another story, which I cannot tell you to-night," replied the Sepoy. "How about to-morrow evening?"

"If that's the only way?" queried Raikes.

"It is," the Sepoy assured him.

"I will be here, then," said Raikes, "but I must leave you now; I will see you at breakfast-time."

With this Raikes departed and made his way along the dim passages to his room.

Arrived at this point, and taking his customary precautions for the night, Raikes prepared to retire.

Since the process involved such little attention to detail in its almost aboriginal readiness, it was not long before Raikes was tucked away in his uneasy rest.

Possibly a half hour later a series of labored snores announced his successful escape from the disturbing realities of the day and his stentorian entrance upon more fictitious complications.

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Just across the hallway, in the room occupied by his nephew, conditions were more animated, for Robert, giving his admiring and somewhat incredulous attention to the alert Gratz, sat with his eyes bright with the acknowledgment of the purport of the speaker.

Just a trace of excitement appeared in the manner of the detective.

He had witnessed the return of the sleepy Raikes to his room, and was relieved to be able to assure himself that the miser was altogether unaware of his presence.

Gratz was about to provide himself with the confirmation of a theory which he dared not discuss in advance.

The possibilities of failure were numerous enough to provide him with the element of fascination, and its bizarre unfamiliarity piqued his imagination.

If he was not mistaken in his calculations, he would be in possession, before morning, of some interesting data which would make a startling addition to the criminal records to which his past

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activities had contributed.

The suggestion which stimulated him was the last which would occur to a wholly sensible man and the first which would be likely to present itself to a genius for speculation and morbid analysis.

Consequently silence upon these somewhat abstruse reasonings was his safeguard against ridicule in the event of failure.

However, he had intimated to Robert that events would transpire during the night which would be illuminative, but he could not be persuaded to indicate to the curious youth just what to expect.

Whatever was to occur, Robert was assured that he would witness; in fact, he would be a necessary feature to the mysterious plans of the detective.

Stimulated, therefore, by these occult hints and the lively prospect they introduced, the young man developed a clandestine emotion of weird anticipation, which he readily accredited to an unsuspected fitness for intrigue.

Gratz, in the meantime, having primed the young enthusiast, maintained an irritating silence, and when an hour had passed in this spiritless fashion Robert was electrified by the solitary word "Now!" from the lips of the enigmatical Gratz. 236

Unable to comprehend the significance of the subdued exclamation, Robert nevertheless followed the detective with confiding docility, and the pair hastened down a flight of stairs which conducted them to the main hallway.

From this Gratz proceeded to a door directly beneath the stairway which they had just traversed, and which opened upon another short series of steps that concluded in the cellar.

Descending these, the two hastened along the chill floor and presently paused by the main coal-bin in which the widow stored her fuel.

With an impressive injunction to silence, Gratz indicated the course which Robert was expected to pursue, and in the recess created by a flight of disused stairs the two secreted themselves.

It was pitch dark.

Neither of the watchers could see the other, and communication was only maintained by the reassuring pressure of the hand of the detective upon the arm of the excited Robert. 237

At last the latter ventured to inquire in a whisper what it was that Gratz expected to discover.

"The solution of the puzzle," replied the other in the same tone.

"The thief?" asked Robert.

"No, the accessory," was the reply; "but do not ask any further questions; you will be treated to the surprise of your life in a little while, unless I am much mistaken."

Scarcely had the detective uttered these words when the faint click of a door-latch was borne to their ears from the direction of the stairway they had just descended.

The next moment a dim ray of light flickered into the darkness, and a figure vaguely shadowed its grotesque disproportion on the walls just behind as it crept, with cautious lightness, step by step down the stairs.

At last it reached the floor and moved in the direction of the bin.

The light, which was furnished by a candle, was raised in the air at about the height of a man's face, and directly behind it a man's face appeared. 238

"Great heavens!" whispered Robert as the strange figure advanced, "it is uncle!"

"Steady, now!" whispered the detective; "not a word or you will ruin everything."

Revealed by the weird light, the miserable countenance of the miser had never looked so contemptible.

The sputtering flame seemed to have the power to betray all the miserly emotions and mean parsimonies usually concealed behind its starved pallor.

The lips had fallen inanely apart with an absurd look of silly wonder.

The eyes were wide open and stared directly ahead with the most unnatural expression or lack of it that Robert had ever beheld in the visage of mortal man.

Even the detective, accustomed as he was to all sorts of uncommon spectacles, could not repress a slight disposition to shudder.

One bony hand grasped the candlestick, and the other held some sort of round object, to which Robert directed his attention. 239

By the sudden motion he made the detective knew that the young man had discovered what this object was, and pressed his arm warningly.

It was one of the canvas bags from the recess in the wall.

Just before the opening of the bin his uncle paused, like a speculative phantom, as if to consider its next doleful move.

His entire countenance, upon nearer view, like the canvas which the painter has roughly

outlined, was suggestive of anything, according to the fancy of the beholder.

Upon this spiritless blank Robert depicted, with a morbid genius and the stimulation of his unnatural surroundings, all that was reminiscent of his uncle's littleness.

But this uneasy transit from the room upstairs to the bin below, the vacant, irresponsible ensemble, the inscrutable determination to fulfill some strange obligation, enforced by what influence or moral unrest he could not tell, culminated in the mind of the young man in the only possible explanation:

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His uncle was engaged in the unaware execution of some fixed idea.

He was responding to an uncontrollable, secret impulse, and Robert, guiding himself by the touch of his hand in order to locate his lips as close to the ear of the detective as he might, whispered with conviction:

"Somnambulist!"

"No," replied Gratz—"worse; be silent."

Amazed and wondering what could possibly be worse, and rummaging through the garret of all his unusual experiences, Robert could find nothing to correspond to this inexplicable phenomenon; and it was with a sort of superstitious distraction that he beheld his uncle discard his transient hesitation and proceed with ghostly purpose to the opening of the bin.

Advancing, Raikes placed the candle upon the bed of coals and began to unfasten the cord which secured the mouth of the bag which he carried.

Robert had never beheld anything so ghastly as his uncle's eyes, intent but unseeing; nor so frightful as his motions, direct but unintelligent, like those of a midnight marionette controlled by invisible strings.

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In a few moments his efforts were successful, and the incredulous Robert beheld his uncle invert his precious burden and send a clinking, intrinsic shower of coin to the floor.

Apparently this familiar sound had penetrated in some degree to his inner consciousness.

An expression of vague uneasiness, of troubled irresolution, clouded his eyes, but this semi-intellection and its transient phasis subsided to his original apathy as, with a sigh of helpless impersonality, he began to collect, with a silly, childish selection, as if to balance, by the size of the individual coals, the proportion of the discharged gold, handfuls of these dusky diamonds and substitute the sordid heaps in the bag.

This weird absurdity concluded, Raikes, repossessing himself of the candle, turned wearily and retraced the path of his ghostly journey.

In a little while his shuffling footfalls had concluded with the doorway at the top of the cellar stairs, the latch was heard to click into place, and all was still.

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"Now," whispered Gratz with concentrated emphasis, "not a word—not a sound from this moment. We have seen the accessory, now for the principal."

In reply Robert pressed his hand upon the arm of the detective to indicate that his instructions were understood and would be obeyed, and in a silence through which he felt that his heart-throbs must certainly be audible, the watchers awaited developments.

The obscurity and silence which prevailed, and the vault-like chill and dampness, harmonized so fully with the unnatural spectacle which he had just witnessed, and the grim expectation of something untoward still to come, that Robert was prepared to reconsider his views of the earlier portion of the evening as to his fitness for secret investigation and criminal analysis.

He no longer felt the exultation of this association with relentless and cunning pursuit, and began to wonder how any normal human being could adopt a profession which embraced all these cheerless handicaps when there were so many occupations into which a little sunlight and geniality penetrated now and then.

