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On the Lightship
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON THE LIGHTSHIP ***

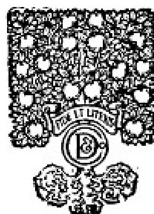
ON THE LIGHTSHIP

On the Lightship

BY
Herman Knickerbocker Vielé

AUTHOR OF "THE INN OF THE SILVER MOON," "MYRA OF THE PINES," "THE LAST OF THE KNICKERBOCKERS," "HEARTBREAK HILL," ETC.

Introduction by
THOMAS A. JANVIER



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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

[Pg 9]

"On Board the Light-Ship" is the title—retained in loving deference to his intention—that would have been given to this collection of stories by their author. Had Vielé lived but a little while longer, he would have justified it by placing them in a setting characteristically fantastic and characteristically original.

He had planned to frame them in an encircling story describing, and duly accounting for, the chance assemblage aboard a vessel of that unusual type of a heterogeneous company; and—having in his own fanciful way convincingly disposed of conditions not precisely in line with the strictest probability—so to dovetail the several stories into their encirclement that the telling of them, in turn, would have come easily and naturally from those upcasts of the sea. [Pg 10]

It was a project wholly after his own heart. I can imagine the pleasure that he would have found in working his machinery—always out of sight, and always running with a silent smoothness—for getting together in that queer place his company of story-tellers. He would have used, of course, the Light-ship and the light-keepers as his firmly real ground-work. Ship and crew would have been presented in a matter-of-fact way, in keeping with their recognized matter-of-fact existence, that subtly would have instilled the habit of belief into the minds of his readers: and so would have led them onward softly, being in a way hypnotized, to an equal belief—as he slipped lightly along, with seemingly the same simplicity and the same ingenuousness—in what assuredly would not have been matter-of-fact explanations of how those story-tellers happened to be at large upon the ocean before they were taken on board!

That far I can follow him: but the play of fancy that he would have put into his explanations—as [Pg 11] he accounted in all manner of quite probable impossible ways for such flotsam being adrift, and for its salvage aboard the Light-ship—would have been so wholly the play of his own alert individual fancy that it is beyond my ken. All that I can be sure of—and be very sure of—is that his explanations of that marine phenomenon, and of the coming of its several members up out of the sea and over the ship's rail, would have been very delightfully and very speciously satisfying. That the explanations might have been less convincing when critically analyzed is a negligible detail: the only essential requirement of a fantastic tale being that it shall be convincing as it goes along.

Even my bald outline of this story—that now never will be told—shows how harmoniously in keeping it is with Vielé's literary method. He delighted in creating delicately fantastic conditions lightly bordering upon the impossible; and, having created them, in so re-solving their elements [Pg 12] into the seemingly commonplace and the apparently probable that the fine art with which he worked his transmutations was veiled by the very perfection of its accomplishment.

Such was the method that he employed in the making of what I cherish as his master-piece: "The Inn of the Silver Moon"—a story told so simply and so directly, and with such a color of engaging frankness, that each turn in its series of airily-adjusted impossible situations is accepted with an unquestioning pleasure; and that leaves upon the mind of the reader—even when released from the spell that compels belief throughout the reading of it—a lasting impression of verity. It was the method, precisely, of an exquisite form of literary art that has not flowered more perfectly, I hold with submission, since the time of the so-called Romantic School in Germany: when de la

Motte Fouqué created "Undine," and Eichendorff created the "Good-for-Nothing," and all the world went at a gay quick-step to bright soft music that had been silent for nearly three hundred years. [Pg 13]

Beyond recognizing the fact that it is of the same genre, to class "The Inn of the Silver Moon" with "Undine" is to belittle it by an over-claim; but to class it with "Aus dem Leben eines Tongenichts" is to make a comparison in its favor: since Eichendorff's happy ending is a little forced and a little tawdry; while Vielé's happy ending is as inevitable as it is gracious—a result flowing smoothly from all the precedent conditions, and so deftly revealed at the crisic culminating moment that a perfecting finish is given to the delightingly perfect logic of its surprise.

The manner of the making of the two stories is identical; and so is their peculiar charm. In his preface to his translation of the "Good-for-Nothing," forty years and more ago, Charles Godfrey Leland wrote: "Like a bird, the youthful hero flits along with his music over Austria and Italy—as semi-mysterious in his unpremeditated course, fed by chance, and as pleasing in his artless character"; which is close to being—if for artless we read sophisticated artlessness—an accurate description of the joint journeying of *Monsieur Vifour* and *Mademoiselle de Belle Isle*. And Leland added: "It is strikingly characteristic of the whole book that it abounds in adroitly-hidden touches of art which produce an effect without betraying effort on the part of the writer. We are willing to declare that we never read a story so light and airy, or one betraying so little labor; but critical study soon tells us *quant' é difficile questa facilità*! All this ease is the grace of a true genius, who makes no false steps and has carefully estimated his own powers." That description fits "The Inn of the Silver Moon" to a hair! [Pg 14]

In part, it applies only a little less closely to "Myra of the Pines"—in which is much the same gay irresponsibility of motive and of action; the same light touch, so sure that each delicate point is made with a firm clearness; and the same play—save for the jarring note struck by the "pig-man"—of a gently keen and a very subtle humour: that maintains farce on the plane of high comedy by hiding artful contrivance under a seeming artlessness; and that sparklingly crystallizes into turns of phrase so seemingly spontaneous in their accurate appositeness that the look of accident is given to them by their carefully perfected felicity. [Pg 15]

"The Last of the Knickerbockers" has this same humour and this same happiness of phrasing; and in its serious midst is set the fantastic episode of "The Yellow Sleigh"—that needs only to be amplified to become another "Inn of the Silver Moon." But there its resemblance to Vielé's other stories ends. Least of all has "The Inn of the Silver Moon" anything in common with it. That delectable thistle-down romance goes trippingly over sunbeams in a straightaway course that has no intricacies: with all the interest constantly focussed upon a heroine and a hero to whom all the other characters are minor and accessory; and with never a break in the light-hearted note that is struck at the start. "The Last of the Knickerbockers," a blend of comedy and semi-tragedy, is far away from all this—both in spirit and in form. It is the most largely and the most seriously conceived of Vielé's works: not a romance, but a novel with a substantial plot carefully developed in intricate action; and while the main interest is centred—as properly it should be—upon a wholly charming heroine and a wholly satisfying hero, these pleasing young people are made to know, and to keep, their place in a crowd of strong characters strongly drawn. [Pg 16]

It is a good story to read simply as a story; but it is more than that, it is a document: an ambered preservation of a phase of New York society that already almost has vanished, and that soon will have vanished absolutely—when the last Mrs. and Mr. Bella Ruggles shall have closed to decayed aristocracy the last shabbily pretentious boarding house in the last dingy Kenilworth Place; and when decayed aristocracy, so evicted, shall be forced to dwell in apartment-houses of the bell-and-speaking-tube type, and to dine (as *Alida* prophetically put it) "at Italian tables-d'hôte—like the Café Chianti, in grandfather's old house, where they have music and charge only fifty cents, including wine"! [Pg 17]

So true a presentment as this story is of New York's old-time strait faiths and straiter social customs will outlive long, I am confident, the great mass of the fiction of Vielé's day. It will be actively alive while even a faint memory of those faiths and customs is cherished by living people; and when all of such ancients shall have retired (with the final befitting dignity attendant upon a special license) to their family homes beneath the shadows of St. Mark's and Trinity, carrying their memories with them, it will become, as I have said, a document: preserving the traditions which otherwise would have been buried with them; and so linking permanently—as they linked temporarily—New York's ever-increasingly ardent present with its ever-paling less strenuous past. [Pg 18]

As to "The Inn of the Silver Moon," I can see no end to the lastingness of it: since in the very essence of it is that which holds humanity with an enduringly binding spell. The luring charm of a happy love-story—charged with gay fantasy and epigrammatic grace and gently pungent humour—is a charm perpetual and irresistible: that must hold and bind while ever the world goes happily in ever-fresh sunshine, and happily has in it ever-fresh young hearts.

THOMAS A. JANVIER.

NEW YORK,
June 20, 1909.

THE STORY OF IGNATIUS, THE ALMONER

THE STORY OF IGNATIUS, THE ALMONER

Though this happened at the Butler Penfields' garden party, the results concern Miss Mabel Dunbar more than any one else, except, perhaps, one other. Mabel had been invited, as she was invited everywhere, partly because she was a very pretty girl, and helped to make things go, and partly through public policy.

"So long as the dear child remains unmarried," Mrs. Fessenden had said, "we must continue to buy our tea from her."

For Mabel owed her amber draperies to the tea she sold and everybody bought because her grandmother had lived on Washington Square. In society, to speak of tea was to speak of Mabel Dunbar; to look in Mabel's deep brown eyes was to think of tea, and, incidentally, of cream and sugar.

"I used to consider her clever," Mrs. Fessenden remarked, "until she became so popular with clever men.... It is really most discouraging.... See, there is Lena Livingston, who has read Dante, pretending to talk to her own brother-in-law, while Mabel, who is not even married, walks off with Archer Ferris and Horace Hopworthy, one on each side." [Pg 22]

"I do wonder what she talks to them about," speculated Mrs. Penfield, and Mrs. Fessenden replied:

"My dear, you may depend, they do not let her talk."

Mrs. Penfield reflected, while three backs, two broad and one slender and sinuous as a tea-plant, receded toward the shrubbery.

"I wonder which one Mabel will come back with?" she said.

"If Jack were here, he would give odds on Mr. Hopworthy," replied Jack's wife.

"Of course, Mr. Hopworthy is the coming man," observed Mrs. Penfield. "But Mr. Ferris has 'arrived.'"

"Yes," assented Mrs. Fessenden, "as Jack says, he has arrived and taken all the rooms.... But, then, I have great faith in Mr. Hopworthy. You know Jack's aunt discovered him." [Pg 23]

"Yes," said Mrs. Penfield, "I remember, but, Clara, it was you that introduced him."

"Oh, that was nothing," murmured Clara. "We were very glad——"

"My two best men!" sighed Mrs. Penfield, her eyes upon the shrubbery, where nothing now was to be seen.

"Yes," acquiesced her friend, "but think how badly that last Ceylon turned out."

Meanwhile, the three had found a cool retreat, an arbour sheltered from the sun and open to the air, wherein a rustic garden seat, a table and a chair extended cordial invitations.

"Ah, this is just the place!" cried Archer Ferris. "By shoving this seat along a trifle, and putting this chair here, we can be very comfortable."

It was noticeable that Mr. Ferris retained possession of the chair. As for the vacant place beside her on the bench, Mabel's parasol lay upon it. Mr. Ferris beamed as only the arrived can beam. [Pg 24]

"With your permission, I will take the table," said Mr. Hopworthy, looking to Miss Dunbar, who smiled. Mr. Ferris became overcast.

"I fear our conversation may not interest you," he told the other man. "You know, you do not write short stories."

And this was not the first time in the last half hour that Mr. Ferris had offered Mr. Hopworthy an opportunity to withdraw. The latter smiled, a broad, expansive smile.

"Oh, but I read them," he persisted, perching on the table. "That is," he added, "when there is plot enough to keep one awake."

Here Mr. Ferris smiled, or, rather, pouted, for his mouth, contrasted with that of Mr. Hopworthy, seemed child-like, not to say cherubic.

"Plots," he observed, "are quite Victorian. We are, at least, decadent, are we not, Miss Mabel?" [Pg 25]

Mabel smoothed her amber skirt, and tried to look intelligent.

"Oh, yes, indeed," she said.

"Now, there was a story in last week's *Bee* called 'Ralph Ratcliffe's Reincarnation,'" continued the gentleman on the table. "Did you read it, Miss Dunbar?"

"I laid it aside to read," she answered, with evasion.

"Pray don't. It's in my weakest vein," remonstrated Mr. Ferris. "One writes *down* for the *Bee*, you know."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Hopworthy, "I did not recognize the author's name as one of yours."

"No one with fewer than twelve names should call himself in literature," the other said, a little vauntingly.

Mr. Hopworthy embraced his knee.

"The plot of that story——" he had begun to say, when Mr. Ferris interrupted.

"There are but seven plots," he explained, "and thirty situations. To one that knows his trade, the outcome of a story should be from the very beginning as obvious as a properly opened game of chess." [Pg 26]

"How interesting it must be to write," put in Miss Dunbar appreciatively. Perhaps, in her simple way, she speculated as to where the present situation came among the thirty, and whether the sunbeam she was conscious of upon her hair had any literary value.

"Do you ever see the *Stylus*?" inquired Mr. Hopworthy, from whose position the sunbeam could be observed to best advantage.

"Sir," said Mr. Ferris, through his Boucher lips, "I may say I *am* the *Stylus*."

"Really!" cried the lady, though she could not have been greatly surprised.

In truth, her exclamation veiled the tendency to yawn often induced in the young by objective conversation. If clever people only knew a little more, they would not so often talk of stupid things. [Pg 27]

"Ah, then it is to you we owe that spirited little *fabliau* called 'The Story of Ignatius, the Almoner'?" remarked Mr. Hopworthy, almost indifferently.

"A trifle," said the other; "what we scribblers call 'hack.'"

Mr. Hopworthy's broad mouth contracted, and he might have been observed to suffer from some suppressed emotion.

"But you wrote it, did you not?" he asked, beneath his breath.

"I dashed it off in twenty minutes," said the other.

"But it was yours?" insisted Mr. Hopworthy.

"When I wrote that little story——" said Mr. Archer Ferris.

"'The Story of Ignatius, the Almoner?'" prompted Mr. Hopworthy, with unnecessary insistence.

"'The Story of Ignatius, the Almoner,'" repeated Mr. Ferris, flushing slightly, while Mr. Hopworthy seemed to clutch the table to keep himself from bounding upward. [Pg 28]

"I was convinced of it!" he cried. "No other hand could have penned it. The pith, the pathos, passion, power, and purpose of the tale were masterly, and yet it was so simple and sincere, so logical, so convincing, so inevitable, so——"

"Spare me," protested Mr. Ferris, not at all displeased. "But it had a sort of rudimentary force, I own."

"And have you read it, Miss Dunbar?" inquired Mr. Hopworthy, almost letting slip one anchor.

"No," she replied, "but I have laid it aside to read. I shall do so now with added pleasure."

"Unless the author would consent to tell it to us in his own inspired words——" said Mr. Hopworthy, regarding his boot toe with interest. Miss Dunbar caught at the suggestion.

"Oh, do!" she pleaded. "I should so love to hear a story told by the author."

"An experience to remember," murmured Mr. Hopworthy. [Pg 29]

"I am afraid it would be rather too long to tell this afternoon," demurred the author, with a glance of apprehension toward the sky.

"But you dashed it off in twenty minutes," the other man reminded him.

"That is another reason," said the writer. "Work done with such rapidity is apt to leave but a slight impression on the memory."

"Perhaps a little turn about the grounds——" suggested Mr. Hopworthy.

Miss Dunbar had put up her amber parasol, and the lace about it fell just across her eyes. This left the seat beside her free.

"Perhaps a little turn——" urged Mr. Hopworthy again. Mr. Ferris regarded him defiantly.

"As you have read my story, sir," he said, "I can scarcely hope to include you in my audience."

"But it is not at all the sort of thing one is satisfied to hear but once," Mr. Hopworthy declared, in a tone distinctly flattering. Mr. Ferris moved uneasily. [Pg 30]

"I really forget how it began," he asserted. "Perhaps another time——"

"If I might presume to jog your memory——" said Mr. Hopworthy, with deference.

"Oh, that would be delightful!" exclaimed Miss Dunbar. "With two such story-tellers, I feel just like Lalla Rookh."

Mr. Ferris was upon his feet at once.

"I suggest we adjourn to the striped tent," he said; "they have all sorts of ices there."

"Oh, but I mean the Princess, not frozen punch," declared Mabel, settling herself more securely in the corner of the garden seat. "Please sit down, and begin by telling me exactly what an almoner is."

Mr. Ferris hesitated, cast one glance toward the open lawn beyond the shrubbery, another to the amber parasol, and sat down in the other corner. Mr. Hopworthy slipped from the table to the vacant chair.

"An almoner," explained the *Stylus*, in as nearly an undertone as the letter of courtesy permitted, "is a sort of treasurer, you know.... In a monastery, you understand.... The monk who distributes alms and that sort of thing." [Pg 31]

"Oh, then it is a mediæval story!" cried Mabel. "How delightful!"

"No, modern," corrected Mr. Hopworthy.

"Modern in setting, though mediæval in spirit," said Mr. Ferris, taking off his hat.

"Ah, that, indeed!" breathed Mr. Hopworthy. "I shall not soon forget your opening description; that picture of the old cathedral, lighted only by the far, faint flicker of an occasional taper, burning before some shrined saint. I can see him now, *Ignatius*, the young monk, as he moves in silence from one to another of the alms-boxes, gathering into his leathern bag the offerings that have been deposited by the faithful."

"I think he had a light," suggested the author of short stories, who was listening, critically. [Pg 32]

"Of course; a flaming torch."

"How sweet of him!" Mabel murmured, and Mr. Hopworthy went on.

"There were twelve boxes—were there not?—upon as many pillars, and in each box, in addition to the customary handful of copper *sous*, there lay, as I recall it, a silver coin——"

"You will perceive the symbolism," the author whispered.

"It is perfect," sighed Mabel.

"Never had such a thing occurred before," continued Mr. Hopworthy, who appeared to know the story very well, "and in the solitude of his cell, *Ignatius* sat for hours contemplating the riches that had so strangely come into his hand. His first thought was of the poor, to whom, of right, the alms belonged; but, when he recalled the avarice of *The Abbot*, his heart misgave him——"

"Rather a striking situation, I thought," remarked the writer. "Go on a little further, please." [Pg 33]

"I wish I could," said Mr. Hopworthy, "but this is where your keen analysis comes in, your irresistible logic. I confess you went a shade beyond my radius of thought."

"Perhaps," admitted the other. "Very likely." But he had now caught the spirit of his own production, and, turning to his neighbor, he went on to explain:

"My purpose was to present a problem, to suggest a conflict of emotions, quite in the manner of Huysmans. Should *The Abbot*, who is but the type of sordid wisdom, be consulted, or should *The Almoner*, symbolizing self, obey the higher call of elementary impulse?"

"And which did *Ignatius* do?" Mabel asked.

"I fear you fail to catch my meaning," said the author. "It is the soul-struggle we are analyzing ——"

"But he must have come to some conclusion?"

"Not necessarily," said Mr. Ferris, gravely. "A soul-struggle is continuous, it goes on——" Mr. Ferris waved his white hand toward infinity. [Pg 34]

"But did not *Ignatius* decide to put the money where it would do the most good?" inquired Mr. Hopworthy.

"The phrase is yours," responded Mr. Ferris, "but it conveys my meaning dimly."

"As I recall the story," the other went on, "he resolved to sacrifice his own prejudices to the

service of his fellow-creatures. But, when he thought of all who stood in need—the peasants tilling the fields, the sailors on the sea, the soldiers in the camp—he decided that it would be better to confine the benefit to one deserving object."

"A very sensible decision," Mabel opined, and Mr. Ferris muttered:

"Yes, that was my idea."

As the voices of the garden came to them on the summer breeze, he made a movement to consult his watch.

"You see my little problem," he observed. "The rest is immaterial." [Pg 35]

"But I so liked the part where the young monk, filled with his noble purpose, stole from the monastery by night," said Mr. Hopworthy. "Ah, there was a touch of realism."

"I'm glad you fancied it," replied the author, relapsing into silence.

Mabel tapped the gravel with her foot; it is strange how audible a trifling sound becomes at times.

"Please tell me what he did," she begged. "I never heard a story in which so little happened."

The writer of short stories bit his full red lip, and sat erect.

"The young monk waited till the house was wrapped in sleep," he said, almost defiantly, it seemed. "Then, drawing the great bolt, he went out into the night. The harvest moon was in the sky, and——"

"It rained, I think," suggested Mr. Hopworthy.

"No matter if it did," rejoined the other. "Unmindful of the elements, he wound his cowl about him, and pressed on, fearlessly, into the forest, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. Mile after mile he strode—and strode—and strode—until—until—it was time to return——" [Pg 36]

"You forget the peasant festival," prompted Mr. Hopworthy.

"Festival?" said Mr. Ferris. "Ah, that was a mere episode, intended to give a sense of contrast."

"Of course," Mr. Hopworthy assented. "How frivolous beside his own austere life appeared these rustic revels. How calm, by contrast, was the quiet of the cloister——"

"Yes," Mr. Ferris took up the screed, "and, as from a distance he watched their clumsy merriment, he—he—he——"

"He determined to have just one dance for luck," assisted Mr. Hopworthy.

Perhaps the author, thus hearing the story from another, detected here some flaw of logic, for he did not proceed at once, although Miss Dunbar waited with the most encouraging interest. The momentary pause was put to flight by Mr. Hopworthy. [Pg 37]

"Ah, Zola never did anything more daring," he declared. "Even Zola might have hesitated to make *Ignatius* change clothes with the intoxicated soldier, and leaping into the middle of the ballroom, shout that every glass must be filled to the brim."

"Hold on!" gasped Mr. Ferris. "There must be some mistake. I swear I never wrote anything like that in my life."

"But you have admitted it!" the other cried. "You cannot conceal it from us now. You are grand. You are sublime!"

"I deny it absolutely," returned Mr. Ferris.

"Please stop discussing, and let me hear the rest," Mabel pouted. "Do go on, Mr. Ferris."

"I can't," said Mr. Ferris, sadly. "My story has been garbled by the printer."

"But the waltz," urged Mr. Hopworthy. "Surely, that waltz was yours."

Perhaps once more the irresistible logic of events became apparent, for, with an effort, Mr. Ferris said: [Pg 38]

"Oh, yes, that waltz was mine. Enraptured by its strains, and giddy with the fumes of wine, *The Almoner* floated in a dream of sensuous delight till suddenly he recalled—suddenly he recalled ——"

"If you will pardon another interruption," put in Mr. Hopworthy, "he did nothing of the sort. Suddenly, as you must remember, word was brought that *The Abbot* was dead, and that *Ignatius* had been elected in his place."

"You spoil my climax, sir," the author cried. "Dashing the wine cup from his lips, *Ignatius* then rushed into the night——"

"But he could not find the soldier anywhere," Mr. Hopworthy interposed.

"Why should he want to find the confounded soldier?" demanded the narrator, fiercely.

"Why, to get his cowl, of course."

[Pg 39]

"Splendid!" exclaimed Mabel, clapping her hands.

"He—he——" the author stammered, and again the other lent a friendly tongue to say:

"*Ignatius* returned to the monastery at once. And what should he discover there but *The Soldier*, seated in the chair of office, presiding at the council. But, see here, old chap, perhaps you had better finish your own story yourself?"

"Sir!" cried the author, springing to his feet. "I detect your perfidy, and I call this about the shabbiest trick one gentleman ever attempted to play upon another. I shall not hesitate to denounce you far and wide as one capable of the smallest meanness!"

"That is what *The Almoner* told *The Soldier*," Mr. Hopworthy explained to Mabel, in a whisper, but the other, becoming almost violent, went on:

[Pg 40]

"You are unfit, sir, to associate with people of refinement, and, when I meet you alone, it will give me a lively satisfaction to repeat the observation!"

"That is what *The Soldier* replied to *The Almoner*," Mr. Hopworthy again explained. But the other gentleman had lifted his hat, and was moving rapidly toward the striped tent, where ices were to be had.

"I shall never forgive him for leaving the story unfinished," announced the lady of the bench. "And, don't you think his manner toward the end was rather strange?"

Mr. Hopworthy sighed, and shook his head.

"Those magazine men are all a trifle odd," he said. "Does not that parasol fatigue your hand?"

"Yes, you may hold it, if you like," she answered. "I am glad everybody does not tell stories."

[Pg 41]

THE DEAD MAN'S CHEST

[Pg 43]

THE DEAD MAN'S CHEST

One May morning in the brave year 1594, Mistress Betty Hodges, from the threshold of the narrowest house in the narrowest of the narrow streets in the ancient parish of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, observed with more than passing interest the movements of a gentleman in black.

"Whist, neighbor!" she called out to Mistress Judd, whose portly person well-nigh filled a kindred doorway just across the street. "Yonder stranger should be by every sign in quest of lodgings, and by my horoscope this is a day most favorable for affairs of business. I pray thee, get thy knitting, lest he take us for no better than a pair of idle gossips."

"In faith," retorted Mistress Judd, folding her arms complacently after a side glance in the loiterer's direction, "an he should ever lodge with thee let us hope his shillings prove more nimble than his feet."

[Pg 44]

The gentleman indeed advanced with much deliberation, pausing from time to time to look about him as a man who balances advantages and disadvantages one against the other. It was a quaint old-mannered thoroughfare he moved in; a crooked street of overhanging eaves and jutting gable ends which nearly met against the sky; a shadowy, sunless, damp, ill-savored street, paved with round pebbles and divided in the middle by a trickling stream of unattractive water. For London, still in happy, dirty infancy, had yet to learn her lessons at the hands of those grim teachers, plague and fire.

"A proper man enough!" Mistress Judd added, "though I'll warrant over-cautious and of no great quality. To me he looks a traveling leech."

"Better a country student of divinity," suggested Mistress Hodges.

[Pg 45]

"Or better, a minor cleric, or at best some writing-master," Mistress Judd opined.

"Please God, then he can read," rejoined her neighbor, already debating within herself a small advance of rent. "Mayhap he might acquaint me whether those rolls of paper left by Master Christopher in his oaken chest be worth the ten shillings he died owing me."

"An they would fetch as many pence," sniffed Mistress Judd, "our master poet had long ago resolved them into Malmsey."

"Nay, speak not harshly of the dead," protested Mistress Hodges, conveying furtively a corner of her apron to one eye.

"Marry, if Master Kit did sometimes sing o' nights 'twas but to keep the watch awake. I'd wipe my

shutter clean and willingly to hear his merry catch again. Ah, he was ever free with money when he had it. And 'twas a pleasure to see him with his bottle. In faith, he'd speak to it and kiss it as a woman would her child."

"And kiss it he did once too often, to my thinking," murmured Mistress Judd unsympathetically, "the night he got to brawling in the street and met his death." [Pg 46]

"Marry, he was no brawler," Mistress Hodges protested warmly, "but ever cheerfullest when most in drink. They were thieving knaves who set upon him, and, God be good to sinners, ran him through the heart before the poor young man could so much as recite a couplet to prove himself a poet."

