The Gates of Chance

Van Tassel Sutphen

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I. The Gentleman's Visiting−Card

The card that had been thrust into my hand had pencilled upon it, "Call at 4020 Madison Avenue at a quarter before eight this evening." Below, in copper−plate, was engraved the name, Mr. Esper Indiman.

It was one of those abnormally springlike days that New York sometimes experiences at the latter end of March, days when negligee shirts and last summer's straw hats make a sporadic appearance, and bucolic weather prophets write letters to the afternoon papers abusing the sun−spots. Really, it was hot, and I was anxious to get out of the dust and glare; it would be cool at the club, and I intended dining there. The time was half−past six, the height of the homeward rush hours, and, as usual, there was a jam of vehicles and pedestrians at the Fourth Avenue and Twenty− third Street crossing. The subway contractors were still at work here, and the available street space was choked with their stagings and temporary footwalks. The inevitable consequent was congestion; here were two of the principal thoroughfares of the city crossing each other at right angles, and with hardly enough room, at the point of intersection, for the traffic of one. The confusion grew worse as the policemen and signalmen stationed at the crossing occasionally lost their heads; every now and then a new block would form, and several minutes would elapse before it could be broken. In all directions long lines of yellow electric cars stood stalled, the impatient passengers looking ahead to discover the cause of the trouble. A familiar enough experience to the modern New−Yorker, yet it never fails to exasperate him afresh.

The impasse looked hopeless when I reached the scene. A truck loaded with bales of burlap was on the point of breaking down at the crossing, and it was a question of how to get it out of the way in the shortest possible time consistent with the avoidance of the threatened catastrophe. Meanwhile, the jam of cars and trucks kept piling up until there was hardly space for a newsboy to worm his way from one curb to another, and the crowd on the street corners began to grow restive. They do these things so much better in London.

Now, I detest being in the mob, and I was about to back my way out of the crowd and seek another route, even if a roundabout one. But just then the blockade was partially raised, an opening presented itself immediately in front of me, and I was forced forward willy− nilly. Arrived at the other side of the street, I drew out of the press as quickly as possible, and it was then that I discovered Mr. Indiman's carte de visite tightly clutched in my left hand. Impossible to conjecture how it had come there, and my own part in the transaction had been purely involuntary; the muscles of the palm had closed unconsciously upon the object presented to it, just as does a baby's. "Mr. Esper Indiman—and who the deuce may he be?"

The club dining−room was full, but Jeckley hailed me and offered me a seat at his table. I loathe Jeckley, and so I explained politely that I was waiting for a friend, and should not dine until later.

"Well, then, have a cocktail while I am finishing my coffee," persisted the beast, and I was obliged to comply.

"I had to feed rather earlier than usual," explained Jeckley.

"Yes," I said, not caring in the least about Mr. Jeckley's hours for meals.

"You see I'm doing the opening at the Globe to−night, and I must get my Wall Street copy to the office before the theatre. And what do you think of that by way of an extra assignment?" He took a card from his pocket−book and tossed it over. It was another one of Mr. Esper Indiman's calling−cards, and scrawled in pencil, "Call at 4020 Madison Avenue at eight o'clock this evening."

Jeckley was lighting his cigar, and so did not observe my start of surprise. Have I said that Jeckley was a newspaper man? One of the new school of journalism, a creature who would stick at nothing in the manufacture of a sensation. The Scare−Head is his god, and he holds nothing else sacred in heaven and earth. He would sacrifice— but perhaps I'm unjust to Jeckley; maybe it's only his bounce and flourish that I detest. Furthermore, I'm a little afraid of him; I don't want to be written up.

"Esper Indiman," I read aloud. "Don't know him."

"Ever heard the name?" asked Jeckley.

I temporized. "It's unfamiliar, certainly."

Jeckley looked gloomy. "Nobody seems to know him," he said. "And the name isn't to be found in the directory, telephone−book, or social register."

Wonderful fellows, these newspaper men; I never should have thought of going for Mr. Indiman like that.

"But why and wherefore?" I asked, cautiously.

"A mystery, my son. The card was shoved into my hand not half an hour ago."

"Where?"

"At Twenty−third and Fourth. There were a lot of people around, and I haven't the most distant notion of the guilty party."

"What does it mean?"

Jeckley shook his head. "What will you do about it?"

"I will make the call, of course."

"Of course!"

"There maybe a story there—who knows. Besides, it's directly on my way to the Globe, and the curtain is not until eight−thirty. Tell you what, old man; come along with me and see the thing to a finish. Fate leads a card—Mr. Esper Indiman's—and we'll play the second hand; what do you say?"

I declined firmly. God forbid that I should be featured, along with the other exhibits in the case, on the first page of to−morrow's Planet.

"So," he assented, indifferently, and pushed his chair back. "Well, I must push along—Lord! there's that copy—the old man will have it in for me good and plenty if I don't get it down in time. Adios!" He disappeared, and I let him depart willingly enough. Later on I went up to the library for a smoke—no fear of encountering any Jeckleys there, and, in fact, the room was entirely deserted. I looked at my watch; it was ten minutes after seven, and that gave me a quarter of an hour in which to think it over. Should I accept Mr. Indiman's invitation to call?

I looked around for an ash−tray, and, seeing one on the big writing−table in the centre of the room, I walked over to it.

There were some bits of white lying in the otherwise empty tray— the fragments of a torn−up visiting−card. A portion of the engraved script caught my eye, "Indi—"

It was not difficult to piece together the bits of pasteboard, for I knew pretty well what I should find. Completed, the puzzle read, "Mr. Esper Indiman," and in pencil, "Call at 4020 Madison Avenue at half−past seven this evening."

So there were three of us—if not more. Rather absurd this assignment of a separate quarter of an hour to each interview— quite as though Mr. Indiman desired to engage a valet and we were candidates for the position. Evidently, an eccentric person, but it's a queer world anyhow, as most of us know. There's my own case, for example. I'm supposed to be a gentleman of leisure and means. Leisure, certainly, but the means are slender enough, and proceeding in a diminishing ratio. That's the penalty of having been born a rich man's son and educated chiefly in the arts of riding off at polo and thrashing a single−sticker to windward in a Cape Cod squall. But I sha'n't say a word against the governor, God bless him! He gave me what I thought I wanted, and it wasn't his fault that an insignificant blood−clot should beat him out on that day of days—the corner in "R. P." It was never the Chicago crowd that could have downed him—I'm glad to remember that.

Well, there being only the two of us, it didn't matter so much; it wasn't as though there were a lot of helpless womenfolk to consider. After the funeral and the settlement with the creditors there was left—I'm ashamed to say how little, and, anyway, it's no one's business; the debts were paid. What is a man to do, at thirty−odd, who has never turned his hand to anything of use? The governor's friends? Well, they didn't know how bad things were, and I couldn't go to them with the truth and make them a present of my helpless, incompetent self.

And so for the last two years I've been sticking it out in a hall bedroom, just west of the dead−line. I have a life membership in the club—what a Christmas present that has turned out to be!—and twice in the week I dine there. As for the rest of it, never mind— there are things which a man can do but of which he doesn't care to speak.

The future? Ah, you can answer that question quite as well as I. Now I had calculated that, at my present rate of expenditure, I could hold out until Easter, but there have been contingencies. To illustrate, I had my pocket picked yesterday morning. Amusing— isn't it?—that it should have been my pocket—my pocket!

Fortunately I have stacks of clothes and some good pearl shirt− studs, and I continue to present a respectable appearance. I shall always do that, I think. I don't like the idea of the pawn−shop and the dropping down one degree at a time. If, in the end, it shall be shown clearly that the line is to be crossed, I shall walk over it quietly and as a man should; I object to the indecency of being dragged or carried across. What line do I mean? I don't

know that I could tell you clearly. What is in your own mind? There IS a line.

At half after seven I left the club, and exactly a quarter of an hour later I stood opposite the doorway of No. 4020 Madison Avenue. A tall man was descending the steps; I recognized Bingham, a member of my club, and recalled the torn−up visiting−card that I had found in the library. So Bingham was one of us.

Now I don't know Bingham, except by sight, and I shouldn't have cared to stop and question him, anyway. But I caught one glimpse of his face as he hurried away, and it looked gray under the electrics. Call it the effect of the arc light, if you like; he was hurrying, certainly, and it struck me that it was because he was anxious to get away.

Many are the motives that send men into adventurous situations, but there is at least one among them that is compelling—hunger. I have said that I had gone to the club for dinner; I did not say that I got it. To be honest, I had hoped for an invitation—charity, if you insist upon it. But I had been unfortunate. None of my particular friends had chanced to be around, and Jeckley's cocktail had been the only hospitality proffered me. You remember that my pocket had been picked yesterday morning, and since then—well, I had eaten nothing. I might have signed the dinner check, you say. Quite true, but I shall probably be as penniless on the first of the month as I am to−day, and then what? Too much like helping one's self from a friend's pocket.

So it was just a blind, primeval impulse that urged me on. This Mr. Indiman had chosen to fish in muddy waters, and his rashness but matched my necessity. A host must expect to entertain his guests. I walked up the steps and rang the bell.

Instantly the door opened, and a most respectable looking serving− man confronted me.

"Mr. Indiman will see you presently," he said, before I had a chance to get out a word. "This way, sir."

The house was of the modern American basement type, and I was ushered into a small reception−room on the right of the entrance hall. "Will you have the Post, sir? Or any of the illustrated papers? Just as you please, sir; thank you."

The man withdrew, and I sat looking listlessly about me, for the room, while handsomely furnished, had an appearance entirely commonplace.

Five and ten minutes passed, and I began to grow impatient. I remembered that Jeckley's appointment had been for eight o'clock, and for obvious considerations I did not wish that he should find me waiting here. It was eight o'clock now, and I would abide Mr. Indiman's lordly pleasure no longer. I rose to go; the electric bell sounded.

I could hear Jeckley's high−pitched voice distinctly; he seemed to be put out about something; he spoke impatiently, even angrily.

"But this is 4020 Madison Avenue, isn't it? Mr. Indiman—I was asked to call—Mr. Jeckley, of the Planet."

"Must be some mistake, sir," came the answer. "This is No. 4020, but there's no Mr. Inkerman—"

"Indiman, not Inkerman—Mr. Esper Indiman. Look at the card."

"Never heard the name, sir."

"What! Well, then, who does live here?"

"Mr. Snell, sir. Mr. Ambrose Johnson Snell. But he's at dinner, and I couldn't disturb him."

"Humph!" I fancy that Jeckley swore under his breath as he turned to go. Then the outer door was closed upon him.

It was a relief, of course, to be spared the infliction of Mr. Jeckley's society, but I could not but admit that the situation was developing some peculiarities. Eliminating the doubtful personality of Mr. Ambrose Johnson Snell, who was this Mr. Esper Indiman, whose identity had been so freely admitted to me and so explicitly denied to Jeckley? The inference was obvious that Jeckley had failed to pass the first inspection test, and so had been turned down without further ceremony. This reflection rather amused me; I forgot about the incivility to which I was being subjected in the long wait, and began to be curious about the game itself. What next?

At a quarter after eight, and then again at half after, there were inquiries at the door for Mr. Indiman. To each caller the answer was returned that no Mr. Indiman was known at No. 4020 Madison Avenue, and that Mr. Ambrose Johnson Snell could not be disturbed at his dinner.

There was no caller at the next quarter, and none again at nine o'clock. The series had, therefore, come to an end, and I remained the sole survivor—of and for what?

I dare say that my nerves had been somewhat weakened by my two days' fast, or else it was the effect of Jeckley's cocktail on an otherwise empty stomach. Whatever the cause, I suddenly became conscious that I was

passing into a state of high mental tension; I wanted to scream, to beat impotently upon the air; Jeckley would have put it that I was within an ace of flying off the handle.

A deafening clash of clanging metal smote my ears. It should have been the finishing touch, and it was, but not after the fashion that might have been expected. As though by magic, the horrible tension relaxed; my nerves again took command of the situation; I felt as cool and collected as at any previous moment in my life.

In the centre of the room stood a heavy table of some East−Indian wood—teak, I think, they call it. I could have sworn that there was nothing whatever upon this table when I entered the room; now I saw three objects lying there. I walked up and examined them. As they lay towards me, the first was a ten− thousand−dollar bill, the second a loaded revolver, caliber .44, the third an envelope of heavy white paper directed to me, Winston Thorp. The letter was brief and formal; it read:

"Mr. Indiman presents his compliments to Mr. Thorp and requests the honor of his company at dinner, Tuesday, March the thirtieth, at nine o'clock.

"4020 Madison Avenue."

Dishonor, death, and dinner—a curious trio to choose between. Yet to a man in my present position each of them appealed in its own way, and I'm not ashamed to confess it. Perhaps the choice I made may seem inevitable, but what if you had seen Bingham's face as I did, with the arc light full upon it? It was the remembrance of that which made me hesitate; twice I drew my hand away and looked at the money and the pistol.

Through the open door came a ravishing odor, that of a filet a la Chateaubriand; the purely animal instincts reasserted themselves, and I picked up the gardenia blossom that lay beside the letter and stuck it into the button−hole of my dinner−jacket. I looked down at the table, and it seemed to me that the ten−thousand−dollar note and the pistol had disappeared. But what of that, what did anything matter now; I was going to dine—to dine!

I walked up−stairs, guided by that delicious, that heavenly odor, and entered the dining−room in the rear, without the smallest hesitation. At one end of the table sat a man of perhaps forty years of age. An agreeable face, for all of the tired droop about the mouth and the deep lines in the forehead; it could light up, too, upon occasion, as I was soon to discover. For the present I did not bother myself with profitless conjectures; that entrancing filet, displayed in a massive silver cover, stood before him; I could not take my eyes from it.

My host, for such he evidently was, rose and bowed with great politeness.

"You must pardon me," he said, "for sitting down; but, as my note said, I dine at nine. I will have the shell−fish and soup brought on."

"I should prefer to begin with the filet," I said, decidedly.

A servant brought me a plate; my hand trembled, but I succeeded in helping myself without spilling the precious sauce; I ate.

"There are three conditions of men who might be expected to accept the kind of invitation which has brought me the honor of your company," remarked my host as we lit our cigarettes over the Roman punch. "To particularize, there is the curious impertinent, the merely foolish person, and the man in extremis rerum. Now I have no liking for the dog−faced breed, as Homer would put it, and neither do I suffer fools gladly. At least, one of the latter is not likely to bother me again." He smiled grimly, and I thought of Bingham's face of terror.