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He had about decided that such industry was the manifestation of a disease, and that his silent companion was a desperate incurable, when his diagnosis was suddenly interrupted.

The detective pressed the shoulders of his companion, communicating a slight impulse toward the opposite end of the cellar, and Robert, in obedience to its intimation, turned and beheld an approaching light.

It had the unreal appearance of a detached eye of some malignant Cyclops, glancing in a ghastly, bodiless way, from object to object, and concentrating itself at last in a definite course along the floor.

To witness the approach of this stealthy, gleam, without visible means of support or guidance, caused the young man's flesh to creep and his heart to throb almost to the point of suffocation.

If it requires experience to become a successful narrator, Robert was certainly in a way to accumulate a budget of startling data.

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Nothing, hitherto, in his life could explain the marvel, but Gratz, with trained certainty, knew that he gazed upon the disk of a dark lantern which, exposing all else to view, shielded, with its distracting flash, the object of this midnight quest.

With an assurance that indicated a definite purpose, the figure at last stood within the door of the coal bin.

At once the searching gleam began to dance hither and thither upon the floor, and finally, with unerring pause, fell directly upon the heap of glittering coin.

"Ah!" exclaimed a voice.

In its concentrated emphasis there was the unmistakable accent of certitude, of expectation gratified.

The next instant the light was placed upon the floor with a tilt that sent its rays upon the treasure, and the unknown began to collect the gold with oblivious haste and bestow it in some receptacle near-by.

Suddenly Robert felt his companion move forward noiselessly, at the same time he recognized the intimation of a detaining hand; and then he stood alone.

Scarcely had he adjusted himself to these startling conditions when he heard a sharp, metallic snap, and beheld a sudden flood of light directed upon the kneeling figure.

There was a cry of desperate amazement, the quick clink of scattering coin, and the next instant a wild, rage-distorted face shot into view.

"My God!" cried Robert.

It was the Sepoy!

"Hands up!" commanded a voice which the young man recognized as that of Gratz; "hands up, or you are a dead man. There are five bullets in reserve for you if you budge from where you stand."

With an imprecation that was charged with malignant venom, the Sepoy looked upon the gleaming barrel of a pistol which was advancing into the light, recognized his helplessness, and with snarling obedience elevated his arms in the air.

"Robert!" called Gratz.

The young man, trembling, hurried to the opening.

"Get behind me," directed Gratz; "put your hand in my coat pocket; you'll find a pair of bracelets there for our friend here."

With shaking hands Robert followed these sharply delivered instructions, and withdrew a set of handcuffs, gaping at the fastenings to receive a pair of guilty wrists.

"Now move around to the rear of this gentleman," continued the relentless Gratz, "and snap them on his wrists."

Somehow Robert managed to obey these commands.

He reached to the uplifted hands of the Sepoy, embraced his wrists with the handcuffs, and closed them with a snap.

(To be continued on Bosom No. 2, Series C.)

Unknown to himself, Dennis, stimulated by the lively succession of incidents, had spurred his enunciation in a racy adjustment to these animated conditions.

His eyes appeared to have appropriated the sparkle which had intensified the glance of the Sepoy of whom he had just read, and when he arrived at the familiar legend at the bottom of the bosom, his expression, vivid with all these communicated emotions, was duplicated in the sweet, absorbed face of his bewitching listener, who, in order the better to follow his rapid utterance, leaned, with the exquisite intoxication of her presence, in rapt nearness to the reader.

Consequently, when Dennis looked up from his reading, he was transported along the highway of a sympathetic glance into deeps of dazzling blue.

For a moment he abandoned himself to the enchanting witchery with the dreamful enjoyment of the voluptuary inhaling the odors of a scented bath.

He seemed to be on the best of terms with some well-disposed harlequin.

Scarcely had the excitement of one series of events developed to its climax when he was whisked to another.

His providence was working overtime in his behalf, and being at heart sound and genuine, the weight of his obligations to all these auspices warned him not to be too prodigal with his privileges; so, with an effort, the stress of which communicated some of its rigors to his countenance, he closed his eyes for one ascetic moment and came bravely to earth again.

Suspecting something of the nature of his confusion, as a lovely woman will, and secretly applauding his undemonstrative deference, which, in the cynical atmosphere to which she was habituated, came to her like a refreshing zephyr, the widow asked him with an engaging smile of encouragement:

"Of what were you thinking, Mr. Muldoon?"

"Mr. Muldoon!" he repeated to himself with an endeavor to reflect the intonation of personal distinction which issued so entrancingly from the Cupid's bow of a mouth. He had not been so ceremoniously addressed since he knew not when, and never realized that his homely name had such music in it. "Oh!" he thought, "if she would only say 'Dennis,' it would be like grand opera."

"Why," replied Dennis with simple frankness. "I was thinking, for one thing—for one thing"—but encouraged by her smiling invitation he stammered—"how beautiful you are!" and added to himself, or it looked as though he might express his sentiments that way: "There, you've done it!"

"Ah!" exclaimed his companion, with a rosy enjoyment of this unstudied situation and frank appreciation, "and what was the other?"

"I don't know how to tell you the other," answered Dennis. Then with an unreflective inspiration: "Did you ever read about Launcelot and Guinevere?"

"Ye-yes," was the apprehensive answer.

"Well," continued Dennis with a naïve remembrance only of the chivalry of this idyllic indiscretion, "when I look at you I can understand how a knight could battle for a queen."

There was silence for a moment, but in the interval the lady did not laugh, though her eyes were bright as she said:

"You are a strange boy."

"Oh!" cried Dennis, "tell me, have I offended? I would not do that for the world."

"I am sure of that," replied the widow, "and I believe that you mean what you say."

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"Oh, I do, I do!" exclaimed Dennis impulsively; then, with a realization of the thin surface over which he was making such rapid strides despite the danger signals of conventionality, and with a diplomacy born of his native good sense, he glided, with cheerful Celtic sagacity, to safer footing by asking abruptly: "May I recommend myself"—as if he had not already done so—"for the position you offer?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the widow, from whom no alternation of his mobile countenance seemed to escape, "it is your turn now; I must not receive all the honors."

"Well," replied Dennis, altogether aware of the graceful courtesy of this exquisite woman, and constituted by nature, if not by past association, to accord it due appreciation, "well, there isn't much to say, but here's my outfit:

"I am sorry to have to begin badly. I don't know anything about flowers. I can't tell you, even, the difference between a shamrock and a clover."

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"All that can be easily remedied," his listener reassured him; "but proceed."

"But there's one thing I'm sure about," continued Dennis. "You can rely upon me, an' that's better."

"It is, indeed," answered the widow.

"I am anxious to do the best I can for myself," resumed Dennis. "I have just one way of doing it, and that is to do the best I can for others."

"That is real business principle," exclaimed his companion, "and very rare. What else?"

"I guess that's about all," answered Dennis, "an' it don't sound so very much, does it?"

"More than you think," answered the widow. "Now listen to me:

"I need such service as I hope from you very much. Would you like to come and help me here?"

"Oh!" cried Dennis.

"I am answered," responded his companion, "When can you come?"

"At once!" cried Dennis—"or no, wait a bit; that wouldn't be fair to my present employer. But I can tell him to look out for somebody else right away; surely he can fill my place within a week. Suppose I say next Monday?"

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"Very well, that will suit," answered the widow; "but you have not asked me what your salary will be."

Dennis blushed, and his blush was appreciated. To enjoy the genial inspiration of such an association would be a perquisite which, other things being only approximately even, would repair any possible shortage.

"Will twenty dollars a week and your board satisfy you for the present?"

Dennis held his breath and pictured the contrast.

His present employment brought him just ten dollars and the association of a barkeeper—would it satisfy him? However, he managed to say, without too great a show of emotion: "It is more than I expected."