"How thinkst thou poetry would save him?" Mistress Judd demanded curtly.

"Marry, come up! What thief would kill a poet for his purse?" cried Mistress Hodges. "Quick, neighbor, get thy knitting!" she added hurriedly, and catching up a pewter plate began to polish with her apron as the stranger, attracted by their chatter, quickened his pace.

He was a slight man, apparently of thirty or thereabout, with deep-set, penetrating eyes and a lean face ending in the short, sharp, pointed beard in fashion at the time.

"Give you good-morrow, dames," he said, when within speaking distance; "can you direct me to some proper lodging here-about?" [Pg 47]

Mistress Hodges dropped a deeper courtesy to draw attention to herself as the person of most importance.

"In truth an't please you, sir," she said, "'tis my good fortune to have this moment ready for your worship the fairest chambers to be had in all the town at four and six the week. Gentility itself could ask no better, for doth not the Lord Mayor live around the corner in his newly purchased Crosby Hall, the tallest house in London, and near at hand do not the gardens of Sir John Gresham stretch from Bishopsgate to Broad Street like a park? And if one would seek recreation, 'tis not five minutes to Cornhill, which is amusing as a fair o' pleasant evenings, with the jugglers and peddlers and goldsmiths and——"

"Ah, by my faith," the stranger interrupted gravely, "I should seek elsewhere, for I am not a man born under Sol, that loveth honor, nor under Jupiter, that loveth business, for the contemplative planet carrieth me away wholly." [Pg 48]

"An you be disposed toward contemplation," interposed Mistress Hodges, quickly, "there can be found no purer place in London for such diversion than is my second story back. From thence one may contemplate at will either the almshouse gardens and the woodland beyond Houndsditch, or the turrets of the Tower itself, in winter when the leaves are gone."

"Please Heaven the leaves are thick at present!" said the stranger with a grim half smile. "Nevertheless, I have a mind to look from your back windows. The almshouse gardens may at least teach one resignation."

"Enter an't please you, sir," replied the landlady with a low obeisance.

The stranger made a close inspection of the chamber, peering into cupboards, testing the bed and stools and chairs, and finally pausing before a small oak box secluded in a corner. [Pg 49]

"'Tis but a chest of papers left by my last lodger, one Master Christopher," Mistress Hodges explained, adding, "A poet, sir, an't please you, who was slain by highwaymen, and I know not if his lines be fitted for honest ears to hear, though, an one might believe it, they have been spoken in the public play-house. Think you," she added, raising the lid of the chest to disclose a dozen manuscripts or more, bound together with bits of broken doublet lacing, "the lot would bring as much as ten shillings at the rag fair?"

The stranger laughed and shook his head.

"'Tis a great price for any dead man's thoughts," he said, taking up a package at random and hastily turning over the leaves, while Mistress Hodges regarded him anxiously. His interest deepened as he read, and presently his eyes devoured page after page, oblivious of the other's presence.

"In truth," he said at length, "there be lines not wholly without merit." [Pg 50]

"And pray you, sir, what is the matter they set forth?" the landlady ventured to inquire.

"This seems the story of a ghost returned to earth to make discovery of his murder—" the stranger was beginning to explain, but Mistress Hodges checked him.

"Marry!" she cried, "such things be profanations and heresy against the Protestant religion, which Heaven defend. Marry, 'twould go ill with the poor woman who should offer such idolatries for sale."

More protestations followed, prompted, no doubt, by fear lest disloyalty to the dominant party be charged against her; to prove her detestation of the documents she declared her purpose to burn the last of them unread.

"Still better, shift responsibility to me," suggested the stranger, smiling grimly at her zeal. "Sell

me the lot for two shillings and sixpence, and my word for it the transaction shall be kept a secret. The reading of these idle fancies will serve as a relaxation from my own employment." [Pg 51]

"Marry, they shall be yours and willingly," cried the woman, glad to be rid of dangerous property on such generous terms. And it was thus that the stranger became possessor of the chest of manuscripts. His bargaining for the lodgings proved him a man of thrift to the point of meanness, a quality not to be despised in lodgers, for, as Mistress Hodges often said to Mistress Judd, "Gentlemen are ever most liberal who least mean to pay." In answer to reasonable inquiries he would say no more than, "My predecessor was known as Master Christopher; let me be, therefore, Master Francis, a poor scholar who promises only to take himself off before his purse is empty."

The new lodger entered into possession of his chamber on the afternoon of the day on which he saw it first. His luggage, brought thither by two porters on a single barrow, and consisting chiefly of books and manuscripts, proved him to be the humble student he had represented himself, and [Pg 52] in a week his neighbors were agreed in rating him a rather commonplace recluse. His days were spent in reverie by the open window or in writing at the parchment-littered table. If he stirred abroad at all it was but for an hour in the long twilight after supper, and his candle rarely burned later than ten o'clock. It was not until a fortnight had gone by that Mistress Hodges had the satisfaction of announcing a visitor.

"Come in!" cried Master Francis, responding to her knock at his chamber door, and not a little surprised by a summons so unusual, for the remnants of his supper had been removed, and he was himself preparing for his evening stroll.

"A gentleman attends below, an't please you, sir," she announced, entering hurriedly.

"Impossible!" her lodger protested, "for how should a visitor inquire for one who has no name?"

"By your description, an't please you, sir," replied the woman. "He drew you to the life. By my [Pg 53] faith, there could be no mistake, and when he said you might be known as Master Francis how could I but admit him? Grand gentleman that he is, with a servant at his heels and half a score of varlets waiting within call!"

Master Francis bit his lip and moved impatiently about the room.

"Go tell this grand gentleman that you were wrong," he said. "Tell him I was requested out to supper at half an hour before seven. Tell him what falsehood slips most easily from your tongue, and as you are a woman, tell it truthfully."

"'Twould not avail, for even now your visitor, grown impatient, mounts the stair," replied the hostess, while a heavy footfall coming every moment nearer testified to the truth of her assertion.

"Then off with you and let us be alone," commanded Master Francis, stopping resolutely in his walk, while Mistress Hodges in the doorway found herself thrust unceremoniously aside to give [Pg 54] place to a dignified man in middle life. The visitor's dress was black, relieved only by a broad white ruff, yet of so rich a quality that the appointments of the room descended in the scale from homeliness to shabbiness by contrast. But apparently he concerned himself no more with the apartment than with Mistress Hodges.

"How now, nephew?" he began at once. "What means this hiding like a hedgehog in a hole?"

Master Francis bowed with almost servile deference and clasped his hands, making at the same time a gesture with his foot intended to convey to Mistress Hodges an intimation that she was free to go.

"My uncle, this is far too great an honor that you pay me," he said, when the landlady had closed the door behind her.

"Odsblood! For once, I hear the truth from you. Why have you left your chambers in Gray's Inn for this?" the other answered with a movement of the nostrils as though the whole environment [Pg 55] was comprehended in a whiff of Mistress Hodges' mutton broth.

"In truth, most gracious kinsman," the younger man rejoined, "since my exclusion from the Court some certain greasy bailiffs have favored me with their company a trifle over often, nor had I otherwhere to go while waiting for a fitting opportunity to recall myself to your lordship's memory."

"And pray you, to what end?" the other asked impatiently.

"You are not ignorant, uncle, of the state of my poor fortune," said the scholar.

"No," was the answer, "nor can you be forgetful, nephew, of my efforts in the past to mend that fortune."

"For all of which believe me truly grateful," responded Master Francis with a touch of irony. "'Tis to your gracious favor that I owe my appointment to the reversion of the Clerkship of the Star Chamber, worth sixteen hundred pounds a year, provided that I, a weak man, survive in poverty a strong affluence. 'Tis like another man's ground buttaling upon his house, which may mend his [Pg 56] prospect but does not fill his barn."

The other, crossing to the open window, half seated himself upon the sill, folding his arms while

fixing disapproving eyes on his nephew's face.

"This attitude becomes you not at all," he said. "Through me you were returned to Parliament, and through me you might have been advanced to profitable office had you not seen fit to antagonize the Ministry, opposing, for the sake of paltry public favour, that four years' subsidy of which the Treasury stood in dire need to meet the Popish plots."

"I sought to shield the Ministry and Crown from public disapproval," replied Master Francis. "The country in my judgment was not able to endure the tax."

"'Twas most presumptuous to set up your judgment against that of your betters," said the other. [Pg 57] "Your part is plain. This act of yours must be forgotten. It must be known that you have once for all abandoned public life for study. Publish some learned disquisition upon what you will. Absent yourself from town, and in a twelvemonth, perhaps, or less if things go well——"

"A twelvemonth!" cried Master Francis. "Unless my pockets be replenished I shall have starved to death by early summer."

The gentleman upon the window-sill remained for a space silent with knitted brows. Presently he said:

"I shall arrange to pay you an allowance, small, but sufficient for your needs, upon condition that you go at once to France, where you already have acquaintances."

"It may be you are right, my lord," responded Master Francis, "but it suits my humor not at all to exile myself, and before accepting your offer grant me permission to speak to the Earl of Essex. He has the favor of the Queen."

[Pg 58] The other laughed a scornful laugh, and rising deliberately drew on a glove he had been holding in one hand.

"Enough!" he said. "Depend on Essex's favor with the Queen and follow him to the Tower in good time."

"But, uncle, give me your kind permission at least to speak with him."

"My kind permission and my blessing!" the uncle answered suavely, moving toward the door. With his hand upon the latch he stood to add, across his shoulder, "You are behind the times in news, nephew. Three days ago my Lord of Essex departed somewhat suddenly for his estates—upon a hunting expedition, it is said, though beldame Rumor will insist that our most gracious Queen hath turned the icy eye at last upon his fawning."

"A morning frost!" cried Master Francis with a gesture. "A frost that the recurring sun of pity turns full soon to tender dew. But 'tis a chill of which to take advantage. Let me but follow my [Pg 59] peevish lord to his retirement, lock in my humble cause with his, and in due season claim the meet reward of faithful service."

His manner had grown so earnest that the other turned to listen, albeit with a smile of contempt.

"Look you, uncle," the younger man went on, "were I to start at once, travelling in modest state, yet as befitting the nephew of the Lord Treasurer of England, well mounted and attended by a single man-servant, the whole adventure might be managed for a matter of one hundred pounds."

"Good!" cried the other with suspiciously ready acquiescence. "Thou art in verity a diplomat. By all means put your fortunes to the test, and when you have, acquaint me with the issue."

He turned and once more laid a hand upon the latch.

"But," protested Master Francis, "I have still to find the hundred pounds——"

"A riddle for diplomacy to solve!" replied the Lord Treasurer of England, laughing sardonically. "I [Pg 60] can tell you no more than that you shall not find it in my purse!" And so saying, he strode from the room, leaving the door wide open.

For many minutes Master Francis paced the floor, muttering to himself, now angry imprecations at his own folly, now curses on the relentless arrogance of the Lord Treasurer. As the long twilight of the season fell he caught up his wide-brimmed hat and hurried from the house.

He took his way through narrow winding streets, and after several turnings came at length to one much wider, a thoroughfare lined with little shops, whose owners when not occupied with customers stood on their thresholds soliciting the patronage of passers-by.

"What do you lack?" they cried; "hats, shoes, or hosiery; gloves, ruffs, or farthingales?" each setting forth the value of his wares in frantic effort to outshout competitors. Along the pavement [Pg 61] worthy citizens sauntered with wives and sweethearts, or stood in interested groups about some mountebank or maker of music performing upon several ill-tuned instruments at once. On a patch of trodden grass young men played noisy games of bowls until a gilded coach in passing wantonly destroyed their goal. Here a bout with single-stick was in progress, there a contest with bare fists which must have grown serious had not the watch arrived in time to separate the belligerents with their pikes. But the centre of most interest was a seafaring man who smoked a long-stemmed pipe with rather ostentatious unconcern. The men regarded him with furtive admiration, the women disapprovingly, while children ran to catch a whiff of the strange

aromatic scent. When he blew puffs of vapor from his nostrils everybody laughed.

Master Francis, moving hastily aside to make way for the smoker and his escort, came into collision with a man of his own age, whose broad good-humored face showed due appreciation of the scene.

"What think you, friend?" the stranger asked, laughing. "Will this new savagery become an institution? Have we been at such pains to banish smoke from our churches only to turn our heads into censers? Mayhap this be another Popish plot?" [Pg 62]

"It seems to me a bit of arrant folly," Master Francis answered somewhat listlessly, "and as such, certain to become the rage."

"They tell us it will prolong the life," went on the other, "for it is well known a herring when smoked outlasts a fresh one."

"Say rather he who smokes will live the longer because the wise die young," retorted Master Francis, pleased by the conceit.

"At least," remarked the stranger, "the fashion will make trade for fairy chimneysweeps."

Some further conversation followed naturally, for Master Francis, weary of his own society, was in the mood to welcome any companionship, and, moreover, the newcomer, who seemed a man of understanding, met another's eyes too frankly to leave the question of his honesty in doubt. They spoke of tobacco as a possible feature in social life, and both agreed that a whiff of the new herb might be an interesting experiment. [Pg 63]

"Let us go then to the Bull," the stranger suggested, "where in a small room behind the tap one may smoke a pipe for threepence under the tutelage of this very seaman, who acquired the art in our Virginia colonies."

"Agreed!" cried Master Francis willingly; though at another time he might have rejected such an offer. "'Twill be an experience to remember."

"Marry," replied the other, "'tis he who lags behind the cavalcade who must take the dust. For my part I like not to be outfaced by any idle boaster who may lisp—'Ah, 'tis an art to keep the bowl aglow! Ah, shouldst see me fill my mouth with smoke, and blow it out in rings! Odd's bodkin, the Duke himself said bravo!'" [Pg 64]

The stranger's mimicry of the mincing gallants of the day was to the life, and as they turned their steps toward the tavern, Master Francis laughed with satisfaction at finding himself in such good company. When presently his companion quoted Horace, he ventured to inquire at what school he had read the classics.

"At none," was the reply. "Let those who will perform the threshing. I am content to pick up kernels here and there like a sleek rat in a farmer's barn. Your tippling scholar of the taproom will set forth a rasher of lean Xenophon with every cup of sack, and as for churchmen—they be all unnatural sons who so bedeck their mother tongue in scraps and shreds of foreign phrase, the poor beldame walks abroad as motley mantled as a fiddler's wanton."

"But surely—*Justitia eum cuique distribuit*—as Cicero hath it," Master Francis cried in protest against such heresy. "You will not deny that an apt quotation lends grace to our too barren English." [Pg 65]

"'Tis a thin sauce to a rich meat," replied the other; adding modestly, "I am, an't please you, sir, but one who, having little Latin and less Greek, must make a shift with what is left to him."

"Your speech belies you, sir," retorted Master Francis courteously, "for it proclaims a man of nice discrimination. I could swear you are a doctor of the law."

"Then would you be forsworn," replied the other, laughing, "for, by the grace of God, I am near kinsman to the dancing poodle of a country fair. Come any afternoon at three o'clock to the Curtain Play-house at Shoreditch, and there for sixpence you may see my antics."

"Ah, then you are a player!" Master Francis cried, well pleased.

"For the lack of a more honest calling," his companion answered with a gesture as who should say, "Tell me where can be found an honester?"

"Then we are in like case," laughed Master Francis. "*Fere totus mundus exercet histrionem*, says Phædrus; or as one might put it bluntly, 'All the world's a stage.'" [Pg 66]

"Methinks our English hath the better jingle," commented the player. "Would that some wordsmith might e'en recoin these ancient mintages to fill the meager purses of our mouths!"

They had come now to the broad low archway leading to the courtyard of the Bull, and passing in beneath its shadow, Master Francis recalled the plays he had witnessed there in boyhood.

"Ah," said his companion, "'tis not so long since we poor players hung our single rag of curtain where we might. Now we have playhouses of our own, and when the servants of the Lord Chamberlain shall occupy the Globe at Bankside, you shall see how plays may be presented. But *Navita de ventis de tauris narrat orator*, as thy gossip Propertius hath it, though I like best the homely adage, 'A tinker will talk of his trade.'" [Pg 67]

They found the seaman in the little room behind the tap, a veritable high priest of some mystic cult in dignity. He bowed a hearty welcome to the visitors and presently made clear to them the true relationship between his pot of dried tobacco and the earthen pipe bowls at the ends of hollow reeds. He cautioned them to have a care, when the coal of fire was applied, not to draw the smoke into their mouths too suddenly and fall to coughing. He was a swarthy man, with brass rings in his ears and long hair braided in a queue behind, and his account of the savage king held captive until the inner secrets of the art of smoking were revealed by way of ransom was in itself a yarn well worth his fee.

"I pray you, gentlemen, hold not the pipe too lightly lest it be overset and mar your garments," he instructed them. "And, by your leave, it must be grasped between the thumb and second finger, nicely balanced that the forearm grow not weary. Should the brain become afflicted by the vapor it is well to pause and inhale some breaths of common air. Extend the little finger carelessly and compose the face as though the flavor were agreeable, for to spit and grimace at the pipe were most inelegant." [Pg 68]

"Out upon you for an arrant knave!" cried Master Francis, springing to his feet, exasperated by the solemn affectation of superior wisdom. "'Tis but an indifferent entertainment at the best, and as for the art, I know of none too great a fool to compass it."

He had grown a trifle pale about the lips and his nerves tingled.

"Nay, then," protested his fellow investigator, "were the taste less vile and the savor less like a smithy 'twould make an excellent good physic for one afflicted with too much health."

The sailor was a man of evil disposition, who had not only sailed with Raleigh's godless mariners but, had the truth been known, in other service still less creditable. Hearing his enterprise thus flouted, his anger rose, and with a mighty oath he turned upon his clients. [Pg 69]

"A pest upon such horse boys!" he exclaimed. "Get back to the stables whose smells best suit you. Leave elegant accomplishments to your betters."

Master Francis, grown fearful lest his knees give way beneath him, and blinded by a film which swam before his eyes, moved unsteadily toward the door, half throwing, half dropping his pipe upon the oaken table, where the red clay bowl fell shattered in a dozen fragments.

"Hold!" cried the sailor. "Not another step, my gallant, till you have paid me ten shillings for my broken pipe."

He sprang upon the slighter man and, grasping him by the shoulders, would have done him violence had not the other smoker interposed a doubled sinewy fist beneath his irate nose and bade him let go his hold. As the command was not instantly obeyed, a sharp blow followed.

"Beshrew my blood!" the pirate roared, turning to strike at random. [Pg 70]

"Gadslid!" returned the player, facing him and bringing both fists into action with such good effect that presently the table groaned beneath the weight of the struggling freebooter, while pipes, jug, and precious weed went flying.

The uproar brought the company from the taproom at a run, customers, servants, the drawer, the pot-boy, a brace of hostlers, until the small room filled to suffocation. Swords were drawn, cudgels brandished, above the din the seaman's oaths boomed like the cannon of a sloop of war in action.

"Good friends," the player bawled out, springing to a stool to command attention, "behold to what a pass the smoking of this weed will bring a man. I pray you bind this fellow fast and get him safe to Bedlam before some mischief happens."

Master Francis sank down into the corner of a high-backed seat, too ill for much concern with what passed about him, and it was not till some moments later, in the open air and propped against a wall, that consciousness returned. His champion in the late encounter stood beside him. [Pg 71]

"Sir," said the student, "it is to you I owe my preservation, though, by my honor, I should have cut a better figure in the skirmish had not the vapors of that vile weed overpowered me. How made you our escape?"

"Even as Æneas with Anchises on his back," replied the other, laughing. "'Twas high time to take ourselves away, being but two against so many, though, by my faith, I've rarely seen a merrier opening for a game of skull cracking."

The player, whether actuated by humor or generosity, seemed disposed to make light of the whole affair. Grasping his companion's arm he supported that gentleman's still uncertain steps in the direction of the lodging-house of Mistress Hodges. He spoke of broils and frays as though such pastimes were of every-day occurrence with men of spirit, whether the sport were putting a pinnace crew of drunken sailors to their heels, or by some trickery outwitting the watch. At the door Master Francis could do no less in hospitality than invite so stanch an ally to enter. [Pg 72]

"Come to my chambers and rest awhile," he said, adding regretfully, "though they be plain indeed, and offer no better entertainment than my poor company."

"Good cheer enough," replied the other, stepping back for a better view of the house. "By my estates in Chancery!" he cried, "yon bristling roof that sets its lance against the very buckler of

the moon hath met mine eyes before. 'Twas here, unless my memory be a lying kitchen wench, our noble Christopher did lodge, the prince and potentate of pewter pots."

"And knew you Master Christopher?" asked Master Francis with increasing interest.

"Marry, I knew him well," replied the player. "Marry, a poet. Marry, a rimester to couple you a couplet while your Flemish fighter quaffs a mug of sack, and pay the reckoning with a sonnet to his landlord's honesty. 'The first line,' he would say, 'shall tell the weight of it.' And here he did set down a naught. 'So likewise with the second, which doth sing its breadth; the third proclaims its depth'—another naught, and thus until the measure of the verse was writ. 'Now add them for thyself,' he bids the rum-fed Malmsey monger, 'and by the thirst of Tantalus, the sum shall blazon both thine honor and my debt.'" [Pg 73]

"Methinks 'twas but a scurvy trick," protested Master Francis, laughing tolerantly. "What said the host to it?"

"In faith," replied the player, "he found the meter falling short and clamored for money. 'Money!' quoth Kit. 'Think well on't! for if, as men of reason all agree, naught is better than money, you are overpaid in getting naught!'"

"His was a pretty wit indeed," assented Master Francis. "Enter!" he urged with a gesture of hospitality.

"Nay!" cried the other. "As I am a just man it is perilous to enter into a writer's castle where one without offense is often lashed with lyrics or—what is more fearful—pilloried in prose. And furthermore, this Hebe of all Hodges, I have heard, this Helen of Houndsditch, hath a stout broomstick hid behind her door for players," he added, making a pretense of looking about him warily as he followed his host up the stairs, Master Francis going first to light a candle with a flint and steel. [Pg 74]

"Come in," he said as the flame flickered up, "and welcome to my chambers, though this poor farthing dip is little better than a glowworm that doth serve to make the darkness visible."

"So shines a good deed in a naughty world," returned the other, throwing himself into a seat.

"You are yourself a poet!" Master Francis cried, "for you temper the cold iron of rough speech with oil of metaphor."

"Nay," said the player, "I am no rimester, but like a scissors-grinder I sometimes put a keener edge on better men's inventions. Faith," he continued, looking about him with approval, "I knew not that our Kit was housed so well. This is a very bower in which to woo the Muse. Friend, had I your table and your chair, your inkwell and your wit, it would not take me long to be the owner of one hundred pounds." [Pg 75]

"One hundred pounds?" gasped Master Francis. "Believe me, it is not from inkwells that such miraculous drafts are made." He waved his hand toward the scattered papers on the table. "Look," he said, "it hath taken me a year to make that much fair paper valueless."

"You waste your time," replied the player lightly. "Instead of learned discourses, treatises, and theses, in which our age will not believe and the next most certainly prove false, you should devise a mask, a mummery, a play to set the groundlings' munching mouths agape, and make the gentle ladies of the boxes mince and murmur to their cavaliers, 'Ah, me, 'tis such a sweet death! Oh, la! and 'twould be pure to be so undone!'" [Pg 76]

"A play!" exclaimed the scholar in surprise. "That's a task for poets, not for men of learning."

"Say not so!" the other interposed. "For learning is but poetry turned prude. Coax her with kisses, cozen her with a sigh, give her a broidered girdle and a fan, and call me Cerberus if thy staid Minerva will not tread a merry measure to Orpheus's lute."

"An' should she play the wanton thus for me, how should advantage follow?" Master Francis asked with growing interest, as he leaned forward in the candle-light to catch the answer.

"'Tis simplicity itself," replied the player. "Look you, this new-built play-house of the Globe is shortly to be opened, and the town is at the very finger pricks of curiosity to behold its marvels. The players stand like greyhounds in their gyves, the counters wait the welcome buffets of the coin, and Burbage, madder than a hare in March, bounds doubling on his track hither and thither to find a play." [Pg 77]

"Sure London hath as many playwrights as a cheese hath mites," commented Master Francis.

"True," the other answered, "but look you, here's a case when mite and wright agree not. For one is mad, and one hath lost his cunning, and one will spend in drink the money given him for ink, and Kit, the master of them all, is writing comedies for shades in Pluto's courtyard. In troth, there seems no better market for a hundred pounds than 'twere a huckster's hat of rotten cherries."

"An hundred pounds!" gasped Master Francis. "The sum doth spell for me ambition gratified."

"Ah, ha, my lean scholar!" cried the player. "Is not the matter worth considering?"

"Marry, it is," admitted Master Francis, "if one had but the fancy." [Pg 78]

"Oh, as to that," returned the other, "I'll warrant when your blood ran hot from the full caldron of

lip-scalding youth, thy fancy played you many a pretty mask, for young imagination dreams more dreams than waking age doth have the wit to write. These conjure up again, unbar your closet, unlock your treasure chest—" Here Master Francis gave a start, but the player went on heedlessly: "By my faith, yon rascal coffer well might be the grave wherein the best of thee lies buried."

He made a motion of the hand toward the box of the departed Christopher, and Master Francis's visage in the candle-light turned pale.

"What ails you, man?" the other inquired. "Have you a memory of that last tobacco pipe?"

"Sir," cried Master Francis, rising slowly to his feet, "is it the truth that a play can be sold for so much money?"

"In the Queen's coin," the other answered. "So that it be worth the playing, so it be such a play as Kit could have written." [Pg 79]

Master Francis, taking up the candle, moved toward the chest.

"I'll take you at your word," he said. "Like one who creeps with shrouded lanthorn and with muffled spade to force the moldering hinges of the gate of Death, I'll bring you back a play."

He stooped, and lifting the lid seized the first manuscript that met his hand and waved it triumphantly at his companion sitting on the table.

"A play!" cried the other, catching at the roll. "Ah, then I guessed aright. 'Tis a dull writer, fitted best for slumber-wooing churchmen's homilies, who has not in his time chucked blushing Thalia under her fair chin.... What have we here?" he demanded, spreading the pages open before him. "A play, indeed! A comedy, i' faith! Gadslid, a tragedy! A miracle of masterpieces, a masterpiece [Pg 80] of miracles! 'Twill be the talk of London town and in the ages yet to come, when stately playhouses shall stand where now the painted savage cleaves his enemy, your play shall win the coy and cautious coin of nations yet unborn, your fame—"

"Peace, peace!" protested Master Francis, with a smile that would have done credit to his uncle, the Lord Treasurer, "you are like a paid praisemonger who bawls loudest to extol the book he has not read."