"I found my desperate man in you, my dear Mr. Thorp, shall we drink to our better acquaintance?" I bowed, and we drank.

"The precise nature of your misfortune does not concern me," he continued, airily. "It is sufficient that we are of the same mind in our attitude towards the world—'to shake with Destiny for beers,' is it not?

"One may meet with many things on the highway of life—poverty, disease, sorrow, treacheries. These are disagreeable, I admit, but they are positive; one may overcome or, at least, forget them. But suppose you stand confronting the negative of existence; the highway is clear, indeed, but how interminable its vista, its straight, smooth, and intolerably level stretch. That road is mine.

"Yes; I have tried the by−paths. Once I was shanghaied; twice I have been marooned and by my own men. That last amused me—a little. I was the second man to arrive at Bordeaux in the Paris− Madrid race of 1903; during the Spanish−American war I acted as a spy for the United States government in Barcelona.

"I made the common mistake of confounding the unusual with the interesting. Romance is a shy bird, and not to be hunted with a brass band. Where is the heart of life, if not at one's elbow? At the farthest, one has only to

turn the corner of the street. It is useless to look for prodigies in the abyss, but every stream has its straws that float; I have determined to watch and follow them.

"I want a companion, and so I advertised after my own fashion. I selected you, tentatively, from the mob; later on I made the test more complete. But you have no boutonniere; allow me."

He took a spray of orchid from the silver bowl in the centre of the table and handed it to me.

I protested: "I have my gardenia—" I looked at my button−hole and it was gone.

Mr. Indiman smiled. "Let me confess," he said. "You recall the abnormal tension of your nerves as you sat waiting in my reception− room. Merely the effect produced by a mixture of certain chemical gases turned on from a tap under my hand. Then the crash of a brazen gong; it is what the scientists call 'massive stimulation,' resolving super−excitation into partial hypnosis.

"Once I had you in the hypnotic condition, the rest was simple enough. I had only to suggest to your mind the three objects on the table, and you saw them. The bank−note, the revolver—they were as immaterial as the gardenia that no longer adorns your button−hole.

"I did not attempt to influence your choice among the three, as that would have destroyed the value of the test to me. But, as I had hoped, you accepted my invitation to dinner. Frankly, now, I am curious—why?"

"That is very simple," I answered. "I had not eaten anything for two days, and I detected the odor of that exquisite filet. Not the slightest ethical significance in the choice, as you see."

Esper Indiman laughed. "I should have kept my pantry door closed. But it does not matter; I am satisfied. Shall we go into the library for coffee?"

Directly opposite the door of the latter apartment stood an easel holding an unframed canvas. A remarkable portrait—little as I know about pictures, I could see that clearly enough. A three−quarter length of a woman wearing a ducal coronet and dressed in a magnificent costume of red velvet.

"Lely's 'Red Duchess,'" remarks my host, carelessly. "You may have seen it in the Hermitage at Petersburg."

I looked at the picture again. Why should this masterpiece not have been properly mounted and glazed? The edges of the canvas were jagged and uneven, as though it had been cut from its frame with a not oversharp knife. We sat down to our coffee and liqueurs.

As I awake in the narrow quarters of my hall bedroom I am inclined to believe that the occurrences of the preceding night were only the phantasms of a disordered digestion; where had I eaten that Welsh rabbit? The morning paper had been thrown over the transom, and, following my usual custom, I reached for it and began reading. Among the foreign despatches I note this paragraph dated St. Petersburg:

"The famous portrait of the Duchess of Lackshire, by Sir Peter Lely, better known as the 'Red Duchess,' has disappeared from the gallery of the Hermitage. It is now admitted that it must have been stolen, cut bodily from its frame and carried away. The theft took place several months ago, but the secret has just become public property. The absence of the picture from its accustomed place had, of course, been noted, but it was understood that it had been removed for cleaning. An enormous reward is to be offered for information leading to its recovery."

There is also a letter for me which I had not noticed until now. It was from Indiman, and it read:

"Dear Thorp,—Dine with me to−night at half after eight. I noticed that you were rather taken with my 'Red Duchess'; we will ask the lady to preside over our modest repast, and you can then gaze your fill upon her. Faithfully, E. I."

Of course, I intend to accept the invitation.

II. The Red Duchess

At half after eight we sat down to dinner. Indiman, of course, took the head of the table, and opposite him, propped up on the arms of an enormous "bishop's chair" of Flemish oak, was Lely's portrait of the "Red Duchess." What a glorious picture it was, in the masterly sweep of its lines, in the splendor of its incomparable coloring! The jagged edges of the canvas showed plainly where the vandal knife had passed, separating the painting from its frame. But the really big thing is always independent of its cadre; one hardly noticed the mutilation, and then immediately forgot about it.

I had been honored with a seat at the lady's right hand, and opposite me a fourth cover had been laid. Indiman noticed my look of inquiry.

"Only one of my fancies," he explained, smiling. "I always make provision for the unexpected guest. Who knows what supperless angels may be hovering around?"

We were hardly at the soup before a servant brought in a card.

"Roger W. Blake," read Indiman, aloud. "An honest−enough−sounding name. Is the gentleman in evening dress, Bolder?"

"No, sir; I don't think so, sir."

"Hym! That is unfortunate. Still, if Madame la Duchesse will permit, and you, Thorp, have no objection—Good! Ask Mr. Blake to do me the favor of joining us at dinner."

A few minutes later Mr. Roger Blake appeared at the door of the dining−room. He was a young man with a profusion of fair hair and a good deal of color, the latter heightened considerably by the somewhat embarrassing circumstances attending his introduction. But Indiman relieved the situation immediately, going forward and greeting the new guest with unaffected cordiality.

"Mr. Blake, is it? You are very heartily welcome, I assure you. Let Bolder take your hat and stick; indeed, I insist upon it. Allow me now to present you: Her Grace the Duchess of Lackshire, more generally known as Lely's 'Red Duchess'—Mr. Roger W. Blake. My friend, Mr. Thorp—Mr. Blake."

Evidently the young man was not overclear in his own mind as to how it had all happened, but there he was, sitting bolt upright in the vacant chair and drinking two glasses of wine in rapid succession to cover his confusion. A comedy, apparently, but to what purpose? Mr. Blake blushed painfully, and made no reply to the polite commonplaces that I ventured; Indiman smiled benevolently upon both of us, and in the most natural possible manner led the conversation to the subject of portrait−painting. There was his text before him− −the famous "Red Duchess"—and he talked well. I found myself listening with absorbed attention, and even the shy Mr. Blake became oblivious of the keener agonies of self−consciousness. So we went on until the game course had been removed.

Our host rose to his feet, champagne glass in hand. "Gentlemen," he said, and we followed his example, Blake managing to upset a decanter of sherry in the process, "in life and in art—the fairest of her sex. I give you, gentlemen, 'La Duchesse Rouge.'"

The toast was drunk with becoming decorum. I was about to resume my seat when I saw that Mr. Blake had screwed himself up to a desperate decision, and that the climax of the drama was at hand. He was quite pale, and he stuttered a little as he spoke.

"Very sorry, I—I'm sure," he blurted out, "but you are Mr. In− Indiman?"

"I am, and not in the least sorry for it. Go on."

"It is my d−duty, sir, to place you under arrest for complicity in the theft of that p−p−picture." Mr. Blake threw back his coat and displayed a detective's shield attached to an aggressively red suspender brace.

Esper Indiman bowed ironically. "I presume that my presence at Police Headquarters is necessary?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir. I have a coach in waiting outside, and we will start at once, if you please." Mr. Blake, under the stimulus of his professional functions, lost his embarrassed air and became severely business−like and official. "This gentleman will have to accompany us," he continued, looking at me.

"The coffee, Bolder," called our host, "and never mind the sweets." I drank a demi−tasse and lit a cigarette.

"Ready," announced Indiman, and we descended to the coach, Mr. Blake bringing up the rear and carrying the precious picture enveloped in a silken table− cover.

"What reward is offered, officer?" asked Indiman as the carriage drove off.

"One hundred thousand dollars, sir. It will be a big thing for me if—if—" He stopped, a trifle embarrassed.

"Ah, those ifs!" quoted Indiman, musingly.

The chief of the detective bureau received us in his private room. He listened attentively to Blake's report, but seemed rather puzzled than gratified by its triumphant peroration. Now the young man felt that he had done a big thing, and this non−committal attitude of his superior chagrined him. He unrolled the covering in which the picture had been wrapped.

"There!" he said, half resentfully. The chief looked carefully at the picture and turned to Indiman.

"Do you desire to make any explanation, Mr. Indiman, as to how this picture happens to be in your possession?"

"Certainly," was the prompt reply. "I bought it for a small sum a month ago on the lower Bowery. The dealer's name was Gregory, I think."

Young Mr. Blake sniffed incredulously. A messenger handed a couple of telegrams to the chief. He read them with knitted brows and then touched a call−bell.

"Send in Officer Stone," he ordered.

Mr. Stone immediately made his appearance. In his hand he carried a flat, square parcel which, in obedience to a further order, he proceeded to unwrap. I uttered an involuntary cry, for it was nothing less than a replica of the famous portrait of the "Red Duchess." A replica, indeed!—it would take an expert to decide which of the two was the copy; they were absolutely alike, even to the detail of the rough edges, the marks of the blunted knife.

"This picture was discovered in an art dealer's window on Fourth Avenue near Twenty−ninth Street," explained the chief of the detective bureau. "And now kindly listen to these despatches. The first from the chief of police of New Orleans:

"'Lely portrait discovered in pawn−shop. Officer Smith goes North to−night to return property and claim reward. J. H. BOWEN.'

The other from Pittsburg, in substantially the same language, reports the finding of the portrait of the 'Red Duchess' in a private gallery. This fourth picture is also on its way to New York for identification."

We all looked at one another, Blake the picture of puzzled anger and disappointment. "Which is the true picture?" asked the chief. "Mr. Indiman, I should be glad of your opinion."

Indiman, who had been examining the canvas held by Stone, answered quickly: "Neither of these, and it is more than probable that the other two are also copies by the same hand. Wonderfully well done, too, but the study of portraiture is a hobby of mine; I have even contemplated a monograph on the subject, or, more particularly, a hand−book to the smaller galleries and private collections. But I doubt if I ever do it now," he concluded, meditatively.

"The 'Red Duchess'?" persisted the chief.

"Of course, I know it perfectly. I won't bore you with technical explanations, but on the back of the stretcher is the address of the American art dealer from whom the original canvas was purchased. That should be enough."

It was as Indiman said; each of the canvas stretchers carried a small gummed label, the address of a Fulton Street art−supply shop.

"That settles the question," remarked the chief of detectives. "I may say finally that I have this cable from the Minister of Police at St. Petersburg, communicated to me through the Russian Consul− General:

"'Lely portrait recovered and replaced in the gallery at the Hermitage. Withdraw published reward.

"'(Signed) SOBRIESKA.'

A queer piece of business; but this appears to be the end of it," commented the chief. "Needless to say, gentlemen, that you are at liberty to depart. My apologies for the annoyance to which you have been subjected."

We all bowed and withdrew to the anteroom. Blake, blushing redly, came up to Indiman; he began to apologize, stuttering pitiably, but Indiman cut him short.

"Call up the coach and offer the driver extra fare for the best time his horses can make to this address." He scribbled the name of the street and the house number on a leaf torn from his note−book and handed it to Blake. "Yes, you can come along if you like; it may be the big thing yet."

As the carriage rolled along Indiman vouchsafed certain explanations.

"As I have already told you," he began, "I bought the picture from a small dealer in the Bowery. I happened to notice it in his window, and, the 'Red Duchess' being one of the half−dozen superlative portraits of the world, I was naturally interested. It was certainly a fine copy, and I was pleased to get it so cheaply.

"Now there were two or three circumstances connected with my find that afterwards struck me as peculiar. In the first place it is well known that permission to copy any of the pictures at the Hermitage Gallery is very rarely given, and the authorities are particularly averse to having reproductions made of the Lely portrait. Secondly, why were the edges of the canvas so curiously serrated, giving the picture the look of having been hastily cut away from its frame? And, finally, where and when had this copy been made? for the label of the Fulton Street art dealer on the back bore the date 1903, and this was the 2d of February in the same year. Obviously impossible that the artist could have gone to Russia, painted the picture, and returned with it to New York in a little over a month.

"Two days later I was walking up Fourth Avenue, through the district affected by the curio and old−furniture dealers, and I discovered a replica of my 'Red Duchess' hanging in a shop−window. In every respect identical, you understand, the two pictures were unquestionably the work of the same hand. Whose hand?

"Do you remember, Thorp, the name of Clive Richmond? Well, for a year or two he was the favorite painter of women's portraits here in New York, hailed as genius and all that. Then suddenly his work began to fall off in quality; his failures became egregious, and his clients left him. Shortly after he disappeared; it was the common report that his misfortunes had affected his reason; there were even hints at suicide. That was some four or five years ago, and whatever the secret may be it has been kept faithfully.

"At least I had solved a portion of the problem—it was Clive Richmond and no other who had painted my copy of the 'Red Duchess.' How do I know? Well, with the expert it is a matter partly technical but more largely intuitive. How do you recognize a friend's face? How does the bank clerk detect the counterfeit bill?

"Now this second copy bore the same ear−marks as the one in my possession—the edges of the canvas marred and jagged, the Fulton Street label on the back. What was this mystery?

"Mystery—yes, and behind it the shadow of a crime, of a human tragedy. Who was to lift the veil? There was but one man—Clive Richmond—who could answer my question; and where was Clive Richmond? A week later I found still a third copy of my 'Duchess' over on Sixth Avenue. I had left my purse at home that morning, and when I went back the next day to buy the picture it was gone—sold to a stranger. Did I say that I had missed getting possession of the second picture through the same sort of contretemps? I never saw either of them again.

"I had written to a friend in Petersburg to make certain inquiries for me, and his answer confirmed my suspicions. The 'Red Duchess' was not hanging in its accustomed place at the Hermitage; it was in process of renovation, according to a statement made by the director of the gallery.