"Well, then, that point is settled," said the widow with a brisk business air, which provided such a sharp contrast to her delightful womanly qualities and caused Dennis to wonder at the graceful alternation of the one with the other. "Now as to board: In the rear of the conservatory is a suite of rooms as cozy as any young man could wish. At the end of the week I expect to have them vacated."

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"They are occupied just now by the manager, but he has already been notified through my attorney, and all will be in readiness for you by next Monday.

"It has been somewhat difficult to make him comprehend my purpose; it is so different from what he expected. He is incautious enough to demand a reason."

"There is one," ventured Dennis boldly, "if I may venture to suggest it."

"Surely!" replied the widow, remarking Dennis curiously.

"Well," replied the young man as he recalled the astonishing array of details surrounding the death of the æsthetic proprietor, "just enclose him a note with two words in it."

"And those?" queried the widow as Dennis paused.

"Cape Jessamine."

For a space Dennis feared that he had offended. A shade of depression darkened the lovely features before him, but his companion looked into his apprehensive eyes reassuringly as she said: "You have penetration."

His momentary embarrassment, however, introduced another perturbation, for in glancing away for an instant to reassemble himself, so to speak, his eyes fell upon the clock, which at that very moment chimed the hour of eleven.

This was startling!

Dennis was familiar enough with social usage, or, at least, had the practical good sense to realize that he had exceeded the limits of good taste by an hour, and began to make disconcerted preparations for departure.

Perceiving his embarrassment, his companion relieved him with genial tact by asking: "And what about bosom No. 2? I want to hear the rest of that story."

"Ah!" exclaimed Dennis, brightening, "when shall it be?"

"How will Wednesday evening suit?" suggested the widow.

And Dennis, with a mien which plainly indicated that he considered the time represented in the space that must elapse between the delightful present and the evening appointed embodied his views of a brief eternity, assured the widow that he would be on hand, and added: "I will not read a line until then."

"Leave the story here, then, and I will put it away until you make your appearance. I promise, too, that I will not read it in the meantime," and the widow received the remaining bosoms from Dennis with an extravagant show of gravity, which caused them both to laugh, in view of its absurd occasion, as she bestowed them in a music rack and turned to conduct him to the entrance.

"Good-by!" she said, and once more extended her hand, which Dennis received with an unmistakable indication of his appreciation of the exceptional favor.

"Good-by!" he responded as he prepared to descend the steps, "good-by!" and added to himself, with a fervor which conveyed some intimation of his sentiments if it did not suggest his words:

"An' may the saints preserve you!"

CHAPTER IX

When Dennis retired for the night at The Stag, his transit from his room, which had never seemed so contracted as now, to the Land of Nod was somewhat delayed by reason of the exhilarating conditions through which he had just passed.

Toward midnight, however, his pulse had resumed its normal, and the young man, reaching his drowsy destination at last, began a series of the most surprising horticultural experiments until, what with orchids as big as a barrel, and geraniums which could be reached only by a ladder, he had converted the silvery strand of the dreamful domain into a forest of atrocious color and floral monstrosity.

Awakening on the succeeding morning, Dennis, accepting the sense of general lassitude which oppressed him as an indication of the arduous nature of his efforts in his dreams, began to prepare for the activities of the day.

On this occasion he was compelled to attire himself in the shirt which he had worn on the occasion of his visit the evening before, since his remaining bosoms, along with his heart, were in the possession of the beautiful widow.

But the extravagance of such indulgence did not alarm him now.

Under the circumstances, what did a shirt more or less matter?

Was he not about to be admitted into paradise and receive twenty dollars per week besides?

"Shirt, ha!" he exclaimed with a touch of Celtic wit; "it's a robe of white I want." However, he compromised on a new necktie, and almost ventured the length of patent leathers.

Stimulated by the prospect of all this beatitude, Dennis proceeded to the dining-room and revived the spirit of the discouraged waiter by ordering a liberal breakfast.

At the conclusion of the meal he further celebrated his disposition to mortgage providence by the bestowal of a gratuity moderate enough to renew the waiter's original unflattering estimation.

Had his father witnessed this imprudence he would have been prepared to believe that Dennis was under the influence of a danseuse, and the proportions of the breakfast could only have indicated a determination to commit suicide by repletion.

On his way to the street Dennis paused to inform the barman of his intended departure.

As an indication of his sentiments at this announcement, the barman, who was engaged in the mixture of a mysterious decoction, said, as he poured an amber-colored fluid into the glass: "This wan is fur grief at the goin', an' this wan"—pouring from another bottle—"is fur good luck when ye git there," and he pushed the mixture toward Dennis.

But the young Irishman, remembering his recent experience, declined with thanks.

"No?" queried the barman. "Well, an' that's not a bad idea at all. It's the right stharta fur a bad day an' a bad stharta fur a right wan. 'Tis th' divil's own way av showin' wan's sintimints." Then, reaching for the glass, he added: "I'll do th' honors fur th' two av us"; and with the singular tendency, so often noted under such circumstances, to swallow with haste that which it required such trouble to prepare, the barman bolted the contents of the glass and looked his appreciation through moist eyes.

As Dennis neared the establishment of his employer, he recalled his obligation.

He must begin the day by informing the foreman of his changed intentions.

He disliked the idea of the possible friction involved in the performance of this disagreeable duty, but there seemed to be no other way out of the dilemma.

His announcement, however, was to be less embarrassing than he anticipated.

His providence was about to take a short nap.

As he approached the foreman, he discovered that individual, several degrees less breezy than usual, engaged in an animated conversation with a young man whose prevailing expression was so penitential that Dennis, with prompt Celtic intuition, decided that he was gazing upon his predecessor in office.

He was assured of this by the glance of belligerent appraisal with which the young fellow surveyed him from head to foot, in response to some suggestive indication from the foreman.

He seemed, to the apprehensive eyes of Dennis, to be calculating his chances in the event of a physical contest.

And this recalled what the foreman had said about his biceps.

"You want to see me?" queried the latter with an expression in which the sunshine seemed overdue.

"Yes," answered Dennis as his employer stepped aside to hear what he had to say.

As Dennis proceeded the look of perplexity which he had noted upon the face of his listener seemed to give way to one of unmistakable relief, and when Dennis had stated his case he exclaimed: "Shure, now, it's an aisy way out av a bad muss, so it is. Here, Phil!" he shouted, turning to the young fellow in the background, who had witnessed this brief interview with scowling interest, "here, you two can t'row th' gloves down an' shake; Muldoon here wants to hand yure job back to ye."

At this announcement, the disfavor in the countenance of the other disappeared and was replaced by an expression which indicated that he regarded such liberality as something in the nature of a freak.

Some evidences of his debauch still clung to him.

His eyes were moist and heavy-lidded; his lips dry and tremulous, and the hand which he extended to Dennis shook somewhat.

"Come, now!" exclaimed the foreman, "that's well over"; and addressing the one he called Phil he added: "Now get to work."

Dennis looked his astonishment.

He had not calculated upon such a prompt acceptance of his resignation. He felt that he presented an absurd appearance, and that the foreman did not appear to his usual bluff advantage.

"Come this way," said the latter to Dennis, who followed him into his office with a strange sinking at heart.

"I did not mean to hand over everything right off!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Well," replied the foreman, "Phil's wife came here early this mornin' an' put up a few tears, an' Phil made all sorts av promises; an' you have no children an' he has, an—oh, the divil!" cried the foreman, weary of the series of explanations in which he was getting involved. "I can't kape th' two av ye, an' Phil there is an ould hand at th' paint-pot."

"Then," cried Dennis, "you mean that I must leave at once?"

"That's about th' size of it."

"Why," exclaimed Dennis, indignant at this injustice, "I tried to be fair with you, and you haven't —"

"Here," interrupted the foreman, in evident haste to conclude a disagreeable interview; "there's no use talking about it, it's got to be done"; and turning to a drawer in the desk he extracted Monday's pay and placed it in the young man's hand.