"'Tis my prophetic soul," returned the player merrily, and waving the scroll above his head he went on: "Hear ye, hear ye, good servants of the Queen, here's meat for your digestions, matter for your minds; here's wit and wisdom, prose and poetry, to make ye swear that brave Kit Marlowe walks the earth again.... Come, gossip, write your name upon the title sheet. You are too modest."

"My name I may not sell," said Master Francis, holding back.

"Unnatural parent!" roared the other. "Would you thus turn your offspring loose upon the world without parentage?" [Pg 81]

"I'll not be father to a brat so ill-begotten," replied Master Francis.

"How shall I answer then to Burbage should he ask the writer?" demanded the player.

"As you may," returned Master Francis with a shrug. "An't please you, say it was yourself. I care not, so my name be not revealed."

"'Twill be a jest," the player cried, laughing, "a jest which, should the play find favor, may be at any time corrected."

And taking up a pen he dipped it in the ink-horn to write across the page:

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet
by William Shakespeare

"A proper title, surely!" commented the scholar, looking across his shoulder. "Your name, friend Will, should lure the public eye more cunningly than that of Francis Bacon."

THE CARHART MYSTERY

[Pg 83]

THE CARHART MYSTERY

[Pg 85]

The conversation had grown reminiscent, as conversations will when old acquaintance stirs its coffee after dinner and the blue wreaths of good tobacco-smoke float ceilingward, like pleasant specters, in the subdued light of the shaded lamps.

Barton and I, in following back some winding paths of memory now well-nigh overgrown, were in danger of forgetting our good manners till Willoughby reminded us of his presence.

"I might as well embrace this opportunity for a nap," he said, stretching his long legs to the fire, and sinking back into one of Barton's most engaging armchairs. "Just wake me up when you fellows hit upon a subject I know something of. I happen to have been living in India during the time the thrilling tea-and-tennis episodes you recall so fondly were taking place, and, to tell the truth, they bore me." [Pg 86]

Barton laughed.

"Oh, we have done with recollections, and now you shall have a chance to bore us with an Indian tale or so by way of recompense," he said, with the candor permissible only between men who know each other well. "Make clear to us the difference between a maharajah and a pongee pajama, and go ahead."

"At least, my stories do not deal with duels that ended in Delmonico's, and flirtations which fell flat," asserted Willoughby, blowing a cloud of fragrant incense into space. "I've no idea of wasting occult material on a brace of rank Philistines, but if I were so disposed——"

"Dear boy!" I put in, rather testily; for I dislike fatuous patronage even in fun. "Either Barton or I could relate to you an incident which occurred in this very room, within a yard of where you sit, remarkable enough to make your Kiplingest jungle-tale seem as tame as 'Mother Hubbard's Dog!'" [Pg 87]

"Indeed!" he said, sinking still farther into his chair, with something very like a yawn; and Barton, as he arose and moved to the mantelpiece, cast a look of remonstrance toward me which I was careful not to recognize.

"Ah, here comes Nathan with fresh coffee," our host announced, clearly to change the subject, as the round-shouldered figure of his worthy valet appeared in the lamplight. "Pray let him fill your cups, and, if it is not strong enough, don't hesitate to tell him."

"It'th not the coffee gentlemen dethired when I wath young," commented Nathan, a trifle sadly, and with the amusing lisp which made him something of a character, albeit he was rather a dull man even for a valet.

"I never take a second cup," Willoughby declared, adding: "But, if it's all the same, I might be tempted by a sip of soda later, say in half an hour or so." [Pg 88]

This struck me as an excellent suggestion, and Barton evidently thought the same.

"Bring soda in half an hour," he instructed the servant, "and mind you have it cold."

"It'th never any other way you've had your thoda a thingle night for fifteen yearth, thir," retorted Nathan, with quite sufficient truth, no doubt, to justify the protest; and as he shuffled from the room, "Jim" Barton's guests chuckled.

"I move we give the half-hour to your yarn," said Willoughby, crossing his legs. "That is, if it can be told in thirty minutes."

"It's not worth half that time if it were told at all," replied our host. "The story is not worth much at best, but to give old Joe here the chance to intimate a too-elaborate dinner."

My name is Joseph, by the way.

"Oh, if you will admit that explanation——" I began, to draw him on, for I was anxious Willoughby should understand that interesting things could happen elsewhere than in India. [Pg 89]

"I don't admit it in the least!" cried Barton, interrupting. "I assure you, Willoughby, upon my word, as sure as I stand here, I had tasted nothing more potent than a glass or two of Burgundy that night."

"What night?" inquired Willoughby.

"The night young Carhart disappeared," I interposed impressively. "The night a fellow six feet high and heavier than any one of us vanished as completely from this room as a puff of smoke dissolves in air."

"I have seen a puff of smoke go flying through a window," Willoughby suggested, laughing, though his interest had evidently been aroused, for he glanced toward the bay of leaded glass which made one of the pleasantest features of Barton's cozy smoking-room.

"But no man ever went through this particular window," I replied, taking the burden of enlightenment upon myself, in spite of my host's very apparent disapproval. "This window looks out upon a neighbor's yard, and ever since the house was built it has been barred as heavily as you see it now." [Pg 90]

I sprang up, and, when I had pressed a button which set a dozen electric bulbs aglow in the four corners of the room, drew the light curtains to one side.

"Examine for yourself!" I cried, much in the manner of a showman.

"I'll take your word for it the iron in that grille is genuine," said Willoughby, without rising. "And I will admit that no fasting Yogi could worm himself through interstices so small. But how about the door?"

"The door," I hastened to assure him, "was then just as you see it now, an opening three feet wide, and Barton himself stood before it in the hall, a single step beyond the threshold."

I should have gone on in my eagerness to call attention to the walls and ceiling and floor, all obviously free from secret openings, had not Barton interrupted. [Pg 91]

Shifting uneasily on his feet before the mantelpiece, he said: "Our friend Joe has not explained that he knows nothing of the circumstances beyond what I have told him."

"But not in confidence," I protested.

"No," admitted Barton, "not in confidence." And to his other guest he said: "I have made no secret of this strange occurrence, Willoughby, and my reluctance to discuss it arises from a doubt that long familiarity with the circumstances has not made it impossible for me to give to each its proper weight. I am in constant fear of coming upon a weakness which I have overlooked in the chain, and yet it would be a relief to discover such a flaw. I should have called in an expert at once. I should have sought the counsel of detectives; and such would unquestionably have been my course had not those most interested dissuaded me, Young Carhart's father telegraphed me: [Pg 92] 'Say nothing to authorities. Disappearance satisfactorily explained.' And, at the time, that was enough. It was not till some months later that I learned the family were theosophists, a sect to which nothing is so satisfactory as the inexplicable. I have, myself, no theory to advance. The man, my guest, was here one moment, and the next he had gone from a room where the only openings were a grilled window and a guarded door. His overcoat and hat are still in my possession; and, from all I have been able to learn, he has not been heard of since."

"I beg that you will not think it necessary to tell me more of the story if it distresses you," protested Willoughby, courteously; for Barton's face had grown grave, and I had begun to feel my introduction of the subject ill-timed. But our host was quick to reassure him with a gesture.

"On the contrary," he said, "you have but just returned from India, where, as I have heard, [Pg 93] mysterious disappearances are not uncommon, and occult matters are better understood. Your opinion will be of the greatest service."

"In that case," Willoughby replied, becoming instantly, judicially alert, "let us begin at the beginning. Who was Carhart? How came he here? What was the manner of his going?"

"That's just the mystery," I interposed.

"Joe, please don't interrupt," said Barton, making an effort to collect his thoughts.

"Sit down, old man," Willoughby suggested. "We'll choke Joe if he speaks again. Now let us have the facts—I'm deeply interested. Do sit down."

Barton complied in so far as to perch himself upon the broad arm of a leather chair.

"I shan't be tragic," he began; "for, as I said, there may be—in fact, there must be—some purely natural explanation. Of course, you never met young Carhart; for he came here while you were away. He had but few acquaintances in New York; for, although he brought good letters from [Pg 94] Boston, where his people lived, he had not chosen to present them. He was a most attractive sort —half-back at Harvard, stroke-oar and all the rest. Great fellow in the Hasty Pudding Club, and poet of his class, but just a trifle—shall I say—susceptible and—"

"Soft," I suggested.

"No," contradicted Barton; "though, to tell the truth, he never could resist a pretty face. That was his failing."

"Remarkable man!" Willoughby commented, with fervor.

"He was," assented Barton. "In that respect, at least. He carried it too far. He wanted to marry every good-looking girl he met. He would have been married a dozen times before he graduated, had not his friends interfered."

"Thank heaven for friends!" commented Willoughby, with still more fervor.

"Till at last," continued Barton, now sufficiently himself to punctuate his narrative with occasional [Pg 95] whiffs of his cigar, "at last Carhart fell under the influence of a widow."

"A designing widow," I put in, to make the situation clearer.

"Attractive?" Willoughby inquired.

"Oh, decidedly."

"Encumbrances?"

"No," answered Barton. "Not exactly. There were rumors of a husband in the background somewhere, but he was not produced."

"A pretty widow is beyond the habeas corpus act," mused Willoughby.

"Quite so," Barton admitted. "But, at all events, there was nothing really known against the lady except a maiden aunt, and this objectionable relative was, by the way, quite as much opposed to the match as were Carhart's own people."

"And why were they opposed to it?"

"Oh, you see, with his proclivities for poetry and acting, they were afraid an unhappy marriage would drive him to the stage, and, naturally, they took every measure to prevent it." [Pg 96]

Here Barton paused to light a fresh cigar, while we others sipped our coffee thoughtfully.

"And what were these preventive measures?" Willoughby inquired.

"Oh, the usual thing," said Barton. "Threats, badgering, advice and promises. All these failed to move him; he was determined to make her his wife, and, as a last resource, his father wrote to me, putting the matter in my hands without reserve. Our ancestors came over on the same boat, so it appeared."

"The *Mayflower*," I breathed, but that was scarcely necessary.

"Quite so," he admitted; "and that, of course, entailed a certain obligation."

"Of course," we both assented, and the narrative continued.

"An elopement had been planned, as we had every reason to believe, for a certain evening; and the elder Carhart kept the Boston wires hot all day with appeals to me to save his son." [Pg 97]

"And did you?" Willoughby inquired.

"Yes," answered Barton, cautiously, "in a way."

"How?"

"I began by inviting him to dinner."

"And, of course, he did not accept?"

"Oh, yes, he did. He both accepted and arrived on time, and I must say I never saw a man confront a filet mignon bordelaise with more outward satisfaction; and, though we spoke upon indifferent topics, his spirits seemed exuberant beyond all bounds. But you may be sure I kept an eye upon his every movement. I was determined he should not escape. In an extremity, I was prepared to administer a harmless sleeping-potion in his coffee."

"Indeed!" said Willoughby, as he set down his cup, and ran an investigating and suspicious tongue along the edges of his lips.

"A drastic measure, I admit," continued Barton, "but one which I should have considered justifiable, could I have foreseen the miscarriage of my other plan. You know my eldest sister, Emily?" [Pg 98]

We bowed, for it was a duty to know Emily.

"And you know her eldest daughter, Emeline?"

We bowed again; it was a pleasure to know Emeline.

"Well," went on Barton, "it so happened that they were to dine that evening in the neighborhood, and I arranged with them to drop in upon me in an offhand way soon after their dinner, which was a small, informal one. I was convinced, you see, that Carhart could not fail to fall desperately in love with Emeline, which would have simplified affairs at once."

Of course, we both assented—I through civility, but Willoughby, as I fancied, with a somewhat heightened color.

"I presume you did not take Miss Emeline into your confidence," he said, a trifle stiffly.

"No," answered Barton, "but I have often wished since that I had been more frank. It's just the sort of thing she's good at." [Pg 99]

Willoughby tossed his excellent cigar, half smoked, into the grate, with what appeared unnecessary violence.

"You were saying that your plan fell through," he prompted.

"It did," rejoined the host. "It fell through completely, as you shall see. I kept my young friend at the table as long as possible, and Nathan—to his credit I will say it—was never more deliberate; but when Carhart had declined almonds and raisins rather pointedly for the third time, we rose from the table, as the clock struck ten, and came in here to smoke. The lights were low, as they were before our friend Joe tried to blind us."

"I beg your pardon!" I exclaimed, and, hastening to the button, I reduced the room again to semi-darkness.

"Ah, that's more like it," said Barton. "I much prefer the light subdued. Well, here we were— [Pg 100] Carhart before the mantelpiece, where I stood just now, smoking composedly enough, and I between him and the door, listening for the sound of the bell which might at any moment announce the arrival of the ladies. I remember perfectly that we were discussing setter-dogs; and, as you may well believe, I was never so put to it for anecdotes in my life, when at last the welcome summons came."

"I thought you said your plan fell through," Willoughby interposed.

"It did," retorted Barton. "The bell, which echoed through the house, was not rung by Emily at all, but by a servant with a note from her to say that, being indisposed, my sister had decided to drive directly home. Emeline, she added, was going on to some infernal dance. I had given Carhart no intimation of my sister's coming, and, naturally, I did not reveal the contents of her note. In fact, I made the dim light an excuse for stepping into the brighter hall, and this enabled me to conceal from him my first chagrin. As I stood not two feet from the threshold, debating what my course should be, I observed that Nathan closed the front door upon the messenger; and presently he passed me, going to his pantry, as I thought. I must have remained standing there before the door nearly a minute, though it seemed much less, for, when I turned, Nathan was at my elbow again, holding in his hand a tray of cups. [Pg 101]

"'You served the coffee not a minute ago, you idiot!' I said, betraying the irritation which I felt; and, furthermore, I will confess, the smell of coffee brought back to me most painfully the only plan which then remained.

"'I thought you might be ready for thum more,' persisted Nathan, with his most aggravating lisp. 'I did not know the gentleman had gone.'

"'Gone!' I exclaimed. 'You must be blind. The gentleman, Mr. Carhart, is in the smoking-room.'

"'I beg your pardon, thir; but he'th not,' retorted Nathan, moving from me as though to avoid a blow. 'The gentleman ain't in the thmoking-room.' [Pg 102]

"'Fool!' I cried, and darted from him, but the next moment I had found his words too true. Carhart had vanished, disappeared, melted, as one might say, into the element of air."

"Strange!" I reflected, lowering my voice as an aid to Barton's climax.

"Strange enough!" cried Willoughby, less impressed than I had hoped. "And so your servant was the first to make the discovery?"

"Yes," answered Barton; "although I have never allowed him to know of my astonishment. I did my best to pass it off as a joke. I allowed him to believe that Carhart had taken leave of me before the stupid blunder of the second coffee."

"Athking your pardon, thir," came in injured, lisping accents from the gloom. "I never brought no thecond coffee that night, becauth the cat upthet the coffee-pot, nor did I thay, thir, that the gentleman had gone." [Pg 103]

Barton, concealing his annoyance, sat regarding his domestic for a moment with assumed indifference.

"And pray, what did you say, then, when you stood there beside me at the door?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, thir," answered Nathan. "I wathn't there. I went back to my pantry when I had let out the methenger, and there I thtayed until I heard you hammering on the wallth and floor with the fire-shovel."

"That will do, Nathan," returned Barton stiffly; and I perceived an odd expression on the face of Willoughby.

"Thoda, thir?" inquired Nathan of the other guest.

"Yes," was the answer. "And please fill it up."

We settled down into an awkward silence, while Nathan fidgetted with soda-water bottles, Barton fingering his cigar, I toying with a paper-weight, and Willoughby intent upon the fire. [Pg 104]

"Carhart," he kept repeating, almost to himself. "Where have I heard that name before? Carhart!"

"Carhart?" said Barton inquiringly.

"Carhart!" repeated Willoughby, with still more abstraction. "Carhart!"

"Yes, Carhart!" I put in, by way of keeping up the train of thought.

"Carhart!" roared Barton, springing to his feet. "Can't anybody say anything but Carhart?"

"And what became of the widow?" Willoughby demanded meditatively.

"I never knew nor cared to know," replied our host.

"Pretty, I think you said," continued Willoughby. "And auburn-haired?"

"Yes, deuced pretty, deuced auburn-haired. What are you driving at?"

Willoughby held up a soothing hand. "Just let me think," he said. "I used to know a man once in Calcutta. An American from Boston; sold canned goods, calico and caramels at wholesale; had a pretty wife. Clever fellow, too; and great at giving imitations—could mimic anything. Used to do an old domestic with a lisp in a way that would make your sides ache. I wish I could recall that fellow's name. By Jove, it was—it was!—it was!——" [Pg 105]

"Was what?" I asked.

"Why, 'Carhart'!"

Barton, before the fire, swayed on his feet unsteadily, and clutched the mantelpiece for support. Old Nathan shuffled to his side.

"Thoda, thir?" the servant asked.

"Yes," said the master absently. "If you please, one lump of sugar and a little cream."

[Pg 107]

THE MONSTROSITY

[Pg 109]

THE MONSTROSITY

Fifteen minutes after Mr. and Mrs. Lemuel Livermore, accompanied by their daughter Selma, had driven away from their comfortable West Side residence, for the purpose of attending an annual family gathering at the house of Mrs. Livermore's widowed mother, Mrs. Pease, on the opposite side of Central Park, the Livermore domestics were stirred by a more than usually imperative ring at the front door-bell. It was Christmas Eve, a season when mercantile delivery wagons may appear at any hour. Presents had been arriving all the afternoon, and the sight of a large van backed up against the curbstone occasioned no surprise.

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"What are they bringing us now?" inquired Bates, the butler, who rarely condescended to open the door in the absence of the family, from his pantry.

"It looks to me something like a sofa," replied the smiling housemaid, who generally knew by instinct when the ringer was to be young and good-looking, "and the delivery gentlemen want to know where to put it."

"A sofa, is it?" exclaimed the butler, coming forward. "I'd like to know who has been silly enough to make a present of a sofa to a family who have already more household goods than they know what to do with. They'll be sending in a porcelain bath-tub next," he added with a grunt, as he unbolted the second half of the front door to make room for a cumbrous piece of furniture, just then ascending the steps apparently upon four lusty legs. "Here, you fellows, wipe your feet and put it in the parlor, and when the family comes home I bet somebody'll get a blessing."

[Pg 111]

The sofa was, in point of fact, a well-fed lounge, corpulent and plushy and be-flowered, and when, its wrappings removed, it occupied the center of the Livermore pink and white drawing-room, the Livermore bric-à-brac and bibelots and bijouterie appeared to turn a trifle pale and to shrink within themselves, as though a note of discord had distressed them.

"Lord!" said the housemaid frankly, as she regarded the latest unwelcome acquisition, "but it is a beast!"

"Sets the room off, don't it?" remarked the fattest and most optimistic of the furniture men, as he consulted a memorandum in his hat. "Come in handy, won't it, when the missus wants to snatch a nap in the afternoon?"

The butler and the housemaid exchanged a glance of tolerant pity, but such benighted ignorance of social use was beyond enlightenment.

"Best give it a good brush-up to bring out the colors," the optimist admonished, surveying his late burden admiringly.

[Pg 112]

"I wouldn't touch it with the tongs," declared the housemaid, and the butler prophesied, "It won't stop long to gather dust where it is when the missus sets eyes on it once."

"Well," moralized the other, with a comprehensive glance about the room, "it's certainly a fact that rich folks does come in for all the luck."

And so saying he withdrew, accompanied by his mate, and the bolts were shot behind them.

"Our dinner will be getting cold," observed the butler. "Go down, Mary Anne, and tell the cook I'm coming, and I'll bring down the decanters. That sherry's hardly fit to serve upstairs again."

The housemaid sniffed.

"Be careful, Mr. Bates," she cautioned him. "The old butler, Auguste, was discharged because he found so many bottles of champagne that were unfit to serve upstairs."

[Pg 113]

"Auguste," rejoined the butler, "was a French duffer. He ought to have known that even broad-minded gentlemen always count champagne."

"Shall we leave the lights all burning in the parlor?" asked the housemaid.

"Certainly," replied Bates; "it wouldn't do for the missus to stumble over that thing in the dark."

"Lord!" said the housemaid, with a parting glance across her shoulder. "Lord! but it *is* a beast."

"An out and out monstrosity," the butler agreed.

Time passed; the servants went their ways; the parlor gas purred soothingly; the bric-à-brac engaged in whispered consultation. Whatever happened, the monstrosity should be made to feel its isolation—and it did. It stood a thing apart from its environment; it seemed to sigh, and presently its plebeian breast began to heave as with emotion. A crack developed in its tufted side, a pair of eyes appeared within the crack. The gas purred on; sounds from the servants' hall below suggested that the sherry had begun to express itself in terms of merriment. The crack grew wider until the sofa opened like a fat and flowery trunk. The eyes became a head, the head a man, who sat upon the sofa's edge and looked about him. [Pg 114]

"All zings is the same," he murmured to himself in broken English. "Nothing is changed except that ze arrangements are in less taste zan in my time. Ah, people do not know when zay have ze good fortune."

He sighed, and, rising, ventured one large foot, encased in a felt shoe, upon the rug. He stood and gazed about him lovingly, as one who contemplates inanimate things once dear. He moved with noiseless caution to the nearest door and disappeared. Presently he returned, bearing a salver laden with pieces of silver from the dining-room—an ice-pitcher, an epergne, some dishes; these he proceeded deftly to roll in flannel bags, depositing each with loving care in the interior of the Monstrosity. Another expedition resulted in an equally attractive lot of plate, to be bestowed as carefully. Next, stepping to the mantel-piece, he selected a modest pair of Dresden images from the assortment there displayed. [Pg 115]

"These," he soliloquized, "are mine undoubtedly. I might have broken them a thousand times and did not, and, therefore, they are mine."

He laid the figures tenderly and almost with a sigh beside the silver and closed the heavy tufted lid upon them.

"I will go upstairs for ze last time," he mused, a trace of sadness on his Gallic features, "and behold if Madame is still as careless with her jewel-box as in old days. I will ascertain for myself if Monsieur still sticks his scarf-pins in ze pin-cushion.... Ah, but it is depressing to revisit once familiar scenes. It makes one shed ze tear."

The tall clock in the hall struck half-past eight.

Even as the clock struck the butler below was rising to propose a toast.

"'Here's to those that love us,'" it began, and went on: "'Here's to us that love those,'"—but as this was not the way it should have gone on, the butler paused and blinked in disapproval at the cook, who laughed. [Pg 116]

"'Here's to those that love those that love those that love those,'" he persisted solemnly, and might have continued the hierarchy still further had not an electric summons from the front door interrupted him.

"Sakes!" cried the cook, "what can that be?"

"More presents," the housemaid suggested.

"Another monstrosity, I'll be bound," the butler chuckled, stumbling from the room. "Let'sh all go shee about it."

He climbed the stairs unsteadily, and made his way along the hall with noticeable digressions from an even course.

"'Here's to those that love us that love them,'" he caroled cheerily, and when, with fumbling fingers, he had thrown the front door open, his eyes, still blinking, failed to perceive for the moment that Mr. Livermore himself stood on the threshold, surrounded by some half a score of muffled figures. [Pg 117]

"Bates," began Mr. Livermore, "I forgot my latch-key, and ..."

"Get away with you," cried cheerful Mr. Bates; "we've got all the monstrosities we want already. 'Here's to them that love them that we love' ..."

"Bates," said Mr. Livermore, "you're drunk."

"Shir," said Bates; "shir, I ashure you sherry was not fit to sherve upstairs."

"Bates," said Mr. Livermore, "you are very drunk."

"Shir," said Bates, "shir, I ashure you it's all owing to that monstrosity. Monstrosity not fit to sherve upstairs."

Meanwhile Mrs. Livermore had lost no time in pushing past her husband into the hall, followed by Selma, followed by her widowed mother, Mrs. Pease, and Mr. Bertram Pease, her brother, and Miss McCunn, to whom Mr. Pease was supposed to be attentive, and Cousin Laura Fanshaw, and the two Misses Mapes, and Mr. Sellars, and Doctor Van Cott, all old friends, and a young gentleman by the name of Mickleworth, whom nobody knew much about, except Selma, who, for [Pg 118]

reasons of her own, kept her knowledge to herself. He had been invited to the family party as a chum of Cousin Dick Busby's, and was to have come with Dick, but the latter gentleman, at the last moment having received a more promising invitation, had sent word that he was ill.

While Mr. Livermore drew Bates aside, the housemaid busied herself with the ladies' wraps.

"You're through dinner early, ma'am," she said to Mrs. Livermore.

"We haven't had any dinner, Mary Anne," replied her mistress. "Mother's range exploded, or something awful happened to the pipes just after we sat down, and everything was ruined. So we brought the entire party here in cabs. Tell cook she must give us some sort of a meal at once ... canned tomato soup to begin with, followed by cold canned tongue, and ..." [Pg 119]

"The breakfast fishballs," suggested Mary Anne.

"Excellent!" exclaimed her mistress. "And after that we might have ..."

"Marmalade," suggested Mary Anne.

"And buckwheat cakes," Selma interrupted.

"Of course," her mother acquiesced, "that will have to do ... with lots of bread and butter.... And now," she added cheerfully, turning to her guests, "we'll all go into the drawing-room and guess conundrums till dinner is ready. How fortunate it was that we had had our oysters before the accident!"

"My dear," said Mr. Livermore in a whisper, "I fear that Bates is hopelessly intoxicated."

"Oh, Lemuel, what are we to do?" gasped the hostess, clutching the hat-rack for support. [Pg 120]

They were alone together in the hall and face to face with a dilemma.

"I give it up," said Mr. Livermore.

"You can't," rejoined his wife. "You'll have to think of something."

"Perhaps," suggested the gentleman foolishly, "an angel might be induced to come down from heaven...."

But his words were truer than he thought; a figure which had been creeping unobserved down the stairs now stood before them.

"Auguste!" gasped Mrs. Livermore, with an almost superstitious start.

"Yes, Madame," replied her former servant, while his benignant smile brought reassurance; "it is I. I have taken ze liberty of dropping in to wish Madame a merry Christmas."

"Thank Heaven!" cried the Hostess, restraining her impulse to fall upon his neck. "Now you must stay and help us out of our difficulties. You know exactly where all the silver is." [Pg 121]

"Perfectly," replied the man respectfully, "and it will give me great pleasure to once more serve Madame."

"Auguste," said Mr. Livermore, "let bygones be forgotten. Go quickly and set the table, and put on everything to make it look attractive."