"That was enough for me. The portrait had been stolen and was probably in New York at this very moment. Where? Let me first find Clive Richmond, and I must be quick about it, for once the secret of the theft got out the detectives would not be long in rounding up the various purchasers of those wonderfully accurate copies. This morning the cable brought the news, and at dinner−time Mr. Blake's card was presented to me. Quick work, Mr. Blake; I congratulate you.

"Here is the letter that I received just before we left my house; you remember that it had come in the evening mail and been overlooked. I will read it.

"'DEAR INDIMAN,—There's more in the art business than can be squeezed out of a color tube, isn't there? But I have the secret now; it was given me by Lely himself—no less. What a pity it is that I shan't have the chance to use it, but you and the cognoscenti can fight it out together. You might bury me decently if you like; you ought to be willing to do that much, seeing that your critical pronouncements have been so amply vindicated.

C. R.

"'P. S.—My secret? But on second thought I will take it with me.'"

St. John's Park and the streets fronting upon it was once a fashionable quarter of the town. Now a hideous railway freight station occupies the former park area, and the old−time residences, with their curiously wrought−iron stoop−railings and graceful fan− lights, have been degraded to the base uses of a tenement population. Only the quaint chapel of St. John has survived the slow process of contamination, a single rock rising above the sordid tide.

The coach stopped before one of the most pretentious of the old− time houses−now, alas! one of the dirtiest and most dilapidated. We were directed to the upper story, Indiman leading the way.

A single attic chamber, bearing the marks of the cruelest poverty, a stove, an artist's easel, a pallet spread directly on the grimy floor, and upon it a man in the last stage of consumption. He glanced up at Indiman and waved his hand feebly. He tried to speak, but his voice died away in his throat; Indiman knelt by his side to catch the words.

"It is cold—shut stove door—there's enough now to last me out."

Indiman went to the stove, where a little fire was smouldering; he shut the door and turned on the draught. The flame leaped up instantly, the crazy smoke−pipe rattling as it expanded under the influence of the heat. Indiman turned again to the dying man.

"You know well enough why I have come," he said, slowly. "I have in my possession one of your copies of the 'Red Duchess.' Tell me the truth."

There was no audible response from the bloodless lips, but the dark eyes were full of ironic laughter. Then they closed again.

"Richmond!" said Indiman, sharply. "Richmond!"

I had been standing by the door, but now I came forward and joined Indiman. "Gone!" he said, briefly. "Gone, and taken his secret with him. Only, what WAS the secret?"

We tried to argue it out on the way up−town, but with only indifferent success. Granted the premise that Richmond had actually stolen the "Red Duchess," what were his motives in multiplying copies of the picture, a proceeding that must infallibly end in the detection of his crime? And the supreme question—what had finally become of the original?

My theory was simple enough. The man was mentally unbalanced, the result of brooding over his own failure in art. He had stolen the picture, possessed with the idea that by study of it he should discover the secret of its power. He had made copies of the picture and sold them in order to supply himself with the necessities of life. At the end, knowing himself to be dying, he had caused the original to be returned to the gallery at Petersburg, a contribution to the conscience fund.

Indiman's argument was more subtle. "Granted," he said, "that the poor chap was mentally irresponsible, and that he actually did steal the picture. But you must take into account his colossal vanity, his monumental egotism. Richmond never admitted for a moment that he was a failure as an artist; there was a cabal against him, and that accounted for everything. This affair was simply his revenge upon his critics and detractors; he would turn out these reproductions of a masterpiece so perfect in their technique as not to be distinguished from their original, nor indeed from each other. So having set the artistic world by the ears, he would enjoy his triumph, at first in secret, and afterwards openly."

"But what was the picture returned to the Hermitage?"

"One of these same copies—that was the supreme sarcasm."

"The original, then—the 'Red Duchess'?"

"The fuel in the stove consisted of some strips of painted canvas," said Indiman, gravely. "I don't know, I can't be sure—they were almost consumed when I shut the door."

"An imperfect copy," I hazarded.

"Some day we will take a trip to the Hermitage to make sure," answered Indiman. "'Where ignorance is bliss,' etc. What do you think, Blake?" he continued, turning to our companion.

"It's all the same to me, sir," answered Blake, a little ruefully. "It was a big thing, right enough, but somehow I seem to have missed it all round. Well, good−night, sir, if you'll kindly set me down at this corner."

Indiman and I enjoyed a small supper under Oscar's watchful eye. The night was fine and we started to walk home. Have I said that Indiman had proposed that I should move my traps over to his house and take up my quarters there for an indefinite period? In exchange for services rendered, as he put it, and somehow he made it possible for me to accept the invitation. It had been twenty−four hours now since I had first enjoyed the honor of Mr. Esper Indiman's acquaintance; the novelty of having enough to eat— actually enough—was already beginning to wear off. Man is a wonderful creature; give him time and he will adjust himself to anything.

At the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty− seventh Street, Indiman stopped suddenly and picked up a small object. It was a latch−key of the familiar Yale−lock pattern. I looked at it rather indifferently.

"Man! man!" said Indiman, with simulated despair. "Surely you are an incorrigibly prosaic person. A key—does it suggest to you no possibilities of mystery, of romance?"

"Well, not without a door," I answered, smartly.

"Oh, is that all! To−morrow we will go out and find a door upon which this little key may be profitably employed. You promise to enter that door with me?"

"I promise."

III. House in the Middle of the Block

All things come to him who waits," quoted Indiman. "Do you believe that?"

"It's a comfortable theory," I answered.

"But an untenable one. And Fortune is equally elusive to those who seek her over−persistently. The truth, as usual, lies between the extremes."

"Well?"

"The secret is simple enough. He who is ready to receive, receives. Love, fame, the shower of gold—they are in the air, and only waiting to be precipitated. I stand ready to be amused, and that same afternoon the Evening Post aims a blow at the Tammany 'Tiger' over the shoulder of Mr. Edward M. Shepard; I am in the mood adventurous, and instantly the shadow of a prodigy falls across my threshold; yea, though I live on upper West End Avenue. Do you remember this?" and he held out a small Yale latch−key.

"It is the one you picked up at Twenty−seventh Street and Fifth Avenue last night."

"Precisely. Now a key, you observe, is intended to open something— in this case a door. What door? As though that mattered! Put on your rain−coat, my dear Thorp, and let us begin a little journey into the unknown. Fate will lead us surely, O unbelieving one, if you will but place your hand unresistingly in hers."

We left the house, and Indiman tossed a penny into the air. "Broadway, heads; Fourth Avenue, tails." Tails it was.

Arrived at Fourth Avenue, we stood waiting for a car. The first that came along was on its way up−town and we boarded it.

"Was it you who asked for a cross−town transfer at Twenty−ninth?" inquired the conductor of Indiman a few minutes later, and Indiman nodded assent and took the transfer slips.

At Eighth Avenue the cross−town car was blocked by a stalled coal− cart. We alighted and passively awaited further directions from our esoteric guide. Quite an amusing game for a dull, rainy afternoon, and I felt grateful to Indiman for its invention.

The policeman on the corner was endeavoring to direct a very small boy with a very large bundle. "Up one block and turn east," he said, impressively. "I've told you that now three times."

I had a flash of inspiration. "Copper it," I cried.

"Right," said Indiman, soberly. We walked down one block to Twenty− eighth Street and then turned westward.

New York is a big city, and therefore entitled to present an occasional anomaly to the observant eye. And this particular section of Twenty−eighth Street is one of these departures from the normal, a block or two of respectable, even handsome houses set as an oasis in a dull and sordid neighborhood. How and why this should be does not matter; it is to be presumed that the people who live there are satisfied, and it is nobody else's business.

We walked on slowly, then, half−way down the block, Indiman stopped me. "What did I tell you?" he whispered.

The house was of the English basement type, and occupied two of the ordinary city lots; nothing particularly remarkable about that, and I said as much.

"But look again," insisted Indiman. I did so and saw a man standing at the door, evidently desirous of entering. Twice, while we stood watching him, he rang without result, and the delay annoyed him. He shook the door−knob impatiently, and then fell to researching his pockets, an elaborate operation that consumed several minutes.

"Lost his latch−key," commented Indiman. He walked up the steps of the entrance porch. "You might try mine," he said, politely, and held out the key picked up the night before at Fifth Avenue and Twenty−seventh Street.

"Huh!" grunted the man, suspiciously, but he took the little piece of metal and inserted it into the slot of the lock. The door swung open. Amazing, but what followed was even more incredible. The man stepped into the hall, but continued to hold the door wide open.

"You're coming in, I suppose," he said, surlily.

"Certainly," answered Indiman. "This way, Thorp," he called at me, and most unwillingly I obeyed. We passed into the house and the door closed behind us. Our introducer turned up the gas in the old− fashioned hall chandelier, and favored us with a perfunctory stare. "New members, eh!" he grunted, and turned away as though it were a matter of entire indifference to him. But Indiman spoke up quickly.

"Pardon me," he began, with the sweetest suavity. "I was afraid for the moment that we had got into the wrong place. This is the—" a delicately suggestive pause.

"The Utinam Club," supplied the other.

"Exactly," said Indiman, in a most relieved tone. "It IS the Utinam, Thorp," he continued, turning to me. Now I had not the smallest notion of what the Utinam Club might be, consequently I preserved a discreet silence. Indiman addressed himself again to our ungracious cicerone.

"A snug little box you have here, Mr, er—"

"Hoyt, sir—Colman Hoyt."

"Ah, yes—of North Pole fame. You are the man—"

"Who has led four expeditions to reach it, and failed as often. That is MY title to fame. And also my qualification for membership in the Utinam Club," he added, grimly.

"Ah, yes—the discovery of the Pole. A unique and delightful idea in clubdom—eh, Thorp? To succeed—"

"No, sir; to FAIL," interrupted Mr. Hoyt, rudely. "What the devil do you suppose I am doing in this galley? You must be a very new member of the Utinam Club."

"To tell the truth, Mr. Hoyt," said Indiman, with an air of engaging frankness, "I have never, until this moment, even heard of the Utinam Club. But for all that I am convinced that I am about to become a member of it, and I may say the same for my friend, Mr. Thorp. Now, possibly you may be inclined to assist us."

Mr. Hoyt stared. "It's a pity, isn't it," he remarked, reflectively, "that our standard of eligibility doesn't conform to that of your impudence. Still, I won't say that it can't be done; this is a proprietary club, you know. You had better see Dr. Magnus."

"Dr. Magnus?"

"The proprietor of the Utinam Club. Here he comes now."

A slight, gray−haired man of fifty or there− abouts had entered the hall from the rear and immediately came forward to meet us. His eyes were the extraordinary feature of his face, piercingly brilliant and enormously magnified by the spectacles that he wore. The lenses of the latter were nearly an eighth of an inch thick and evidently of the highest power. Even with their aid his powers of vision seemed imperfect. On hearing the few words of explanation vouchsafed by the unamiable Mr. Hoyt, he drew from his pocket a second and third pair of glasses and deliberately added both to his original optical equipment. I know that I felt like a fly under a microscope in facing that formidable battery of lenses. But the scrutiny seemed to satisfy him; he spoke courteously enough:

"Step into my office, gentlemen, and we will talk the matter over."

Mr. Colman Hoyt had departed without further formality, and we followed our host into the room adjoining the hall on the right. It looked like the study of a man of science; charts and globes and plaster−of−Paris casts were everywhere, while the far end of the apartment was occupied by a huge, flat−topped table covered with papers, test−tubes, and glass−slides. But even more remarkable than its contents was the room itself, and its singular architectural proportions at once engaged my attention.

As I have said, the house occupied two twenty−five−foot city lots, but the entrance and hall were at the extreme right as one looks outward towards the street, instead of being in the centre, as is usually the case. Consequently, the room in which we stood (being undivided by any interior partitions) extended the full width of the house, less that of the entrance hall—forty feet, let us say, in round numbers. But its measurements in the other direction were barely ten feet, the apartment presenting the appearance of a long, low, and narrow gallery. At the back were a row of five windows taking light from the interior court−yard; in brief, the house, imposing in its dimensions from the street side, was little more than a mask of masonry extremely ill−adapted for human habitation, or, indeed, for any purpose. Stepping to one of the rear windows, I looked out, and then the reason for this extraordinary construction—or, rather, reconstruction—became apparent. The lot was of the usual depth of one hundred feet, and, being a double one, it had a width of fifty. A large building of gray stone occupied the farther end of this inside space, the erection measuring about sixty feet in depth and extending the full width of

the enclosure. That left a little less than thirty feet of court− yard between this back building and the one facing on the street, and it was evident that the rear of the original house had been sheared off bodily to provide for this singular readjustment in the owner's modus vivendi, only the party walls on either side being left standing. And these had been extended so as to enflank the building in the rear.

If I have made my description clear, it now will be understood that the facade of the original house was nothing more than a shell, a ten−foot screen whose principal office was to conceal the interior structure from curious eyes. Describing the latter more particularly, it should be noted that it was connected with the original house by a covered passageway of brick running along one side of the court−yard and communicating with the hallway that led to the street door. Apparently, the rear building was three stories in height—I say apparently, for, being entirely destitute of windows, it was impossible to accurately deduce the number of its floors. Aesthetically, it made no pretensions, its only architectural feature being a domed roof of copper and a couple of chimney−stacks, from one of which a thin streak of vapor ascended. A chilling and depressing spectacle was that presented by the "House in the Middle of the Block," as I mentally christened it, and I speculated upon the strange offices to which it had been consecrated.

"The Utinam Club," answered my unspoken query. Dr. Magnus had advanced to my side and stood staring at me through his triple lenses. I started, involuntarily.

"There! there!" he said, soothingly. "I did not perceive that your attention was so entirely absorbed. I am honored by your interest— the Utinam Club, it is my hobby, sir, and one not altogether unworthy of the consideration of an intelligent man."

"I can quite understand that," said Indiman, who had joined us at the window. "There is a distinct stimulus to the imagination in the picture before us. And what a picture!—this eyeless, gray−faced, architectural monstrosity, crowned with squat, domelike head of coppery red, and set in that gigantic cadre of fifty−foot masonry! Superb! Magnificent!"

"The honor of your acquaintance—"began Dr. Magnus.

"In two words," interrupted Indiman, smilingly. He made a brief statement of the circumstances attendant upon the finding of the Yale latch−key, and the proprietor of the Utinam Club listened attentively.