At that moment a burly porter filled up the doorway.

"What is it?" asked the foreman, glad of the interruption, as he hastened, with unnecessary and suspicious promptness, to attend to the wants of the intruder.

In a little while Dennis realized that he waited in vain for the return of the foreman, and that, in so far as he was concerned, he was out of a job.

Dennis had been, at various times in his life, subjected to some rugged experiences, but could not recall any treatment quite so heartless as this.

It upset all his calculations.

He must exist somehow between the unhappy realities of the present and the blissful expectations of the approaching Monday.

He recalled, with the self-accusation of a repentant prodigal, his needlessly elaborate breakfast, the extravagance of the necktie.

His return led him past the cheap amusement district of the Bowery.

Never had their tawdry invitations seemed so alluring.

By that singular perversity which opens up every suggestion of riotous expenditure to destitution, the poor fellow felt inclined to indulge himself regardless.

An obese nymph pictured in the foam of a beer sign, apparently elaborated with a whitewash brush and finished in the throes of an epileptic fit, solicited a share of his patronage.

Long rows of slot machines offered all sorts of libidinous suggestions in placards, which proposed to debauch his morals for a penny a sight.

And with absurd propriety a vender of shoddy jewels presented the chance of his lifetime in bizarre decoration.

But somehow Dennis reached Broadway at last, and faced the unpleasant prospect of the next few days with despairing calculation.

As Dennis looked up and down this busy thoroughfare, with its thousands speeding oppositely in preoccupied interest, as if all that was vital and worthy was to be found at either extreme of its splendid distances, he paused for a moment to account his meager finances.

He found that he possessed just four one-dollar bills and about eighty cents in small change.

Since he was compelled to pay a half dollar each night in advance for his lodgings, a little over two dollars would remain to him.

With rigid economy and almost miserly abstemiousness this sum would suffice for his meals, unless he developed a mania for Delmonico's, and for his carfare, provided he did not venture outside the possibilities of the elevated.

As he was about to return his resources to his pocket there was a rattle and clamor up the street, and looking in that direction he beheld a glittering engine, drawn by a splendid team of white horses, speed along with plunging dash and portent rumble.

Along the sidewalk directly in his rear the usual mob of men and boys who have nothing more to do apparently than to attend fires and scramble with a morbid curiosity to behold the misery of some victim of accident, ran in scuffling uproar.

With a pathetic realization of his own idleness, Dennis turned to join the speeding throng, when suddenly he became aware of a desperate clutch at his hand, heard the rattle of scattering change at his feet, and felt the bills which he held slip away from his grasp and disappear in the rush.

It was over in a second. Apparently no one noticed him or his loss. He was as abandoned as the unfortunate marooned by rushing waters; as unheeded as a lame lamb in the multitude of the flock.

Not a head turned, and by the time he realized precisely what had happened and prepared to give chase to the thief, a score of other men and boys formed an unconscious barricade between the unfortunate boy and the rogue.

His suddenly created interest in the fire vanished and was replaced by the despair of his own disaster.

The nap of his providence was developing into a sound slumber, and since this deity never gets up before noon Dennis had still two hours of despair before him.

And what despair!

Of his pitiful hoard of a few moments since only a few dimes and nickels remained.

And just across the street was the Third National Bank with barrels of them.

The whimsies of the contrast almost amused him; but there was not enough of the Tapley about

him to detect its humor.

Again he counted his resources.

Fifty-eight cents!

He could lodge to-night, at any rate, and dine on one of those sidewalk pretzels.

"The darkest hour is just before the dawn." Dennis tried to cheer himself with this reflection, but the only dawn upon which he could calculate was five days off.

In vain the poor fellow adjured his brains for some homely suggestion, some meager inspiration.

Nothing responded but his destitution, like the echo of a groan; and through such mental straits he arrived, at last, at The Stag.

He decided that he would do nothing radical until the following day.

He could afford a night's rest, at least, and that might revive his numbed faculties.

As he reached the office he glanced at the proprietor.

Could he persuade that cynical-visaged individual to trust him until he received his first week's pay?

Would he be credited if he related his prospects?

As a measure in this assurance, would not the proprietor feel justified in calling upon the widow for indorsement of the statement of the young man?

This would never do.

He could not endure the humiliation of such a revelation.

The poor fellow got little encouragement from the face of the proprietor.

This was suspicious and hard. It had scarcely the perfunctory smile of the professional boniface.

The prospect of having to address that forbidding ensemble was disheartening.

Suddenly his reflections were interrupted.

The proprietor waved a beckoning hand to him.

Dennis hurried to the desk.

"A letter for you," said the proprietor, as he placed in the young man's hand an envelope addressed in a handwriting which he recognized at once.

"'Dennis Muldoon'; yes, that's mine," and hastening to an unoccupied seat in a remote portion of the office, Dennis hastily opened the envelope and withdrew a short letter, and—ye gods! was it possible?—a postal order for twenty-five dollars.

Philadelphia.

Dear Dennis:

It's a hard row you have to hoe, I'm a-think-in', and it's a bad spot you have to hoe it in. I know New York of old, and it's a lonesome place for a poor lad.

I send you the week's wages due you, and an extry five to come back with in case your dreams don't come true.

I've got over my mad, my boy, and I'll be glad to see you.

Run over annyhow; it's a dull place without you. The mother misses you bad.

Come Saturday if you can; I've got a business proposition I want to make.

Tell me how you're getting on, anyway.

The Old Man.

"Oh, ho!" cried Dennis. His providence was wide awake now, had made its toilet, and was ready for business.

For a long while Dennis sat with the letter in his hand, gazing, with unseeing eyes, upon its eccentric chirography.

His exultation had not fully materialized.

To grope in the valley of despair one moment and skip along the summit of beatitude the next was a little too much for immediate comprehension.

Somewhat in the manner of the metaphysician, he was inclined to believe, since his misfortune was no longer a reality, that his prosperity might be equally immaterial, and in unaware corroboration he made a minute tear in the edge of the postal order to establish its tangibility.

In the evening, influenced perhaps by his comparative weal, Dennis decided that he would purchase a ticket to the Olympus, and climbing the rear approach to that elevation, found himself seated shortly with the gallery gods, viewing with uncritical contrasts the relative merits of the clown, the harlequin and the columbine.

Between the acts his roving glance found a sudden destination and his elation went into abrupt decline, for seated in one of the boxes, her glass surveying the house in all sorts of disconcerting directions, sat the beautiful widow.

Instinctively Dennis crouched into his seat.

Fortunately he was able by thus collapsing within himself, to escape the radius of her vision, which was interrupted by the railing extending around the balcony.

It would never do to be discovered in his present situation. The elevation was degrading, and Dennis understood the unhappy paradox.

It emphasized the social distinctions too much, and caused the distance from where he sat to the placid beauty below to appear immeasurable.

But this was not the least of his perturbations.

Near the widow a gentleman sat, solicitous, engaging, persistent.

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A certain air of distinction rendered doubly obnoxious the assumption of proprietorship which Dennis believed he remarked, and while the young man was able to comfort himself with the discovery that his bewitching companion devoted more attention to the stage and the house than to her escort, still, as Dennis contemplated the faultless attire of the gentleman in the box and contrasted it with his own modest apparel, he felt unaccountably depressed.

All this was revealed by the furtive glances which the young Irishman ventured over the gallery rail.

A strange foreboding overwhelmed him.

The bewildering tinsel of the stage no longer diverted, and he would have been astonished to analyze the reason why.

As the last curtain fell and Dennis was no longer able to adjust his gloomy contemplation to incongruous orchestration, he hastened from the theater, scrambled down the precipitate stairs and hastened to The Stag.

It was midnight before he slept, and scarcely morning when he awoke.