"Pardon, Monsieur," Auguste protested, "might it not seem out of place to display too much silver at such a simple meal?"

"He is right," declared Mrs. Livermore, "Auguste is right. His taste was always perfect—even in champagne."

Further discussion was prevented for the time by Selma's appearance at the drawing-room door, convulsed with mirth. Close at her side stood Mr. Mickleworth, also laughing.

"Oh, mamma!" cried the daughter of the house, "will you come and see what somebody has sent us as a present? The ugliest thing conceivable, an absolute monstrosity." [Pg 122]

But the Livermores were thankful for the sofa, and the diversion which it brought. As no one present could possibly have made such a choice, they felt at liberty to abuse it to their hearts' content, and they stood just then in dire need of something to abuse ... until the fishballs filled the atmosphere with welcome fragrance.

Later, after Auguste had compounded his celebrated punch, they said some most amusing things about the lounge.

"It would make a capital wedding gift," laughed Mr. Livermore, with a sly glance at Mr. Bertram Pease, and Miss McCunn declared that she would die single rather than begin married life in the society of the monstrosity.

As time went on the spirit of the joyous season filled the company, and Yule-tide pastimes were suggested.

"In my young days," said Mrs. Pease, growing distinctly sporty, "we used to play hide-and-seek all over the old homestead, and whoever found the person hiding was entitled to a kiss." [Pg 123]

"Capital!" pronounced Doctor Van Cott, debating which of the Misses Mapes a prosperous practitioner would be most fortunate in finding.

"Let's play it now," cried Uncle Bertram, knowing quite well whom he himself should seek most diligently.

"Good!" put in Mr. Mickleworth, "I'll be It first. All go into the little smoking-room, and when I say 'Coo' come out and look for me." To Selma he added, in a whisper, "If you, while searching, should hum 'In the Gloaming' softly, may I scratch to let you know where I am?"

Miss Livermore blushed.

Now, of course, the game was all a joke, not to be taken seriously, and to make the situation funnier, Mr. Mickleworth, who, in his boarding-house commonly kept his evening clothes in a divan box, went direct to the monstrosity and climbed in, closing the lid upon himself. But, as it happened, Mr. Mickleworth's box was old-fashioned and unprovided with the latest patent catch, impregnable to those unacquainted with the combination. His position, therefore, in the lounge's dark interior must have been alarming for a moment, had he not discovered an ample breathing hole, concealed from outward observation by a fringe. Some bundles, hard and angular, occasioned but a trifling inconvenience at his feet. [Pg 124]

"Coo!" cried Mr. Mickleworth through the hole, when he had allowed sufficient time to mystify his fellow players. But for a moment it seemed to him that the others had not been playing fair, for there were voices speaking close to him.

"Say, you're a slick one, Frenchy," somebody remarked in unfamiliar accents. "You'll have your picture in the Gallery yet."

"Zat is all right," a foreign voice replied, "I know my business."

Now others appeared to join in the conversation, and it became evident that the entire company had entered. [Pg 125]

"Let me out!" cried Mr. Mickleworth, but in the general Babel no one heard, and presently Mrs. Livermore's silvery notes were audible above the rest.

"It was a very stupid mistake," she said. "You should have known such an ugly thing could not be for us. Please take it away at once, and another time be more careful about reading the address."

"I'm sorry, mum," retorted somebody, "but I do hope you won't go for to report us to the firm? We're just pore workingmen."

"You have probably been drinking," put in Mr. Livermore magnanimously, "and as it is Christmas we will overlook the error. Auguste, see that they do not scratch the wood-work."

"Hurrah!" cried Selma joyfully. "It's going. The Monstrosity is being taken away. I hope whoever gets it will appreciate its merits more than we did."

"Let me out! Let me out!" cried Mr. Mickleworth, but by this time all the guests were chattering louder than ever. [Pg 126]

Doctor Van Cott and the two Misses Mapes joined hands and danced as King David did before the Ark. Mr. Bertram Pease at the piano began to play the first selection that occurred to him, which chanced to be the Wedding March. The others clapped their hands and cheered.

"Let me out!" cried Mr. Mickleworth for the last time from his prison, but an oily apron was now pressed tight against the hole, and he caught the whispered observation:

"Say, Frenchy, you must have chucked the cat in by mistake."

He felt himself raised, jolted, tipped; he felt the chill of cold night air as it found access through the crack. He realized that he was being thrust feet first into a van and driven rapidly, he knew not where.

"And now," said Mr. Sellars, "I think we had better look for Mr. Mickleworth."

"Let us begin in the butler's pantry," suggested Cousin Laura Fanshaw, not loud enough for anyone else to hear. [Pg 127]

The Christmas party sought high and low; they penetrated to the upper floors, and not until Selma had sung "In the Gloaming" before every closet door did they give up the quest.

"It's most mysterious," asserted the host.

"It's worse," his wife corrected him; "it's most ill-bred."

"Oh, we must look again," cried Selma, now in real distress; "he may be lying somewhere faint and ill."

"Nonsense!" rejoined Mrs. Pease. "Leave him alone, and, my word for it, he will make his appearance in a little while looking silly enough. Lemuel, a glass of water, if you please."

While the good lady sank exhausted to a chair, her devoted son-in-law hastened to the dining-room to supply her want.

"The ice-pitcher is not there," he said, returning. "I'll ring."

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"But the pitcher must be in its usual place on the sideboard with the other silver," his wife protested.

"But all the same, it isn't," he insisted. "There is nothing on the sideboard; not a thing. Come see for yourself."

This gave occasion for the playful aphorism concerning the inability of man to see beyond his nose, but presently a scream from Mrs. Livermore confirmed her husband's statement.

"My pitcher!" she cried piteously. "My silver dishes! My epergne! Where have they gone? Where is Auguste?"

"Auguste," said Mary Anne, who, scenting an excitement, now ran up the kitchen stairs, "has also gone. He drove off with the sofa in the van."

"With the sofa?"

"Yes, ma'am; sitting on it."

"Robbed!" cried Mr. Livermore, with a lightning flash of keen conviction, and the entire company repeated in a hollow chorus:

"Robbed!"

[Pg 129]

But Mr. Livermore's lightning, after the manner of such fluids, was not satisfied to score a single bull's-eye.

"It was a deep conspiracy," he went on, becoming clairvoyant, "and ten to one that Mickleworth young man was in the plot."

"You shall not say such horrid things of him, papa," cried Selma.

"A thief!" persisted Mr. Livermore, disregarding her. "A villain in disguise! I don't believe that this impostor was ever Cousin Dick's old chum."

"Oh, papa," Selma interrupted, trembling; "Dick himself introduced Mr. Mickleworth to me at Southampton last summer. I did not tell you about it till you could know him and see how nice he is."

"Nice?" gasped her mother. "Nice?"

"Yes, mamma," Selma cried, sobbing, but still undaunted; "awfully nice, and he can write the most respectful little notes."

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"Notes?" screamed her mother. "Selma, you stand there and tell me you have corresponded with a burglar? Oh, that I should have lived to see this day!"

Miss McCunn, much disturbed, had retired to the smoking-room, where Mr. Bertram Pease did all he could to comfort her. Doctor Van Cott on the stairs had put an impartial arm about each of the Misses Mapes. Cousin Laura Fanshaw, behind a screen, wept copiously on Mr. Sellars's left lapel.

"In my young days," said Mrs. Pease, "we kept a closer watch on both our children and our silverware."

"Mother," cried Mrs. Livermore, "don't make things worse by being aggravating. Poor Selma is suffering enough."

"I am not suffering at all," protested Selma stoutly. "My faith in George remains unshaken."

"George!" ejaculated her mother. "Lemuel, do you hear?"

"I do," replied Mr. Livermore, "and I'll attend to George's case just as soon as I can get Mulberry Street on the telephone."

[Pg 131]

"Stop!" cried his wife; "we must avoid a scandal."

The doorbell, which had taken such an active part in this eventful evening, now rang again. A silence followed, while the form of Bates was seen to pass through the hall. Then, almost with his accustomed dignity, though somewhat pale and wet about the head, he reappeared.

"Mr. Mickleworth!" he announced.

"I knew it!" Selma cried, with jubilation.

And Mr. Mickleworth it was, in truth, though much disheveled as to dress. A streak of mud lay on his rumpled shirtfront, and his evening coat suggested active combat. From each shoulder hung a nosebag, such as teamsters use for feeding horses in the street, and each bag bulged with priceless silver heirlooms. Behind him came a stalwart minion of the law, bearing the family ice-pitcher on a massive salver.

"Ah, ha!" cried Mr. Livermore complacently. "So, ho! 'Caught with the goods on,' as you say officially. You have done well, officer, and this night's work shall not go unrewarded." [Pg 132]

"It wasn't me," the policeman protested ungrammatically; "this here young feller did it all himself."

"That we already know," said Mrs. Livermore.

"Be quiet, my child, until we hear the story," put in Mrs. Pease, who usually objected to her daughter's methods.

And the policeman told his tale.

"This here young chap," he said, with generous fervor, "must be a regular Herculaneum. He burst the lock and stopped the van and knocked two of the robbers out of time. When I came up he had the Frenchman by the throat, a-rolling of him in the mud. All I had to do was to ring for the patrol, and help him bring the stuff right back to you for recognition."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Livermore. "Ahem! Ahem!"

"Papa," cried Selma, while tears of triumph made her eyes more bright, "aren't you going to shake hands with George?" [Pg 133]

And thereupon Mr. Livermore cordially enough did shake hands with George.

"Papa," said Selma, "won't you tell George that his part in this night's work shall not go unrewarded?"

"Oh, tell him that yourself," cried old Mrs. Pease impatiently.

In the drawing-room Mr. Bertram Pease was playing the Wedding March.

THE PRIESTESS OF AMEN RA

[Pg 135]

THE PRIESTESS OF AMEN RA

[Pg 137]

In the cold light from the tall studio window Frank Morewood's face seemed almost haggard, and certainly the right hand which held the little square of photographic paper trembled perceptibly. His left hand still retained its glove, although he had been George Dunbarton's guest for fully half an hour; his hat was pushed back on his head, his cane beneath his arm, as though he had forgotten everything except the negative before his eyes.

"Dunbarton," he demanded, with an obvious effort at unconcern, "is this some silly trick you have been playing me?"

The other, openly impatient, shrugged his shoulders beneath the velvet painter's jacket, and took a step toward the Frisian cabinet upon which lay a box of cigarettes.

"A trick, indeed!" he repeated across the flaming match. "You must think I have very little on my mind!" Then, under the inspiring influence of the Melachrino, his just resentment of the charge expressed itself more vehemently. "You break in upon me like a wild man; you insist that I stop in my serious work to develop your wretched little film; you watch every step of the process with the most unflattering suspicion, and now, by Jove, you're not satisfied!" [Pg 138]

"Dunbarton," Morewood calmly replied, holding the print above his head, "you cannot realize what this may mean to me; the thing is too strange, too weird."

Dunbarton blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling, thoughtfully. "These amateur snap-shots are usually a trifle weird," he admitted, "they seldom do the subject justice, especially in the eyes of ardent admiration. Better keep your treasure covered up, old man, if you don't want it to fade out altogether. It isn't fixed, you know; it's just a negative."

"It's the most positive thing that ever came into the world," his visitor asserted; "the truest, the most wonderful." [Pg 139]

"And so have twenty other pretty faces been for you, my dear boy," the confidant urged. "Each wonder commonly endures about a month."

"This wonder has endured three thousand years and more," retorted Morewood, once more regarding the photograph with reverent awe.

"A case of re-incarnation, I suppose?" the other suggested lightly, with a glance at his neglected easel that might have been accepted as a hint. "You'll excuse me if I daub a little on the masterpiece while the light lasts?" he added. "Going; no? Well, I'm glad to have you stay. Trouble? Oh, none at all. Always happy to oblige a friend. Of course, if you mean to follow up photography you ought to learn how to do these little things for yourself. And, by the way, do get

[Pg 140] a decent camera instead of a Cheap Jack department store affair such as every Seeing New Yorker has slung across his shoulder. Get out of the light, please. Sit down, do! Take off your hat; have a cigarette; make yourself comfortable, confound you!"

"Thanks, old man," Morewood answered, "I won't smoke; and, as for work this afternoon, I mean to tell you something which shall put all other thoughts out of your head for a while. I mean to tell you presently of the most wonderful thing that ever happened in the world."

"Great Scott!" the artist groaned; "is it as bad as that? Please keep your stick a little farther from my canvas, if you don't mind."

"It's quite a long story," Morewood admitted, disposing of the cane.

"Most of yours are!" his friend interjected.

Already the shadows were beginning to invade the painter's spacious studio; lurking in the folds of Flemish tapestry and Oriental stuffs, and filling distant corners where the glint of steel and copper arms and arabesques suggested the twinkling eyes of impish and unearthly listeners. If [Pg 141] there is a time for everything, the early twilight is the season for story-telling, and the painter felt far less reluctance than he feigned when he resigned himself to listen. Throwing himself upon a divan and clasping his hands about an elevated knee, he said, "Begin your yarn, old fellow, I'm all attention."

Morewood took off his hat, bestrode a chair, and rested both elbows on its back.

"Dunbarton," he remarked, by way of introduction, "I don't suppose you have ever so much as heard of the college of Amen Ra?"

"Never in my life!" the other admitted frankly. "Where under the sun may be the college of Amen Ra?"

"No longer anywhere beneath the sun," Morewood replied, "but it used to be in Thebes about sixteen hundred years before Christ, as nearly as I can remember."

[Pg 142] "Quite near enough," Dunbarton assented amiably. "We will not let a century or so retard a narrative which is to comprehend three thousand years."

"Don't jump too quickly at conclusions!" protested Morewood. "The story as I know it goes no farther back than the early sixties, when a party of five friends from Philadelphia——"

"Quakers?" inquired the painter.

"I don't know!" replied the other, not without a touch of irritation. "Five acquaintances, men of cultivation and means, who in the course of travel ascended the Nile as far as the first cataract. At Luxor they rested for a week, with a view to visiting the site of the great city of Thebes, and especially its marvelous and mystic temple of Amen Ra, unequaled upon earth for the sublimity of its ruined magnificence——"

"For further particulars, see Baedeker!" Dunbarton muttered.

"Upon the night of their arrival," continued the narrator, unheeding the interruption, "a fête was given in their honor by the Consul, Mustapha Aga. It was in the middle of this festivity, and [Pg 143] during a dance by the Gaivasi girls of Luxor, that a strange nomad from the desert made his appearance unexpectedly. The Sheik Ben Ali, he was called, and his errand was to inform Mustapha Aga of the discovery, near a certain oasis, of an object of unusual interest, nothing less than a mummy case of surpassing beauty which had once held the body of a high priestess of Amen Ra."

"Hold on!" Dunbarton interrupted, relinquishing his grasp upon his knee. "Your local color is so intense that I feel myself in danger of becoming interested."

"Just wait until I get a little farther," answered Morewood, with a touch of triumph; "I only wish you could hear the story as it was told to me."

"By whom, if one might ask?" inquired Dunbarton, and his friend replied impressively:

[Pg 144] "By a venerable man whom I met by the merest chance late one afternoon in the Egyptian room of the Metropolitan Museum—a strange old man, poorly dressed, but who had evidently seen better days, for he had traveled much in the East and knew the country well."

"I recognize the type," Dunbarton commented, "and make no doubt your learned friend was in the end prevailed upon to accept a trifling loan——"

"That has nothing to do with the story," Morewood retorted. "How far had I got?"

"You were in Luxor, at the last reports," the other prompted, "attending an informal little dance of Gaivasi ladies."

"Yes, yes," cried Morewood, taking up his thread again. "It was, indeed, a scene to captivate the traveler's fancy."

"Never mind the scene!"

"I don't intend to. Escorted by Mustapha Aga and his guard, they left the revels and followed the

[Pg 145] mysterious sheik out into the desert to a grove of palm-trees, where, bathed in the Egyptian moonlight, lay the marvelous mummy-case."

"What had become of the mummy?" asked Dunbarton.

"Hush!" Morewood whispered reverently. "Hear the story. The case, though decorated throughout with a surpassing skill, was most remarkable for the extreme beauty of the woman's face portrayed upon its upper end, in colors which had defied the ravages of time."

"I know the kind!" the painter put in. "Flat nose, wide mouth, two staring eyes, that might be either rights or lefts."

"The art of that period was, as we know, conventional," returned Morewood, "and it was that very fact which made this particular painting so remarkable, for it was realistic, vivid; it conveyed, indeed, a distinct impression of personality."

"Oh, amazing!" Dunbarton murmured.

[Pg 146] "The most amazing thing in the world, as you yourself will presently admit," continued the story-teller. "You may believe the travelers were overjoyed to be the first outsiders to whom the treasure had been shown. They were not only men of talent and cultivation, but each was abundantly able to pay the very moderate price demanded by the sheik, and they lost no time in closing the bargain. To avoid contention, they drew lots among themselves for the privilege of becoming the owner of the mummy-case."

Here the narrator made an effective pause, and Dunbarton took the opportunity to light another cigarette.

"At first," pursued Morewood, "good fortune seemed to favor the eldest of the party, who was designated to me simply as Mr. X., though I strongly suspect him to have been no other than my old acquaintance of the Museum. But he had a generous disposition, and, touched by the keen disappointment of another member of the party, he relinquished his rights in favor of the second highest number, after an ownership of barely thirty seconds. [Pg 147] Mr. P. forthwith became the sole possessor of the coveted object. I need not now recount the circumstances which led in the course of a few months to the transfer of the property to each in turn of the remaining members of the company, Mr. G. and Mr. Q. But here begins the mystery."

Another dramatic pause and the speaker's voice deepened.

"Within the year, P. lost his life by the explosion of a fowling piece without visible cause; G. disappeared while bathing in the Nile in the vicinity of a crocodile pool, and Q., after a period of captivity among hostile Arabs, died of a snake bite. Mr. X. alone survived, and arrived in Cairo broken in health, only to learn that the greater part of his fortune had been lost through the knavery of an agent. Truly, the priestess of Amen Ra had signified her displeasure in a most convincing manner."

"Who the deuce was she?" demanded Dunbarton.

[Pg 148] "Why, the mummy, as I should have told you."

"But you didn't," remarked the painter. "And why do you suppose she was displeased?"

"Because," the other replied, with conviction, "she had been accustomed in life to veneration, worship, love, and naturally she did not like to have her coffin knocked about from place to place."

"I see," Dunbarton admitted gravely, but with the suspicion of a yawn suppressed. "What became of the coffin?"

"It had been shipped meanwhile to Germantown as a gift to the aunt of the last owner, a lady of so far unblemished reputation, who almost immediately acquired the cocaine habit."

"What? Cocaine in the sixties?" cried the painter captiously.

"Perhaps it may have been opium," Morewood admitted. "At all events she took to something pernicious, lost everything she had, and finally sold the precious relic to a Mrs. Meiswinkle, of [Pg 149] Tuckahoe, who gave it a conspicuous place in her baronial hall."

"Which promptly burnt down without insurance," Dunbarton supplemented at a venture.

"As it happens, it didn't," Morewood answered with spirit. "But from that day misfortune following misfortune fell upon the family—troubles, disappointments, losses. I have all the details, if you care to hear them."

Dunbarton made a sweeping gesture of negation, and his friend resumed: "It so happened that this Mrs. Meiswinkle, who was something of an amateur in occultism, received one day a visit from a noted adept in theosophy. This gentleman, who had newly come from Thibet and was in consequence highly sensitive, had scarcely set foot in the house when he announced the presence of a sinister influence. 'There is something here,' he cried, 'that simply radiates misfortune.'"

[Pg 150] "Extraordinary acumen!" Dunbarton murmured, having got the better of the yawn.

"Of course," Morewood proceeded, "it did not take an expert long to identify the mummy-case,

and of course a weight of evidence to support the adept's assertion was not long in accumulating. All the misfortunes which had befallen its recent owners were quickly traced in some direct way to the possession of the mysterious coffin, and in the end Mrs. Meiswinkle needed no great persuasion to rid herself of the thing forever."

"How?" Dunbarton asked.

"She made a present of it to the city of New York."

"Noble woman!" cried the painter. "That simple act of patriotism may account for much!"

It was a frivolous remark, but more than once Morewood had noticed that his companion glanced over his shoulder when a breeze from the open windows stirred some bit of drapery, although the studio was still well lighted by a golden sunset. The storyteller's manner would have made a stoic nervous. His muscles twitched, his eyes had brightened, and his bearing was that of one determined to throw off the burden of a mighty secret. [Pg 151]

"Dunbarton," he said solemnly, "that mummy-case stands at this moment in the uptown corner of the first Egyptian room, numbered 22,542 in the catalogue, which reads, 'Lid of Egyptian coffin, unearthed at Thebes,' and the name of the donor; nothing more. No word to tell that this poor shell of papier-maché once contained the mortal body of a priestess of Amen Ra; no hint of her surpassing loveliness except the lineaments you painters sneer at, and the ill-drawn hands crossed on her breast. She is gone; she is forgotten—she that was the most beautiful of Nature's works!"

"Frank," said Dunbarton, "has this story of yours anything to do with your Kodak film?"

"Yes, everything!" Morewood declared, speaking rapidly. "Listen. To-day I smuggled my camera into the Museum, and stood before the mummy-case undetected. But scarcely had I pressed the button when I was arrested by an official, who confiscated the machine and took it to the parcel room. I lost no time in finding the Director, gave my name and yours for surety for my respectability, and, after some delay and red tape, got back my property." [Pg 152]

"You were lucky," the other commented coolly. "The rules are very strict. Well? Is that the end?"

"No!" exclaimed Morewood, "only the beginning, as I firmly believe. I am now about to tell you of an extraordinary fact, which I have so far purposely kept back." Dunbarton sighed.

"I am going to startle you," went on Morewood. "While the casket was still in the possession of Mrs. Meiswinkle, she, acting under the theosophist's direction, sent for an expert and had a photograph taken of the lid, with every possible safeguard against deception or mistake." [Pg 153]

He spoke with tremulous deliberation; now he rose to his feet, and his eyes, fixed upon the wall above his listener's head, seemed to gaze beyond its limits.

"George, I should not tell you this, had I not the proof of its truth which even a scoffer like yourself can hardly question. When the plate was developed it was not the painted features of the mummy-case that looked from the negative, but—the face of a living woman! The face of the priestess of Amen Ra, unchanged through three thousand years, and *alive*!"

"That must have jarred them!" Dunbarton commented irreverently. "It was going it pretty strong, even for Thibet." But his cigarette dropped to the floor unheeded.

"And mark me, George," Morewood said, very gravely, "it was the same face, I have not the slightest doubt, that you and I beheld to-day appear before us, the same strange, wonderfully beautiful face that I hold now in my hand." [Pg 154]

"By Jove!" ejaculated Dunbarton, alive at once to the arcane significance of the statement. "But you can't really believe——"

"I believe nothing that I have not seen," asseverated Morewood. "Nothing that you have not seen yourself. I, too, was incredulous at first; I laughed at the story of the photograph as the figment of a disordered brain; but it took possession of me, haunted me night and day, until I determined to prove its wild impossibility to myself. I bought a camera, took it to the Museum, as I have told you, and came directly here with the result. You yourself developed the film; you saw the face appear; if you can suggest any other explanation of the mystery, in Heaven's name let us discuss it reasonably."

"Let me look at the glass film again," Dunbarton suggested, below his breath. He picked up the smoldering cigarette and, coming to his friend's side, looked long and gravely at the glass film. Both men were silent for a time, so silent that they could hear their own hearts beating. [Pg 155]

"She is indeed beautiful," said the painter, finally. "To our eyes she seems about twenty years old, though Eastern women reach perfection early. That diadem upon her brow is, I think, the two-horned crown of Isis. The drapery falling down on either side is certainly Egyptian and probably of a period antedating the Pharaohs, but the type of feature is scarcely Oriental."

"Yet Cleopatra was a blonde," Morewood suggested.

"True," assented the other, "and possibly the race three thousand years ago differed materially from the degenerate Sphinx-like personalities of the hieroglyphics. We must get Biggins of the Smithsonian to give us his opinion."

"Never!" cried Morewood, thrusting the negative in his breast.

[Pg 156] "But in the interest of science——" protested Dunbarton.

"Science?" Morewood returned scornfully; "what has science to do with this? What right have I to betray a lady's confidence?"

Dunbarton made a sign of impatience. "Your lady has been dead a matter of three thousand years or more," he remarked.

"That's not true!" the other contradicted, warmly. "I tell you, man, that woman is alive to-day. Don't ask me to explain the unexplainable. I simply know that she lives, as young and innocent as every feature of her face proclaims her. For years, for centuries, perhaps, she has been trying to make herself known to the stupid brutes who have been incapable of comprehending. But now, thank heaven, she has selected me to do her will—whatever it may be—and I shall consecrate my life to her!"

He grew very pale as he spoke, but there was a rapt joy in his face.

[Pg 157] "See here, old man," Dunbarton remonstrated kindly, with a hand on his shoulder, "you're rather overwrought just now, and I don't blame you. But take a friend's advice, and don't get spoony on a girl so very much older than yourself. It never turns out well."

"That's my affair!" Morewood said, doggedly.

"Of course, of course!" Dunbarton assented. "She's awfully pretty, I admit, and no doubt well connected; but, even if we overlook her playful little way of killing people, think of the difficulties about meeting, and that sort of thing."

"I'm willing to leave it all to her," Morewood said. "A priestess of Amen Ra must have learned by this time every mystery of life and death, and I am confident that in the proper time and place I shall meet her face to face."

"Old chap," Dunbarton pronounced with conviction, "what you need is a good night's rest."

[Pg 158] But Morewood did not reply to this, for the gentle swaying of an Eastern curtain just then caught his eye. It hung before the open door of the studio, and the movement might have come from some breath of air. But immediately it occurred again, and this time accompanied by the vision of a human hand, clearly in search of something on which to rap.

"There's someone there," said the painter, whose eyes had followed the other's, and he spoke lower: "Possibly a model in search of work." Then he raised his voice in an encouraging "Come in!"—the tone that painters use to models who are often pretty and sometimes timid.

Morewood paid no attention; he stood transfixed, watching the swaying curtain. His finger tips tingled with a strange electric current and his pulses beat with an unreasoning hope. Then Dunbarton said, a little louder:

"Come in; please come in."

[Pg 159] "I think the curtain must be caught," replied a low, melodious voice without. Dunbarton took three strides across the room, seized the drapery, and, with a single movement of his arm, swept it aside.

