The Accident

Oliver Onions

Table of Contents

The Accident

Oliver Onions

I

The street had not changed so much but that, little by little, its influence had come over Romarin again; and as the clock a street or two away had struck seven he had stood, his hands folded on his stick, first curious, then expectant, and finally, as the sound had died away, oddly satisfied in his memory. The clock had a peculiar chime, a rather elaborate one, ending inconclusively on the dominant and followed after an unusually long interval by the stroke of the hour itself. Not until its last vibration had become too subtle for his ear had Romarin resumed the occupation that the pealing of the hour had interrupted.

It was an occupation that especially tended to abstraction of mind the noting in detail of the little things of the street that he had forgotten with such completeness that they awakened only tardy responses in his memory now that his eyes rested on them again. The shape of a door.

knocker, the grouping of an old chimney−stack, the crack, still there, in a flagstone somewhere deep in the past these things had associations; but they lay very deep, and the disturbing of them gave Romarin a curious, desolate feeling, as of returning to things he had long out−grown.

But, as he continued to stare at the objects, the sluggish memories roused more and more; and for each bit of the old that reasserted itself scores of yards of the new seemed to disappear. New shop−frontages went; a wall, brought up flush where formerly a recess had been, became the recess once more; the intermittent electric sign at the street's end, that wrote in green and crimson the name of a whiskey across a lamp−lit façade, ceased to worry his eyes; and the un−familiar new front of the little restaurant he was passing and repassing took on its old and well−known aspect again.

Seven o'clock. He had thought, in dismissing his hansom, that it had been later. His appointment was not until a quarter past. But he decided against entering the restaurant and waiting inside; seeing who his guest was, it would be better to wait at the door. By the light of the restaurant window he corrected his watch, and then sauntered a few yards along the street, to where men were moving flats of scenery from a back door of the new theatre into a sort of tumbril. The theatre was twenty years old, but to Romarin it was "the new theatre." There had been no theatre there in his day.

In his day! . . . His day had been twice twenty years before. Forty years before, that street, that quarter, had been bound up in his life. He had not, forty years ago, been the famous painter, honoured, decorated, taken by the arm

by monarchs; he had been a student, wild and raw as any, with that tranquil and urbane philosophy that had made his success still in abeyance within him.

As his eyes had rested on the door−knocker next to the restaurant a smile had crossed his face.

How had that door−knocker come to be left by the old crowd that had wrenched off so many others? By what accident had that survived, to bring back all the old life now so oddly? He stood, again smiling, his hands folded on his stick. A Crown Prince had given him that stick, and had had it engraved, "To my Friend, Romarin."

"You oughtn't to be here, you know," he said to the door−knocker. "If I didn't get you, Marsden ought to have done so. . . ."

It was Marsden whom Romarin had come to meet Marsden, of whom he had thought with such odd persistency lately. Marsden was the only man in the world between whom and himself lay as much as the shadow of an enmity; and even that faint shadow was now passing. One does not guard, for forty years, animosities that take their rise in quick outbreaks of the young blood; and, now that Romarin came to think of it, he hadn't really hated Marsden for more than a few months. It had been within those very doors (Romarin was passing the restaurant again) that there had been that quick blow, about a girl, and the tables had been pushed hastily back, and he and Marsden had fought, while the other fellows had kept the waiters away. . . . And Romarin was now sixty−four, and Marsden must be a year older, and the girl who knew? probably dead long ago. . . . Yes, time heals these things, thank God; and Romarin had felt a genuine flush of pleasure when Marsden had accepted his invitation to dinner.

But Romarin looked at his watch again it was rather like Marsden to be late. Marsden had always been like that had come and gone pretty much as he had pleased, regardless of inconvenience to others. But, doubtless, he had had to walk. If all reports were true, Marsden had not made very much of his life in the way of worldly success, and Romarin, sorry to hear it, had wished he could give him a leg−up. Even a good man cannot do much when the current of his life sets against him in a tide of persistent ill−luck, and Romarin, honoured and successful, yet knew that he had been one of the lucky ones. . . .