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He dressed himself like an automaton, and breakfasted like an anchorite.

He left the hotel without his personal knowledge, and traversed half the length of Broadway without volition. His mind was making the visit in advance of the appointed time, and his torpid body alone observed the social usages.

By noon the patent leathers were a reality; by six-thirty he had assumed a clean shirt and his new necktie.

When the clock struck seven he hastened to the elevated; a half hour later found him parading the street opposite the conservatory, and at eight he arrived with a promptness which, persistently observed, commends a young man to a junior partnership.

When the widow finally presented herself, Dennis was more than ever convinced, by the richness of her attire, that the business must be in a flourishing condition.

For some unknown reason the beautiful woman was dressed entirely in black with the exception of some exquisite trceries in white about her throat and wrists.

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Had his life depended upon it Dennis could never have described the fabric of her gown.

He only knew that it was distinguished by a sort of subdued sheen; that it rustled with an entrancing swish and suggestion of femininity as she moved, and that it was adjusted to her shapely figure as though her delightful personality had been moulded into it.

A slim wonder of a white hand was extended to him, a bright smile illumed her bewildering eyes and bent the Cupid bow of her lips into a curve which sent an intangible arrow into the young man's heart as she said with musical simplicity:

"I am glad to see you."

To this Dennis made no direct reply.

His eyes gleamed their idealized eloquence, however; his attitude presented unmistakable shades of deference, and to save himself further revelation he collapsed into the chair indicated by his hostess.

Apparently the widow extracted the same enjoyment from these ingenuous acknowledgments as ever, for she did not immediately resume the conversation.

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Fortunately, Dennis assembled himself, so to speak, and realized his psychological moment.

"Shure," he said as he became aware of his involuntary self-revelations, "'shure, an' you would know that I am glad to see you if I was deaf and dumb."

The widow laughed heartily at this, as she replied:

"I'm afraid that you have kissed the blarney stone, Mr. Muldoon."

Having no response for this, Dennis substituted: "I saw you at the theater last night," and a palpable degree of joy left his countenance at the announcement.

"Ah!" exclaimed the widow, regarding him curiously. "Where were you?"

"In th' lobby," replied Dennis unblushingly.

"What did you think of the performance?" asked his companion after a moment.

Dennis looked her directly in the eyes with the light of inspiration in his glance as he said:

"I did not see it."

The widow gazed at the young man for one searching moment, reddened slightly, and, rising, proceeded to the music rack, from which she extracted bosoms Nos. 2 and 3.

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"Suppose we read the story," was her reply.

As the widow extended the bosoms toward him, Dennis could not avoid the thought which had presented itself to him on the day before, that this woman had not only two bosoms of his in her possession, but his heart as well; and a certain degree of the animation of this reflection found its way into his eyes.

"Well," inquired this observing woman, "what is it?"

Dennis flushed as he replied: "I'll tell you by-and-by," and added: "Will you do me a great favor?"

"What is it?" she asked.

"Why," answered Dennis, "I would like to hear you read bosom No. 2."

"Why?"

"Well," replied the young man, with a sincerity that was unmistakable, "I think it would sound like a song then."

"Very well," she assented, "let me have it"; and with a voice that reflected, to this young man's ears, at least, at one moment the rippling of silver brooks, the trill of woodbirds, the sigh of zephyrs scented with daffodils, and the next the full, round resonance of an animated day in June, she read:

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"Now!" exclaimed Gratz as the familiar click assured him that the handcuffs were in place, "now you can lower your hands and come over here."

As the Sepoy advanced into the light, Gratz instructed Robert to pick up the remaining coins and restore them to the bag.

During all this time the Sepoy had not uttered a word, but his fierce eyes, which stared with savage intentness in the direction of the disk of light, from the rear of which issued that implacable voice, were vital with rage and impotent menace.

As he gazed thus with his distorted countenance concentrated into a look of bitter speculation in his futile attempt to discover by whom he was addressed in this tone of insolent authority, there was something frightful in the quest and uncertainty of the disturbed features.

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An unnatural luster, partly the reflection of his somber eyes and partly from the tawny hue of his saturnine visage, added an inexpressible degree of malignant rancor to his expression.

His hands, which he was compelled by the manacles to hold directly in front of him in an absurd travesty of penitential clasp, gripped each other in his consuming resentment until the tendons of his wrist stood out with the tense distinction of whipcords.

While Robert was engaged in restoring the coins to the bag, the only sound came from the derisive click and fall of the gold-pieces as they chinked their mockery into the ears of the raging prisoner.

As the last coin joined its fellows a neighboring clock chimed the hour of two.

"Good!" exclaimed Gratz; "there is time to settle this business before morning"; and turning to the Sepoy he added: "I will trouble you to precede me to your room."

There was something unreal in the silence which the Sepoy still maintained and the enforced apathy with which he proceeded to obey these instructions, and Robert, unaccustomed to such episodes as this, in which he was a contributing factor, was more affected than if he had witnessed some violent demonstration or listened to a raging vituperation.

279

The transit of the trio from the cellar to the apartment of the Sepoy was effected without attracting further regard, and the balance of the boarders slept away in snoring oblivion and provided another instance of the frail partition which separates the violent from the placid.

Arrived at the room of their swarthy prisoner, Gratz provided the uncomfortable Robert with the relief he required by instructing him to hasten to his uncle and summon him to the scene, and to avoid giving him any of the details of what had transpired.

Glad to escape the depression of the gloomy vicinity, and the unabashed directness of the Sepoy's glance, the young man hurried away.

If the terrible concentration which the Sepoy resumed, with his luminous eyes upon the countenance of the detective, affected the latter, there was certainly no such evidence.

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It was as dull and lifeless as ever; the eyelids had fallen to their accustomed suggestion of ambush, and it seemed scarcely possible that the sharp directions of a few moments since could issue from such flaccid lips, and so much determination could dominate such an insignificant figure.

Apparently exasperated by the undemonstration of this negative aspect, the Sepoy was near the limit of his repression.

The lines about his lips relaxed somewhat, the pupils of his eyes reduced their staring diameter, and his head was inclined forward a trifle.

Gratz concluded that his companion had decided to speak.

He was not mistaken.

"Can I be spared the humiliation of meeting that old dotard you have sent for?"

"I do not see how," replied Gratz.

"What do you gain by it?" asked the Sepoy.

"I cannot tell that in advance; possibly nothing," replied Gratz.

"That is likely," replied the Sepoy quietly.

"We shall see," exclaimed the detective. "I am working out a theory; I need the assistance of all concerned."

"Look at me!" exclaimed the Sepoy abruptly. "I will credit you with being something of a physiognomist. Do you see any evidences of determination in my face?"

"And if I do?" queried Gratz.

"Only this," was the reply: "No matter what your object may be, I will oppose it with all the resolution and dexterity at my command, if you conduct your inquiries as you contemplate."

In reply Gratz offered an exasperating shrug of the shoulders.

"There is no mystery to be solved," he said. "I have no further facts to discover; I know that you have managed to secure three separate bags of coin from Raikes, and I am aware of your process."

"If you know all this," replied the other with curious calmness, "why do you——"

The question was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Now!" exclaimed Gratz, as if with sudden determination, "I will try to grant your request in part. Retire into your bedchamber, leave the door open, and listen."

"I will place Raikes and his nephew where they cannot see you, but I will sit here where I can note your slightest move."

The Sepoy arose hastily and entered the bedchamber, seating himself according to the direction of the detective.

At that moment there was a knock upon the door.

In answer to the salutation of the detective Raikes and his nephew entered.

Seating themselves in the chairs indicated, they awaited with intense curiosity the proceedings of this enigmatical man.