"Oh!" he cried, starting back, while Morewood clutched the table for support. Then, instantly recovering themselves, both men bowed as in the presence of a queen. And well they might.

Against the background of green velvet curtain with its embroidery of dull gold, there stood a lady all in poppy red, crowned with a headdress seemingly of the flowers themselves. It was not the dress of any period of time, for since the beginning of time flowers have grown for women to wear, and the two onlookers, being masculine, knew only that she wore them, and cared not whether they had bloomed in Eden or the Rue de la Paix. Time was for the moment eliminated, disregarded: the centuries rolled away like dewdrops from a rose, for, by the grace of Isis and Osiris, were they not bowing before the peerless priestess of the rites of Amen Ra? It was she and none other—the mistress of the mummy-case, the mystery of the Kodak film; the lady of Thebes [Pg 160] three thousand years ago.

Morewood passed his hand across his brow and caught his breath; Dunbarton was the first to recover the power of speech.

"Madam," he said, and his voice shook a little, "you do me far too great an honor. What is your will? You have but to command me."

"I venture to assert a prior claim to do your bidding," put in Morewood, coming forward quickly.

The priestess of Amen Ra tried to control a little laugh, and failed bewitchingly. "I am looking for a Mr. Dunbarton," she explained.

The painter drew himself erect and bowed with dignity. "I have the good fortune to bear that name," he said, taking a sidewise step which left his friend a trifle in the background.

[Pg 161] "Oh, I am so glad!" cried the lady. "Then perhaps you can tell me where to find a Mr. Morewood?"

"Your humble and devoted servant!" the other man pronounced himself, executing a maneuver which totally eclipsed Dunbarton.

"Really?" asked the lady, her face radiant with pleasure. "How very fortunate!"

At this Morewood fairly beamed with satisfaction, but she went on rapidly, in a silvery ripple of feminine narrative:

"Do you know, Mr. Morewood, that you have something of mine and I have something of yours? It was not my fault and it wasn't yours, either; it was the stupid person in the parcel room of the Museum. Of course two Kodaks are exactly alike, if one of them hasn't got a name scratched on the bottom with a pin; but I don't suppose he ever thought of looking, so he gave you mine and me yours, and I should never have found out who you were if you hadn't been arrested. Of course it wouldn't have made very much difference, after all, if my Cousin Jack hadn't snapped me in a most ridiculous Egyptian fancy dress." [Pg 162]

Dunbarton gave a groan as of agony suppressed, and Morewood's face might have been in color a fragment of the sacerdotal robe of Ra.

"Oh!" moaned the painter, "if I could only howl!"

"Don't mind him, please!" the other man pleaded. "You see, I, too, had used a film, and we were rather interested in seeing how it came out."

"Oh, but yours came out beautifully!" she reassured him. "My Cousin Jack developed it after lunch. That's the way we discovered the mistake, and here it is. We made up our minds that you must be at least seventy-five years old to want to photograph a hideous mummy-case."

It was then that Dunbarton mastered himself and became once more conscious of the duties of hospitality.

"A thousand pardons!" he protested, "for not offering you a seat. This is a painter's workshop, as you see, and therefore public property in a way. Might I suggest a cup of tea? It won't take me a minute to telephone for a chaperon." [Pg 163]

The priestess was graciously pleased to laugh.

"I should like tea," she said, with an approving glance about the room, flooded with the last of a long sunset; "but, if you don't mind, I detest chaperons. You see, I'm from Oklahoma."

There was an instant's hesitation, then:

"My friend, Mr. Morewood," remarked the painter, "has just been telling me the strangest story in the world. Perhaps you can induce him to repeat it for you."

He laughed a mocking laugh and turned to busy himself with the silver tea-service standing on an Adams table, while Morewood drew forward a low chair for the lady.

"Is your story romantic?" she asked, as she settled her poppy-colored ruffles; "has it a heroine?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," he answered, by no means including Dunbarton in the confidence. "No less a personage than the priestess of Amen Ra." [Pg 164]

She looked at him suspiciously, while the veriest suggestion of a blush suffused her cheek.

"Is there anything about photographs in it?" she demanded, regarding him defiantly.

"Yes," he replied, "there is; a lot!"

"Then I don't care to hear it, for it's certain to be stupid," she protested, pouting.

"It is," he told her, frankly; "and I shall not inflict it on you now. But some day, when we know each other better."

"We start for Boston to-morrow morning early," she interrupted; "and from there we go to Bar Harbor for mamma's hay fever. We're staying at the Waldorf."

"Then I shall return the camera this evening," said Morewood.

"If you do," she said, "my Cousin Jack will be very glad to talk photographs with you." [Pg 165]

"How old is your Cousin Jack?" Morewood demanded.

"Twelve," replied the lady, with just the shadow of a smile.

THE GIRL FROM MERCURY [Pg 167]

AN INTERPLANETARY LOVE STORY

Being the interpretation of certain phonic vibragraphs recorded by the Long's Peak Wireless Installation, now for the first time made public through the courtesy of Professor Caducious, Ph. D., sometime secretary of the Boulder branch of the

association for the advancement of interplanetary communication.

It is evident that the following logograms form part of a correspondence between a young lady, formerly of Mercury, and her confidential friend still resident upon the inferior planet. The translator has thought it best to preserve as far as possible the spirit of the original by the employment of mundane colloquialisms; the result, in spite of many regrettable trivialities will, it is believed, be of interest to students of Cosmic Sociology.

THE GIRL FROM MERCURY

[Pg 169]

THE FIRST RECORD

Yes, dear, it's me. I'm down here on the Earth, and in our Settlement House, safe and sound. I meant to have called you up before, but really this is the first moment I have had to myself all day.—Yes, of course, I said "all day." You know very well they have days and nights here, because this restless little planet spins, or something of the sort.—I haven't the least idea why it does so, and I don't care.—I did not come here to make intelligent observations like a dowdy "Seeing Saturn" tourist. So don't be Uranian. Try to exercise intuitive perception if I say anything you can't understand.—What is that?—Please concentrate a little harder.—Oh! Yes, I have seen a lot of human beings already, and would you believe it? some of them seem almost possible— [Pg 170] especially *one*.—But I will come to that one later. I've got so much to tell you all at once I scarcely know where to begin.—Yes, dear, the One happens to be a man. You would not have me discriminate, would you, when our object is to bring whatever happiness we can to those less fortunate than ourselves? You know success in slumming depends first of all upon getting yourself admired, for then the others will want to be like you, and once thoroughly dissatisfied with themselves they are almost certain to reform. Of course I am only a visitor here, and shall not stay long enough to take up serious work, so Ooma says I may as well proceed along the line of least resistance.—If you remember Ooma's enthusiasm when she ran the Board of Missions to Inferior Planets, you can fancy her now that she has an opportunity to carry out all her theories. Oh, she's great!

[Pg 171] My transmigration was disappointing as an experience. It was nothing more than going to sleep and dreaming about circles—orange circles, yellow circles, with a thousand others of graduated shades between, and so on through the spectrum till you pass absolute green and get a tone or two toward blue and strike the Earth color-note. Then with me everything got jumbled together and seemed about to take new shapes, and I woke up in the most commonplace manner and opened my eyes to find myself externalized in our Earth Settlement House with Ooma laughing at me.

"Don't stir!" she cried. "Don't lift a finger till we are sure your specific gravity is all right." And then she pinched me to see if I was dense enough, because the atmosphere is heavier or lighter or something here than with us.

I reminded her that matter everywhere must maintain an absolute equilibrium with its environment, but she protested.

[Pg 172] "That's well enough in theory; you must understand that the Earth is awfully out of tune at present, and sometimes it requires time to readjust ourselves to its conditions."

—I did not say so, but I fancy Ooma may have been undergoing readjustment.—My dear, she has grown as pudgy as a Jupitan, and her clothes—but then she always did look more like a spiral nebula than anything else.

(*The record here becomes unintelligible by reason of the passage of a thunderstorm above the summit of Long's Peak.*)

—There must be star-dust in the ether.—I never had to concentrate so hard before.—That's all about the Settlement House, and don't accuse me again of slighting details. I'm sure you know the place now as well as Ooma herself, so I can go on to tell what little I have learned about human beings.

It seems I am never to admit that I was not born on Earth, for, like all provincials, the humans pride themselves on disbelieving everything beyond their own experience, and if they understood [Pg 173] they would be certain to resent intrusions from another planet. I'm sure I don't blame them altogether when I recall those patronizing Jupitans.—And I'm told they are awfully jealous and distrustful even of one another, herding together for protection and governed by so many funny little tribal codes that what is right on one side of an imaginary boundary may be wrong on the other.—Ooma considers this survival of the group-soul most interesting, and intends to make it the subject of a paper. I mention it only to explain why we call our Settlement a Boarding-House. A Boarding-House, you must know, is fundamentally a hunting pack which one can affiliate with or separate from at will.—Rather a pale yellow idea, isn't it? Ooma thinks it necessary to conform to it in order to be considered respectable, which is the one thing on Earth most desired.—What, dear?—Oh, I don't know what it means to be respectable any more than you do.—One thing more. [Pg 174] You'll have to draw on your imagination! Ooma is called here Mrs. Bloomer.—Her own name was

just a little too unearthly. Mrs. signifies that a woman is married.—What?—Oh, no, no, no, nothing of the sort.—But I shall have to leave that for another time. I'm not at all sure how it is myself.

By the way, if *any one* should ask you where I am, just say I've left the planet, and you don't know when I shall be back.—Yes, you know who I mean.—And, dear, perhaps you might drop a hint that I detest all foreigners, especially Jupitans.—Please don't laugh so hard; you'll get the atmospheric molecules all woozy.—Indeed, there's not the slightest danger here. Just fancy, if you please, beings who don't know when they are hungry without consulting a wretched little mechanism, and who measure their radius of conception by the length of their own feet.—Of course I shall be on hand for the Solstice! I wouldn't miss that for an asteroid!—Oh, did I really promise that? Well, I'll tell you about him another time. [Pg 175]

THE SECOND RECORD—THOUGH PROBABLY THIRD COMMUNICATION

—I really must not waste so much gray matter, dear, over unimportant details. But I simply had to tell you all about my struggles with the clothes. When Ooma came back, just as I had mastered them with the aid of her diagrams, the dear thing was so much pleased she actually hugged me, and I must confess the effect made me forget my discomfort. Really, an Earth girl is not so much to be pitied if she has becoming dresses to wear. As you may be sure I was anxious to compare myself with others, I was glad enough to hear Ooma suggest going out.

"Come on," she said, executively, "I have only a half-hour to devote to your first walk. Keep close beside me, and remember on no account to either dance or sing."

"But if I see others dancing may I not join them?" I inquired. [Pg 176]

"You won't see anybody dancing on Broadway," she replied, a trifle snubbily, but I resolved to escape from her as soon as possible and find out for myself.

I shall never forget my shock on discovering the sky blue instead of the color it should be, but soon my eyes became accustomed to the change. In fact, I have not since that first moment been able to conceive of the sky as anything but blue. And the city?—Oh, my dear, my dear, I never expected to encounter anything so much out of key with the essential euphonies. Of course I have not traveled very much, but I should say there is nothing in the universe like a street they call Broadway—unless it be upon the lesser satellite of Mars, where the poor people are so awfully cramped for space. When I suggested this to Ooma she laughed and called me clever, for it seems there is a tradition that a mob of meddling Martians once stopped on Earth long enough to give the foolish humans false ideas about architecture and many other matters. But I soon forgot everything in my interest in the people. Such a poor puzzle-headed lot they are. One's heart goes out to them at once as they push and jostle one another this way and that, with no conceivable object other than to get anywhere but where they are in the shortest time possible. One longs to help them; to call a halt upon their senseless struggles; to reason with them and explain how all the psychic force they waste might, if exerted in constructive thought, bring everything they wish to pass. Mrs. Bloomer assures me they only ridicule those who venture to interfere, and it will take at least a Saturn century to so much as start them in the right direction. Our settlement is their only hope, she says, and even we can help them only indirectly. [Pg 177]

Not long ago, it appears, they had to choose a King or Mayor, or whatever the creature is called who executes their silly laws, and our people so manipulated the election that the choice fell on one of us. [Pg 178]

I thought this a really good idea, and supposed, of course, we must at once have set about demonstrating how a planet should be managed. But no! that was not our system, if you please. Instead of making proper laws our agent misbehaved himself in every way the committee could suggest, until at last the humans rose against him and put one of themselves in his place, and after that things went just a little better than before. This is the only way in which they can be taught. But, dear me, isn't it tedious?

Of course, I soon grew anxious for an exchange of thought with almost anyone, but it was a long while before I discovered a single person who was not in a violent hurry. At last, however, we came upon a human drawn apart a little from the throng, who stood with folded arms, engaged apparently in lofty meditation. His countenance was amiable, although a little red.

Saying nothing to Ooma of my purpose, I slipped away from her, and looking up into the creature's eyes inquired mentally the subject of his thoughts; also, how he came to be so inordinately stout, and why he wore bright metal buttons on his garment. But my only answer was a stupid blink, for his mentality seemed absolutely incapable of receiving suggestions not expressed in sounds. I observed farther that his aura inclined too much toward violet for perfect equipoise. [Pg 179]

"G'wan out of this, and quit yer foolin'," he remarked, missing my meaning altogether.

Of course I spoke then, using the human speech quite glibly for a first attempt, and hastened to assure him that though I had no idea of fooling, I should not go on until my curiosity had been satisfied. But just then Ooma found me.

"My friend is a stranger," she explained to the brass-buttoned man.

"Then why don't you put a string to her?" he asked.

[Pg 180] I learned later that I had been addressing one of the public jesters employed by the community to keep Broadway from becoming intolerably dull.

"But you must not speak to people in the street," said Ooma, "not even to policemen."

"Then how am I to brighten others' lives?" I asked, more than a little disappointed, for several humans hurrying past had turned upon me looks indicating moods receptive of all the brightening I could give.

I might have amused myself indefinitely, studying the rapid succession of varying faces, had not Bloomer cautioned me not to stare. She said people would think me from the country, which is considered discreditable, and as this reminded me that I had as yet seen nothing growing, I asked to be shown the gardens and groves.

"There is one," she said, indicating an open space not far away where sure enough there stood some wretched looking trees which I had not recognized before, forgetting that, of course, leaves [Pg 181] here must be green. I saw no flowers growing, but presently we came upon some in a sort of crystal bower guarded by a powerful black person. I wanted so to ask him how he came to be black, but the memory of my last attempt at information deterred me. Instead, I inquired if I might have some roses.

"Walk in, Miss," he replied most civilly, and in I walked through the door, past the sweetest little embryonic, who wore the vesture of a young policeman.

"Boy," I said, "have you begun to realize your soul?"

"Nope," he replied. "I ain't in fractions yet."

—Some stage of earthly progress, I suppose, though I did not like a certain movement of his eyelid, and one never can tell, you know, how hard embryonics are really striving. So I made haste to gather all the roses I could carry, and was about to hurry after Ooma, when a person barred my way.

[Pg 182] "Hold on!" he cried. "Ain't you forgetting something? Why don't you take the whole lot?"

"Because I have all I want for the present," I answered, rather frightened, perceiving that his aura had grown livid, and I don't know how I could have soothed him had not Ooma once more come to my relief. I could see that she was annoyed with me, but she controlled herself and placed some token in the being's hand which acted on his agitation like a charm.

As I told you, Bloomer had given me with the other things, a crown of artificial roses which, now that I had real flowers to wear, I wanted to throw away, but this she would not permit, insisting that such a proceeding would make the humans laugh at me—though to look into their serious faces one would not believe this possible. The thoughts of those about me, as I divined them, seemed anything but jocular. They came to me incoherent and inconsecutive, a jumble of conditional premises leading to approximate conclusions expressed in symbols having no intrinsic [Pg 183] meaning.—Of course, it is unfair to judge too soon, but I have already begun to doubt the existence of direct perception among them.—What did you say, dear?—Bother direct perception? —Well, I wonder how *we* should like to apprehend nothing that could not be put into words? You, I'm sure, would have the most confused ideas about Earthly conditions if you depended entirely upon my remarks.—Now concentrate, and you shall hear something really interesting.

—No, not the One yet.—He comes later.—

We had not gone far, I carrying my roses, and Bloomer not too well pleased, as I fancied, because so many people turned to look at us (Bloomer has retrograded physically until she is at times almost Uranian, probably as the result of wearing black, which appears to be the chromatic equivalent of respectability), when suddenly I became sensible of a familiar influence, which was [Pg 184] quite startling because so unexpected. Looking everywhere, I caught sight of—who do you suppose? Our old friend Tuk.—Mr. Tuck, T-u-c-k here, if you please. He was about to enter a—a means of transportation, and though his back was towards me, I recognized that drab aura of his at once, and projected a reactionary impulse which was most effective.

In his surprise he was for the moment in danger of being trampled upon by a rapidly moving animal.—Yes, dear, I said "animal."—I don't know and I don't consider it at all important. I do not pretend to be familiar with mundane zoölogy.—Tuck declared himself delighted to see me, and so I believe he was, though he controlled his radiations in the supercilious way he always had. But upon one point he did not leave me long in doubt. Externally, at least, my Earthly Ego is a—

[Pg 185] (Note: *The word which signifies a species of peach or nectarine peculiar to the planet Mercury is doubtless used here in a symbolic sense.*)

—I caught on to that most interesting fact the moment his eyes rested on me.

"By all that's fair to look upon!" he cried, jumping about in a manner human people think eccentric, "are you astral or actualized?"

"See for yourself," I said, holding out my hand, which it took him rather longer than necessary to make sure of.

"Well, what on Earth brings you here? Come down to paint another planet red?" he rattled on, believing himself amusing.

"Now haven't I as much right to light on Earth as on any other bit of cosmic dust?" I asked, laughing and forgetting how much snubbing he requires in the delight of seeing anyone I knew.

Then he insisted that I had a "date" with him.—A date, as I discovered later, means something nice to eat—and hinted very broadly that Bloomer need not wait if she had more important [Pg 186] matters to attend to. I must confess she did not seem at all sorry to have me taken off her hands, for after cautioning me to beware of a number of things I did not so much as know by name, she shot off like a respectable old aerolite with a black trail streaming out behind. If she remains here much longer she will be coming back upon a mission to reform *us*. As for Tuck, he became insufferably patronizing at once.

"Well, how do you like the Only Planet? and how do you like the Only Town? and how do you like the Only Street?" he began, waving his hands and looking about him as though there were anything here that one of *us* could admire. But, of course, I refused to gratify him with my crude impressions. I simply said:

"You appear very well pleased with them yourself."

"And so will you be," he replied, "when you have realized their possibilities. Remark that elderly entity across the street. I have to but exert my will that he shall sneeze and drop his eyeglasses, [Pg 187] and behold, there they go."—Yes, my dear, eyeglasses. They are worn on the nose by people who imagine they cannot see very well.

"I consider such actions cruel and unkind," I said, at the same time willing an embryonic girl to pick the glasses up, and though the child was rather beyond my normal circle, I was delighted to see her obey. But I have an idea Tuck regretted an experiment which taught me something I might not have found out, at least for a while.

I had now been on Earth several hours, and change of atmosphere gives one a ravenous appetite. You see, I had forgotten to ask Ooma how, and how often, humans ate, so when Tuck suggested breakfast as a form of entertainment I put myself in sympathy with the idea at once. Besides, it is most important to know just where to find the things you want, and you may be sure I made a lot of mental notes when we came, as presently we did, to a tower called Astoria. [Pg 188]

I understand that the upper portions of the edifice are used for study of the Stars, but we were made welcome on the lower story by a stately being, who conducted us to honorable seats in an inner court. There were small trees growing here, green, of course, but rather pretty for all that; the people, gathered under their shade in little groups, were much more cheerful and sustaining than any I had seen so far, and an elemental intelligence detailed to minister to our wants seemed well-trained and docile.

"Here you have a glimpse of High Life," announced Tuck, when he had written something on a paper.

"The Higher Life?" I inquired, eagerly, and I did not like the flippant tone in which he answered:

"No, not quite—just high enough."

I was beginning to be so bored by his conceit and self-complacency that I cast my eyes about and smiled at several pleasant-looking persons, who returned the smile and nodded in a friendly [Pg 189] fashion, till I could perceive Tuck's aura bristle and turn greenish-brown.

"You can't possibly see anyone you know here," he protested, crossly.

"All the better reason why I should reach out in search of affinities," I retorted. But after that, though I was careful to keep my eyes lowered most of the time, I resolved to come some day to the Astoria alone and smile at every one I liked. I don't believe I should ever know a human if Tuck could have his way.

Presently the elemental brought us delicious things, and while we ate them Tuck talked about himself. It appears he has produced an opera here which is a success. People throng to hear it and consider him a great composer. At all of which, you may believe, I was astonished—just fancy our Tuck posing as a genius!—but presently when he became elated by the theme and hummed a bar or two, I understood. The wretch had simply actualized a few essential harmonies—and done [Pg 190] it very badly. I see now why he likes so much being here, and understand why his associates are almost altogether human. I don't remember ever meeting with such deceit and effrontery before. I was so indignant that I could feel my astral fingers tremble. I could not bear to look at him, and as by that time I had eaten all I could, I rose and walked directly from the court without another word. I am sure he would have pursued me had not the elemental, divining my wish to escape, detained him forcibly.

Once in the street again, I immediately hypnotized an old lady, willing her to go direct to Bloomer's Boarding-House while I followed behind. It may not have been convenient for her, I am afraid, but I knew of no other way to get back.—Dear me, the light is growing dim, and I must be dressing for the evening. Good-by!—By the way, I forgot to tell you something else that happened —remind me of it next time!

[Pg 191]

THE THIRD RECORD

—Yes, I remember, and you shall hear all about it before I describe an evening at the Settlement, but it doesn't amount to much.—I told you how cross and over-bearing Tuck was at the Astoria tower, and of the mean way in which he restricted my observations. Well, of all the people in the grove that day there was only one whom I could see without being criticized, and he sat all alone and facing me, just behind Tuck's back. Some green leaves hung between us, and whenever I moved my head to note what he was doing he moved his, too, to look at me. He seemed so lonely that I was sorry for him, but his atmosphere showed him to be neither sullen nor Uranian, and I could not help it if I was just a little bit responsive. Besides, Tuck, once on the subject of his opera, grew so self-engrossed and dominant that one had either to assert one's own mentality or become subjective.

[Pg 192] —No, dear, that is not the *only* reason. There may be such a thing as an isolated reason, but I have never met one—they always go in packs. I confess to a feeling of interest in the stranger. Nobody can look at you with round blue eyes for half an hour steadily without exercising some attraction, either positive or negative, and I felt, too, that he was trying to tell me something which would have been a great deal more interesting than Tuck's opera, and I believe had I remained a little longer we could have understood each other between the trees just as you and I can understand each other across the intervals of space. But then it is so easy to be mistaken.—I had to pass quite close to him in going out, and I am not sure I did not drop a rose.

—There may be just a weenie little bit more about the Astorian, but that will come in its proper place. Now I must get on to the evening.—It was not much of an occasion, merely the usual gathering of our crowd, or rather of those of us who have no special assignment for the time in [Pg 193] the large Council Room I have described to you.

The President of the Board of Control at present is Marlow, Marlow the Great, as he is called, the painter whose pictures did so much to elevate the Patagonians.—No, dear, I never heard of Patagonia before, but I'm almost sure it's not a planet.—With Marlow came a Mrs. Mopes, who is engaged in creating schools of fiction by writing stories under different names and then reviewing them in her own seven magazines. Next, taking the guests at random, was Baxter, a deadly person in his human incarnation, whose business it is to make stocks fly up or tumble down.—I don't know what stocks are, but they must be something very easily frightened.—Then there was a Mr. Waller, nicknamed the Reverend, whom the Council allows to speak the truth occasionally, while the rest of the time he tells people anything they want to hear to win their confidence. [Pg 194] And the two Miss Dooleys, who sing so badly that thousands who cannot sing at all leave off singing altogether when they once hear them. And Mr. Flick, who misbehaves at funerals to distract mourners from their grief, and a Mr. O'Brien, whose duty it is to fly into violent passions in public places just to show how unbecoming temper is.

There were many others, so many I cannot begin to enumerate them. Some had written books and were known all over the planet, and some who were not known at all had done things because there was nobody else to do them. And some were singers and some were actors, and some were rich and some were poor to the outside world, but in the Council Room they met and laughed and matched experiences and made jokes; from the one who had built a battleship so terrible that all the other ships were burnt on condition that his should be also, to the ordinary [Pg 195] helpers who applaud stupid plays till intelligent human beings become thoroughly disgusted with bad art.

In the world, of course, they are all serious enough, and often know each other only by secret signs, while every day and night and minute our poor earth-brothers come a little nearer the light —pushed toward it, pulled toward it, wheedled and tricked and bullied and coaxed, and thinking all the while how immensely clever they are, and what a wonderful progressive, glorious age they have brought about for themselves.—At all events, this is the rather vague composite impression I have received of the plans and purposes of the Board of Directors, and doubtless it is wrong.

I suppose with a little trouble I might have recognized nearly everyone, but the fancy took me to suspend intuition just to see how Earth girls feel, and you know when one is hearing a lot of pleasant things one does not much care who happens to be saying them.

[Pg 196] I fancy Marlow thought less of me when I confessed that I am here only; for the lark, and really do not care a meteor whether the planet is ever elevated or not. But he is a charming old fellow all the same, and the only one of the lot who has not grown the least bit smudgy.

Marlow announced that the evening would be spent in harmony with the vibrations of Orion, and set us all at work to get in touch. I love Orion light myself, for none other suits my aura quite so well, and I was glad to find they had not taken up the Vega fad.—The light here? My dear, it is not even filtered.—Some of us, no doubt for want of practice, were rather slow about perfecting, but finally we all caught on, and when O'Brien, no longer fat and florid, and the elder Miss Dooley, no longer scrawny, moved out to start the dance, there was only one who had not assumed an astral personality. Poor fellow, though I pitied him, I did admire his spunk in holding [Pg 197] back. It seems that as an editor he took to telling falsehoods on his own account so often that the Syndicate is packing him off as Special Correspondent to a tailless comet.

Tuck never came at all; either he realizes how honest people must regard him and his opera, or else the elementals at the Astoria are still detaining him.

We had a lovely dance, and while we rested Marlow called on some of us for specialties. Mrs.

Mopes did a paragraph by a man named Henry James, translated into action, which seemed quite difficult, and then a person called Parker externalized a violin and gave the Laocoon in terms of sound. To me his rendering of marble resembled terra-cotta until I learned that the copy of the statue here is awfully weather-stained. After this three pretty girls gave the Aurora Borealis by telepathic suggestion rather well, and then I sang "Love Lives Everywhere"—just plain song.