"I have a passion for the unique," concluded Indiman, "and the Utinam Club appears to possess claims of unusual merit in that direction. I own frankly that I am curious as to its object and qualifications for membership."

"They are quite simple," answered Dr. Magnus. "Indeed, the name of the club explains its raison d'etre—Utinam, a Latin ejaculation equivalent to our 'Would to Heaven!' or 'Would that I could be!' To be eligible for membership in the Utinam Club, one must have had a distinct object or ambition in life and then have failed to realize it."

"Ah, I begin to understand," murmured Indiman. "An extraordinary basis, indeed, for a social organization—the lame ducks, the noble army of the incapables, the gentlemen a main gauche! Pray go on; you interest me exceedingly."

"We have them all here," answered Dr. Magnus, smiling. "The unsuccessful author, the business bankrupt, the artist whose pictures have never reached the line. The touch−stone of failure, you see; the clubability (odious word!) of our membership is unimpeachable.

"A superb conception. My dear Dr. Magnus, I must beg of you to enroll Mr. Thorp and myself at once. Believe me that we are not unworthy of a place in your galaxy of dark stars."

Dr. Magnus walked to the table and took up his pen. "This gentleman?" he began, inquiringly, and looked at me.

"An unfortunate affair of the heart," answered Indiman—an exquisite piece of audacity at which I frowned, and then perforce had to smile. "It comes within your rule, I trust?"

"For limited membership only," answered Dr. Magnus. "In fact, we rather discourage victims of sentimental reverses, it being invariably impossible to determine whether the transaction is finally to show a profit or a loss. Then, too, the quick recoveries—but we'll let it stand at that. Now, with yourself?"

"I," said Indiman, gravely, "am a mathematician by instinctive preference and early training, but I have never been able to cross the 'Ass's Bridge,' the Forty−seventh problem of Euclid. Incidentally, I may mention that I am a golf−player with a handicap of eighteen."

"A double first," commented the proprietor of the Utinam Club. "I perceive, Mr. Indiman, that you are bent

upon amusing yourself; and since circumstances have undeniably favored you, you may continue to do so. But not at my expense," and thereupon he mentioned a figure for initiation and dues that made me sit up. But Indiman settled without flinching; he happened to have his check−book with him, and the remaining formalities were quickly discharged.

"And now, gentlemen, let me show you about the club," said Dr. Magnus, affably. "Will you be good enough to follow me?"

He led the way into the hall, and thence into the cloister−like passage communicating with the "House in the Middle of the Block." I glanced out at the court−yard as we passed a window; it was most ingeniously planned to take the utmost advantage of its limited area. An antique Italian fountain occupied a niche in the opposite wall, and on either side were sedilia flanked by bay−trees in tubs and two or three fine specimens of the Japanese dwarf oak. A bas− relief in plaster of the Elgin marbles ran friezelike the full length of the party wall, and fixed immediately above the fountain niche the terrible mask of the Medusa face looked down upon us. The time of the year being late in March, there was no snow upon the ground, and I could see that the ground of the court−yard was divided into four garden−beds, separated from each other by narrow paths of broad, red tile bordered by box. All in all it was a charming little bit of formal gardening; I could imagine how pretty it would be on a spring morning, when the beds should be gay with crocuses and tulips.

We were admitted into the club proper by a liveried servant, and from the handsome oak−panelled vestibule we passed into a lofty apartment hung with pictures and filled with miscellaneous objects of art. All, without exception, were execrable—miserable daubs of painting, criminal essays in plastic and decorative work, and a collection of statuary that could be adequately matched only by the horrors in Central Park. "Our art gallery, gentlemen," explained Dr. Magnus.

Art gallery indeed! To me it was the most melancholy of exhibitions, but Indiman was enraptured.

"What a magnificent record of failure!" he exclaimed. "What miracles of ineptitude!" and Dr. Magnus smiled, well pleased.

We ascended to the next floor. Here was the library, lined ceiling− high with books that had fallen still−born from the press. Gigantic cabinet presses occupied the centre of the room, the final depository of countless "unavailable" MSS. In an adjoining room were glass−cases crowded with mechanical models of unsuccessful inventions. Naturally, I expected to see a large section devoted to the resolution of the perpetual−motion problem, but in this I was disappointed, not a single specimen of the kind could I discover.

"We do not attempt the impossible," explained Dr. Magnus, dryly. "Our failures must be inherent in the man, not in his subject."

There were other rooms, a long succession of them, filled with melancholy evidences of incapacity and defeat in almost every department of human activity—plans of abortive military campaigns, prospectuses of moribund business enterprises, architectural and engineering drawings of structures never to be reared, charts, models, unfinished musical scores, finally a huge papier−mache globe on which were traced the routes of Mr. Colman Hoyt's four unsuccessful dashes for the North Pole. It depressed me, the sight of this vast lumber−room, this collection of useless flotsam and jetsam, cast up and rejected by the sea of strenuous life. Most moving of all, a broken golf−club standing in a dusty corner, and beside it a wofully scarred and battered ball. I pointed them out to Indiman.

"A fellow−sufferer," he said, and sighed deeply.

Last of all we were conducted to the common room, a spacious apartment immediately under the dome. At one end a huge stone fireplace, in which a fire crackled cheerfully.

"'Non Possumus,'" read Indiman, deciphering the motto chiselled upon the chimney−breast.

"An admirable sentiment indeed! Dr. Magnus, I venture to infer that the Utinam Club is the child of your own brain. Permit me, sir, to congratulate you—a glorious inception and carried out to perfection."

Dr. Magnus smiled frostily. "I thank you, Mr. Indiman," he said, staring hard at him. "In a civilization so complex as ours the Utinam undoubtedly fills a want. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me; I have some affairs of moment. The club is yours; make use of it as you will. You are already acquainted with Mr. Hoyt, I believe. The other gentlemen—but opportunity will doubtless serve." He bowed and withdrew.

Indiman dropped into an easy−chair and lit a cigar. "Les miserables," he said to me in an undertone. "Look at them."

In truth, it was a strange company with whom we had foregathered. There were perhaps a dozen men in the room, and each seemed absorbed in the listless contemplation of his own dejected personality. The large table in the centre of the room was laden with newspapers and periodicals, but no one had taken the trouble to displace the neat files in which they had been arranged. The card−room adjoining was untenanted; the green−baize tables, with their complement of shiny, new packs of cards and metal counters, bore no evidence of use; in the billiard−room at the back a marker slept restfully in his high−legged chair. Assuredly, the members of the Utinam Club were not advocates of the strenuous life.

It was after six o'clock now, and the big room was beginning to fill up with later arrivals. Yet there was none of the cheerful hum and bustle ordinarily characteristic of such a gathering. A man would enter and pass to his place unfavored by even the courtesy of a friendly glance; at least a score of men had made their first appearance within the last quarter of an hour, and not a single word of greeting or recognition had I heard exchanged. Among them was Mr. Colman Hoyt, the unsuccessful Arctic explorer. He passed close to where Indiman and I sat, yet never looked at us. An odd set, these our fellow−members of the Utinam, and one naturally wondered why they came to the club at all. But we were now to learn.

As I have said, the building was entirely windowless, ventilation being secured by forced draught from an engine−room in the basement. Consequently, artificial light was necessary at all times, and a very agreeable quality of it was furnished by electroliers concealed behind ground−glass slides in the walls and ceilings of the various apartments. The light thus obtained was diffused rather than direct, and, being colorless, it closely approximated natural conditions, the delusion being heightened by the construction of the wall panels so as to simulate windows. To add again to the effect, these lights had been gradually lowered as the day wore on. Now it must be almost dark in the outside world, and it was twilight in the common room of the Utinam Club; I could no longer distinguish between the motionless figures of the men around me and the shadows that enveloped them. Even the fire was dying out; in a few moments the darkness would become profound, and I felt my pulse slow down with the chill of the thought.

One single ember remained in the fireplace; I watched it gleaming like a great red eye in its bed of ashes, then it winked and went out, and at the same instant the last ray from the false windows disappeared. Strain my eyes as I would, the sensitive retina remained absolutely unaffected; the darkness had finally come, and from one to another of that desolate company ran a little, tremulous sigh, then the silence of complete negation.

From the apex of the domed ceiling a sudden and wonderful effulgence of rose−colored light streamed forth, flooding the great room with glorious color and life. Magical were its effects. Men straightened up in their chairs and looked about them, the flush of returning animation in their cheeks, and their eyes bright with questioning interest. A youngish chap leaned over and spoke earnestly to his neighbor, then some one laughed aloud. Instantly the flood−gates were opened; the air was vibrant with the hum of conversation, the ringing of call−bells, and the sputtering of fusees. A blue haze of cigarette−smoke formed itself above the heads of the assemblage; the Utinam Club had come to its own again.

The large folding−doors at the east end were now opened, disclosing the supper−room beyond—a spacious apartment, and decorated with a barbaric splendor of gilding and intricate plastic work. I remarked particularly the preponderance of the red tints; indeed, no other shade of color could I discover—but of this more particularly hereafter. Indiman looked at me, and we trooped out with the rest— que voulez−vous? One must always dine.

We found a small table; the napery and glass were exquisite, the cuisine and service perfect. We surrendered ourselves to the allurements of the hour. I was conscious of an unusual lightness and exhilaration of spirit; Indiman's eyes were sparkling with unwonted brilliancy. I raised my champagne−glass: "To the Utinam Club," I said, with enthusiasm, and rather more loudly than I had intended. The toast was at once re−echoed from every mouth, and a burst of laughter followed.

A late−comer entered and looked about the room somewhat uncertainly, for all the tables had been taken. It was Mr. Colman Hoyt. He saw us and smiled genially. "We have room here," called out Indiman, and he joined us.

"I am fortunate as ever," he said, as he took his seat. "New friends, old wine; and our chef's sauce tartare is incomparable to− night. What more can the heart of man desire?"

"Not even the North Pole?" said Indiman.

"Ah, the Pole! Bah! I can put my hand on it when I want it. Did I tell you that I start to−morrow on my fifth

expedition? Success is certain. Will you honor me by drinking to it?" We drank solemnly.

"I thought you were wearing a dark−green scarf," I interrupted, somewhat irrelevantly, speaking to Indiman.

"I am," he replied.

"It is red," I insisted. "Not green at all."

"Nonsense!" said Indiman, and thereupon Mr. Colman Hoyt burst into a cackle of laughter.

"Complementary colors," he said. "All the blue, green, and yellow rays are excluded from this kindly light invented by our friend Magnus; consequently there can be no sensation of those colors within our vision."

"A curious fancy," said Indiman.

"Say rather the most glorious and beneficent of discoveries," retorted Mr. Hoyt. "All life and vigor and power of achievement are dependent upon the red end of the spectrum. Incapacity, failure, disease, death−they are generated by the violet rays alone; eliminate them, and the problem of existence is solved. All hail to thee, O Magnus, and to thy incomparable genius! Light of lights! All hail!"

A score of voices took up the cry, and I know that I shouted with the rest. Then I felt Indiman's hand upon my arm; my sober senses partially returned. "Keep hold of your− self," he whispered, and the warning came in time, I pushed away my wineglass, and thereafter ate only enough of the exquisitely seasoned viands to satisfy my hunger. And all the while Mr. Colman Hoyt babbled foolishly about the white glories of the queen of the North; to− morrow he should again be on the way to her dear embraces. "The Pole, gentlemen; behold, I arrive; c'est moi!"

We passed out into the general room. The card−tables were now full, the billiard−balls rolled incessantly across the green cloth; from an inner room came the unmistakable click of a roulette−wheel. Men talked loudly of their projects and ambitions shortly to be accomplished. An epic poet was about to publish his magnum opus, the birth of a new star in the poetical firmament; a speculator had made his great coup—to−morrow he would have the wheat market cornered.

"My novel!" cried one. "My symphony!" retorted another. A third said no word, but looked at the miniature of a woman's face that he held in the hollow of his hand—looked and smiled.

The night wore away; nay, speeded were the better word, for no one felt any suggestion even of weariness or satiety. Then suddenly the rose glow grew dimmer; little by little the laughter died away and the voices were hushed. A few of the bolder spirits set themselves to stem the receding tide, but their blasphemies quickly trailed away into weak incoherencies, and again silence conquered all. And darkness fell.

A servant crossed the room and drew aside the heavy velvet curtains draping the false windows; the pure, colorless light streamed in, but it disclosed a world in tinge all blue and green and indigo. Our eyes, so long deprived of the rays emanating from the violet end of the spectrum, were now affected by them alone; every object was horribly transformed by the bluish−green bands surrounding and outlining it. A man brushed carelessly past me; it was Colman Hoyt, and his face was of a man already dead; his lips moved, but no sound issued from them. He passed into the model−room connecting on the west with the central hall; there was the sound of a fall, and Indiman and I followed quickly. Yet not quickly enough, for across the great globe upon which were traced the records of his four unsuccessful expeditions lay the body of Colman Hoyt. He was a heavy man, and he had evidently flung himself at his full weight upon the sharp, arrow− pointed rod that served as the axis of this miniature world; it had pierced to his very heart. The North Pole− at last he had reached it.

"Let us go," said Indiman to me, and we stole quickly away.

Now, in the vestibule below, a young man who had entered in haste pushed rudely past us and made for the row of private letter−boxes fixed opposite the coat−room. He paused at box No. 82 and gazed eagerly into it. The front was of glass, and I could see readily that the box was empty. The young man had his pass−key in his hand, but it was clearly useless to insert it, and he finally turned away, his countenance displaying the bitterest sense of disappointment. His wildly roving eye encountered that of Esper Indiman. "Sir!" he began, impetuously, then checked himself, bowed ceremoniously, and was gone.

IV. The Private Letter−Box

I had agreed to meet Esper Indiman at the Utinam and dine there. The weather had turned cold again, for it was the end of our changeable March, and the fireplace in the common room of the club was heaped high with hickory logs, a cheerful sight, were it not for that odious motto, "Non Possumus," graven over the mantel−shelf where it must inevitably meet every eye. Never could I read it without a tightening at my heartstrings; a potency of blighting evil seemed to lie in the very words.