But it was just like Marsden to be late, for all that.

At first Romarin did not recognise him when he turned the corner of the street and walked towards him. He hadn't made up his mind beforehand exactly how he had expected Marsden to look, but he was conscious that he didn't look it. It was not the short stubble of grey beard, so short that it seemed to hesitate between beard and unshavenness; it was not the figure nor carriage clothes alter that, and the clothes of the man who was advancing to meet Romarin were, to put it bluntly, shabby; nor was it . . . but Romarin did not know what it was in the advancing figure that for the moment found no response in his memory. He was already within half a dozen yards of the men who were moving the scenery from the theatre into the tumbril, and one of the workmen put up his hand as the edge of a fresh "wing" appeared. . . .

But at the sound of his voice the same thing happened that had happened when the clock had struck seven. Romarin found himself suddenly expectant, attentive, and then again curiously satisfied in his memory. Marsden's voice at least had not changed; it was as in the old days a little envious, sarcastic, accepting lower interpretations somewhat willingly, somewhat grudging of better ones. It completed the taking back of Romarin that the chiming of the clock, the door−knocker, the grouping of the chimney−stack and the crack in the flagstone had begun.

"Well, my distinguished Academician, my " Marsden's voice sounded across the group of sceneshifters. . . .

"'Alf a mo, if you please, guv'nor," said another voice. .

For a moment the painted shut them off from one another.

* * *

In that moment Romarin's accident befell him. If its essential nature is related in arbitrary terms, it is that there are no other terms to relate it in. It is a decoded cipher, which can be restored to its cryptic form as Romarin subsequently restored it.

* * *

As the painter took Marsden's arm and entered the restaurant, he noticed that while the outside of the place still retained traces of the old, its inside was entirely new. Its cheap glittering wall−mirrors, that gave a false impression of the actual size of the place, its Loves and Shepherdesses painted in the style of the carts of the vendors of ice−cream, its hat−racks and its four−bladed propeller that set the air slowly in motion at the farther end of the room, might all have been matched in a dozen similar establishments within hail of a cab−whistle. Its gelatine−written menu−cards announced that one might dine there a la carte or table d'hôte for two shillings. Neither the cooking nor the service had influenced Romarin in his choice of a place to dine at.

He made a gesture to the waiter who advanced to help him off with his coat that Marsden was to be assisted first; but Marsden, with a grunted "All right," had already helped himself. A glimpse of the interior of the coat told Romarin why Marsden kept waiters at arm's−length. A little twinge of compunction took him that his own overcoat should be fur−collared and lined with silk.

They sat down at a corner table not far from the slowly moving four−bladed propeller.

"Now we can talk," Romarin said. "I'm glad, glad to see you again, Marsden."

It was a peculiarly vicious face that he saw, corrugated about the brows, and with stiff iron−grey hair untrimmed about the ears. It shocked Romarin a little; he had hardly looked to see certain things so accentuated by the passage of time. Romarin's own brow was high and bald and benign, and his beard was like a broad shield of silver.

"You're glad, are you?" said Marsden, as they sat down facing one another. "Well, I'm glad to be seen with you. It'll revive my credit a bit. There's a fellow across there has recognised you already by your photographs in the papers. . . . I assume I may . . .?"

He made a little upward movement of his hand. It was a gin and bitters Marsden assumed he might have. Romarin ordered it; he himself did not take one. Marsden tossed down the aperitif at one gulp; then be reached for his roll, pulled it to pieces, and Romarin remembered how in the old days Marsden had always eaten bread like
that began to throw bullets of bread into his mouth. Formerly this habit had irritated Romarin intensely; now . . . well, well, Life uses some of us better than others. Small blame to these if they throw up the struggle. Marsden, poor devil . . .

but the arrival of the soup interrupted Romarin' s meditation. He consulted the violet−written card, ordered the succeeding courses, and the two men ate for some minutes in silence.