Noting the alert questioning in the eyes of the young man, and the half-awakened inquiry in the sordid countenance of Raikes, Gratz, in order to prevent the intrusion of any disturbing remark upon his present purpose, said impressively:

"I must ask you both to listen without interruption. When I want you to speak I will question you"; and fastening his strange eyes upon the blinking Raikes, he added: "Now we will proceed."

"You have lost four bags of coin."

"Three!" corrected Raikes, despite his instructions to silence.

"Pardon me," continued Gratz, "and please do not interrupt. I said four—and here is the fourth," and he pointed to the bag upon the table.

The miser's jaw dropped helplessly, and he stared at the bag with a superstitious terror.

"But," continued Gratz, "what seems so incredible to you is merely the logical outcome of a cunningly established sequence," and the speaker shot an incredibly quick glance at the silent figure in the adjoining room.

"Now attend me closely."

"During the last few evenings you have heard some very curious narratives."

Raikes nodded with gloomy corroboration.

"A series of well-arranged events have introduced a startling episode—the substitution of pebbles for diamonds."

Again Raikes nodded.

"At this point in the narrative the first instalment concludes. Am I right?"

"Yes," answered Raikes.

"Then," continued Gratz, "you went directly to your room; you retired. In the morning you are prompted, with more than your usual eagerness, to open your private safe."

"Right!" exclaimed Raikes in indorsement of this relentless résumé.

"You find the locks undisturbed; the contents apparently as you left them on retiring. Some difference in the conformity of one of the bags urges a nearer examination. You discover that this indicates a difference in the contents. You grasp it; it comes away in your hands with startling lightness. You discharge its deposit upon the table—a shower of coals follows."

"Yes, yes!" stammered Raikes with impatient eagerness.

"Well, you are convinced, by an examination of the fastenings of the door, an inspection of the window, that no human being could have effected an entrance from either direction.

"The next evening is a repetition of the history of the night before.

"The strange Indian narrative, another gem to examine—an additional loss on the succeeding morning."

Raikes nodded savagely.

"On the following night the same unhappy series of events occur, followed by the loss of the third bag."

"But why all this again?" inquired Raikes.

"That concerns me," exclaimed the detective with another rapid glance at the undemonstrative figure in the next room. "You must follow my instructions or you will conclude as badly as you have begun. Now," continued Gratz, "it is incredible to me that, with the astuteness with which you are credited, that having such a good standpoint to begin with, you did not proceed upon that basis."

"I?" questioned the astonished Raikes. "What standpoint had I?"

"Elimination," replied Gratz.

"Several puzzling possibilities were retired permanently.

"Recall the details as we have enumerated them: An impossible door; the window equally out of the question; the substitution of the coals for the coin.

"It is very simple. The outside agency unfeasible, we must look within. There is but one conclusion—"

"And that?" interrupted Raikes.

"An accessory."

"Ah!" cried Raikes, "unthinkable!"

"Not at all," replied Gratz; "there was an accessory—yourself!"

At this announcement Raikes seemed about to collapse into his original helplessness. The facts of his losses were extraordinary enough, but this was too much.

But Gratz hurried on, explained the unconscious visits of his astounded hearer to the cellar, and all that followed.

"Then," exclaimed Raikes, when he had concluded, "I have been the victim of hypnotic suggestion."

"Precisely!" replied Gratz. "The story was merely the medium of transmission, and through this weird conduit the story-teller conveyed his instructions to your subconsciousness."

"But," demanded Raikes, "why this substitution of coals? It strikes me that a scheme so clever as all this would scarcely be jeopardized by such an absurdity."

"That contingency," answered Gratz, "was never intended. In your condition of mind, having discharged the coin upon the floor of the bin, a mental idiosyncrasy of years insisted upon recognition.

"In some inexplicable way you retained enough of your mental identity to preserve some manifestation of the law of equivalents. In other words, having parted with something, you demanded something in return.

"With as much deliberation, therefore, as you manifested in contributing to your loss, you attempted to reimburse yourself by filling the bag with coal.

"In some occult way you assured yourself that you were engaged in a transaction where one commodity took the place of another.

"To this freak of mentality the idea of the pebbles in the story being substituted for the diamonds contributed; and what was intended by the narrator as a consistency of detail, to be explained later on, made an unforeseen appeal to your native cupidity and provided me with a very satisfactory clue.

"Moreover, the narrator assisted himself by allowing you to contemplate some brilliants—a sapphire, a diamond.

"In such demonstrations a centralizing object is an almost indispensable adjunct; and putting the two together, the stories, the brilliants, it is not difficult to see that you have received your instructions in the manner indicated, and obeyed them with unexpected consistency."

For a moment there was silence, which was sharply disturbed by an unexpected and apparently unsuggested query from Gratz.

"Were you ever," he asked, looking directly at Raikes, "in this apartment during the absence of its occupant?"

"No!" stammered Raikes, apparently very much astonished at the question.

"You lie!"

Raikes and his nephew sprang to their feet, their eyes bulging in the direction of the bedroom.

In the doorway stood the Sepoy.

"You lie!" he repeated, "you miserable husk, you! You were here one evening in my absence, or, at least, what you supposed was my absence," and raising his manacled hands the speaker pointed to the closet. "I was there," he said.

"Ah—ah!" faltered Raikes chokingly.

"And now," continued the Sepoy, "let us get to the end of this business. It ought to be a simple proceeding. You want three missing bags of gold; they will be forthcoming on one condition."

"And what is that?" cried Raikes, beginning to withdraw into himself as if he expected a sharp bargain.

"That you leave the details of the transaction in the hands of this gentleman," answered the Sepoy, pointing to Gratz. "You had better consent," he added as he analyzed the hesitation of the startled Raikes, "or I shall describe, with photographic minuteness, all that occurred in the few short moments of your visit."

Raikes regarded Gratz helplessly.

During all this conversation the detective had been doing some rapid thinking and had decided upon his course, so nodding to Raikes, he said: "Leave the matter to me; I will restore your coin to you in the morning. See that neither of you leaves the house until then, or speak to a soul before I see you."

Whatever objections may have been forming in the mind of the miser were quickly dissipated by a look from the Sepoy, and without another word Raikes and his nephew departed.

"Well," inquired Gratz, when the two were again alone, "what have you to say to me that you do not want Raikes to hear?"

"You will know shortly," replied the Sepoy after a few moments of reflection, with his eyes directed upon the handcuffs. "I do not have to resort to your elaborate reasoning to discover the nature of your profession. These," holding up his hands, "are unmistakable."

"Yes," answered Gratz drily, "they require no trope or metaphor to illustrate their application."

"However," continued the Sepoy, "I have just listened to the deductions of an unusual acumen for analysis along abstract lines."

Gratz bowed his acknowledgments.

"That is simple," he said, "when there is such a liberal supply of data."

"True," responded the Sepoy. "That was an oversight on my part. Still, your constructive application, too, is no less convincing."

"But to what does all this lead?" inquired Gratz with a degree of impatience. "Suppose we admit that there is an exquisite balance maintained between my analysis and my synthesis, and have done with it. You have some appeal to make to one or both of these faculties."

"Your penetration is the peer of your reasoning. Listen: Will you do me the favor of assuming that your comprehensive résumé of a few moments ago is all I care to hear on the subject?" asked the Sepoy.

"I understand," replied Gratz.

"Very well, then," continued the Sepoy. "I will extend to you the courtesy of offering no denial to anything you have said."

"That," laughed Gratz, "is the height of affability, under the circumstances; but proceed."

"Good!" responded the Sepoy. "I have a suggestion to make. It is understood, in the first place, that Raikes is to recover his coin; on that point he will be fully satisfied. But there still remains the recognition of your services to him; you will have more difficulty in convincing him of his obligation than you had in persuading me of your acumen."

"Ah!" murmured Gratz; "it is coming."

"Are you any judge of brilliants?" inquired the Sepoy abruptly.

"Somewhat," answered Gratz; "I have seen a few in my time."