There were but two or three club members in the room, one of them the young Mr. Sydenham, who had attracted my attention once or twice before by the infinite wretchedness of his face. A mere boy, too, hardly five−and−twenty at the most. He sat in a big chair, a magazine with its leaves uncut lying in his lap. For an hour or more he had not stirred; then he rang for a servant, directing him to inquire for any mail that might have come in the afternoon delivery. Nothing for Mr. Sydenham was the report, and again the young man relapsed into his melancholy musing. An hour later, and just after Indiman had joined me, Mr. Sydenham repeated his inquiry about his letters, receiving the same negative answer—"Nothing for Mr. Sydenham." Evidently the disappointment was not unexpected, but it was none the less a bitter one. With a sigh which he hardly attempted to stifle, the young man took up his uncut magazine and made a pretence at examining its contents; I watched him with a lively but silent pity; any active sympathy might have seemed obtrusive.

A servant stood at the young man's elbow holding a salver on which lay a missive of some sort, a telegraphic message, to judge by the flimsy, buff envelope.

"Telegram, sir," said the man, at length. "For Mr. Sydenham; yes, sir. Will you sign for it?"

The boy turned slowly, and there was a shaking horror in his eyes that made me feel sick. He signed the book and took the message from the salver, apparently acting against a sense of the most intense repulsion, and for all that unable to help himself. The message once in his hand he did not seem to concern himself overmuch with its possible import; presently the envelope fell from his inert fingers and fluttered down at Indiman's feet. The latter picked it up and handed it to the young man, who thanked him in a voice barely audible.

"The man is waiting to see if there is any answer," suggested Indiman, quietly.

Mr. Sydenham started, colored deeply, and tore open the envelope. He read the message through carefully, then perused it for a second and a third time, and sat motionless, staring into vacancy.

Indiman leaned forward. "Well?" he said, sharply.

The young man looked up; the cool confidence of Indiman's gaze seemed suddenly to inspire in him a feeling of trust; he took the risk; he handed the message to Indiman. "What answer would you advise me to give?" he said.

The message contained these words:

"The Empire State express passes the Fifty−third Street bridge at 8.35 o'clock to−morrow morning. You can drop from the guard−rail. Is life more than honor? Answer. V. S."

Indiman looked at me, then he rose and took Mr. Sydenham by the arm. "Let us go into the card−room," he said, quietly. "Thorp, will you come?"

The young man's story was very simple. He had held until lately the position of cashier in the firm of Sandford Sands, stock−brokers. On January 15th a shortage of fifty thousand dollars had been discovered in his books. Mr. Sandford being an intimate friend of the elder Sydenham had declined to prosecute. That was all.

"Let us proceed frankly, Mr. Sydenham," said Indiman. "Did you take the money?"

"I am beginning to think so," answered the young man, dully.

"Come," said Indiman, encouragingly, "that does not sound like a confession of guilt. Don't you know?"

Mr. Sydenham shook his head. "I can't tell you," he answered, hopelessly. "My accounts were in perfect order up to January 10th, when I discovered that our bank balance showed a discrepancy of fifty thousand dollars. I covered it over for the time, hoping to find the source of the error. Five days later I told Mr. Sandford. The money was gone, and that was all that I could say."

"Let us recall the events of January 9th. Did you make your regular deposit that day, and where?"

"We keep our account at the Bank of Commerce. But that afternoon I overlooked a package of bills in large

denominations. I sent another messenger over to the bank, but it was after three o'clock and the deposit was refused. The boy brought the money back to me— the package contained fifty thousand dollars."

"And then?"

"I don't know. I might have locked it up in our own safe or carried it home with me or pitched it out of the window. It is all a blank."

"Did you stay at the office later than usual that day?"

"Yes; I was busy with some of Mr. Sandford's private affairs, and that delayed me until all the others had gone. I left about five o'clock."

"And now who is V. S.? Pardon me, but the question is necessary."

"Miss Valentine Sandford—Mr. Sandford's daughter. I was engaged to be married to her."

"Since when?"

"I had proposed and was waiting for my answer. Then that very day she sent me a telegram. It contained the single word 'yes' and was signed by her initials. It came at the same moment that the messenger brought back the money from the bank."

"And it is the same V. S, who sends this message?" asked Indiman, smoothing out the telegraph blank which he held in his hand.

The young man took a bundle of papers from his breast−pocket. They were all telegraphic messages, and each was a suggestion towards self−destruction in one form or another. "Suicide's corner" at Niagara, poison, the rope—all couched in language of devilish ingenuity in innuendo, and ending in every instance with the expression, "Is life more than honor? Answer. V. S."

"I have had at least one every day," said the young man. "Sometimes two or three. Generally in the morning, but they also come at any hour."

"And Miss Sandford?"

"I wrote and told her of my terrible misfortune, released her from the unannounced engagement, and begged her to believe in me until I could clear myself. I have not seen her since the fatal day of the 15th of January."

"And you have received from her only these—these messages?"

"That is all."

"And you think they come from her?"

"No; or I should have killed myself long ago. But there are times when I have to take a tight hold on myself; to−day is one of them," he added, very simply.

"Mr. Sydenham," said Indiman, solemnly, "I now know you to be an innocent man. Had it been otherwise you would long since have succumbed under this mysterious and terrible pressure."

"I am innocent!" repeated the young man. "But to prove it?"

"It shall be proved."

"The money?"

"It shall be found."

"Through whom?"

"Yourself. A simple lapse of memory is the undoubted explanation. The gap must be bridged, that is all. Will you put yourself in my hands?"

"Unreservedly."

"Good! I desire then that you should return to your home and wait there until you hear from me. The address—thank you. You had better leave the club at once; this atmosphere is not the most wholesome for a man in your position."

Mr. Sydenham proved most amenable to all of Indiman's suggestions, and we did not lose sight of him until he was finally on his way uptown in a Columbus Avenue car.

"A good subject," remarked Indiman, "and it should be comparatively easy to get at the submerged consciousness in his case. A simple reconstruction of the scene should be sufficient."

"You don't think the money was stolen, then?"

"Not at all. It will be found in some safe place, its disposal being an act of Sydenham's subliminal personality, of which his normal consciousness knows nothing."

"But why—"

"The man was NOT himself that ninth day of January. He had received a tremendous impression in the receipt of that message from Miss Sandford. He was an accepted lover, and the consciousness, for the time being, swept him off his feet. He was doing his work mechanically, and it did not matter so long as it was only routine. Then came the emergency, and, objectively, he was unable to cope with it. The subjective personality took command and did the right thing, for Sydenham is an honest man. What action the subliminal self actually took is known only to itself, and no effort of Sydenham's normal memory will suffice to recall it. But there are other means of getting at the truth. The most practical is to reproduce the situation as exactly as possible. Given the same first causes and we get the identical results. First, now to see Mr. Sandford, with whom luckily I have some acquaintance."

It was like the playing of a game, the scene in Sandford Sand's office that following afternoon. The staff of clerks had been sent home as soon as possible after three o'clock, all save the young man who acted as bank messenger. The calendar on the wall had been set back to January 9th, and the HERALD of that date lay half−opened on Sydenham's old desk. It will be remembered that Sydenham had been detained on some of Mr. Sandford's private business, and it was perfectly feasible to reconstruct its details. Mr. Sandford had been coached in his part by Indiman, and the preparations for the experiment being finally perfected, Sydenham was called in. He appeared, dressed in the same clothes that he had worn the month before, looking a little pale, indeed, but resolute and collected.

"Mr. Sydenham," said Indiman, keeping his eyes fixed on the young man's face, "you will observe that this is January 9, 1903. Kindly seat yourself at your desk, and remain there as passive as possible. Wait now until we withdraw."

Through the half−opened door of Mr. Sandford's private office we could see distinctly all that passed. Sydenham sat motionless at his desk; Alden, the bank messenger, was within call in the outer office. The hands of the clock, which had been set back, pointed to five minutes of three.

A telegraph delivery boy entered and handed Sydenham a yellow envelope. He signed for it and the boy withdrew. He opened it, and instead of a written message drew out a fresh sprig of heliotrope. Motionless and scarcely breathing, he sat and gazed at it as though he could never fill his eyes with the sight.

"Now," said Indiman, pushing Mr. Sandford into the room where the young cashier sat.

The conversation was a brief one, relating to the papers that Mr. Sandford carried in his hand.

"Leave them on your way up−town in my box at the safe−deposit company," concluded Mr. Sandford. Then he took his hat and went out.

Sydenham swung back to his desk; the HERALD lying there was in his way, and he tossed it onto the floor. Underneath lay a package of bills of large denominations.

The cashier acted quickly. "Alden!" he called, and the messenger came running in.

"I overlooked this package," said Sydenham; "it contains fifty thousand dollars. Do you think you can get to the bank with it? You have a minute and a half."

The messenger seized the package and dashed away. Sydenham looked again at the sprig of heliotrope; he pressed it passionately to his lips. Then carefully placing it in his pocket−book, he began an examination of the papers left by Mr. Sandford. The clock struck three.

The clerk Alden re−entered. "They wouldn't take it," he said, and handed the package of bills to Sydenham.

"Oh, very well," said the cashier, absently, "I'll take care of it. That's all, Alden; you can go."

For an hour or more Sydenham worked steadily. Then, gathering the papers together, he rose, took off his office−coat, and began making preparations to depart. Once he came into Mr. Sandford's private office, where we were sitting, but apparently he did not notice our presence. Indiman gripped my hand hard. "Going splendidly," he whispered.

The cashier put on his hat and top−coat. The legal papers were carefully stowed in an inside pocket, and he was about to close down his roll−top desk when the package of bank−bills met his eye. He frowned perplexedly; then picking up the bundle he dropped it into the same pocket with the papers belonging to Mr. Sandford. He went out, closing the door behind him.

We followed as quickly as we could, but this time luck was against us—Sydenham had disappeared.

"To the safe−deposit company," said Indiman, and we jumped into a hansom. Mr. Sandford was there, and we waited impatiently for Sydenham's appearance; it was the only chance of again picking up the lost trail.

There he came, walking slowly up Nassau Street, his manner a trifle preoccupied and his eyes bent on the pavement. Opposite the safe− deposit company he stopped and thrust his hand into a waistcoat− pocket. He took it away empty and a terrible change came over his face. With a quick movement he drew out the bundle of bank−notes and regarded it fixedly. A cry burst from his lips; he reeled and fell, the money still clutched in his hand.

Instantly we were at his side. A coach was at hand, and we got him into it and directed the driver to proceed to Indiman's lodgings. The attack had been but a momentary one, and Sydenham revived as we turned out of Park Row. He looked at us, then at the money in his hand.

"It has failed," he said, brokenly, and none of us could say a word. "I came to myself," continued Sydenham, with forced calmness, "there in Nassau Street; it was as though I had awakened from a dream. The money—it was in my hand. I stood before the world, a self− convicted thief. I thank you; you have done your best, but it is useless." He passed the money to Mr. Sandford; mechanically his hand went to the inside breast−pocket of his over− coat; he drew out the package of legal papers bearing Mr. Sandford's name. "But— but," he stammered, "I don't understand—I left these in your box at the safe−deposit company."

"To be sure you did," answered Indiman, coolly. He pulled the check−cord. "Drive back to the safe deposit," he called to the hackman.

"Now, then," said Indiman, in a quiet, matter−of−fact tone, "will you tell me the conditions under which you had access to Mr. Sandford's vault. Of course your name as an authorized agent of Mr. Sandford was on the company's books. You had your pass−key, of course?"

"No," said Mr. Sandford. "There was but one pass−key, and that I kept myself. When Mr. Sydenham had any business to do for me at the safe−deposit vaults I would let him have the key temporarily."

"You gave it to him on that particular day, the 9th of January?" continued Indiman.

"Yes."

"Where is it now?" almost shouted Indiman.

"Here," said Mr. Sandford, in surprise. "On my key−ring."

"Exactly. There is the broken link in our psychological chain. When Mr. Sydenham felt for the pass−key, which should have been in his pocket, he discovered that it was missing. Instantly the continuity of events was broken, the subliminal personality was again submerged, and Mr. Sydenham's normal consciousness was re− established. Mr. Sandford, you are perfectly aware of the fact that these legal papers were properly deposited in your vault, and that the pass−key was returned to you by Mr. Sydenham on the morning of January 10th. Gentlemen, it is evident that we shall find the original fifty thousand dollars lying in Mr. Sandford's strong− box, where it was left by Mr. Sydenham on the afternoon of January 9th."

I confess that I was mightily excited when the moment came to test the correctness of Indiman's deductions. We were shown into a private room, and, under Mr. Sandford's eye, the treasure−box belonging to him was carried in and opened. Almost at the bottom lay a long, brown Manila envelope fastened with three red rubber bands. It contained fifty one−thousand− dollar bills.

"I noticed that envelope several times," explained Mr. Sandford, "but supposed it contained some mining stock. You see here is another envelope identical in appearance and lying directly beneath it. Mr. Sydenham never suggested even that he might have left the missing money in my safe−deposit vault."

"It never occurred to me that I could have done so," said Sydenham. "I remembered making a deposit of the papers—but the money, no, I had no recollection of having seen or touched it from the moment that Alden brought it back from the bank and laid it on my desk."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Sandford, "I am indebted to you for much more than the mere recovery of the money. But we will speak of that again. Where can I put you down? Mr. Sydenham I shall carry off to my house; I want to have a talk with him."

But Indiman declined to re−enter the coach, pleading some further business down−town, and, of course, I remained with him. The carriage was about to drive off when Indiman put up his hand.

"How stupid of me!" he exclaimed. "I had almost forgotten." He took from the pocket of his overcoat a rather bulky package and handed it to young Mr. Sydenham. "They'll explain themselves," he said, smiling. The coach rolled away.

"The missing letters from V. S.," said Indiman, in answer to my look of inquiry. "An average of two a day,

and all addressed to him at the Utinam. Well, what was the poor girl to do? The young fool had changed his lodgings and obliterated every possible trace of his whereabouts. All Miss Sandford had to go on was the bare intimation that he could be addressed at the Utinam Club. She might as well have posted her communications in the North River."

"I don't follow you."

"Two days ago I put a dummy letter addressed to Sydenham in his private lock−box at the Utinam. I had promised, you know, to send him on his mail if he would keep away from the club, and accordingly I had the key of the letter−box in my possession. Ten minutes later I went again to the box and it was empty—that is, you could see distinctly from one end of the box to the other, and it was absolutely bare."