"Well," said Romarin presently, pushing away his plate and wiping his white moustache, "are you still a Romanticist, Marsden?"

Marsden, who had tucked his napkin between two of the buttons of his frayed waistcoat, looked suspiciously across the glass with the dregs of the gin and bitters that he had half raised to his lips.

"Eh?" he said. "I say, Romarin, don't let's go grave−digging among memories merely for the sake of making conversation. Yours may be pleasant, but I'm not in the habit of wasting much time over mine. Might as well be making new ones. . . . I'll drink whiskey and soda."

It was brought, a large one; and Marsden, nodding, took a deep gulp.

"Health," he said.

"Thanks," said Romarin instantly noting that the monosyllable, which matched the other's in curtness, was not at all the reply he had intended. "Thank you yours," he amended; and a short pause followed, in which fish was brought.

This was not what Romarin had hoped for. He had desired to be reconciled with Marsden, not merely to be allowed to pay for his dinner. Yet if Marsden did not wish to talk it was difficult not to defer to his wish. It was true that he had asked if Marsden was still a Romanticist largely for the sake of something to say; but Marsden's prompt pointing out of this was not encouraging.

Now that he came to think of it, he had never known precisely what Marsden had meant by the word "Romance" he had so frequently taken into his mouth; he only knew that this creed of Romanticism, whatever it was, had been worn rather challengingly, a chip on the shoulder, to be knocked off at some peril or other. And it had seemed to Romarin a little futile in the violence with which it had been maintained. . . . But that was neither here nor there. The point was, that the conversation had begun not very happily, and must be mended at once if at all. To mend it, Romarin leaned across the table.

"Be as friendly as I am, Marsden," he said. "I think pardon me that if our positions were reversed, and I saw in you the sincere desire to help that I have, I'd take it in the right way."

Again Marsden looked suspiciously at him.

"To help? How to help?" he demanded "That's what I should like you to tell me. But I suppose (for example) you still work?"

"Oh, my work!" Marsden made a little gesture of contempt. "Try again, Romarin."

"You don't do any? . . . Come, I'm no bad friend to my friends, and you'll find me especially so."

But Marsden put up his hand.

"Not quite so quickly," he said. "Let's see what you mean by help first. Do you really mean that you want me to borrow money from you? That's help as I understand it nowadays."

"Then you've changed," said Romarin wondering, however, in his secret heart whether Marsden had changed very much in that respect after all.

Marsden gave a short honk of a laugh.

"You didn't suppose I hadn't changed, did you?" Then he leaned suddenly forward. "This is rather a mistake, Romarin rather a mistake," he said.

"What is?"

"This our meeting again. Quite a mistake."

Romarin sighed. "I had hoped not," he said.

Marsden leaned forward again, with another gesture Romarin remembered very well dinner knife in hand, edge and palm upwards, punctuating and expounding with the point.

"I tell you, it's a mistake," he said, knife and hand balanced. "You can't reopen things like this.

You don't really want to reopen them; you only want to reopen certain of them; you want to pick and choose among things, to approve and disapprove. There must have been somewhere or other something in me you didn't altogether dislike I can't for the life of me think what it was, by the way; and you want to lay stress on that and to sink the rest. Well, you can't. I won't let you. I'll not submit my life to you like that. If you want to go into things, all right; but it must be all or none. And I'd like another drink."

He put the knife down with a little clap as Romarin beckoned to the waiter.

There was distress on Romarin's face. He was not conscious of having adopted a superior attitude. But again he told himself that he must make allowances. Men who don't come off in Life's struggle are apt to be touchy, and he was; after all, the same old Marsden, the man with whom he desired to be at peace.

"Are you quite fair to me?" he asked presently, in a low voice.

Again the knife was taken up and its point advanced.