—I know this must all sound dreadfully flat to you, quite like "Pastimes for the Rainy Season in Neptune," but Bloomer says she doesn't know what would happen if we should ever give a really characteristic jolly party. [Pg 198]

We wound up with an Earth dance called the Virginia Reel, the quickest means you ever saw for descending to a lower psychic plane. That's all I have to tell, and quite enough, I'm sure you'll think.—What? The Astorian? I have not seen him since.—But there is a little more, a very little, if you are not tired.—This morning I received a gift of roses, just like the one I dropped yesterday, brought me by the same small embryonic I had seen in the flower shop. I asked the child in whose intelligence the impulse had originated, and he replied:

"A blue-eyed feller with a mustache, but he gave me a plunk not to tell."

I understood a plunk to be a token of confidence, and I at once expressed displeasure at the boy's betrayal of his trust. I told him such an act would make dark lines upon his aura which might not fade for several days. [Pg 199]

"Say, ain't you got some message to send back?" he asked.

"Boy!" said I, "don't forget your little aura."

"All right," he answered, "I'll tell him 'Don't forget your little Aura.' I'll bet he coughs up another plunk."

I don't know what he meant, but I am very much afraid there may be some mistake.—Oh, yes, I am quite sure to be back in time for the Solstice.—Or at least for the Eclipse.

THE FOURTH RECORD

(Note.—Between this logogram and the last the Long's Peak Receptive Pulsator was unfortunately not in operation for the space of a fortnight, as the electrician who took the instrument apart for adjustment found it necessary to return to Denver for oil.)

—Yes, dear, it's me, though if I did not know personality to be indestructible I should begin to have my doubts. I have not made any more mistakes, that is, not any bad ones, since I went to the Astoria alone for lunch, and the elementals were so very disagreeable just because I had no money. [Pg 200] I know all about money now, except exactly how you get it, and Tuck assures me that is really of no importance. I never told Ooma how the blue-eyed Astorian paid my bill for me, and her perceptive faculties have grown too dull to apprehend a thing she is not told. Fresh roses still come regularly every day, and of course I can do no less than express my gratitude now and then. —Oh, I don't know how often, I don't remember.—But it is ever so much pleasanter to have some one you like to show you the way about than to depend on hypnotizing strangers, who may have something else to do.

—I told you last week about the picnic, did I not? The day, I mean, when Bloomer took me into the country, and Tuck so far forgave my rudeness to him as to come with us to carry the basket.— Oh, yes, indeed, I am becoming thoroughly domesticated on Earth. And, my dear, these humans are docility itself when you once acquire the knack of making them do exactly as you wish, which is as easy as falling off a log.—A *log* is the external evidence of a pre-existent tree, cylindrical in form, and though often sticky, not sufficiently so to be adhesive. [Pg 201]

—That picnic was so pleasant—or would have been but for Bloomer's anxiety that I should behave myself, and Tuck's anxiety that I should not—that I determined to have another all by myself— and I have had it.

I traveled to the same little dell I described before, and I put my feet in the water just as I wasn't allowed to do the other day. And I built a fire and almost cooked an egg and ate cake (an egg is the bud of a bird, and cake is edible poetry) sitting on a fence.—Fences grow horizontally and have no leaves.—Don't ask so many questions!

[Pg 202] After a while, however, I became tired of being alone, so I started off across some beautiful green meadows toward a hillside, where I had observed a human walking about and waving a forked wand. He proved the strangest-looking being I have met with yet, more like those wild and woolly space-dwellers who tumbled out when that tramp comet bumped against our second moon. But he was a considerate person, for when he saw me coming and divined that I should be tired, he piled up a quantity of delicious-scented herbage for me to sit on.

"Good-morning, mister," I said, plumping myself down upon the mound he had made, and he, being much more impressionable than you would suppose from his Uranian appearance, replied.

"I swan, I like your cheek."

"It's a pleasant day," I said, because one is always expected to announce some result of

observation of the atmosphere. It shows at once whether or not one is an idiot.

"I call it pretty danged hot," he returned, intelligently.

"Then why don't you get out of the sun?" I suggested, more to keep the conversation fluid than because I cared a bit. [Pg 203]

"I'm a-goin' to," he answered, "just as soon as that goll-darned wagon comes." (A "goll-darned" wagon is, I think, a wagon without springs.)

"What are you going to do then?" I asked, beginning to fear I should be left alone again after all my trouble.

"Goin' home to dinner," he replied, and I at once said I would go with him.—You see, I had placed a little too much reliance on the egg.

"I dunno about that, but I guess it will be all right," he urged, hospitably, and presently the goll-darned wagon arrived with another man, who turned out to be the first one's son and who looked as though he bit.

Together the two threw all the herbage into the wagon till it was heaped far above their heads.

"How am I ever to get up?" I asked, for I had no idea of walking any farther, and I could see the man's white house ever so far away. [Pg 204]

"Who said you was goin' to get up at all?" inquired the biter, disagreeably, but the other answered for me.

"I said it, that's who, you consarned jay," he announced, reprovingly.

When I had made them both climb up first and give me each a hand, I had no difficulty at all in mounting, but I was very careful not to thank the Jay, which seemed to make him more morose than ever. Then they slid down again, and off we started.

Once when we came to some lovely blue flowers growing in water near the roadside I told the Jay to stop and wade in and pick them for me.

"I'll be dogged if I do," he answered; so I said:

"I don't know what being 'dogged' means, but if it is a reward for being nice and kind and polite, I hope you will be."

Whereupon he bit at me once and waded in, while the older man, whose name, it seems, was Pop, sat down upon a stone and laughed. [Pg 205]

"Gosh! If this don't beat the cats," he said, slapping his knee, which was his way of making himself laugh harder.

I put the flowers in my hair and in my belt and wherever I could stick them. But there was still a lot left over, and whenever we met people I threw them some, which appeared to please Pop, but made the Jay still more bite-y.

Presently we came to a very narrow place and there, as luck would have it, we met an automobile.—Thank goodness, I need not explain automobile.—And who should be at the lever all alone but—the Astorian.

I recognized him instantly, and he recognized me, which was, I suppose, his reason for forgetting to stop till he had nearly run us down. In a moment we were in the wildest tangle, though nothing need have happened had not the Jay completely lost his temper. [Pg 206]

"Hang your picture!" he called out, savagely, "What do you want?—The Earth?"

And with that he struck the animals—the wagon was not self-propelling—a violent blow, and they sprang forward with a lurch which made the hay begin to slip. I tried to save myself, but there was nothing to catch hold of, so off I slid and—oh, my dear, my dear, just fancy it!—I landed directly in his lap.—No, not the Jay's.—Of course, I stayed there as short a time as possible, for he was very nice about moving up to make room for me on the seat, but I am afraid it did seem frightfully informal just at first.

"It was all the fault of that consarned Jay," I explained, as soon as I had recovered my composure, "and I shall never ride in his goll-darned wagon again."

"I sincerely hope you will not," replied Astoria, looking at me with the most curious expression. "It would be much better to let me take you wherever you wish to go." [Pg 207]

"That's awfully kind of you," I said, "but I don't care to go anywhere in particular this afternoon, except as far as possible from that objectionable young man."

The Astorian did not speak again till he had turned something in the machine to make it back and jerk, and, once free from the upset hay, go on again.

"Say, Sissy, I thought you was comin' to take dinner," Pop called out from under the wagon, where he had crawled for safety, and when I replied as nicely as I could, "No, thank you, not to-day," he said again, quite sadly as I thought, "Gosh blim me, if that don't beat the cats!" and also

several other things I could not hear, because we were moving away so rapidly.

When we had gone about a hundred miles—or yards, or inches, whichever it was—the Astorian, who had been sitting very straight, inquired if those gentlemen—meaning Pop and Jay—were near relations. [Pg 208]

I showed him plainly that I thought his question Uranian, and explained that I had not a relative on Earth. Then I told him exactly how I had come to be with them, and about my picnic and the egg. I am afraid I did not take great pains to make the story very clear, for it was such fun to perplex him. He is not at all like the Venus people, who have become so superlatively clever that they are always bored to death.

"Were you surprised to see me flying through the air?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he said; "I have always thought of you as coming to Earth in some such way from some far-distant planet."

"Oh, then, you know!" I gasped.

The Astorian laughed.

"I know you are the one perfect being in the world, and that is quite enough," he said, and I saw at once that whatever he had guessed about me he knew nothing at all of the Settlement.

"Miss Aura," he went on,—he has called me that ever since that little embryonic made his stupid blunder, and I have not corrected him—here it is almost necessary to have some sort of a name—"Miss Aura, don't you think we have been mere acquaintances long enough? I'm only human ——" [Pg 209]

"Yes, of course," I interrupted, "but then that is not your fault——"

"I'm glad you look upon my misfortune so charitably," he said, a trifle more puzzled than usual, as I fancied.

"It is my duty," I replied. "I want to elevate you; to brighten your existence."

"My Aura!" he whispered; and I was not quite sure whether he meant me or not.

We were moving rapidly along a broad road beside a river. There were hills in the distance and the air from them was in the key of the Pleiades. There were gardens everywhere full of sunlight translated into flowers, and without an effort one divined the harmony of growing things. I felt that something was about to happen; I knew it, but I did not care to ask what it might be. [Pg 210] Perhaps if I had tried I could not have known; perhaps for that hour I was only an Earth girl and could only know things as they know them, but I did not care.

We were going faster, faster every moment.

"Was it you who willed me to come out into the country?" I asked. "Have you been watching for me and expecting me?"

We were moving now as clouds that rush across a moon.

"I think I have been watching for you all my life and willing you to come," he said, which shows how dreadfully unjust we sometimes are to humans.

"While I was on another planet?" I inquired. "While we were millions and millions of miles apart? Suppose that I had never come to Earth?"

We were moving like the falling stars one journeys to the Dark Hemisphere to see.

"I should have found you all the same," he whispered, half laughing, but his blue eyes glistened. [Pg 211] "I do not think that space itself could separate us."

"Oh, do you realize that?" I asked, "and do you really know?"

"I know I have you with me now," he said, "and that is all I care to know."

We were flying now, flying as comets fly to perihelion. The world about was slipping from us, disintegrating and dissolving into cosmic thoughts expressed in color. Only his eyes were actual, and the blue hills far away, and the wind from them in the key of the Pleiades.

"There shall never any more be time or space for us," he said.

"But," I protested, "we must not overlook the fundamental facts."

"In all the universe there is just one fact," he cried, catching my hand in his, and then—

(NOTE: *Here a portion of the logogram becomes indecipherable, owing, perhaps, to the passage of some large bird across the line of projection. What follows is the last recorded vibragraph to date.*) [Pg 212]

—Yes, dear, I know I should have been more circumspect. I should have remembered my position, but I didn't. And that's why I'm engaged to be married.—You have to here, when you reach a certain point—I know you will think it a great come-down for one of us, but after all do we not owe something to our sister planets?—

THE UNEXPECTED LETTER

[Pg 213]

THE UNEXPECTED LETTER

[Pg 215]

As much as I dislike superlatives, I must confess that nothing in my life has given me greater surprise than that letter addressed to me in a firm but unfamiliar hand, face upward on the counter of a small curiosity shop in an insignificant by-street of a strange city.

I have a weakness for such small shops, where one is commonly permitted to roam at will amid a multitude of attractive objects without the slightest obligation to buy, and the proprietors are often men of intelligence and education. When I have leisure I rarely resist the temptation to enter, and in this case the impulse had been almost mandatory.

[Pg 216]

It was my first visit to Selbyville, and I may say that it will probably be my last; for I have never seen a duller, less interesting place. A bad connection had left me stranded at the railway station there, with several hours to be disposed of, as I feared, in aimless wanderings along streets and avenues each one more crude and commonplace than the last; but the chance discovery of a favorite haunt filled me at once with lively satisfaction.

A dark and musty little shop, it proved to be, and its owner all I could have wished—a mild old Dickens person who had a virtuous pride in his collection, and at once divined in me a sympathetic listener. At first I followed him from case to case with unaffected interest and attention; but presently, I own, his conversation grew a trifle wearisome, and I allowed my thoughts to stray.

He had produced, as I remember well, a tray of antique cameos, and to make room for it upon the counter brushed aside a litter of disordered papers. Neglected bills, they seemed to be, and circulars such as a careless man forgets to throw away. But I noted nothing more; for suddenly amid the trash my own familiar name confronted me, bold, clear, and unmistakable, across a large and square envelope of a bluish tint: "Josiah Brunson Dykefellow, Esq., 109 South Ninth Street, City."

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Now, I am not a man to jump at rash conclusions. The address, of course, was one that might be found in almost any city; but as it happened to be mine in Masonburg, and as my name was not a common one, to say the least, the letter seemed so clearly meant for me that I should have taken it without compunction, could I have done so unobserved. But the merchant never left me for a moment, and though most amiable I gave him credit for too much good sense to deliver a sealed communication on the unsupported statement of a perfect stranger; for I had left my card-case in my satchel at the station, and as I am a bachelor my linen is unmarked. However the letter came to be there, it was evident that I should have to exercise diplomacy to gain possession of my own. And so, continuing our circuit of the shop, I weighed the matter nicely. My final resolution was, I shall always think, little short of inspiration.

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We had reached an ancient rosewood wardrobe of enormous size and hideous design before I found the opportunity to put my plan in operation.

"Ah! this is something I should like to own," I cried, "provided that my new rooms are large enough to hold it. And," I added carelessly, "perhaps you can direct me to the address"—I feigned to consult a memorandum—"109 South Ninth Street."

The worthy dealer turned on me a look of half-amused surprise. "That's here," he said—"right here, this street and house."

"Indeed!" I cried, though I had not been wholly unprepared for such an answer. "That's really odd! for this, my dear sir, is the very place where I was told to seek lodgings."

"There must be some mistake," replied the dealer civilly; "for as it is the house is too small to accommodate my family."

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At this I must have feigned the signs of extreme annoyance rather cleverly; for the dealer joined in condemnation of officious friends in general, and especially of one McPherson, a second auditor, who had so misled me.

"That ass McPherson," I explained, "has put me to the greatest inconvenience! For, feeling certain of the rooms, I have actually given this address to correspondents. But," I hastened to assure my courteous listener, "I shall, of course, write at once and save you any trouble on that score. Please save the wardrobe for a day or two. My name is Josiah Brunson Dykefellow."

As I pronounced each syllable with distinctness, I could perceive the dealer's kindly face expand with pleasure. "Why, Mr. Dykefellow!" he exclaimed, "a letter came for you this morning. I was about to return it to the carrier. Here it is."

I thanked him, gave the square envelope only a casual glance before slipping it into an inner pocket, and then bought a curio, scarcely knowing what I did. I could hardly wait to see my

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purchase wrapped in newspaper. I feared the dealer might think better of his confidence and make demands on me for identification. I felt the prick of conscience that an honest man must feel who gains even a righteous victory by disingenuous means.

When the door had closed behind me and I was free to stride up Ninth Street with my curio beneath my arm, I dreaded at every step to hear the hue and cry of "Stop thief!" at my heels. Once safe beyond the nearest corner, I actually ran. Up one street, down another, now running, and now short of breath, proceeding at a rapid walk, I came at length to a small, well-nigh deserted public square, and here, seated on a retired bench, I cautiously took out my blue envelope, and for the first time scrutinized its inscription.

The writer was evidently a person of decided character; but whether man or woman it was impossible to guess. There was something masculine about the stationery, which suggested a well-appointed club; but on the other hand, the seal of violet wax, the rather blurred impression of what might have been a dainty crest, the smell of orris, I fancied, spoke of a lady's boudoir. As for the postmark, it was non-committal as to place, but the hour and date were clearly nine-thirty P. M. the previous day, which seemed rather late for a lady; but again, few men ever write "In haste" across the corner of a letter. Of course it would have been a simple matter to have solved the mystery then and there; but a mystery solved can never be itself again, and for the moment I determined to prolong the pleasures of anticipation. I chuckled to myself, and cast a friendly glance about me, vaguely imagining what Selbyville might mean to me in after years. Assuming an easy attitude upon the bench, I gazed into the sky. [Pg 221]

"Ah, Fate!" I was beginning to soliloquize, when a rude voice beside me interrupted. [Pg 222]

"Say, kape yer feet offen the grass, unless ye own the earth!" it said, and looking up I saw before me the sinister visage of a minion of the law. "And what are ye doin' here anyway?" the voice went on while the visage turned with undisguised suspicion toward my curio, which did look something like an infant wrapped in newspaper.

I said that I was waiting for my train, and asked with all humility to be directed to the station.

I was answered with contumely. I was commanded to "Get a move on!" I was told with scant civility that the Union Station was only one block away. "Even you can't miss it," my informant said. "Follow South Ninth Street."

I rose and thanked the man with all the dignity at my command. I also gave him a cigar, which seemed to mollify him; but if my random flight had brought me once more to the far end of Ninth Street, I should have let every train that ever cleared from Selbyville depart without me rather than have risked another meeting with the curiosity man. As I sauntered nonchalantly in the wrong direction, I am sure that I caught a vulgar idiom muttered by official lips. [Pg 223]

But the experience had taught me that one who has a secret to conceal should avoid above all things making himself conspicuous. So, carrying my curio—which was of bronze and growing every moment heavier—as though it was a package from the laundry, I struck into a swinging gait, and hummed a popular refrain. My single wish now was to seem absolutely sane; for to be "bug-house" (such was the policeman's phrase), though not a crime, may lead to inquiries, perhaps examination, and I was by no means certain what incriminating matter my hidden letter might contain. Thus reasoning, I became doubtful all at once of my right to the blue envelope. And the more I thought about it, the weaker grew my confidence in the course I had pursued. What if after all I had appropriated some one's else business, some one's else secret, the hideous clue to some one's else misdemeanor? [Pg 224]

It had been my half-formed purpose to walk until the town was far behind me, out into the quiet country where there were surely haystacks and deserted barns, or at least, if nothing better offered, trees to climb. But now the thought occurred to me that it might be safer to read my letter in broad daylight and the open street, than in uncertain and suspicious solitude.

The decision was a wise one, and I lost no time in turning it into action; for my surroundings at the moment could scarcely have been more favorable. I stood before what appeared to be a public building, tightly closed and to all appearance unused, and right at hand there was a most convenient newel-post on which to rest my curio, which had for some time been threatening to shed its wrappings altogether. I can't remember now just what it was—some Eastern object, doubtless—but scarcely had it left my hands when all the air grew resonant with yells as though the fiends of Tophet were released from durance; the great doors of the building opened, and children, innumerable children, issued forth. I have never in my life beheld so many children all at once. They swarmed about me and my curio, uttering uncouth cries, and pointing with their horrid little fingers urged their young companions far and near to join in the affray. I yield to no one in my love for childhood—properly conducted childhood—but Selbyville is not the place to find it. [Pg 225]

With one disheartened cry, I grabbed my property, and started whither I neither knew nor cared, the children pursuing like a pack of misbehaved young wolves. I crossed a crowded thoroughfare, doubled on my tracks, overturned a push-cart full of oranges, threw a matinee audience into wild alarm, and everywhere I seemed to hear two fatal words. And when at last I threw myself upon a trolley-car the stupid vulgarism still rang in my ears. [Pg 226]

I am sure the conductor eyed me with suspicion; but I did not care; for I was moving every moment farther from the scenes of my discomfiture, my curio out of sight beneath the seat, and

my letter safely in my inside pocket. I picked up an abandoned paper, and read it, or appeared to do so, with composure, though all the while the fingers of my left hand never ceased to pinch the blue envelope, making fresh discoveries.

Within the sheet of folded note-paper there was unquestionably an inclosure of a smaller size and softer texture, perhaps a bank-note, perhaps a draft. Of course I held my imagination well in check, and tried to think of nothing more important than a newspaper cutting; but even this allowed a certain scope for fancy. Advertisements for missing heirs are not uncommon, and even poems when embalmed in orris may have deep significance. Ah! What if I were rich? What if I [Pg 227] were loved? What if both at once? The thing is not impossible. Soon I should know all, beneath my haystack, in my barn, or, bird-like, swinging in my tree. I was so certain now that what had cost so much inconvenience must be all my own, that I would have parted from the blue envelope only with my life.

It was a shock to have my dreaming interrupted by the conductor's cheerful call, "All out!" and to find that the thrice accursed trolley had all the while been flying, not toward the country, but into the depths of darkest Selbyville, where gasworks, rolling-mills, and docks compete for grimy precedence. But if by that time I had not grown used to disappointment, the opportunity to abandon my curio beneath the seat would have made up for much.

I have often wondered since my afternoon in Selbyville where the man who wrote in praise of solitude obtained his information. I feel convinced that Crusoe never sat down for a quiet pipe [Pg 228] without black Friday butting in to ask what time it was. But this is idle speculation.

Once freed from my incumbrance, my heart beat high with hope, and crawling through a broken fence I found myself within a lumber-yard. On every hand well-ordered planks were piled reposefully, and under foot the ground was soft with sawdust. And here I lost no time in taking out my letter. As I did so, a new and most absorbing possibility flashed upon me. The smaller inclosure might be a photograph, one of those unmounted carbon prints taken by amateurs, and so frankly truthful that only good-looking people care to send them to their friends. I felt my pulses flutter at the thought and pressed the blue envelope to my lips, secure from observation, as I fancied.

But such was not the case. A large check-jumpered person, with a protruding jaw, perched on a heap of railway ties, had been regarding me with tolerant amusement all the while. "Well, what in [Pg 229] Paradise are you up to anyhow?" he drawled complacently.

"I trust that you will pardon the intrusion," I replied politely; "but I have taken the liberty of stepping in to read a letter."

"Then you can just step out again," returned the man with a deliberation in itself a rudeness. "This ain't no reading-room."

"But," I protested, "surely you will not grudge me a modicum of solitude and quiet?"

"I guess we ain't got what you want in stock to-day. I guess you'd better inquire up at the jail; they make a sort of specialty of just them things."

I left, unwilling to expose myself to further incivility; and presently I quitted the gas-house region altogether; but not before I had been driven from a brewery by a dog, and from a canal-boat by a woman bargeman; a stevedore had challenged me to fight, and an intoxicated roustabout had [Pg 230] given me an apple. And nowhere, nowhere, did I find a spot to read my letter.

Time passed; how much I shall never know, for I had lost all track of it. Nor could I find to-day the little bridge where, weary and disheartened, I sank down upon the broad stone coping to rest. Below, the waters tumbled foaming through a raceway toward the turbines of a power-house, with a sound that mingled pleasantly with the whir of wheels and dynamos within. In contrast with the sordid sights and sounds of Selbyville, the place was grateful and refreshing to the eye and ear, and looking from the coping I was pleased to perceive a shelf of masonry projecting below, wide enough to form a comfortable seat, and easily reached by a short drop from the bridge. Here, indeed, was an oasis, a refuge, a retreat. But unfortunately the place had been preëmpted by a negro, who appeared to be asleep.

"Hello!" I shouted, for nothing short of manslaughter could now balk me of my purpose. "Hello, [Pg 231] my colored friend! Would you not like to earn a dollar?"

"Sure, boss!" he answered, waking instantly.

"Then go," I said, "directly to the City Hall and find out if the Mayor is in town."

The man demurred, until the actual contact of the dollar with his palm convinced him of my good faith. And presently he clambered to the bridge, while I lost little time in dropping to his place.

"Say, boss," he called down to me in a nervous whisper, "if youse done goin' to drown yourself, won't you please wait till I get off where I cain't hear you splash?"

At last I was alone, at last secure from interruption! And scarcely daring to believe in such good fortune, I crouched against the wall and held my breath. So minutes went by, each one an agony of fear that some fresh difficulty might yet confront me. Then, gaining strength, I cautiously drew forth once more the treasured blue envelope.

My hands were tremulous, my nerves tingling with emotion; but I had schooled myself to bear whatever good or evil Fate might have in store. The strong cool wind from beneath the bridge brought me new courage, and the very machinery seemed to murmur promises. I pressed my blue envelope to my heart; I laid it on my knee for one brief instant, to experience again the tantalizing delights of anticipation. [Pg 232]

The breeze became a gale. It threatened to dislodge my hat, and in one mad moment I raised both hands. In the next—I know not how it happened—in the next, I saw my letter far below where the wild waters whirled. For an instant it leaped and danced before me, lighter than the foam, and then with one last flash of blue it disappeared in the black waters of the turbine pit.—

> "Continued on page 14," *Sunday Magazine*, April 1, '07.

Much as I dislike superlatives, I may say that never have I been so disappointed and annoyed.

> ("If you have read this story, it may be well to remind you that this is April 1st."—Ed. *Sunday Magazine*.)

THE MONEY METER

[Pg 233]

THE MONEY METER

[Pg 235]

Hiram Clatfield, upon the threshold of his office, peered out into the counting-room in a manner difficult to associate with the inscriptions on the plate-glass door half open at his back. "Private" was printed there in gilded letters, and "President," but the tone of the president was almost that of one who asks a favor as he said:

"Mr. Wattles, if you should happen to be disengaged, I should like to speak with you a moment."

The cashier, wheeling on his lofty-legged stool, gave one regretful glance toward a regiment of figures, a marching column six abreast from which he had been casting out the nines, and replied resignedly:

"I'm disengaged at present."

"Then please come in," said Mr. Clatfield, accepting the untruth with gratitude. "Come in and shut the door." [Pg 236]

The room marked "President," paneled in quartered oak much like the state apartment of a private car, contained a polished desk, six chairs with red morocco seats, a Turkish rug, and the portrait of a former president done in oil. Beneath the picture, upon a pedestal and protected by a dome of glass, stood a small machine which, from time to time, emitted jerky, nervous clicks, and printed mystic characters upon an endless paper tape.

The former president upon the wall smiled perpetually, with eyes directed to the plate-glass door, as though it pleased him to observe through it the double row of neat young men on lofty stools so well employed. Perhaps it pleased him better still to watch the little, brass-barred windows farther on, where countless faces came and went all day from ten till three—thin faces and fat, and old and young, and hands, innumerable hands, some to carry and some to fetch, but all to leave a tribute for whomever might be sitting at the polished desk. [Pg 237]

"Please read this item, Mr. Wattles," said the president, indicating with a well-kept finger-nail a paragraph in the *Morning Mercury*, and, putting on his glasses, Mr. Wattles read:

"Conservative estimates place the fortune of Hiram Clatfield at seven million dollars."