"A duplicate key, of course."

"Not at all. It is only a stupid person who descends to crime— except as a last resort."

"Well, then?"

"Did you ever attend any of the exhibitions at the old Egyptian Hall? One of the favorite illusions was the trick cabinet in which the performer seated himself in full view of the spectators. The doors would be closed for an instant, and then, when reopened, the man had disappeared. The full interior of the cabinet was plainly visible; it stood on legs, which precluded the idea of a trap−door, and it was incontestably shown that egress from the back, top, or sides was impossible."

"Yet the performer was gone?"

"I said that the cabinet appeared to be empty—quite another thing."

"Go on."

"It was a simple arrangement of plate−glass mirrors fitting closely at the sides and backed by the distinctive pattern of wall−paper with which the rest of the cabinet was covered. Immediately that the doors were closed, the performer drew these false sides outward, so that they met the centre post of the doors at an acute angle. The true side walls were thereby exposed, and, of course, they were papered to correspond with the rest of the interior. Their reflection was doubled in the mirrors, making it appear to the observer that the whole cabinet was open to his vision. The truth was that he saw only half of it, the performer being concealed behind the mirrors. The only possible point at which the illusion could be detected was the angle where the mirrors joined, and this was masked by the centre post at which the double doors met. To conclude the trick, the doors were again closed, the performer swung the mirrors back into place, and, presto! he was back in the cabinet, smiling genially at the gaping crowd."

"Then you think—"

"I know. Lock−box No. 82 was constructed on the same principle in miniature, the letter− slit being placed in such a position that anything deposited in the box fell behind the mirrors, the whole interior remaining apparently visible through the glass front, and presumably empty. The owner of the box would naturally glance into it before actually using his pass−key. Obviously, it were a waste of time to go through the form of opening an EMPTY box, and so poor Sydenham never got any of the letters that were daily deposited there, for the receptacle is a large one and the secret place behind the mirrors was almost full. The action of unlocking the box operated upon an interior mechanism that swung back the mirrors at the same instant that the door was pulled open. After seeing my dummy disappear, I tried the experiment, and was amply rewarded.

"There isn't much more to tell. When I saw the letters lying there I knew that it was all right so far as the girl was concerned. I had only to acquaint Miss Sandford with the circumstances in the case to secure her further co−operation, for, of course, she had never ceased to believe in her lover. She prepared and sent the message which you saw delivered to Sydenham in Sandford's office this afternoon.

"But it was not the same as the one received by him on the actual January 9th. That contained a word, 'yes,' and was signed by her initials; this second one consisted simply of a sprig of heliotrope."

"Do you understand the language of flowers? The heliotrope means, 'Je t'adore,' and Sydenham understood it instantly, as you saw."

"Yes; but why—"

"To repeat the original message would not have impressed him as I wished; it would simply have seemed part of the illusion which he knew perfectly well we were endeavoring to create. The problem was to suddenly startle him by a real communication from V. S., and, above all, to have it of such a nature as to convince him that the

cloud between them had finally lifted. Now, without trust and confidence, true love is impossible. The message of the sprig of heliotrope told him all that he had been hungering and longing to hear throughout these terrible two months; the shock was sufficient to drive the normal consciousness from its seat and permit the subliminal self to take control. In other words, it practically put him back in the identical mental mood of the afternoon of January 9th, and that was the crucial point of the whole experiment. Anything more?"

"Who sent the false telegrams?"

"Of course, you would ask that. I don't know."

"Such a monstrous wickedness! It is inconceivable."

"Yes, unless we admit the existence of a spirit of pure malevolence seeking to drive an innocent man to self−destruction for no other motive than that of doing evil for evil's sake. That such an intelligence has been active in this case is certain; or how explain the cheat of the letter−box, a necessary factor in the problem, as you will admit?"

"But you don't know."

"Not yet," answered my friend Indiman.

We dined down−town that evening, and it was about nine o'clock when we called a hackney−coach and started homeward. As we drove on up the Bowery an illuminated transparency caught our eyes.

"'Fair and Bazaar,'" read Indiman. "'Benefit of the United House− smiths' Benevolent Association.' What is a house−smith, Thorp? Evidently we will have to go and find out for ourselves." He pulled the check−cord and gave the driver the new direction. Pure foolishness, of course, but Indiman was not to be put out of his humor.

Up one flight of stairs to a large, low−ceilinged hall that was jammed to suffocation. A score of gayly trimmed booths wherein were displayed various articles of feminine fallals and cheap bric−a− brac, each presided over by a lady house−smith. "Or should it be house−smithess?" asked Indiman. "Hullo! What's this?"

Behind a long counter covered with red−paper muslin sat a dozen young women of more or less pronounced personal charms, and a huge placard announced that, kisses were on sale at the uniform price of fifty cents. "Take your own choice." Smaller cards bore the various cognomens assumed for the occasion by the fair venders of osculatory delights. "Cleopatra," "The Fair One with Golden Locks," "Kathleen Mavourneen," "Pocahontas," or more simply, albeit not less mysteriously, "Miss A. B.," or "Mademoiselle X." Of course, each had dressed the part as nearly as might be, and the exhibition was certainly attractive to the masculine eye. In questionable taste, no doubt, but one does not stand upon trifles when it is all for sweet charity's sake.

"My dear Thorp," said Indiman, with the utmost gravity, "have you half a dollar in your pocket? Then come with me," and forthwith we jammed and corkscrewed our way through the crowd until we reached the long counter covered with red−paper muslin

V. The Ninety−and−nine Kisses

The fair and bazaar of the United House−smiths' Benevolent Association was assuredly a tremendous success, and not the least of its attractions was the open market where kisses might be purchased at the ridiculously small price of fifty cents each. But "Cash before delivery" was the motto, and on the counter in front of each young woman stood a brass bowl in which the purchaser deposited his money—"Free list entirely suspended." One could see that "The Fair One with Golden Locks," a large, full−fed blonde with extraordinarily vivid red cheeks, had been doing a rushing business; her bowl was overflowing with notes and coin. And the others also had done well, all except "Mademoiselle D.," the girl at the far end; she had not made a single sale. A slight little thing, pale and somewhat anxious−looking; no wonder that customers had passed her by. Then she looked up, and we both caught our breath. What eyes! Eyes of the purest, serenest gray—gray of that rare quality that holds no tint of either green or blue. Her eyes were her one beauty indeed, but the superlative miracle of loveliness is best seen when it stands alone. And these dolts of house−smiths had passed on to sample the pink−and−white confectionery at the other end of the counter.

"One hundred, if you please," and Indiman laid a fifty−dollar bill in the bowl of the girl with the gray eyes. The crowd stopped and gaped, and "Mademoiselle D." turned from white to red and then to white again.

"Bought up the whole stock, boss?" asked a foolish−looking youth whose collar was slowly but surely choking him to death.

"Better take a couple on account," said the pert damsel attached to the young fellow's arm; "they might turn sour on you, Mister Man."

"Give 'em away with a pound of tea," put in a third joker. "Eh, Josie?"

"Let's get away from here," whispered Indiman to me. "The girl looks as though she might faint."

We pushed on through the crowd that continued to chaff us good− naturedly—"joshing" they called it. Then we managed to struggle into a sort of backwater at the side of the dais upon which an alleged string band was trying to make good, as the scornful Miss Josie remarked.

"There's something wrong in this, Thorp," said Indiman to me, in an undertone. "Did you notice the stout man who stood immediately behind her?"

"The chap with one ear a full size larger than the other? Yes, I did."

"He never takes his eyes from her, and I believe that the girl is here against her will."

"Indiman!—" I began, but he cut me short.

"I know it, I tell you, and I'm going to take her away. Do you see that electric−light switch on the wall behind you?"

Back of the musicians' platform was a small wall cupboard holding the usual apparatus for controlling the incandescent lights with which the hall was illuminated. "Pull down both handles when I give the signal," he went on, imperturbably.

"What signal?"

Indiman considered. "I'll take one of my kisses," he said, smiling.

"I'll do nothing of the kind."

"Oh yes, you will. Remember now—the instant that I bend down to kiss her."

He was gone, leaving me to curse his folly. I tried to overtake him, but the foolish youth and his Josie blocked my way, intentionally, it seemed; that was part of their joshing of the stranger within the house−smiths' gates. I stepped up on the platform, and looked for Indiman. He had just reached the counter covered with red−paper muslin; he pushed his way up to the girl with the gray eyes and said something to her. She seemed to shrink away. Indiman turned for an instant and looked back at me, then he bent down and kissed her.

Without having had the slightest intention of so doing, I pulled down both handles; the hall was in instant and utter darkness. For a moment the following silence persisted, menacing and deadly; it was as though panic had suddenly reared her frightful head, a wild beast ready to spring.

A girl's light laugh turned the scale. "Trying to raid the fruit− stand, are you, bub?" went on Miss Josie, in her thin, cool voice. "Thought you could pinch a couple in the dark of the moon; but nay, nay, Thomas—those two

smacks 'll just cost you supper for four. I'm not sitting behind the bargain−counter to−day, thank you."

A babel of cat−calls, oaths, and laughter broke out, but the tension had been released and the danger was over. I pushed and jammed through the crowd to the stairs. No one was attempting to leave; in the hall they had just got the lights turned on again. I started down.

"Here, you!"

I looked back; the stout man with the disproportionate ears stood at the head of the stairs, hemmed in by the crowd. He panted and shook his clinched fist at me. "You!—you!" he shouted, impotently. I ran on.

In the street below Indiman was helping the girl into the coach. He turned as I ran up.

"Good!" he said, and offered me his cigarette− case.

"The big fellow is coming down," I urged.

"Have a light," said Indiman. "And now, my son, allons!"

I stepped into the coach, and Indiman after me. There was a sound of angry voices from the hall above; two or three men dashed down the stairway, others following.

"Drive on!" shouted Indiman, and the carriage started. Then we both turned and looked blankly at that empty back seat.

Indiman bit his lip. "It is an old trick—leaving by the other door," he said, quietly. "It was while we were lighting our cigarettes; and that reminds me that I have decided to give up the habit." He tossed his cigarette out of the window; the coach rolled away.

Private business called me to Washington the next day, and I had to take the night train back, arriving in New York at the uncomfortably early hour of seven. But it was some small satisfaction to rap vigorously upon Indiman's door as I passed to my own room. One always experiences a sense of virtue in being up at unseasonable hours, and blessings should be shared with one's friends. Later on we met at breakfast, and he did not thank me.

The following paragraph in the "Personal" column of the HERALD caught my eye. "Listen to this," I said, and read it aloud to my sulky host:

"'To Mademoiselle D.,—There are ninety−and−nine kisses still due me, and I propose to collect. Box 90, Herald office (up−town), or telephone 18,901 Madison Square. (Private wire.) '"HOUSE−SMITH."'

Esper Indiman smiled and touched an electric button. "The letters, Bolder," he said, but the man had anticipated his request, and was carrying in a salver heaped high with missives and papers.

"I had the personal put in the HERALD the same night of our adventure at the House− smiths' bazaar," said Indiman. "Also repeated in to−day's issue."

"It seems to be bearing a fine crop of replies."

"There's a bushel−basket of 'em already—mostly from the alleged humorist. Or else it's this sort of thing," and he tossed over an extraordinary piece of stationery—white cream− laid, with edging like a mourning band, only pink instead of black; think of that!

Of course, the contents of the letter did not belie its exterior. "Mr. House−smith" was informed that not only ninety−nine, but nine hundred and ninety−nine, kisses were at his disposal whenever he cared to communicate with Miss Delicia Millefleurs. The writing was somewhat shaky, and "communicate" was spelled with one m. Moreover, the general appearance of the epistle was marred by the presence of a large blot. But Miss Millefleurs was plainly a young person of instant ingenuity, and she had turned the disfigurement to good purpose by drawing a circle around it and labelling it, "One on account."

"Then there's this," said Indiman, and handed me a sheet of foolscap which had been folded and sealed without an envelope, after the fashion of our great−grandfathers. On it was pasted a strip of the tape used in electric−recording instruments, and the characters were those of the Morse alphabet, rather an unusual sight nowadays, when receiving messages by sound is the universal practice. Underneath the row of dots and dashes had been written their English equivalents in Indiman's small, close handwriting. The transcribed message read:

"One thousand (s) dollars apiece (s) offered for any or all of ninety−nine (s) kisses, undelivered. Take car No. 6 (s), 'Blue Line' crosstown, any (s) evening, and get off at West Fourth Street. Purchase two pounds of the best (s) butter at the corner grocery, and ask for a purple trading (s) stamp."

"Quite as extravagant as the advertisement that called it forth," I remarked. "To the wholly impartial mind it seems like nonsense."

"'Ah, but what precious nonsense!'" quoted Indiman, musingly. Then, suddenly: "Thorp, we need butter; I

wish you'd step around to that West Fourth Street grocery and get a couple of pounds—the best butter, mind."

I rose. "Certainly; back in half an hour."

"Oh, this evening is time enough. Man, man, can't you see through a ladder? They're after the girl with the gray eyes, and hope in this way to get a clew to her whereabouts. Now, you can't fight shadows; the only chance is to match them against each other. Do I make myself quite clear?"

"Not in the least."

"I want to know who sends that message, and it's possible that the answer is right under our eyes." He held up the strip of telegraphic tape. "Do you see the letter S, enclosed in parentheses, and repeated before several words?"

"Means nothing, so far as I see."

"Unless it's a habit with the operator to occasionally sound the three dots that make up the letter S in the Morse alphabet— unconsciously, you know, and just as another man, in speaking, might stutter or continually introduce a hesitating 'er' or 'um.'"

"Impossible."

"Nothing is impossible, my dear fellow." Here the bell of the desk− telephone rang. "For example, this call may be from Mademoiselle D. herself." He picked up the receiver and held it to his ear. "It is," he said, looking over at me.

The weather conditions happened to be particularly favorable for telephonic communication; I could hear almost as distinctly, standing on my side of the table, as Indiman himself. I started to walk away, then I stopped, and announced my intention of listening also; Indiman nodded assent.

There was unmistakable annoyance and anxiety in the tones of the voice that greeted us. "I have just seen your absurd advertisement," it began. "I beg of you to let this matter drop, instantly, finally."

"A request without a reason," answered Indiman, "You owe me something more than that."

"There is danger—"

"To me or to you?"