"Yes, I am," said Marsden in a slightly raised voice; and he indicated with the knife the mirror at the end of the table. "You know you've done well, and I, to all appearances, haven't; you can't look at that glass and not know it. But I've followed the line of my development too, no less logically than you. My life's been mine, and I'm not going to apologise for it to a single breathing creature. More, I'm proud of it. At least, there's been singleness of intention about it.

So I think I'm strictly fair in pointing that out when you talk about helping me."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," Romarin agreed a little sadly. "It's your tone more than anything else that makes things a little difficult. Believe me, I've no end in my mind except pure friendliness."

"No−o−o," said Marsden a long "no" that seemed to deliberate, to examine, and finally to admit. "No. I believe that. And you usually get what you set out for. Oh yes. I've watched your rise I've made a point of watching it. It's been a bit at a time, but you've got there. You're that sort. It's on your forehead your destiny."

Romarin smiled.

"Hallo, that's new, isn't it?" he said. "It wasn't your habit to talk much about destiny, if I remember rightly. Let me see; wasn't this more your style 'will, passion, laughs−at−im−possibilities and says,' et cetera and so forth? Wasn't that it? With always the suspicion not far away that you did things more from theoretical conviction than real impulse after all?"

A dispassionate observer would have judged that the words went somewhere near home.

Marsden was scraping together with the edge of his knife the crumbs of his broken roll. He scraped them into a little square, and then trimmed the corners. Not until the little pile was shaped to his liking did he look surlily up.

"Let it rest, Romarin," he said curtly. "Drop it," he added. "Let it alone. If I begin to talk like that, too, we shall only cut one another up. Clink glasses there and let it alone."

Mechanically Romarin clinked; but his bald brow was perplexed.

" 'Cut one another up?' " he repeated.

"Yes. Let it alone."

" 'Cut one another up?' " he repeated once more. "You puzzle me entirely."

"Well, perhaps I'm altogether wrong. I only wanted to warn you that I've dared a good many things in my time. Now drop it."

Romarin had fine brown eyes, under Oriental arched brows. Again they noted the singularly vicious look of the man opposite. They were full of mistrust and curiosity, and he stroked his silver beard.

"Drop it?" he said slowly. . . . "No, let's go on. I want to hear more of this."

"I'd much rather have another drink in peace and quietness. . . . Waiter!"

Either leaned back in his chair, surveying the other. "You're a perverse devil still," was Romarin's thought. Marsden's, apparently, was of nothing but the whiskey and soda the waiter had gone to fetch.

*** * ***

Romarin was inclined to look askance at a man who could follow up a gin and bitters with three or four whiskeys and soda without turning a hair. It argued the seasoned cask. Marsden had bidden the waiter leave the bottle and the syphon on the table, and was already mixing himself another stiff peg.

"Well," he said, "since you will have it so to the old days."

"To the old days," said Romarin, watching him gulp it down.

"Queer, looking back across all that time at 'em, isn't it? How do you feel about it?"

"In a mixed kind of way, I think; the usual thing: pleasure and regret mingled."

"Oh, you have regrets, have you?"

"For certain things, yes. Not, let me say, my turn−up with you, Marsden," he laughed. "That's why I chose the old place " he gave a glance round at its glittering newness. "Do you happen to remember what all that was about? I've only the vaguest idea."

Marsden gave him a long look. "That all?" he asked.

"Oh, I remember in a sort of way. That 'Romantic' soap−bubble of yours was really at the bottom of it, I suspect.

Tell me," he smiled, "did you really suppose Life could be lived on those mad lines you used to lay down?"

"My life," said Marsden calmly, "has been."

"Not literally."

"Literally."

"You mean to say that you haven't outgrown that?"

"I hope not."

Romarin had thrown up his handsome head. "Well, well!" he murmured incredulously.

"Why 'well, well'?" Marsden demanded. . . "But, of course, you never did and never will know what I meant."