At the same moment the small machine appeared to rouse itself.

"Con-ser-vat-ive—est-i-ma-tes—place—the—for-tune—of—Hi-ram—Clat-field—at——" it seemed to repeat deliberately, as for dictation, and stopped.

"S.e.v.e.n.m.i.l.l.i.o.n.d.o.l.l.a.r.s," concluded a typewriter in the counting-room beyond the plate-glass doors, and the sentence ended in the tinkle of the little bell which gives warning that a line is nearly finished.

Mr. Wattles, having laid the paper on the table, wiped his glasses with a pocket-handkerchief and held them to the light. [Pg 238]

"Do you propose to take action in the matter?" he inquired. "Is there anything I can do?"

Mr. Clatfield moved to the center of the rug and thrust both hands into his trousers' pockets.

"Wattles," he said, "is that thing true?"

"Not altogether," said the other, betraying nothing in his tone beyond a wish for accuracy. "I

think it would be safe to say at least—allowing for fluctuations—ten million dollars."

"Al-low-ing—for—fluc-tua-tions——" repeated the ticker.

"T.e.n.m.i.l.l.i.o.n.d.o.l.l.a.r.s," the typewriter concluded.

Between the two men on the Turkish rug there was so little to choose that, with straw cylinders to protect his cuffs and a left coat sleeve somewhat marred by wiping pens, either might have been cashier, and without these tokens either might very well have been president. The banker [Pg 239] was a trifle bald and gray about the temples. The other's hair was still erect and of a hue which had suggested "Chipmunk" as a fitting nickname in his school days.

"Wattles," said the banker slowly, "what is ten million dollars?"

"Why, it's—it's a heap of money," faltered the cashier.

The other took a turn towards the margin of the rug and back.

"That doesn't help me," he protested. "That doesn't give me an idea. You used to be so full of fancies," he went on, somewhat pettishly; "you used to bring a book of poetry to read at lunch when we were kids outside there"—he nodded toward the counting-room. "You used to laugh at me for puzzling over discounts, and say I went about with blinders, like a horse, to shut out everything that was not right ahead. I never could imagine anything—I can't imagine ten millions now. How long would it be if it were all in dollar bills placed end to end? How big would it be if it [Pg 240] were in two-cent postage stamps?"

"It would take a little time to work that out," replied the other man respectfully, though not without a twinkle in his eye. "I can let you have a statement in half an hour."

"Don't do it, then," rejoined the banker. "I'm sick of figures, and you never needed them when you used to make up fairy tales as we went roaming through the streets after the bank had closed."

"I often make up fairy stories still," said Mr. Wattles, "after the bank has closed."

"Do you?" demanded the other. "Do you still? And do you still take walks before going home to supper?"

"Yes, when it does not rain."

"And do you think it will be clear to-night?"

Mr. Wattles laughed.

"To-night I shall be late in getting off," he said, "because to-morrow is a holiday."

[Pg 241] "What holiday?" inquired Mr. Clatfield.

"Christmas," said Mr. Wattles.

"I don't pretend to keep track of all the holidays," said Mr. Clatfield.

"No," said Mr. Wattles, "I suppose not."

It was a busy day at the bank, and the city clocks had sounded six before the cashier set the time-locks in the vault and bade good-night to the watchman at the door. But if he was surprised to find an old companion waiting on the steps, his face did not betray the fact.

"I thought I'd walk a little way with you," explained the banker, with an attempt at carelessness that overshot the mark.

"All right," said Mr. Wattles, buttoning up his serviceable coat and bestowing a quick, chipmunk glance upon the weather. "You won't mind if I stop to get my collars?"

[Pg 242] A misty rain was falling, and the streets were filled with people hurrying home from work. As the two men fell in with the procession the banker gave an awkward little hop to catch the step.

"I don't suppose you take your laundry to the same place still?" he speculated.

"Oh, yes, the same old place," replied the other. "Mrs. Brennan's dead, of course, but Mary Ann still carries on the business."

"You don't mean little Mary Ann?"

"Yes, she's big Mary Ann now, and has five children of her own. Her husband was a switchman in the yards until he got run over by an engine two years ago."

Connected talk was difficult in the jostling crowd, and often the two men proceeded for half a block in silence. Once Mr. Wattles dived into a little shop to buy tobacco for his pipe. On his return he found the banker occupied with landmarks.

"Didn't there use to be a grocery over there?" asked Mr. Clatfield.

[Pg 243] "Yes, where the tall building now stands," replied the other. "Do you remember the fat groceryman who used to sell us apples?"

"Oh, yes," the banker rejoined, "and they were first rate apples, too. Strange, but I can't eat apples now; they don't agree with me."

"No," said Mr. Wattles, "I suppose not."

The lighted windows of a great department store made an arcade of radiance in the murky night, creating an illusion of protection so strong that one might well believe oneself indoors. The rain was changing into snow, which melted under foot but hung about the hair and beards and shoulders of the passers-by. Along the curb a row of barrows displayed cheap toys and Christmas greens for sale.

"Do you remember how we used to linger at the shops, and pick out presents and imagine we had lots of money?" Mr. Wattles asked.

"That was your game," answered Mr. Clatfield. "I never could imagine anything. I could see only the things you pointed out." [Pg 244]

It seemed to the banker that in the place of his middle-aged cashier there walked beside him an odd, alert little boy, with bristling hair and beady eyes, and he caught himself looking about him in an old, vain hope of being able first to catch sight of something interesting. As they turned into a less frequented street he asked:

"What became of the old woman who made butterscotch?"

"She made the last in '81," replied the other. "The penny-in-the-slot machines broke up her business."

"Really?" the banker commented. "It seems a pity."

The air was growing colder and the dancing motes of snow made halos about every street-lamp.

"Don't they look like swarms of Mayflies?" remarked Mr. Wattles. "One might almost believe it was summer."

"Yes, so one might," assented Mr. Clatfield, "now that you speak of it." [Pg 245]

A few steps up a slippery alley they stopped before a shabby little house, the shabbiest of a row of little houses, each one of which displayed the legend "Washing Done."

"Come in," said the cashier, as he pushed open the door.

Within, a tall spare woman stood with bare red arms before a washtub on a backless wooden chair. Upon the floor, amid the heaps of linen waiting for the tub, a litter of small children rolled and tumbled like so many puppies. Festoons of drying shirts and handkerchiefs hung in an atmosphere of steam and suds.

At sight of Mr. Wattles the woman broke into a flood of explanation and excuse. The water had been frozen all the week, the sun had refused to shine, the baby had been sick. There were a dozen reasons why he could not have his collars, as the speaker called on Heaven to bear witness. [Pg 246]

"You'd have 'em on your neck this minute," she declared, "if work could put them there, for it's meself that needs the money for me rint."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Wattles, "I fancied that your claim against the railway had left you pretty comfortably off."

"Claim, is it?" cried the laundress. "Claim against the railway? Faith, after keeping me waiting for two years they threw me out of court. They said that Mike contributed his negligence and that it served him right."

"That seems a little hard," commented Mr. Clatfield guardedly, for he was a director in the railway.

"Small blame to you, but you're a gentleman!" exclaimed the washerwoman.

"At least your husband left you quite a little family," the banker ventured to suggest.

"Contributory negligence again!" said Mr. Wattles under his breath.

"It's all a body has to do to keep them fed," lamented Mary Ann, "as maybe you know well yourself, sir, if you've childer of your own." [Pg 247]

"I have none," said the other.

"God pity you!" returned big Mary Ann.

"Ah, that reminds me," put in Mr. Wattles, and coming nearer to the laundress, he explained: "My friend here is the banker, Mr. Clatfield."

"It's proud I am this day," she answered, with a courtesy.

"He has no children," went on Mr. Wattles, "but he is very anxious to adopt one, and knowing that you have more than you really need——"

"What are you saying?" began Mr. Clatfield, but his voice was drowned in an outbreak from the woman.

"Is it daft ye are?" she cried. Mr. Wattles continued, unheeding:

[Pg 248] "He is willing to give you ten thousand dollars for such a one as this"—indicating with his cane an animated lump upon the floor.

"Me Teddy, is it?" cried the mother, catching up the lump and depositing it for safety in an empty tub.

"Or what would you say to twenty thousand for this one here?" persisted Mr. Wattles, again making use of his cane.

"Sure that's me Dan," the woman almost shrieked, and another lump went into the tub.

"Well, we are not disposed to quarrel over trifles," went on Mr. Wattles cheerfully. "You select the child and name the price—twenty, thirty, forty thousand—all in cash."

"Gwan out of this, and take your dirty money wid yez!" cried Mrs. Murphy, ominously rolling a wet sock into a ball.

"Of course, if you feel that way, we shall not urge the matter," said Mr. Wattles coldly. "Good-evening, Mrs. Murphy."

[Pg 249] "Bad luck to yez for a pair of thavin' vipers!" she called after their retreating figures. "If I had me strength ye'd not get far."

"I am astonished at you, Wattles," said Mr. Clatfield when they were safe beyond the alley. "I would not have given a dollar for the lot."

"No," said Mr. Wattles, "I suppose not."

The two men walked along in silence for a time, while Mr. Clatfield occupied himself with efforts to divine the point of Mr. Wattles's ill-timed jest. More than once he would have cut short the expedition could he have thought of an excuse, and though the course was somewhat devious, they were headed in a general way toward his own front door, with its broad marble steps and iron lions. The people in the street were few and uninteresting, the houses dull and monotonous, each with its drawn yellow shades and dimly lighted transom, and the banker welcomed the sight of what appeared to be a gathering of some sort up ahead.

[Pg 250] They had come out upon a dreary square, surrounded by tall warehouses and wholesale stores, now tightly closed and barred with iron shutters. A line of vans and drays without their horses occupied an open space in violation of the law. From one of these a man addressed a little group of inattentive loiterers.

The audience changed constantly as those whose passing curiosity was satisfied moved off to be replaced by others, but the man did not appear to care how few or many stayed to listen. He was a young man, and his face, in the full glare of the electric light, was radiant with enthusiasm for his theme, whatever it might be. The cashier pushed his way into the crowd and Mr. Clatfield followed.

"I should think he would prefer to speak indoors a night like this," remarked the banker.

The speaker's subject was an old one, old as the tree of Eden, but never had the two newcomers heard a more effective speech. [Pg 251] Perhaps the setting of the bleak, deserted market-place created an illusion.

"That man is getting rich," he cried, "who can every day add a little to the surplus in his heart ——"

"What interest do you pay?" called out a bystander facetiously.

"None," replied the young man. "Ours is a profit-sharing enterprise."

"That don't mean anything," commented Mr. Wattles; "but it was a first-rate answer all the same. It made the people laugh."

"I wonder why?" demanded Mr. Clatfield.

The discourse ended presently and the audience dispersed, some with swinging dinner-pails and some with thin coats buttoned tightly at the neck.

"It does a fellow good to hear the world ain't going to the dogs," remarked a burly laborer, "even if it is just a crank who says it."

[Pg 252] "Good-evening," said the young man, jumping from his dray and landing within speaking distance of the two adventurers. "I'm glad to see you here."

"And we are glad to be here," answered Mr. Wattles. "We have been greatly interested, especially my friend Mr. Clatfield, the banker."

Mr. Clatfield drew himself erect, for he considered such an introduction unnecessary.

"I have heard of Mr. Clatfield often," said the other simply, "and I am happy now to make his

acquaintance. Good-evening, gentlemen; I hope you'll come again."

"One moment, please," the cashier interposed. "We will not detain you long, but my friend here has a proposition to make you. He is about to build a large church on the Heights, and he is anxious to secure a preacher who entertains the views you have expressed so well. May I ask you, sir, if you are free to undertake such a charge?"

The young man's face blushed red with gratified amazement. [Pg 253]

"A church?—and on the Heights?" he stammered.

"Yes," went on Mr. Wattles, "a large church—very large. I don't suppose you would be sorry to give up this sort of thing." He made a motion of his head toward the dray.

"Would that be necessary?" the young man asked.

"Naturally," rejoined the other. "The two could scarcely be combined."

"In that case," said the preacher, "I am not free."

"The salary, I should have told you, will be twenty thousand dollars."

"You ought to get a first-rate man for that amount," replied the preacher. "I should advise you to consult the Bishop."

"Thank you," said Mr. Wattles, "and good-night."

"Wattles," cried Mr. Clatfield, who had heard the conversation with stupefied astonishment which deprived him of the power of speech; "Wattles, I have not the slightest idea of building a church either on the Heights or anywhere else." [Pg 254]

"No," said Mr. Wattles, "I suppose not."

"I'm going home," announced the banker.

"All right," agreed the other. "We'll strike through here to Main Street."

At Main Street they were detained for several minutes at the corner where the trolleys cross, by the crowds waiting for the cars or flocking about the transfer agent like so many sheep for salt. They seemed a dull, bedraggled lot to Mr. Clatfield, just like every other lot who waited every night there for blue or red or yellow trolley cars. But the cashier's eyes went wandering from face to face, more in selection than in search, and presently he nudged his companion to call attention to a couple who stood apart a little from the rest under the shelter of a small, inadequate umbrella.

"What of them?" asked the banker crossly. "You need not look far to see a fellow and a girl." [Pg 255]

The fellow in this case was tall and stoutly built, and the fact that he wore no overcoat might have been set down to strenuous habits. But as Mr. Wattles noted, he was the only man without an evening paper, and he wore his derby hat reversed in order that a worn place on the rim might be less conspicuous.

"I'll bet that young man is terribly hard up," remarked Mr. Wattles.

"You don't want me to adopt him, do you?" demanded Mr. Clatfield.

"Oh, no, but just see how his shoulder is getting soaked with drippings from the wet umbrella."

"That's the girl's fault," said Mr. Clatfield. "I guess he wishes she were home."

She was a plain girl with freckles on her nose; she carried a lunch basket and her gloves were white about the seams, but as the young man whispered something in her ear even Mr. Clatfield thought that he had never seen a more attractive smile. When a blue car came along the young man helped her carefully to mount the step, and in shaking hands they laughed and made a little secret of the act. As the car went on its way the young man ran for cover to the awning beneath which stood the banker and the cashier. [Pg 256]

"Good-evening, sir," said Mr. Wattles. "I have seen you often at the bank."

"Oh, yes, indeed," replied the other, highly gratified to be recognized by one so great as Mr. Wattles. "I am there every day for my employers, Pullman & Pushings."

"An excellent firm," commented Mr. Wattles. "I understand they pay their people handsomely."

"Oh, as to that," responded the other, laughing, "it's rather handsome to pay at all in times like these."

"That's true," assented Mr. Wattles. "Times are dull, and more than likely to get worse."

"Oh, do you think so, really?" the young man asked rather wistfully. [Pg 257]

"Sure of it," answered the cashier, "and if you've any thought of asking for a raise of salary, I should advise you not to do so."

"I'm very much obliged for the advice," rejoined the other, "because I have been thinking——"

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Wattles, interrupting. "I want to introduce you to our president, Mr. Clatfield."

The junior clerk took off his hat and put it on again the right way by mistake. In his confusion he had not observed that Hiram Clatfield looked frigidly above his head; he only heard the cashier's voice continuing like enchanted music:

"Mr. Clatfield has for some time been looking for a private secretary. The salary would be commensurate with the responsibility from the first, and should you prove the right man—but of course we would make no promises. Do you think you would be disposed to consider such an opening?"

"Would I?" gasped the junior clerk. [Pg 258]

"And, by the way, you are not married, are you?"

"No," said the young man, "I'm not, but——"

"That's good," continued the cashier. "That's very fortunate, for Mr. Clatfield prefers that his confidential secretaries should be single men. In fact, he makes that an absolute condition."

"The deuce he does!" replied the junior clerk. "Then he can give the place to anyone but me. There comes my yellow car. Good-night, and much obliged."

"Wattles," cried Mr. Clatfield, "have you gone crazy? I do not want a private secretary on any terms!"

"No," answered Mr. Wattles, "I suppose not."

The lighted trolley cars went shooting past. The wind had risen till the big umbrella of the transfer agent threatened to go sailing skyward like a yellow parachute. Already at the corners the ground was getting white. A muffled clock somewhere struck seven. [Pg 259]

"Wattles," said Mr. Clatfield, "come home and dine with me. I'd like to talk about our walk."

"I can't to-night," replied the cashier. "I'm going to take dinner with a man named Briggs."

Mr. Clatfield tried to fancy what this Mr. Briggs was like and what his dinner would be like, but in either case failed to make a picture because he never could imagine anything.

"At least come with me to the door," he said.

It was not far to where the iron lions crouched, and presently the two men stood before them shaking hands.

"Good-night," said Mr. Clatfield. "This has been like old times. I suppose you'll not be at the bank to-morrow?"

"I shall be there for an hour perhaps to finish up some work," replied the cashier. "Is there anything I can do?"

He drew a memorandum book from his pocket. Holding the page in the light of a street lamp, his eyes fell on some small, neatly penciled figures. [Pg 260]

"By the way," he said, "I have figured out your problem. Ten million one-dollar bills placed end to end would reach one hundred and ten miles, forty-eight hundredths and a fraction."

"Thank you," said Mr. Clatfield.

"In two-cent stamps——" continued the cashier, but his employer interfered.

"Never mind the stamps," he said. "To-morrow, if you have time, I should like you to draw three checks upon my private account."

"Three checks——" repeated Mr. Wattles, preparing to make a note.

"For twenty thousand each—no, make it fifty thousand each."

"For fifty thousand dollars each—and payable to——"

Mr. Clatfield hesitated an instant, then went on desperately:

"One payable to big Mary Ann; one to the preaching fellow, and one—make it out to the girl with the freckles on her nose." [Pg 261]

The cashier paused, and for the first time in his long service ventured to dispute instructions.

"Hiram," he said, "what harm have they done you?"

Mr. Clatfield did not answer, but stood in silence, poking his cane into the iron lion's open mouth.

THE GUEST OF HONOR

[Pg 263]

THE GUEST OF HONOR

"Letters of introduction!" Clara sighed. "One can't help wishing they were made misdemeanors like other lottery tickets." And this being her third remark of kindred import, curiosity became at least excusable. So Mrs. Penfield stroked a sable muff in silent sympathy.

"We had one yesterday from Jack's Boston aunt," went on her charming hostess, "a Mrs. Bates, who is continually sending us spiritualists or people who paint miniatures, or Armenian refugees, just because we spent a week or so with her one summer when the children had the mumps. In Lent one does not mind, one rather looks for trials, but now one's dinner-table is really not one's own. Maude, do let me give you another cup of tea; it's awfully bad, I know; we have to buy it from the Dunbar girls. If one's friends would only not sell things one has to drink!" [Pg 266]

"Such a delightful little tea-pot would make any tea delicious, I am sure," murmured Mrs. Penfield, and the conversation rested while a noiseless menial entered, put wood upon the fire, and illuminated an electric bulb within an opalescent shell. An odor of cut flowers floated in the air and an exotic whiff of muffin.

Mrs. Fessenden, when she had made the tea, sank back once more among the cushions and stretched her small feet to the blaze.

"I am not at home, Pierre," she announced.

"Perfectly, Madame," replied the menial, as though the absence were self-evident.

Mrs. Penfield mused and sipped.

"Some women are so inconsiderate when they are old," she said remindingly.

"And so are most men when they are young," rejoined the lady of the cushions, "and Jack, though nice in many ways, is no exception. When I ask him to help by having unexpected men who must be fed to luncheon at the club, he says champagne at midday gives him apoplexy. And so we have to invite an unknown person to our very nicest dinner." [Pg 267]

"What unknown person?" inquired Mrs. Penfield, and Clara sighed.

"A Mr. Hopworthy," she replied. "Fancy, if you can, a man named Hopworthy."

Mrs. Penfield tried and failed.

"What is he like?" she asked.

"I haven't an idea. He called here yesterday at three o'clock—fancy a man who calls at three o'clock! and Jack insisted on inviting him for to-morrow night—and I had to give so much thought to to-morrow night!"

"Of course he is coming," put in Mrs. Penfield; "such people never send regrets."

"Or acceptances either, it would seem," returned her friend; "the wretch has not so much as answered, and soon it will be too late to get even an emergency girl." [Pg 268]

"Oh, one can always scare up a girl," the other said consolingly.

Pierre entered with a little silver tray.

"A note, if Madame pleases," he announced. Perhaps had Madame pleased a pineapple or a guinea-pig might have been forthcoming. When he had retired, Madame tore open the envelope. A flush of pleasure made her still more charming.

"Hopworthy has been seriously injured!" she cried almost in exultation.

"And how much anxiety you have had for nothing, dear!" said Mrs. Penfield, rising. "So often things turn out much better than we dare to hope. What does he say?"

"Oh, only this; he writes abominably," and Clara read:

> Dear Mrs. Fessenden:
>
> I assure you, nothing less than a serious injury could prevent my availing myself of your charming invitation for Wednesday evening....

"Oh, Maude, you can't think what a relief this is!" [Pg 269]

"But——" began Mrs. Penfield and paused, while Clara, folding the note, tore it deliberately in twain.

"I don't believe he has been seriously hurt at all," she said on second thought. "He simply did not want to come. Fancy a man who invents such an excuse!"

"But——" began Mrs. Penfield once more, when Mrs. Fessenden interposed.

"I shall hope never to hear his wretched name again," she said. "Maude, dear, you won't forget

to-morrow night?"

"Not unless Butler forgets me," said Mrs. Penfield, whereat both ladies laughed the laugh that rounds a pleasant visit.

"Jack," whispered Clara, "please count and see if everyone is here; there should be twenty."

It was Wednesday evening, and the Fessenden's Colonial drawing-room housed an assembly to make the snowy breast of any hostess glow with satisfaction, especially a hostess possessing one inch less of waist and one inch more of husband than any lady present. [Pg 270]

"Exactly twenty," Jack announced; "that is, if we count the Envoy and the Countess each as only one, which don't seem quite respectful."

"Please don't try to be silly," said his wife, suspecting stimulant unjustly.

To her the function was a serious achievement, nicely proportioned, complete in all its parts; from Mrs. Ballington's tiara—a constellation never known to shine in hazy social atmospheres—to the Envoy Extraordinary's extraordinary foreign boots. Even the Countess, who wore what was in effect a solferino tea-gown with high-bred unconcern, was not a jarring note. Everybody knew how the Countess's twenty priceless trunks had gone to Capetown by mistake, and her presence made the pretty drawing-room a *salon*, just as the Envoy's presence made the occasion cosmopolitan. When the mandolin club in the hall struck up a spirited fandango, no pointed chin in all the town took on a prouder tilt than Clara Fessenden's. [Pg 271]

The Envoy Extraordinary had just let fall no less a diplomatic secret than that, in his opinion, a certain war would end in peace eventually, when Mrs. Penfield, who happened to be near, inquired:

"Oh, Clara, have you heard anything more of that Mr. Hopworthy?"

"Don't speak to me of him!" retorted Clara, clouding over. "When Jack called at his hotel to leave a card, he had the effrontery to be out. Just fancy, and we had almost sent him grapes!"

"But——" began Mrs. Penfield.

Pierre was at the door; one hand behind him held the orchestra in check.

"Madame is served," he formed his lips to say, but having reached "Madame," he found himself effaced by someone entering hurriedly—a tall young man with too abundant hair and teeth, but otherwise permissible.

The new arrival paused, took soundings, as it were, divined the hostess, and advanced upon her with extended hand. Evidently it was one of those amusing little incidents called "contretemps," which often happen where front doors are much alike, and the people on the left have odd acquaintances. [Pg 272]

"I trust I am not late," the blunderer began at once. "It was so kind of you to think of me; so altogether charming, so delightful." His eyes were dark and keen, his broad, unsheltered mouth, which seemed less to utter than to manufacture words, gave the impression of astonishing productive power, and Clara, though sorry for a fellow-creature doomed to rude enlightenment, was glad he was not to be an element in her well-ordered little dinner. But as her guests were waiting she gave a slight impatient flutter to her fan. The other went on unobservant.

"One can say so little of one's pleasure in a hurried note, but I assure you, my dear Mrs. Fessenden, nothing short of a serious accident——"

Where had she met this formula before?

"Oh, Mr. Hopworthy!" she responded with a smile, an automatic smile, self-regulating and self-adjusting, like the phrase that followed, "I am so glad you were able to come." And turning to her husband, she announced, too sweetly to leave her state of mind in doubt: [Pg 273]

"Jack, here is Mr. Hopworthy, your aunt's old friend."

With her eyes she added:

"Fiend, behold your work!"

Jack grasped the stranger's hand and wrung it warmly.

"I'm glad you're out again," he said. "Now tell my wife just how you left Aunt Bates." And so saying he backed toward the door, for he could be resourceful on occasion. Two minutes later when he reappeared his face was wreathed in smiles.

"It's all serene," he whispered to his wife. "They have crowded in another place at your end. We'll make the best of it."

Perhaps it occurred to Clara that things to be made the best of were oftenest crowded in at her end, but she had no time to say so, for Pierre had come into his own again—Madame was served. [Pg 274]

Jack led, of course, with scintillescent Mrs. Ballington, he having flatly refused to take in the

Countess. Jack's point of view was always masculine, and often elementary.

The Countess followed with a Mr. Walker, who collected eggs, and was believed to have been born at sea, which made him interesting in a way. Then came Maude Penfield, preceding Lena Livingston, according to the tonnage of their husbands' yachts. In truth, the whole procession gave in every rank new evidence of Clara's kindly forethought. For herself, she had not only the Extraordinary, but, by perverse fate, another.

"Mr. Hopworthy," she explained, bringing both dimples into play, "a very charming girl has disappointed us. I hope you don't mind walking three abreast."

Clara's untruths were never compromises. When they should be told, she told them, scorning to keep her score immaculate by subterfuge. "Though the Recording Angel may be strict," she often said with child-like faith, "I am convinced he is well-bred." [Pg 275]

The pleasant flutter over dinner cards ended as it should in each guest being next the persons most desired—each guest, but not the hostess. For Jack's resourcefulness having accomplished the additional place, stopped short, and his readjustment of the cards, which had been by chance, had brought the Envoy upon Clara's left and given to Mr. Hopworthy the seat of honor.

For a moment Clara hesitated, hoping against hope for someone to be taken ill, for almost anything that might create an opportunity for a change of cards. But while she stood in doubt the diplomat most diplomatically sat down. Beyond him the Countess was already drawing off her gloves as though they had been stockings, and further on the gentleman born at sea seemed pleased to find his dinner roll so like an egg. [Pg 276]

It was one of those unrecorded tragedies known only to woman. The failures of a man leave ruins to bear testimony to endeavor; a woman's edifice of cobweb falls without commotion, whatever pains its building may have cost.