"To yourself."

"I am sorry, but you have indicated the sole condition which makes my withdrawal possible."

A little feminine sigh came from the other end of the wire. "Oh, dear, it was so stupid of me to say that—to a man!" A pause. Then, in a slightly vexed tone, "Supposing that it is a question of minding one's own business."

"Precisely what I am trying to do," said Indiman, humbly. "It is a settlement that I am proposing."

"I perceive, sir, that I am making myself ridiculous," and the voice sounded cold and inconceivably distant. "I have the honor to wish you a very good−morning." The telephone rang off sharply.

I fancy that the same thought was in both our minds: Could this be the same woman whom we had seen selling her kisses at an East Side bazaar? The very thought was incredible. And remember that we had not heard her voice before. Yet neither of us doubted, even for a moment.

"After all, it was only the one kiss that was actually sold and delivered," said Indiman, half−defiantly. But he need not have defended her to me.

It was getting to be a very pretty problem as it stood, the one obvious probability being that it was the girl herself who stood in danger. What could we do? To discover the nature of the impending peril and, above all, the personnel of the conspirators. And then what? How were we to communicate with or warn the girl?—for, of course, she had called up Indiman from a public pay−station, leaving no clew to her identity or address. Well, there was still the Personal column in the HERALD; it had reached her once and might again.

"I am going down−town to the main office of the Western Union," said Indiman, "and may be away all day. If I shouldn't return by dinner−time, you will carry out the instructions in the message. Exactly, remember—car No. 6, and the best butter—each detail may be important. About nine o'clock should be a good hour."

"I understand," I said, and we parted.

At exactly half after nine that evening I stepped off car No. 6 at the crossing of West Fourth and Eleventh streets. The grocery was on the northwest corner, and I entered without hesitation.

Like many other big cities, New York (even excluding the transpontine suburbs) is a collection of towns and villages rather than a homogeneous municipality. Chelsea and Harlem and the upper West Side—all these are distinct and separate centres of community life. Greenwich Village knows naught of Yorkville, and the East Side

Ghetto has no dealings with the inhabitants of the French quarter.

Now the small area bounded by Waverley Place, Christopher, West Fourth, and West Eleventh streets is also a law unto itself. The neighborhood is respectable and severely old fashioned, the houses large and comfortable, and the resident population almost entirely native New−Yorkers in moderate circumstances. A village, then, with its shops and school−houses and churches; it is as provincial in its way as the Lonelyville of the comic weeklies. The grocery is the village club, at least for the respectable part of the male population, the men who would not be seen in a corner saloon. There were half a dozen of the regulars now in the shop, seated on boxes and chairs around the stove, for it was a raw and chilly day. They looked up as I entered, but no one moved or spoke. Undoubtedly my man was in the group, but how to pick him out. I walked to the counter and addressed the young fellow who lounged behind it.

"Two pounds of the best butter, please."

"All out," was the unexpected reply.

"All out!" I repeated, stupidly.

"None of the best—that's what I said."

"I wanted a purple trading−stamp," I went on, helplessly.

"Anything over five cents' worth—jar of pickles, if you like."

"No, not that. Here, give me—how much are those cigars?"

"Five and ten."

"Ten cents, then."

The young man handed out the box with a nonchalant air. "Help yourself," he said.

I selected a cigar. "You're sure you haven't any butter—the BEST butter?"

"Ah, now, whadjer giving us? This ain't no Tiffany Co. Best butter? Uh! P'r'aps you'd like to take a peck of di'monds home wid jer—the best di'monds, mind, all ready shelled and fried in gold− dust. And just throw in a bunch of them German−silver banglelets for the salad. Yessir; charge 'em to Mr. Astor, Astorville, N. G."

The loungers about the stove sniggered audibly, but something in the fellow's voice made me forget his insolence. I looked up and into the eyes of Esper Indiman.

I think I did it pretty well—the cool, ignoring stare with which one is accustomed to put a boor out of countenance.

"Let me have a light," I went on, quietly, and the pretended grocer's boy was zealous to oblige, scratching the match himself and leaning across the counter to hold the flame to the cigar end.

"Coach waiting for you in front of the church," he whispered. "Drive straight home and slowly—to give him a chance."

I left the shop without troubling to glance at the loungers about the fire; Indiman would attend to that part of the business. The coach was in waiting at the Baptist Church, and the driver touched his hat when I mentioned my name. I gave him the address, and told him to drive slowly. As we turned into Seventh Avenue I looked back and saw a cab following.

An hour later Indiman came in and joined me in the library. "Now, then!" I said, impatiently, after waiting to see him mix a high− ball and light a tremendously black breva. Indiman is a little provoking at times with his infinite deliberation.

"Where were we?" he began. "Ah, yes, I had my theory about finding the chap who wrote out that message. It was correct—absolutely so," and Indiman puffed away in dreamy content, staring up at the ceiling.

"I know Mason of the main Western Union office quite well, and he was most obliging. Recognized the peculiarity of the telegraphic sending at once; there actually was a fellow who had a habit of interjecting the superfluous S in his despatches. Name of Ewall, and he was the operator in a sub−station near Jefferson Market.

"Well, I posted up there and sounded him. He didn't know anything about it at first, so I had to scare him a bit; he weakened then, and told me what I wanted to know.

"Of course it wasn't a real message; he had run it off on his machine at the request of a queer−looking gentleman who had given him a couple of dollars for his trouble. According to his description, the man was stout and dark, with one ear—the left— decidedly larger than the other."

"Aha! the fellow we saw at the bazaar. But he wasn't in the group about the grocery stove."

"Of course not, but he had his capper there."

"Go on."

"Well, I thanked Mr. Ewall for his information, and left him with a solemn admonition to be more careful in the future about doing business on the side. Then I sat down to consider.

"Now, I was sure that the grocery and its proprietor, the two pounds of the best butter, and the purple trading−stamp had nothing to do with the real business of the evening. The game was simply to identify the 'Mr. House−smith' who had advertised for his ninety− and− nine kisses, and the clap−trap of the message in telegraphic characters, and all the rest of it, were simply the kind of bait at which so eccentric a person might be expected to bite. The gentleman with one ear larger than the other desired to find the elusive Mademoiselle D., erstwhile dispenser of kisses at an East Side charity bazaar, and, consequently, he was following up every possible clew. He wanted 'Mr. House− smith,' and I wanted him.

"Fight shadows with shadows, remember; and so I took service with my honest friend, David Brown, dealer in groceries at West Fourth and Eleventh streets. He was rather offish at first, but Mattson, at Police Head− quarters, had provided me with a special detective badge, and Mr Brown was led to believe that I was working up a case of graft. He lent me a jumper, and I was forthwith installed behind the counter.

"Everything went off according to schedule. The 'shadow' had his cab in readiness and I had mine. He trailed you to No. 4020 Madison Avenue, and I followed Mr. Shadow to the Central Detective Office. It seems to have been a case of sleuth against sleuth, with the match all square."

"Anything else?"

"Well, yes. As I came into the house just now, two men were waiting for me in the vestibule. They went through me; but I didn't seem to have what they wanted. I still retain possession of my watch and purse."

"So," I said, somewhat helplessly. "What's the next move on the board?"

"It is the last night of the supplementary opera season," answered Indiman, "and we are going to dress and see what we can of Tschaikowsky's 'Queen of Spades.' A novelty—first and only performance outside of Russia, and Ternina heads the cast."

"There is Mademoiselle D.," remarked Indiman, as his glass swept the semicircle of the parterre. "The fourth box from the end."

There were but three people in the party—the girl with the gray eyes, an elderly man with a ribbon in his button−hole, and Jack Crawfurd, whom everybody knows.

The curtain fell on the third act, and immediately Crawfurd made his appearance in the omnibus−box where we were sitting.

"Come with me, mes enfants," he said, genially. "It seems that you and the adorable Countess Gilda are old friends. She commands your instant attendance. What, man! do you hesitate? I shall lose my head an our sovereign lady be not instantly obeyed."

The girl with the gray eyes greeted us with smiling unconcern. "Do you know my uncle?" she asked, and we were forthwith presented to his Excellency Baron Cassilis, the Russian ambassador to the United States. Then the Countess Gilda addressed herself squarely to Indiman.

"I am in your debt, Mr. Indiman, and you must permit me to discharge the obligation. My dear uncle, your purse."

Indiman bowed and accepted the fifty−dollar bill tendered him.

"Now we are quits," she said, smiling.

"Not quite," he answered, hardily. He drew a half−dollar from his waistcoat−pocket and offered it to her. A flood of color mantled her brow, but she took the coin and slipped it into her glove. "Well?" she asked, her small chin defiantly uptilted.

"I have only one question," said Indiman, earnestly. "Is there danger for you?"

"None in the world."

"Then I am quite satisfied."

She softened at that. "Only a rather aggravating disappointment; it does not matter now. But why will you men interfere in an unoffending woman's affairs."

"I had no idea—"

"Of course not. However, we need not enter further into particulars. Your friend in the orchestra−stall yonder will doubtless enlighten you later on." A stout man with one ear distinctly larger than the other deliberately faced

about in his seat and directed his glasses at our box. Immediately upon this the curtain went up on the last act, and his Excellency held up his hand to command silence.

"Madame," said Indiman, as he handed the Countess Gilda to her carriage, "I swear to you that the blunder I have unintentionally committed shall be atoned for. I ask but a hint—the slightest of clews."

"With pleasure, monsieur. I give you, therefore, the third appearance of the Queen of Spades. Au revoir! We sail to−morrow by the Cunarder."

The man with the disproportionate ears touched Indiman's elbow. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, deferentially, "but I shall have to have a word or two with you."

We drove to the Utinam Club and found a secluded corner. "Now, what is it, officer?" said Indiman.

The detective looked rather sheepish. "I'm afraid we've made a mess of it between us. Case of political blackmail, you see, and the young lady thought she could handle it herself. And so she could have done if we hadn't butted in, begging your pardon for so saying."

"Get to the point."

"Well, then, it's a question of a letter belonging to a great person in Roosha—written to or by her don't matter. The letter is here in New York, and it isn't a question of money with the holder, but power. There's only one thing to do in that case—steal it, and the Countess thought she could turn the trick. So she went over on the Rooshan East Side and laid her pipes to stand next to the old party who holds the precious document. At the Baron's request I was detailed from the Central Office and instructed to keep my eyes on the young woman and my hands off the case. 'Course, then, I couldn't do neither. I lost the girl when you walked off with her at the house−smiths' bazaar, and then I had to stick in my oar and answer your personal in the Herald. I laid what I thought was a pretty smart trap. You fell into it, right enough."

"So you were the fellow who had me searched and held up at my own front door," said Indiman. "Confound your impudence! What did you expect to get?"

"Why, the letter, sir. I had figured it out that you was the black− mailer."

"Oh, the deuce! And in the mean time the real article had been put on his or her guard by all this hullabaloo, and the Countess Gilda's game was blocked."

"That's it, sir. A mistake all round."

"I should think so. Well, there's nothing more to be done. That's all you know about the case?"

"That's all, sir."

"Never heard of the Queen of Spades in this connection?"

"Never, sir."

"Well, good−night, officer. Brownson's your name, eh? I shan't forget it."

"Good−night, sir."

The night was fine, and we walked home. Over on Eighth Avenue a masquerade ball was in progress; we passed under the brightly lit windows of the hall in which it was being held. A masker stood at the door, a woman dressed to impersonate the Queen of Spades. She waved her hand to Indiman, who had chanced to look up; then she plucked a rose from her bodice and tossed it over to him. He caught the flower, as becomes a gallant man, but immediately walked on.

"That was your cue—the Queen of Spades," I said.

"Not at all. It is only the third time that counts. First at the opera, and now here; the final and only important appearance is still to come."

At the next corner a wretchedly clad woman sat grinding a small barrel−organ. "For the love of Mary!" she whimpered, and Indiman thrust something into her waiting hand. He tried to hide the action, but I had caught sight of the money—a yellow−backed bill bearing the magic figures 50.

"Did you notice the tune?" said Indiman, as we walked on. "The Ninety−and−Nine."

VI. The Queen of Spades

I am very fond of Esper Indiman, but there are times when he is positively unfit for human society. Last week, for instance, when for three days on end we did not exchange a single word, not even at dinner, where the amenities should come on at least with the walnuts. I grant you that humdrum wears upon the spirit, that the flatness of the daily road may be a harder thing to get over than even Mr. Bunyan's hill Difficulty, but for a man to surrender himself mind and body to solitaire argues weakness. Moreover, it was a ridiculous combination of the cards that Indiman invariably set himself to resolve; the chances were at least a hundred to one against the solitaire coming out, and, indeed, I never saw him get it but once. Under rather curious circumstances, too—but I won't anticipate; let us begin with the beginning of the adventure of the Queen of Spades.

You will remember that there was a mislaid letter whose possession had become a matter of supreme importance to a certain great person in Russia. The Countess Gilda (she of the Ninety−and−nine Kisses) had been on the point of obtaining the treasure, but the over− confidence of my friend Indiman, coupled with the blunders of a stupid detective, had brought about a premature explosion of the train. To Indiman, apologetic and remorseful, the Countess Gilda had vouchsafed a single pregnant utterance—"Wait for the third appearance of the Queen of Spades." This was his cue; let him make the most of it if he would repair the mischief that he had unwittingly done.

Now the opera, on the night preceding the Countess's departure for Europe, had been Tschaikowsky's "Queen of Spades"; the inference was inevitable that here was the first materialization of our mysterious heroine. That same evening we had encountered, at an Eighth Avenue ball, a masker whose costume had been designed upon the familiar model of the court−card in question; so much for number two. But Fortune had been almost too kind, and immediately upon this promising beginning she had withdrawn her smiles. For upward of a month nothing whatever had happened. As I have said, Indiman played solitaire and I smoked as much as I could. Dull work for all that it was the end of April, the height of the Easter season, and New York was at its gayest. A brilliant show—yes, and the same old one. Did you ever eat a quail a day for thirty days? Why not for three hundred or three thousand days, supposing that one is really fond of quail?

For the thirty−fifth consecutive time the solitaire failed to come out. Indiman gathered the cards, shuffled them with infinite precision, and handed them to me to cut. I did so. Indiman took the pack and flung it into the air; the cards fluttered in all directions, and one came sailing straight for my nose. I put up my hand and caught it—it was the Queen of Spades.