"By Romance? . . . No, I can't say that I did; but as I conceived it, it was something that began in appetite and ended in diabetes."

"Not philosophic, eh?" Marsden inquired, picking up a chicken bone.

"Highly unphilosophic," said Romarin, shaking his head.

"Hm!" grunted Marsden, stripping the bone. . . . "Well, I grant it pays in a different way."

"It does pay, then?" Romarin asked.

"Oh yes, it pays."

The restaurant had filled up. It was one frequented by young artists, musicians, journalists and the clingers to the rather frayed fringes of the Arts. From time to time heads were turned to look at Romarin's portly and handsome figure, which the Press, the Regent Street photographic establishments, and the Academy Supplements had made well known. The plump young French−woman within the glazed cash office near the door, at whom Marsden had several times glanced in a way at which Romarin had frowned, was aware of the honour done the restaurant; and several times the blond−bearded proprietor had advanced and inquired with concern whether the dinner and the service was to the liking of M'sieu.

And the eyes that were turned to Romarin plainly wondered who the scallawag dining with him might be.

Since Romarin had chosen that their conversation should be of the old days, and without pick−ing and choosing, Marsden was quite willing that it should be so. Again be was casting the bullets of bread into his mouth, and again Romarin was conscious of irritation. Marsden, too, noticed it; but in awaiting the rôti he still continued to roll and bolt the pellets, washing them down with gulps of whiskey and soda.

"Oh yes, it paid," be resumed. "Not in that way, of course " he indicated the head, quickly turned away again, of an aureoled youngster with a large bunch of black satin tie, " not in admiration of that sort, but in other ways "

"Tell me about it."

"Certainly, if you want it. But you're my host. Won't you let me hear your side of it all first?

"But I thought you said you knew that had followed my career?"

"So I have. It's not your list of honours and degrees; let me see, what are you? R A., D C L., Doctor of Literature, whatever that means, and Professor of this, that, and the other, and not at the end of it yet. I know all that. I don't say you haven't earned it; I admire your painting; but it's not that. I want to know what it feels like to be up there where you are."

It was a childish question, and Romarin felt foolish in trying to answer it. Such things were the things the adoring aureoled youngster a table or two away would have liked to ask. Romarin recognised in Marsden the old craving for sensation; it was part of the theoretical creed Marsden had made for himself, of doing things, not for their own sakes, but in order that he might have done them. Of course, it had appeared to a fellow like that, that Romarin himself had always had a calculated end in view; he had not; Marsden merely measured Romarin's peck out of his own bushel. It had been Marsden who, in self −consciously seeking his own life, had lost it, and Romarin was more than a little inclined to suspect that the vehemence with which he protested that he had not lost it was precisely the measure of the loss.

But he essayed it essayed to give Marsden a résumé of his career. He told him of the stroke of sheer luck that had been the foundation of it all, the falling ill of another painter who had turned over certain commissions to him. He told him of his poor but happy marriage, and of the windfall, not large, but timely, that had come to his wife. He told him of fortunate acquaintanceships happily cultivated, of his first important commission, of the fresco that had procured for him his Associateship, of his sale to the Chantrey, and of his quietly remunerative Visitorships and his work on Boards and Committees.

And as he talked, Marsden drew his empty glass to him, moistened his finger with a little spilt liquid, and began to run the finger round the rim of the glass. They had done that formerly, a whole roomful of them, producing, when each had found the note of his instrument, a high, thin, intolerable singing. To this singing Romarin strove to tell his tale.

But that thin and bat−like note silenced him. He ended lamely, with some empty generalisation on success.

"Ah, but success in what?" Marsden demanded, interrupting his playing on the glass for a moment.

"In your aim, whatever it may be."

"Ah!" said Marsden, resuming his performance.