"I gave you that seat," said Clara to the diplomat in dimpled confidence, "because the window on the other side lets in a perfect gale of draught."

"A most kind draught to blow me nearer my hostess's heart," he answered, much too neatly not to have said something of the sort before.

Fortunately both the Envoy and the Countess appreciated oysters, and before the soup came, Clara, outwardly herself again, could turn a smiling face to her unwelcome guest. But Mr. Hopworthy was bending toward Maude, who seemed very much amused. So was the man between them, and so were several others.

Already he had begun to make himself conspicuous. People with broad mouths always make themselves conspicuous. She felt that Maude was gloating over her discomfiture. She detected this in every note of Maude's well-modulated laugh, and could an interchange of beakers with the stranger have been sure of Florentine results, Clara would have faced a terrible temptation. As it was, she asked the Envoy if he had seen the Automobile Show. [Pg 277]

He had, and by good luck machinery was his favorite topic, a safe one, leaving little ground for argument. From machinery one proceeds by certain steps to things thereby created, silk and shoes and books, and comes at length, as Clara did, to silverware and jewels, pearls and emeralds. And here the Countess, who mistrusted terrapin, broke in.

She had known an emerald larger than an egg—Mr. Walker looked up hopefully. It had been laid by Royalty at the feet of Beauty—Mr. Walker, who had been about to speak, resumed his research, and the Countess held the floor. [Pg 278]

She wore a bracelet given her by a potentate, whose title suggested snuff, as a reward for great devotion to his cause, and its exhibition occupied a course.

Meanwhile the hostess, as with astral ears, heard snatches of the conversation all about her.

"And do you think so really, Mr. Hopworthy?"

"Oh, Mr. Hopworthy, were you actually there?"

"Please tell us your opinion——"

Evidently Jack's aunt's acquaintance was being drawn out, encouraged to display himself, made a butt of, in point of fact! This came from taking Maude Penfield into her confidence. There was always a streak of something not exactly nice in Maude. As Clara, with her mind's eye, saw the broad Hopworthian mouth in active operation, she felt—the feminine instinct in such matters is unerring—that Butler Penfield cherished every phrase for future retaliation at the club, and Lena Livingston, who never laughed, was laughing. After all, if foreigners are often dull, at least they have no overmastering sense of humor. [Pg 279]

"My Order of the Bull was given me at twenty-six," the Envoy was relating, and though the story was a long one, Clara listened to it all with swimming eyes.

"Diplomacy is full of intrigue as an egg of meat," it ended, and once more Mr. Walker looked up hopefully.

Again the hostess forced herself to turn with semblance of attention to her right. But Mr.

Hopworthy did not appear to notice the concession. He did not appear to notice anything. He was haranguing, actually haranguing, oblivious that all within the hearing of his resonant voice regarded him with open mockery. Jack in the distance, too far away to apprehend the truth, exhibited his customary unconcern, for Jack's ideals were satisfied if at his table people only ate enough and talked. And perhaps it was as well Jack did not comprehend. [Pg 280]

"To illustrate," the orator was saying—fancy a man who says "to illustrate." "This wine is, as we may say, dyophysitic"—here Mr. Hopworthy held up his glass and looked about him whimsically—"possessed of dual potentialities containing germs of absolute antipathies—" Even Jack, could he have heard, must have resented the suggestion of germs in his champagne.

"Perhaps you would rather have some Burgundy with your duck," suggested Mrs. Fessenden with heroic fortitude, and Mr. Hopworthy checked his train of thought at once.

"Aye, Madam," he rejoined, "there you revive an ancient controversy."

"I am sure I did not mean to," Clara said regretfully, and Mr. Hopworthy smiled his most open smile.

"A controversy," drawled Lena Livingston, "how very odd!"

"It was indeed," assented Mr. Hopworthy, and went on: "Once, as you know, the poets of Reims and Beaune waged war in verse over the respective claims of the blond wine and the brunette, and so bitter grew the fight that several provinces sprang to arms, and Louis the Fourteenth was forced to go to war to keep the peace." [Pg 281]

It was pure malice in Maude to show so marked an interest in a statement so absurd, and it was fiendish in the rest to encourage Mr. Hopworthy. Even the most insistent talker comes in time to silence if nobody listens.

"Oh, M. Hop—Hop—Hopgood," cried the Countess, "if you are a savant, perhaps you know my Axel!"

"And have you taken out a patent for your axel?" asked the diplomat, whose mind reverted to mechanics.

The Countess favored him with one glance through her lorgnettes—a present from the exiled King of Crete—and straightway took her bag and baggage to the hostile camp. For, of course, the young Count Axel was known to Mr. Hopworthy, or at least he so declared. [Pg 282]

"Please tell me how you won your Order of the Bull," said Clara to the diplomat, her one remaining hope.

"I think I mentioned that just now," he answered, and conversation perished.

And thus the dinner wore away, a grim succession of demolished triumphs. When after an æon or two Clara gave the signal for retreat, she sought her own reflection in the glass to make sure her hair was still its normal brown.

"Clara," said Mrs. Penfield, when the ladies were alone, "you might at least have warned us whom we were to meet."

Mrs. Fessenden drew herself erect. Her breath came fast, her eyes were bright, and she had nearly reached the limit of forbearance toward Maude.

"Mrs. Penfield—" she began with dignity, but Maude broke in.

"I must have been a baby not to have recognized the name."

Clara hesitated, checking the word upon her lips, for with her former friend, to be inelegant was to be sincere. [Pg 283]

"I do not understand," she substituted prudently.

"To think, my dear, of you being the first of us to capture Horace Hopworthy and keeping it from me!" cried Maude.

"I am sure I mentioned that we hoped to have him," murmured Mrs. Fessenden.

"So sweet of you to give us such a surprise, it was most delightful," Lena Livingston drawled.

"Your house is always such a Joppa for successful genius," declared Mrs. Ballington, "or is it Mecca? I've forgotten which. How did you come to know he was in town?"

"Jack's relatives in Boston always send us the most charming people with letters," answered Clara. "Shall we take coffee on the balcony? The men are laughing so in the smoking-room we can't talk here with any comfort."

Later—an hour later—when the last carriage-door had slammed, Jack lit a cigarette and said: [Pg 284]

"That Hoppy fellow seemed to make a hit."

Clara yawned.

"Yes, he was rather a fortunate discovery," she said, "but, Jack, we really ought to take a literary

magazine."

THE MAN WITHOUT A PENSION

[Pg 285]

THE MAN WITHOUT A PENSION

[Pg 287]

He was a dapper little man with a gray pointed beard, and he wore knickerbockers and russet hunting gaiters, nearly new. A jaunty Alpine hat was perched upon his head, and as he pursued his cautious way along the cañon's edge it would be hard to fancy anyone less in touch with his surroundings. He seemed uncertain of the trail, mistrustful of himself, or unaccustomed to mountain atmosphere, for within the last hundred yards of the camp he paused in every dozen steps to listen or to recover breath.

There was no sound anywhere except the moan of pine trees, and no motion but the perpetual trembling in the aspen undergrowth. The greater trees nearly met above the cañon; the lesser clung along its brink, leaning far out to catch the sun and send broken lights and colors to the [Pg 288] water far below. Contrasting with the unchanging twilight and boundless solitude of the forest, the meadow where the tents were pitched seemed to blaze with light, and the three small shelters took on the importance of a settlement, whose visible inhabitants consisted of a pair of mountain magpies possessed of an idle spirit of investigation.

The little man coughed a dry inadequate cough to herald his approach, while his foot dislodged a pebble which, rattling down the cañon, sent the magpies to a tree top in affected terror. From under the shelter of his hand he cast a glance about the camp which mastered its small array of unimportant details; two tents, wide open to the air, disclosed elementary sleeping quarters for half a score of men, coarse blankets covering heaps of twigs and pine needles, the bare necessities of a bivouac. The third tent was closed.

[Pg 289] Evidently perplexed, the visitor stood still. Had anyone been watching him, say from behind the ragged canvas of the closed tent, he must have seemed a nervous, apprehensive little man. There came a sound which might have been a derisive chuckle and might have been a magpie in the trees. The visitor controlled a start and clenched his hands as though summoning courage. Then loudly as one who gives a challenge, he shouted, "Is there anybody here?"

The voice was resonant for so small a body, and the echoes caught the last word eagerly, and sent it back, clear from the cañon, faint from where the snow peaks cut the blue, deep from the hollow of the timber. "Here! Here!" as though a scattered army answered to a roll call. Immediately there followed another and louder "Here!" distinctly not an echo, and a gruff ungracious laugh.

The multitude of answers must have bewildered the stranger, for he looked everywhere about him, almost stupidly, except toward the only possible hiding place. It needed a second derisive laugh to guide him to the tent whose half-closed flap concealed the only custodian of the camp, a [Pg 290] man so tall that in his little shelter he gave the impression of a large animal inadequately caged or in a trap. His black hair fell below the ears; his jaws were hidden by a heavy beard cut square, through some freak of fancy, like the carved beards of human-headed Assyrian beasts.

"Ahem! I beg your pardon," began the little man after another cough.

"What do you want?" returned the other without looking up. He bent above a tin pan of dough, kneading the pliant stuff almost fiercely, with red knotted knuckles and sinewy forearms.

"My name," replied the visitor, "is Sands—Professor Sands of Charbridge University."

The man in the tent rolled his dough into a cannon ball and held it up at arm's length. "Sands," he repeated. "Charbridge University?" And striking his dough with his palm as though it could appreciate a joke, he added, "Well, you look it!" [Pg 291]

He wiped his hands upon a strip of burlap bagging which served him as apron, and deliberately surveyed the new comer. "How did you ever get so far from home all by yourself?" he asked with open insolence. A fuller view of his face disclosed incongruous tones of red about the roots of hair and beard, and a long scar on the left cheek.

"I am connected with our geological expedition," Professor Sands explained concisely. "We are camping in the valley, and this morning I ventured to explore the cañon on my own account, and have been tempted farther than I intended."

The large man put his hands upon his thighs and leaned against the tent pole. "So that's it?" he commented patronizingly. "Well, if I was you, I'd stick to camp, and not go roaming in the timber where you might get lost."

[Pg 292] "Quite so," the little man assented readily; "but I was told I should surely come upon the railway survey somewhere in the cañon, and I have had your stakes to guide me. The engineers are

doubtless working somewhere near here?" he added, taking off his hat to cool his head with its thin gray hair.

The other spat and eyed his visitor with amused contempt. "We don't lay out railroads sitting round the fire," he volunteered. "The boys are working up near timber line, and won't be back till dark, and the teamster's gone to Freedom City for more grub."

"Ah!" remarked the scientist. "Then we are quite alone. I'll rest a little, if I may."

He deposited an army haversack that he carried slung about his shoulder upon a flat boulder just outside the tent door and sat down beside it. "My geological specimens are rather heavy," he went on, wiping his brow. "With your permission I should like to label them before I forget their identity." [Pg 293]

The other, with his hands in his overall pockets, took a slouching step beyond the tent to overlook the sack's contents as they appeared—a small steel sorting hammer, a heap of broken bits of float, and a large flask with a silver top. He watched the geologist sort his specimens with an idle interest mingled with contempt—for the trade he did not understand, for the spotless handkerchief, for the physical weakness of the man himself.

"I suppose that's some sort of acid you've got in your bottle?" he speculated presently.

"I beg your pardon?" asked the professor, absorbed in his work; then added as the question's meaning reached him, "Ah, the flask? No, that contains whiskey. I always carry a supply in case of accident." Whistling softly, he marked another specimen, ignoring his host's nearer approach.

"Partner," the latter suggested, "if you'd like a bite to eat, you've only got to say so. That's mountain manners." [Pg 294]

The professor glanced up now and with an odd intentness in his look; no doubt his mind was still with his specimens. "You're very kind, I'm sure," he responded courteously; "but I have lunched already on my sandwiches. Thank you, Mr.——" He paused for a name.

The other chuckled with new-found amiability. "You needn't 'Mister' me," he said. "I'm Budd, Jim Budd the Scorcher, and if any man in camp don't like my grub he's got the privilege of going hungry."

"Ah, quite so, quite so," rejoined the scientist. "I'm very sure your cooking is excellent."

"That's what the boys tell me," returned the scorcher; "but, by blood! I've got 'em educated. I'll just set them biscuits to raise, and then we'll have a chat." He re-entered the tent, limping noticeably, and from the interior his voice was heard mingled with the clatter of utensils in blasphemous denunciation of everything about him. During this explosion the scientist from Charbridge made a rather singular experiment. [Pg 295]

He rose, and after a cautious glance behind him he crept to the verge of the precipice, looked down into the water swirling over jagged rocks far below, and pulling up a sod of wire grass let it drop, and watched it sink and reappear in single straws that circled and sank again. This done, he went back to his specimens.

The Scorcher's pibrock of vituperation had now changed to a tuneless chant, scarcely less vindictive in its cadence:

> Old John Rogers was burnt at the stake;
> His poor wife cried until her heart did break!

he sang, and the professor's listening face took on an expression out of keeping with the meaningless doggerel, the look of one who responds to an inexorable call.

"'Until her heart did break!'" he murmured. But when Budd appeared again he only asked if he was interested in geology. [Pg 296]

"I am if it's the sort that's got silver in it," replied the cook.

"One does not look for silver in sandstone formation," the professor explained.

"Do you mean to tell me the Almighty couldn't put silver in this here red rock?" Jim demanded, from the stone on which he had seated himself.

"No," replied the professor guardedly: "I say only that He did not. However, here is a bit of quartz ——"

"Say!" interrupted the cook, "I'm a heap more interested in the specimen you've got in that bottle." He was staring at the polished cap of the flask.

"Indeed, are you?" the other smiled a a tolerant smile. "Then perhaps you will do me the honor ——"

Budd seized the flask without a second invitation and raised it to his lips. He drank as dying men drink water, and when he stopped for lack of breath his face was fiery but for the white scar. As he lowered the bottle he met the professor's curious fixity of gaze, and wriggled uneasily before it. [Pg 297]

"Say, partner," he remonstrated, "your whiskey's all right; but I'm hanged if I like your eye! By blood! it goes ag'in me!"

"I beg your pardon," said the professor without averting his look. "I have the habit of close observation. And," he proffered the flask afresh, "the more you drink of that, the less I'll have to carry home."

Budd poured a generous portion into a tin cup and stared reflectively at the bright cap. His next remark, mellowed by whiskey, had a genial candor. "Say! if I'd a popped you over, as I had a mind to when you came along the trail, just think what I'd a missed!"

"And so you had a mind to pop me over?" queried the other. "May I ask why?" Having finished his labeling, he was at leisure to regard his companion still more closely. [Pg 298]

"There's fellers prowling in the timber I ain't got no use for," the cook explained, drinking. "But you're all right! You haven't got a cigar handy, now, have you?"

The scientist was well supplied, and as the cook bit off the end of a large and black cigar he sighed with satisfaction.

"I get the horrors sometimes," he explained. "I get as scary as a cottontail. Them quaking asps is enough to drive a feller crazy, anyhow."

"There's nothing like a little whiskey in such cases," remarked the professor, filling the extended cup.

"If this keeps up, one of us is liable to get drunk," remarked Budd. "That's a handy flask of yours. Come all the way from New York?"

"From Richmond, I believe," responded the other. "My brother found it on a battle field and sent it home to me."

"I take it you wasn't there yourself," the Scorcher chuckled. [Pg 299]

"No," said Professor Sands. "I was in bad health at the time."

"So was a lot of others," sneered Budd. "I wasn't feeling what you might call well myself; but I stuck to it till they biffed me in the leg—the hounds!—and put me out of business."

"Of course, you draw a pension," ventured the professor.

"No," said the cook, "I never asked for no pension. They've given one to about every feller what wasn't dead when the war broke out, but there hasn't been a bill passed yet that takes me in."

"Indeed?" His listener was politely observant.

"Yes, that's the truth," went on the cook. "I declare I feel real dopy or dotty or something. They pensioned every beat that came back with a knapsack full of rebel watches, but they left out old Jim. He don't wear no medals; he don't parade on Decoration Day to scatter posies; he don't get no free beer while the band plays 'Georgia'—'Hurrah for the flag that makes us free!'" he chanted hoarsely. "Hurrah for the Devil! that's what I say. Hurrah for the man without a pension!" [Pg 300]

"You interest me," interposed Professor Sands.

"Oh, do I?" cried the cook. "By blood! I've half a mind to interest you more. But don't look at me like that—I tell you, I don't like your eye!" He tried to shield himself from that unmoved gaze. "You're interested, are you? You'd like to put my case before your influential friends back East? You with your little bag of rocks and your little hammer and your gloves! Did you ever in your life see anyone who wasn't a nickel-plated angel? Did you ever run across a real live blackguard out of a story paper? Did you ever see a man who couldn't show his face in a settlement by the light of day, and had to take up any job that kept him out of sight? I don't know why, but I've got to shoot my mouth off now if it hangs me. I've got to blab or go stark mad!" [Pg 301]

"I understand," said the professor.

"I was one of them patriots," Budd went on, speaking almost mechanically, as though hypnotized, "who enlisted for the boodle and then skipped out to work the racket somewhere else."

"In point of fact, a bounty jumper," his listener put in.

"Yes," agreed the cook, "that's what I was. They were paying three hundred gold for likely men to go down South and head off bullets, and that beat getting drafted, so I joined. Oh, those were great old days, great old days!"

"How long were you in the service?"

"About an hour and a quarter the first time," Budd replied. "It happened in New York, and when I'd signed the roll they put me in a squad to march off somewhere to get our uniforms. The sergeant was a tall guy, greener than spinach, who'd drifted down from Maine a week before, and didn't know no more about New York than a bull calf knows about the New Jerusalem; but he made a bluff and asked the feller next me, whose name was Butch, to give him points at every corner. Well, Butch directed, and His Nibs kept on commanding 'Column left!' and 'Column right!' till we got down to the toughest sort of a district—gas works and lumber yards and such. I [Pg 302]

didn't know the game, but I dropped to it quick enough when Butch says in a whisper, 'Here's our chance!' and it happened to be the neatest chance a new beginner ever had. You see, in those days when there was a fire pretty near everybody was welcome to catch hold and help pull the machine, and there was always a crowd that come along to holler and keep up the excitement. Well, that's the sort of outfit we come up against. They filled the whole street, yelling and pushing, and a feller either had to turn and run with them or get knocked down. I didn't stop to see what became of the balance of the squad. I sloped up one street and down another, going like a jack rabbit, till I found myself before a ferry boat. I paid my fare and crossed the river, just to get a chance to think." [Pg 303]

"Quite so," the professor sympathized.

"I never meant no harm," the cook protested—"not then. There wouldn't have been much sense in going back, especially when there were other recruiting offices right there in Jersey City. I got another three hundred, but my new sojer clothes was spoiled when I fell off the transport in the dark the night before we sailed—and got drownded. Oh, it was easy enough those days, before a lot of duffers took to the business. But it got so arter awhile that we professionals had to keep away from cities and play the country stations—Citizens' Committees, Women's Aid Associations, and the substitute racket. Sometimes I did the farmer boy with cowhide boots and hayseed in my hair, and told about the mortgage on the old place, and the kid that was expected; and there wasn't anything they wouldn't do so I could leave the folks comfortable when I went off to the war. Oh, those were great times. In one day, out the next!" [Pg 304]

"And—and was the getting out as easy?" his hearer asked.

"Not quite," Budd admitted; "but pretty near. Say you were at a camp of instruction; then it might be a pass, or a little something to the sentry, or a brickbat in the dark, if you could throw straight. I gave a feller fifty to let me through once, and then the sucker peached on me, the lowdown sneak! But I got even with him later on. So I went marching out of Philadelphia with the band playing and the women crying and the men what was too delicate to go themselves singing out 'God bless you, boys!' I tell you what, professor, for a moment I come pretty near to wishing I was playing square."

"A passing sentiment, I'm sure," said the geologist. [Pg 305]

"Sure!" cried Budd, delighted with his hearer's sympathy. "I'd like to see the sentiment that would hold out after a couple of nights building intrenchments in the rain. How could I help it if when the sentry's back was turned the pick flew out of my hand and clipped him right behind the ear? It was the same cuss who had blocked my game the week before."

"Good!" laughed the professor.

"He dropped," went on the cook, "and that was all I wanted. I lit out and lay around in barns and corn cribs, living on raw carrots and what eggs I found in the straw, till I guessed they must be tired looking for me, and then one morning early I crept out and scared an old black aunty who was feedin' chickens into fits. But I reckon I wasn't the first strange bird she'd seen that summer, for she fed me, and that night she steered me to a friend of hers who was in the clothing business and did a little bartering evenings. He charged a hundred for a suit of hand-me-downs and twenty for a hair cut and a shave—we enlisters never argued over trifles—and shipped me back to Pennsylvania. But maybe you won't believe it—by that time I had sorter lost my nerve. I got a notion in my head that every man who looked my way was spying on me. I couldn't pass the time of day with anyone who didn't seem to talk about deserters. I was afraid to get a gold piece changed, for all the gold went out of sight about that time, and just to have one was suspicious. So what do you think I did? I walked right into a recruiting station and enlisted without getting a cent. 'Rah for the flag!' I says. 'Gimme a gun. I want to fight.' That was in Pittsburgh." [Pg 306]

The professor's start was too slight to break the narrative, but if possible his watchfulness deepened; he leaned forward and his eyes held those of Budd.

"Yes," the cook continued, "in Pittsburgh. Same old band; same old handkerchiefs waving; same old 'God bless you, boys!' I thought at first I was all right and 'twould be the same old game, but it wasn't. They had me spotted with a lot of others, and they kept us guarded like a parcel of wild beasts, for all we was enlisted regular in the 120th Pennsylvania." [Pg 307]

"The 120th Pennsylvania?" repeated the professor slowly.

"That's what I said!" Budd resented the interruption. "And I tell you it was no way to treat men. There must have been forty of us shut up in a baggage car with no light or air but from one door open at the end, and there we was for days and nights, and a tough lot, too! Bounty men and substitutes and drafted truck, slamming along to the front, cussing our luck, and everyone of us ready to bolt at the first chance. I stood it till I heard the guns roaring like sin, not five miles off. Say, did you ever hear that sound? Did you ever hear a gun you knew was fired at real men and sending them to Kingdom Come? I heard it once, and that was enough. We was laying flat along the floor, side by side as though we was dead already, and next me was a German-looking guy, what had been praying and swearing, turn about, ever since we started. When he heard the firing, he went clean off his nut; he'd have blown his brains out rather than take the chance of letting somebody else do it for him; he'd have fought the Union army single-handed sooner than listen to them shots another minute. Well, to make a long story short, him and me we fixed up a scheme." [Pg 308]

The speaker caught his breath to listen, for the forest seemed suddenly alive with sound and motion. A cloud swept down the valley of the North Fork, so low that shreds of scud were caught in the topmost branches. Hail pattered on the wire grass. The tent curtains flapped noisily, and in the shadow the aspen leaves flashed white as though a mailed army sprang from ambush.

[Pg 309] "Go on!" the professor urged, and the cook held up a brawny fist and shook it at the universe defiantly.

"I'll tell it now," he cried, "and all the winds that ever blew sha'n't shout me down! Here's how it was." He faltered, and the professor prompted him.

"There's where you lay," he said, making a gesture to indicate the ranks of trembling men.

"There's where we lay," Budd echoed dully.

"And there was the door," said the professor softly. He pointed to a tree at the cañon's brink.

"Yes, yes!" cried Budd, "there was the door. The platform was outside, and there were two on guard. I was to spring out first—so," he jumped up—"and tackle the one farthest off. The Dutchman was to grab the other from behind. Mine was a stout young feller."

"A stout young fellow," repeated the professor.

[Pg 310] "Yes," and the cook stood motionless as though some vision rose before him. "I can see him now, with straight back and crisp curly brown hair."

"A little curly," murmured the other.

"Percy, they called him," said Budd.

"Percy?" echoed the professor. "You are sure it was Percy?"

"Sure as you're sitting there!" cried Budd. "'Keep your eyes open, Percy, they're a bad lot.' That's what the corporal told him when he went on guard. Lord! but it was a pity!" He chuckled inanely, swaying on his feet.

"What then?" inquired the man from Charbridge, rising slowly.

Budd cowered before his questioner's eyes as he might have cowered when those long silent guns were booming had the tall young fellow turned.

"Nothing!" he muttered sullenly. "Nothing, so help me God! I didn't do it."

"You lie!" retorted the small man quietly.

[Pg 311] Budd laughed a foolish laugh. "There's where we lay," he babbled, "just where your foot is, me and the Dutchman and the balance of us, and here was the door——"

He lurched toward the aspen tree and laid a hand upon its trunk to keep from falling. The professor followed and stood close behind.

"What do you want?" cried Budd, wheeling in sudden panic.

"To learn the manner of my brother's death," the other answered between lips that scarcely moved.

The voice of the pines was like the rumble of a railway train; the winds boomed down from timber line like thunders of artillery; the hailstones struck the aspens' leaves like bullets, and over all the laugh of Budd rang in maniacal mirth.

The professor held his eye steadily; then abruptly: "Turn out the guard!" he shouted.

"Choke him, you big Dutch fool!" Budd called back in response, as with his bare arms he grappled with an invisible adversary.

[Pg 312] He of the straight back and curly hair had been a strong young fellow, but, taken unawares, the contest was bound to go against him. Once, it seemed, he had brought Budd to his knees; once he had nearly hurled him from the rocking car; but his knapsack must have hampered him, and his musket and heavy cartridge box. The bounty jumper fought in silence and with desperate method, gaining advantage every moment; while one hand pinioned a phantom forearm, the other closed with murderous clutch upon a ghostly throat. Meanwhile the professor stood by with folded arms watching critically, one would have thought impartially.

It was over presently, and Budd stood breathing hard. Then—

"Jump for your life!" commanded the professor.

Without an instant's hesitation, Budd crept to the cañon's brink and peered below.

[Pg 313] "All right!" he whispered. "Good-by, Dutch! We're free!"

And with a last grasp of the aspen tree he swung himself across the edge and dropped.

The boys were mad enough to find no supper ready when they came from timber line; but not surprised, for Budd was never one to give long notice when he changed his habitation. And if somewhere on a high shelf in an Eastern university—not Charbridge, by the way—there is still a

cube of red rock labeled "North Fork Cañon," it is the only memorial left of the man without a pension.

THE END

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