"Well," continued the Sepoy, "kindly put your hand in my right vest pocket and withdraw a small case of shagreen which you will find there."

Gratz obeyed.

"Now," continued the Sepoy, "press the spring."

As Gratz complied with this instruction, the lid of the shagreen case flew open and revealed the superb sapphire which had radiated such insidious depravity into the mind of the miser.

"What do you think of that?" inquired the Sepoy.

For a moment or so Gratz did not reply. The mastery of its cutting, its magnificent bulk, its unrivaled purity overwhelmed him. "I have never seen one like it," he said finally, "if it is genuine."

"Oh, you need not doubt it!" exclaimed the Sepoy, "or, if you do, you can assure yourself on that point. Now follow me. Six bags of Raikes' coin could not buy that."

"You set its value high," suggested Gratz.

"Naturally; its like does not exist. Money has never been able to purchase it. There is just one consideration I can accept for it."

"And that?" inquired Gratz as the Sepoy paused.

"A lapse of memory," replied the Sepoy.

"A lapse of memory!" repeated Gratz.

"Yes. Unlock these handcuffs and forget that you have done so."

A sudden irradiation seemed to shoot from the gem. It was the impulse communicated by the trembling hand of the detective, who, either to conceal the flush that was gradually transforming his pallid face, or from his reluctance to remove his gaze, continued to hold the brilliant in much the same oblivious regard as that bestowed upon it by the unhappy Raikes.

294

Gratz was having the struggle of his life.

The veins fretted through his temples with frightful distinction; his forehead was moist with a profuse perspiration; his breath labored with intermittent entrance and egress.

His well-known apathy, his exasperating negation of demeanor, where were they now?

Gradually, however, in the manner of disheartened stragglers whipped again into the firing line, there shadowed in his expression evidences of moral recovery which the Sepoy did not like.

The professional instincts of the detective, reinspired by his better nature, were making some very obvious appeals.

The éclat of this singular case beckoned. He seemed to brace himself morally and physically as he leaned back in his chair and again looked at his desperate companion.

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At once the Sepoy, upon whom no vestige of this mental tumult was lost, again restored the ebbing temptation to its flood by exclaiming:

"Here is a more convincing reason still," and raising his hands to his breast, in order to give the detective easier access to the point designated beneath his arms, he said: "Reach into the pocket on the left."

For a moment Gratz hesitated. If he had found the first subsidy difficult to refuse, how might he resist the second, or, he added to himself, with a sort of usurious exaltation, the depravity of the two combined?

Curiosity, too, without which no detective is truly fit for his calling, moved him, so with the impatient impulse we so often witness when rectitude is about to subject itself to the persuasions of the evil one for the ostensible purpose of combating them and the private determination to yield, Gratz extended a trembling hand toward the Sepoy, who had drawn himself to the extreme limit of his sinewy height, the better to accommodate his figure to the intent search of the detective, and then—

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Just as Gratz managed to insert his trembling fingers over the edge of the pocket rim, a pair of tense, sinewy hands shot upward and with incredible dexterity encircled the throat of the detective.

The surprise was complete.

The hands of the unfortunate man flew out wildly, grasping at nothing, and the next instant closed upon the wrists of the Sepoy.

But the recoil was too late. The frightful grasp concentrated its deadly pressure.

The livid face of the detective grew purple. His eyes seemed about to bulge from their sockets. His grip relaxed from the wrists of his antagonist, and then all vigor seemed to vanish from his body, and he sank inertly to the floor.

As the malignant Sepoy bestowed the stiffening body upon the carpet, he released his horrible clutch upon the detective's throat, and, despite his manacles, began with desperate agility to search the silent man's waistcoat pockets.

297

From one futile quest his implacable hands leaped to another, the length of chain which held the two handcuffs together rattling an eerie accompaniment to his eagerness.

At last he withdrew a tiny key.

Grasping the precious bit of steel in his right hand the Sepoy inserted it in the latch-hole of the left manacle; a quick turn, and the steel clasp relaxed its obnoxious embrace.

It was but the work of a second to repeat these operations on his right arm, and the Sepoy was free.

"Ha!" The breath seemed to whistle from his lungs with one sharp, exulting impulse.

He stretched his superb figure to its utmost, and with the smile of a re-embodied Lucifer restored the sapphire to its case.

For a brief space he gazed upon the man extended upon the floor, and then, urged by some devilish impulse, if one might judge from the expression of his countenance, he knelt by the prostrate body and placed his ear to the pulseless breast.

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The next instant, stimulated, apparently, by some unexpected endorsement of a vague

possibility, he was upon his feet and had darted to a small cabinet near-by.

His hasty foray among its drawers was rewarded with a small bottle, the stopper of which he removed.

With a quick motion of the head to escape the full force of the pungent odor of ammonia which issued, the Sepoy returned to the unfortunate Gratz, and wetting the tip of his handkerchief with a few drops from the vial, he passed it gently to and fro under the nostrils of the detective.

Repeating these maneuvers several times, the Sepoy believed that he remarked a faint twitching of the eyelids.

At this manifestation he seized a sheet of paper and directed a mimic breeze upon the drawn face.

Again he attempted an enforced inhalation of the strong odor, this time from the bottle itself.

The result was startling.

There was a scarcely perceptible attempt to turn the head; a spasmodic throb in the throat.

Renewing his efforts with the paper, the Sepoy, encouraged by what he saw, placed his arms beneath the body and lifted it to a semi-reclining attitude, so that it rested, with a tilt forward, against a chair-arm.

From the table the evilly-smiling man took the handcuffs, and grasping the unresisting arms of the unfortunate Gratz, bent them with cruel force until the hands met behind the gradually stiffening back.

There was a sharp click, and the next instant the manacles embraced the wrists of the detective.

Again the Sepoy placed the bottle so that a concentration of the stinging odor, which by now permeated the atmosphere of the entire room, could attack the sensitive nasal membranes more directly, and unmistakable evidences of imminent reanimation quickened the twitching features.

Again he lifted the uneasy figure and placed it upon the reclining chair, into which it collapsed helplessly with a nerveless huddle.

A few minutes more of alternate fan and bottle resulted in the opening of the eyes and the utterance of a choking gasp.

Assured now, the Sepoy rushed to the bedroom, threw aside the coverlets and possessed himself of one of the sheets.

With the aid of his pocket-knife he ripped this into several lengths, with which he returned to the rapidly reviving Gratz.

In his grim struggle for reanimation the firm lines about the mouth of the unfortunate man had finally relaxed, and into this ugly opening the Sepoy inserted a strip of the sheet and secured it in a rigid knot behind the neck of his victim.

With a few dexterous turns and knots he bound the body to the chair with the remaining lengths of linen, and hastening to the washstand grasped a water pitcher and deluged the face of the now thoroughly awakened Gratz.

From the look in his eyes it was evident that his senses had not only fully returned, but that he was perfectly aware of the changed conditions and their relative humiliations.

For a moment an expression vaguely suggestive of admiration shadowed through the slightly flushed countenance, and the next instant it returned to its customary apathy, from which it was not again disturbed during the bitter ordeal to which the helpless Gratz was subjected.

"And now," exclaimed the Sepoy with a frightful grin of malice, "I trust that your senses are sufficiently restored to receive a farewell suggestion or two. You will notice," he went on with evil emphasis, "that I say 'farewell suggestions,' for I assure you that you will never set eyes on me again.

"A little previous to the change which resulted in your present predicament, I extended to you the courtesy of all sorts of tribute to your acumen.

"Now—note my liberality—I do not insist upon a reciprocal indorsement of my dexterity, since I see"—pointing to the gag which he had inserted in the mouth of the detective—"since I see, with deep regret, that you have an impediment in your speech.

"I excuse you in advance.

"Still, I cannot resist the temptation of chiding your indifference to such a brilliant argument as this," and the Sepoy caused the sapphire to scintillate its mocking rebuke into the eyes of the wretched Gratz.