Romarin had sought in his recital to minimise differences in circumstances; but Marsden seemed bent on aggravating them. He had the miserable advantage of the man who has nothing to lose. And bit by bit, Romarin had begun to realise that he was going considerably more than halfway to meet this old enemy of his, and that amity seemed as far off as ever. In his heart he began to feel the foreknowledge that their meeting could have no conclusion. He hated the man, the look of his face and the sound of his voice, as much as ever.

The proprietor approached with profoundest apology in his attitude. M'sieu would pardon him, but the noise of the glass . . . it was annoying . . . another M'sieu had made complaint. . . .

"Eh? . . ." cried Marsden. "Oh, that! Certainly! It can be put to a much better purpose."

He refilled the glass.

The liquor had begun to tell on him. A quarter of the quantity would have made a clean−living man incapably drunk, but it had only made Marsden's eyes bright. He gave a sarcastic laugh.

"And is that all?" he asked.

Romarin replied shortly that that was all.

"You've missed out the R A., and the D C L."

"Then let me add that I'm a Doctor of Civil Law and a full Member of the Royal Academy,"

said Romarin, almost at the end of his patience. "And now, since you don't think much of it, may I hear your own account?"

"Oh, by all means. I don't know, however, that " he broke off to throw a glance at a woman who had just entered the restaurant a divesting glance that caused Romarin to redden to his crown and drop his eyes. "I was going to say that you may think as little of my history as I do of yours. Supple woman that; when the rather scraggy blonde does take it into her head to be a devil she's the worst kind there is. . . ."

Without apology Romarin looked at his watch.

"All right," said Marsden, smiling, "for what I've got out of life, then. But I warn you, it's entirely discreditable."

Romarin did not doubt it.

"But it's mine, and I boast of it. I've done barring receiving honours and degrees

everything everything! If there's anything I haven't done, tell me and lend me a sovereign, and I'll go and do it."

"You haven't told the story."

"That's so. Here goes then. . . . Well, you know, unless you've forgotten, how I began. . . ."

Fruit and nutshells and nutcrackers lay on the table between them, and at the end of it, shielded from draughts by the menu cards, the coffee apparatus simmered over its elusive blue flame.

Romarin was taking the rind from a pear with a table−knife, and Marsden had declined port in favour of a small golden liqueur of brandy. Every seat in the restaurant was now occupied, and the proprietor himself had brought his finest cigarettes and cigars. The waiter poured out the coffee, and departed with the apparatus in one hand and his napkin in the other.

Marsden was already well into his tale. . . .

The frightful unction with which be told it appalled Romarin. It was as he had said there was nothing he had not done and did not exult in with a sickening exultation. It bad, indeed, ended in diabetes. In the pitiful hunting down of sensation to the last inch he had been fiendishly ingenious and utterly unimaginative. His unholy curiosity had spared nothing, his unnatural appetite had known no ruth. It was grinning sin. The details of it simply cannot be told. . . .

And his vanity in it all was prodigious. Romarin was pale as he listened. What! In order that this malignant growth in Society's breast should be able to say "I know," had sanctities been profaned, sweet conventions assailed, purity blackened, soundness infected, and all that was bright and of the day been sunk in the quagmire that this creature of the night had called yes, stilled called by the gentle name of Romance? Yes, so it had been. Not only had men and women suffered dishonour, but manhood and womanhood and the clean institutions by

which alone the creature was suffered to exist had been brought to shame. And what was he to look at when it was all done? . . .

"Romance Beauty the Beauty of things as they are!" he croaked.

If faces in the restaurant were now turned to Romarin, it was the horror on Romarin's own face that drew them. He drew out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"But," he stammered presently, "you are speaking of generalities horrible theories things diabolically conceivable to be done "

"What?" cried Marsden, checked for a moment in his horrible triumph. "No, by God! I've done 'em, done 'em! Don't you understand? If you don't, question me! . . ."

"No, no!" cried Romarin.

"But I say yes! You came for this, and you shall have it! I tried to stop you, but you wanted it, and by God you shall have it! You think your life's been full and mine empty? Ha ha! . . .

Romance! I had the conviction of it, and I've had the courage too! I haven't told you a tenth of it! What would you like? Chamber−windows when Love was hot? The killing of a man who stood in my way? (I've fought a duel, and killed.) The squeezing of the juice out of life like that?" He pointed to Romarin's plate; Romarin had been eating grapes. "Did you find me saying I'd do a thing and then drawing back from it when we " he made a quick gesture of both hands towards the middle of the restaurant floor.

"When we fought?"

"Yes, when we fought, here! . . . Oh no, oh no! I've lived, I tell you, every moment! Not a title, not a degree, but I've lived such a life as you never dreamed of!"

"Thank God "

But suddenly Marsden's voice, which had risen, dropped again. He began to shake with interior chuckles. They were the old, old chuckles, and they filled Romarin with a hatred hardly to be borne. The sound of the animal's voice had begun it, and his every word, look, movement, gesture, since they had entered the restaurant, had added to it. And he was now chuckling, chuckling, shaking with chuckles, as if some monstrous tit−bit still remained to be told. Already Romarin had tossed aside his napkin, beckoned to the waiter, and said, "M'sieu dines with me. ."

"Ho ho ho ho!" came the drunken sounds "It's a long time since M'sieu dined here with his old friend Romarin! Do you remember the last time? Do you remember it? Pif, pan! Two smacks across the table, Romarin oh, you got it in very well! and then, brrrrr! quick! Back with the tables all the fellows round Farquharson for me and Smith for you, and then to it, Romarin! .

. . And you really don't remember what it was all about? . . ."

Romarin had remembered. His face was not the face of the philosophic master of Life now.

"You said she shouldn't little Pattie Hines you know you said she shouldn't Romarin sprang half from his chair, and brought his fist down on the table.

"And by Heaven, she didn't! At least that's one thing you haven't done!"

* * *

Marsden too had risen unsteadily.

"Oho, oho? You think that?"

A wild thought flashed across Romarin's brain.

"You mean ?"

"I mean? . . . Oho, oho! Yes, I mean! She did, Romarin.

The mirrors, mistily seen through the smoke of half a hundred cigars and cigarettes, the Loves and Shepherdesses of the garish walls, the diners starting up in their places, all suddenly seemed to swing round in a great half−circle before Romarin's eyes. The next moment, feeling as if he stood on something on which he found it difficult to keep his balance, he had caught up the table−knife with which he had peeled the pear and had struck at the side of Marsden's neck. The rounded blade snapped, but he struck again with the broken edge, and left the knife where it entered. The table appeared uptilted almost vertical; over it Marsden's head disappeared; it was followed by a shower of glass, cigars, artificial flowers and the tablecloth at which he clutched; and the dirty American cloth of the table top was left bare.

*** * ***

But the edge behind which Marsden's face had disappeared remained vertical. A group of scene−shifters were moving a flat of scenery from a theatre into a tumbril−like cart. . . .

And Romarin knew that, past, present, and future, he had seen it all in an instant, and that Marsden stood behind that painted wing.

And he knew, too, that he had only to wait until that flat passed and to take Marsden's arm and enter the restaurant, and it would be so. A drowning man is said to see all in one unmeasurable instant of time; a year−long dream is but, they say, an instantaneous arrangement in the moment of waking of the molecules we assocciate with ideas; and the past of history and the future of prophecy are folded up in the mystic moment we call the present. . . .

It would come true. . . .

For one moment Romarin stood; the next, he had turned and run for his life.

At the corner of the street he collided with a loafer, and only the wall saved them from going down. Feverishly Romarin plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out a handful of silver.

He crammed it into the loafer's hand.

"Here quick take it!" he gasped. "There's a man there, by that restaurant door he's waiting for Mr. Romarin tell him tell him tell him Mr. Romarin's had an accident "

And he dashed away, leaving the man looking at the silver in his palm.