"I must also improve the occasion by calling your attention to the reprimand offered by your plight to your curiosity, for you see to what a pass it has brought you.

"However, since it would be a malice of which I am incapable not to gratify it, I will show you what it was I had in reserve," and the Sepoy produced the small shagreen case with which Raikes had been on such questionable terms of familiarity, and pressing back the lid revealed the splendid diamond to the still impassive Gratz.

With a continuation of his elaborate courtesy and his purposely stilted phrasing, the Sepoy said: "If the sapphire was argument, this was certainly conviction. The moral barrier which could

withstand the assault of the first, must, unquestionably, have yielded to the insidious attack of the second.

"But since you have managed to place yourself beyond the reach of such considerations, I will be compelled to discontinue my futile eloquence and leave you to your more mature reflections. 303

"Observe!" he continued, as he replaced the sapphire in the case and restored the latter to the right-hand pocket of his waistcoat, "I place the argument in this repository"; and treating the diamond in like manner, he deposited that in the left-hand pocket and added: "And place the conviction on this side.

"It is not often that one is the embodiment of *belles-lettres*, having such details of logic so easily within reach."

During all this travesty of demeanor and phrase, with its tantalizing mockery and its crafty insinuation, Gratz had betrayed no emotion whatever, nor did his eyes lose one whit of their usual placidity as he beheld the Sepoy, with a sort of lithe, animal rapidity, produce a small traveling-case from the wardrobe and return with it to the bag of coin on the table.

"You see," continued the Sepoy as he was about to deposit the bag in the case, "I have left room for this. I anticipated its addition to my paraphernalia and made preparations accordingly. 304

"Notice how neatly it fits in. And now I offer you my sympathy for the miscarriage of your plans.

"This, to a man of sentiment and enterprise, is always obnoxious. I feel myself indebted to you for some exceedingly intelligent mental processes, and, believe me, I part with you with a feeling so nearly resembling regret that I will not do you the discourtesy of doubting that the sentiment is genuine.

"I leave you to make explanations to your clients in whatsoever way you may see fit. I salute you!" and the next instant the Sepoy had slipped through the doorway into the hall, along which he hurried until he reached the main entrance of the house.

To make his way through this into the vestibule and thence into the street was the work of the next few moments, and with a grin of malicious triumph he descended the steps which led to the pave.

Scarcely had his feet touched the ground when a man from either side of the stone balustrade stepped out, and each grasped an arm of the scowling Sepoy. 305

"A moment, please!" exclaimed one of the men, as he snapped back the shield of a small lantern he carried and directed its searching light into the distorted countenance.

"Ah!" exclaimed his captor to the fellow on the other side of the prisoner, "this is the chap, Tom."

"Now, mister, you can walk back. Not a word; you may be all right and we may be all wrong; it can soon be settled in there."

"One question, please," begged the Sepoy. "Who are you? By what right do you detain me?"

"One at a time, mister," replied the man with the lantern. "There's a man inside who can answer these questions for you."

A sudden light penetrated the mind of the Sepoy. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "I understand."

"That's good, mister; it will save a deal of explanation."

"These men, then," muttered the Sepoy to himself, "are the subordinates of the detective within."

At that moment the moon slipped out from behind a mask of cloud and silhouetted the three. 306

By its light the prisoner examined the grim countenances before him. "Surely," he decided, "there is nothing in these features to indicate a strenuous moral objection to the bribery of the contents of my traveling-case," and at the thought of the absurd discrepancy between his present predicament and the cynical altitudes of a short time since, and as he considered the humiliation awaiting him when he was compelled once more to face the detective, he decided to venture on another attempt to purchase his freedom.

With this thought he was about to place the case he carried on the ground, when one of the men, remarking his movement and mistaking its purpose, cried: "Here; none of that!"

"But," expostulated the Sepoy, "you do not——"

"Shut up!" replied the fellow coarsely. "Come inside and show us where you have left the chief. You here, the boss in there—something's wrong." 307

With a muttered curse, and urged by no ceremonious hands, the Sepoy reascended the steps.

Having in his haste to escape neglected to latch the doors, the raging Sepoy had no difficulty in conducting his captors along the hallway to his room.

In a few moments this strangely assorted trio reached the apartment in which the Sepoy had but a short time before disported himself, so to speak, with such waspish reprisal, and delivered such a farrago of ridicule and cynicism upon the defenseless head of the silent figure bound to the chair.

At sight of this extraordinary spectacle the two understrappers came to a standstill and looked upon the Sepoy with a species of respect.

Never before had they beheld their chief in such a predicament; the means of its accomplishment must have been amazingly clever, and the agent himself somewhat of a marvel.

However, while one of the men stood guard over the Sepoy, with a renewal of his watchfulness awakened by what he saw, the other proceeded to unfasten the gag and remove the strips which bound the unfortunate Gratz.

308

After a pause of inscrutable regard of the Sepoy, who, despite the embarrassing dénouement, managed to maintain a fair degree of composure, Gratz, addressing the man who had released him, said:

"You will find the key of these handcuffs on the table yonder."

Obedient to the direction of the detective's glance, the man proceeded to the table, found the object of his quest, and inserting it in the handcuffs detached them from the hands of the still impassive Gratz.

"Now," continued the latter calmly, "I will transfer these ornaments to that gentleman. Secure him precisely as you found me, with the exception of the gag."

Presently this was done.

At this, turning to his subordinates, the detective said: "Leave me with this gentleman for a while; I will call you in case of need."

As the pair passed through the doorway, Gratz, with no intimation of triumph or exultation in his manner, addressed the unhappy Sepoy, with an emphasis, however, which implied that he had not forgotten the experience to which he had been subjected.

309

"And *now* what have you to say?"

The Sepoy looked his questioner directly in the eyes, with a glance that was subtle in its insinuation and eloquent of collusive suggestion, and replied:

"The sapphire is still in my right waistcoat pocket, and the diamond in the left."

THE END

As the beautiful reader reached this singular conclusion, which came with an abruptness that indicated the decrepit imagination of the author and his overworked vocabulary, she looked up from the absurd vehicle of all this hectic style and incident and beheld in the eyes of her auditor a suggestion of the light that is indigenous to neither land nor sea.

To Dennis, who had in his composition the material of a poet, if not the finish, the melodious intonations of the widow had seemed like the incongruous orchestration of birds in the treetops to some minor tragedy among the denizens of the underbrush.

310

Her elocution was exquisite and provided the bizarre narrative with a refinement which contrasted with its crudities, like Valenciennes lace on a background of calico.

"Well," she said smilingly, after she had subjected his ingenuous glance to the rapid analysis of her intuition, with a satisfaction which it startled her to recognize, "what do you think of it?"

"Is that the end?" asked Dennis.

"Yes, it is the end."

With a shade of emphasis, intended by Dennis to indicate that the words of the reply of the widow were suggestive of other finalities which he did not like to consider, he said:

"That is no end; it looks to me as though the author has struck his limits."

"No," objected the widow, "I fancy that he has left the subject open so that the reader can solve the riddle in his own way."

"There is no riddle!" exclaimed Dennis.

"No?" inquired the widow; "and that splendid sapphire, that magnificent diamond to tempt the detective?"

311

"They will not tempt him," said Dennis with simple conviction and a degree of feeling that might lead one to suppose that he was an indispensable element in the situation. "He will recollect his professional pride; he will remember that he is a man."

"Oh!" exclaimed the widow with an indescribable intonation.

"Don't you think that I am right?" asked Dennis.

"Yes," replied his companion with a pronounced emphasis on the personal pronoun which followed, "yes, *you* are right"; and as she considered the frank revelation of character in his reply and contrasted it with the possible disclosures of similar situations among the majority of men she knew, she added:

"I am glad that we have read the story."

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