"Here is the lady for the fateful third time," I remarked, jestingly. But Indiman was nothing if not serious. He took the card from me and studied it attentively.

"Rather an interesting face, don't you think?" he said, musingly. "Somewhat Semitic in physiognomy, you notice; that comes from the almond−shaped eyes and the abnormally high arch of the brows. Would you know her in the actual flesh—say, on Broadway? Brunette, of course, jet−black hair banded a la Merode over the ears, a little droop at the corners of her mouth. Voila! The Queen of Spades. Let us go out and look for her."

"A proposition," I remarked, judicially, "that savors of the rankest lunacy. And yet, why not? The lady certainly made the advances; it is an equivalent to an invitation to call. Pity she doesn't put her address on her card."

"Hym!" coughed Indiman, delicately. "That is a difficulty. But not necessarily an insurmountable one. Let us consult the street directory, with minds open and unprejudiced, and our faith will be rewarded—doubt it not.

"We will pass over the numbered streets and avenues," continued Indiman. "I am not in the mood for mathematical subtleties, although there is much of virtue in the digit 9, as every adept knows. Names are our quest to−day, so listen to them as they run— Allen, Bleecker, Bayard, Dey, Division—now why Division, do you suppose? What was divided, and who got the lion's share?"

"A delicate allusion to some eighteenth−century graft," I suggested. "Consult the antiquaries."

"Oh, it's enough for our purpose that the division itself exists; it must lie below the 'barbed−wire fence,' somewhere across the line. To speak precisely, Division Street appears to start at Chatham Square, and it runs eastward to Grand Street. We will take the Third Avenue Elevated to Chatham Square, and then ask a policeman.

Nothing could be more simple."

Descending the Elevated stairs, Division Street lay right before our eyes, and further inquiry was superfluous. Indiman's spirits had risen amazingly. "Why, it's only an elementary exercise," he said, smilingly. "Divide an East Side street by a pack of cards, and the quotient is the Queen of Spades; you simply cannot escape from the conclusion. Forward, then."

Now, Division Street IS something out of the ordinary, as down−town thoroughfares go. It is the principal highway to that remote Yiddish country whose capital is William H. Seward Square, and the entire millinery and feminine tailoring business of the lower East Side is centred at this its upper end. In the one short block from Chatham Square to Market Street there are twenty−seven millinery establishments—count them for yourself—and with one exception the other shops are devoted to the sale of cloaks and mantuas and tailor−made gowns. All on the eastward of the street, you notice. There is a dollar and a shilling side in Division Street, just as elsewhere.

Talk of Bond Street and Fifth Avenue! Where will you find twenty− seven millinery shops in an almost unbroken row? What a multiplied vista of delight for feminine eyes—hats, hats, hats, as far as the eye can reach. Black hats and white hats; red, blue, and greenery− yallery hats; weird creations so loaded with gimp and passementerie as to certainly weigh a pound or more; daring confections in gauze and feathers; parterres of exotic blooms such as no earthly garden ever held; hats with bows on 'em and hats with birds on 'em, and hats with beasts on 'em; hats that twitter and hats that squawk; hats of lordly velvet and hats of plebeian corduroy; felt hats, straw hats, chip hats; wide brim and narrow brim; skewered, beribboned, bebowed—finally, again, just hats, hats, hats, a phantasmagoria of primary colors and gewgaws and fallalerie pure and simple, before which the masculine brain fairly reels. But the woman contemplates the show with serenity imperturbable: the hat she wants is here somewhere, and it is only a matter of time and patience to find it.

There is always a Mont Blanc to overtop the lesser Alpine summits— a Koh−i−noor in whose splendor all inferior radiance is extinguished.

Indiman touched my elbow. "Look at that one," he murmured.

Now that WAS a hat. To describe it—but let me first bespeak the indulgence of my feminine readers. I am not an authority upon hats− −most distinctly not; and I shall probably display my ignorance with the first word out of my mouth. But what matter. I am simply trying to tell of what these poor mortal eyes have seen.

In effect, then, the foundation of the hat appeared to be a black straw, with a wide, straight brim, the trimming being a gimcrackery sort of material whose name for the moment has escaped me. Suppose we call it barege, and let it go at that? The principal ornament was a large, red apple in wax, pierced by a German−silver arrow, but the really unique feature of the entire creation was the parasol−like fringe that depended from the edge of the brim, a continuous row of four−inch filaments upon which shining black beads were closely strung. An over−bold device, perhaps, but it certainly caught the eye; there was a barbaric suggestion in those strings of glittering beads that made one think of the Congo and of tomtoms beating brazenly in the moonlight. A hat that WAS a hat, as I have previously remarked, and Indiman and I gazed upon it with undisguised interest. It is hardly necessary to add that this particular hat had the place of honor in the shop−window, it being mounted upon the waxen model of a simpering lady with flaxen curls and a complexion incomparable. Assuredly, then, the pearl of the collection.

"L. Hernandez," said Indiman, reading the sign over the door. "Spanish Jew, I should say. Yes, and the Queen of Spades in person," he added, in an undertone, for L. Hernandez was standing in the open door−way of the shop and regarding us with a curious fixity of glance.

Now, through the summer−time it is the custom of the Division Street modistes to occupy seats placed on the sidewalk. In a business where competition is so strenuous one must be prepared to catch the customer on the hop. Even in winter the larger establishments will keep a scout on duty outside, and the lesser proprietor must, at least, cast an occasional eye to windward, if the balance of trade is to be preserved. Undoubtedly Madame Hernandez was taking a purely business observation, and we had chanced to fall within its focus.

The resemblance was, indeed, striking. There was the banded hair over the eyes, the slightly drooping mouth, the peculiar upspring of the eyebrow arch—the Queen of Spades in person, as Indiman had said. And this was her third appearance.

Indiman removed his hat with a sweep. "Madame," he said, with elaborate civility, "it is a beautiful day."

"What of it?" retorted L. Hernandez, ungraciously enough. "Or perhaps the sun isn't shining above Madison

Square," she added, sarcastically. A strange voice this, raucous in quality and abnormally low in pitch.

"I haven't noticed," said Indiman, with undisturbed good−humor. "Alike upon the just and unjust, you know. Now if you will kindly allow me to pass—"

"What do you want in my shop?"

"I desire to purchase that hat," replied Indiman, and pointed to the atrocity in the window.

"It is not for sale."

"I am prepared to pay liberally for what strikes my fancy." He took out a roll of bills.

"The hat is not for sale."

"Madame," said Indiman, with the utmost suavity, "are you in business for your health?"

"I am."

"Oh, in that case—"

"You may come inside; it tires me to be on my feet for so long. To my sorrow I grow stout."

"It is an affliction," murmured Indiman, sympathetically. We followed her within. The shop was crammed from floor to ceiling with bandboxes arranged in three or four rows, and glazed presses, filled with feminine hats and bonnets, lined the walls. Near the window was a small counter, behind which Madame L. Hernandez immediately installed herself, and from this vantage−point she proceeded to inspect us with cool deliberation, fanning herself the while with a huge palm−leaf. "You wish to buy a hat?" she said, tentatively.

"That one," answered Indiman, stubbornly "—that hat on the model's head."

"Bah! Senor, it is fatiguing to fight, like children, with pillows in the dark. You want that Russian letter. Why not say so?"

For a full half−minute their eyes met in silent thrust and parry; it was to be a duel, then, and each was an antagonist to be respected.

"If it is a question of money—" said Indiman, slowly.

"It is not."

"Then I must take it where I find it."

"So it appears," answered L. Hernandez, placidly. "But you must first find it. Eh, my bold young man?"

"Be tranquil, madame—"

"I am tranquil. You are but wasting your time."

"I have it to spend in unlimited quantity. I am a solitaire− player."

"Oh, you play solitaire. How many variations do you know?"

"One hundred and thirty−five."

"I can count one hundred and forty−two."

"Including the 'Bridge'?"

"The famous 'Bridge'! Do you know it, then?"

"I learned it from a Polish gentleman in Belgrade."

"It is difficult."

"Enormously so. It may come out once in a hundred times."

Madame L. Hernandez produced a pack of cards from underneath the counter. "Will you oblige me, senor? I am anxious to see the play."

Indiman proceeded with the explanation. It was too intricate for me to follow. I could only understand that, with the solitaire properly resolved, the cards should finally divide themselves into four packs, headed respectively by the ace of clubs, king of diamonds, queen of spades, and knave of hearts. Indiman tried it twice, but the combination would not come out.

"We will try it again to−morrow," said Indiman, rising.

"With pleasure. Good−day, gentlemen. Mind the step."

As we walked towards Chatham Square a stout man joined us, a man with one ear noticeably larger than the other. "Mr. Indiman—" he began, deferentially.

"What, you, Brownson?"

"Yes, sir. I have an assignment on this job from the Central Office. I saw you coming out of L. Hernandez's just now. Smooth old bird, ain't it?"

"You on this case?" said Indiman, stupefied.

"Yes, sir. You see, the parties concerned finally determined to put it into our hands, and they'd have been enough sight better off if they'd done it in the beginning. Bless you! it's no great shakes of a lay−out. There's the letter—a single sheet of note−paper written in violet ink on one side only, and we know the party who has it up her sleeve. L. Hernandez—I don't mind saying it, seeing that you're also on. I'll do the trick within three days, or you can boil my head for a corned−beef dinner."

"Well, good luck to you, Brownson," said Indiman, absently. There was a cab−rank here in Chatham Square, and we drove up−town to the Utinam Club for a late luncheon. While we were waiting for our filet to be prepared Indiman wrote a brief note and had it despatched by messenger; it was addressed, as he showed me, to Madame L. Hernandez,—Division Street. "I'm not going to have that booby upset the apple−cart for a second time," he said, savagely. "Now we shall have to wait for at least three days."

This was on Monday; on Friday we presented ourselves again to Madame L. Hernandez. She received us politely, almost graciously; she sat in the great chair behind the counter, engaged in the truly feminine occupation of putting up her hair in curl−papers. A pad of stiff, white writing−paper lay on the counter before her, and from it she tore the strips as she needed them.

"I am tired of these bandeaux," she explained, smilingly. "My friends tell me that curls will become me infinitely better."

"Your friends have reason," acquiesced Indiman; "but tell me, madame, did you receive my note?"

"I did, senor, and I return you a thousand thanks. Ah, how these pigs of detectives have tortured me!—you would never believe it. Twice my apartments, at the back there, have been entered and ransacked from end to end; I even suffered the indignity of being personally searched by a dreadful newspaper woman who had answered my advertisement for 'Improvers Wanted.' Chloroformed in broad daylight in my own house!"

"But they didn't get the letter?"

"I was not born yesterday, senor."

"Good!" said Indiman, heartily. "What imbeciles policemen can be!"

"What, indeed! Behold, senor, I show you the ruin wrought by these swine. This way."

L. Hernandez rose, waddled stiffly to the back room, and threw open the door. "There!" she exclaimed, dramatically.

Evidently these were the lady's living apartments—a bed−chamber and a smaller room at the left, in which were a gas−range and some smaller culinary apparatus. It was plain that the intruders had made thorough work in their search. The carpet had been removed and the flooring partially torn up; the walls had been sounded for secret receptacles, the pictures stripped of their backing, and the chairs and bedstead pulled half to pieces. "Not a square inch of anything have they left unprobed by their accursed needles," said L. Hernandez, furiously. "It will take me a month, stiff as I am, to get things to rights."

"An outrage!" said Indiman, soothingly. "Shall we have a try at crossing the 'Bridge'?" And forthwith they sat down to the great solitaire with the utmost amity. But again it did not come out; the combinations were insoluble.

The next day we paid another visit to L. Hernandez.

"The curl−papers do not seem to be very effective," remarked Indiman, glancing at the familiar smooth bands of hair drawn straight down from the forehead and over the ears.

"Ah, these wretched bandeaux!" sighed madame; "they are intractable. I shall have to wear my curl−papers by day as well as by night. Excuse me, gentlemen, for a few minutes," and she disappeared into the back room, to shortly reappear with the rebellious bands tightly swathed in a dozen little rolls of twisted paper. "Again the impassable 'Bridge,'" she said, gayly, and the pair wrestled half a dozen times with the problem—of course, unsuccessfully.

On the following day the comedy was repeated.

"Madame," said Indiman, gravely, "you have again forgotten your curl−papers."

"Senor, my memory is undoubtedly failing; I go to repair the omission." Re−enter madame in curl−papers, and then the "Bridge" as before; da capo for a week on end.

"It seems impossible to get that accursed combination," said Indiman, and he threw down the cards. Madame L. Hernandez smiled, and there was a little silence.

"Madame," said Indiman.

"Senor."

"You are not treating me fairly. You have allowed those stupid detectives to search your apartments, and I demand an equal privilege."

"You shall have it, senor. I am going to make a complaint of the affair at Police Headquarters. Perhaps Senor Thorp will kindly accompany me?"

"Excellent! I will remain here, and if the letter is within these four walls I shall find it."

"My best wishes, senor."

I called a coach. Madame arrayed herself in a fur cloak and crowned herself, curl−papers and all, with that atrocious hat from the window stock, a grotesque figure of a woman in all conscience. But I had nerved myself for the ordeal, and we drove away amid the jeers and laughter of the street crowd. In an hour we returned. Indiman was placidly smoking and working on his solitaire.

"You were successful, senor?"

"No, but I have hopes."

"Ah! Well, good−day, gentlemen. Come again."

"Of course there was nothing," said Indiman to me as we drove home. "I even went through every bandbox."

"Yet you have hopes?"

"Yes."

It was the second day following, and we were calling again upon L. Hernandez. There was the usual badinage about the curl−papers, and madame retired to her private apartments, carefully closing the door behind her.

"Now!" said Indiman. Hastily he pulled forward a cheval−glass, placing it upon a particular spot and tilting the mirror to a certain exact angle. When finally it was adjusted to his satisfaction, he motioned to me to come and look. In the mirror was plainly visible a vertically reversed reflection of L. Hernandez. Standing in front of a long dressing−glass in her bedroom, she deliberately removed her chevelure in its entirety and tossed it on the table. It was a wig, then; but I was hardly prepared for the secret that it had concealed—for the close− cropped head, with its straw−colored hair, was unmistakably that of a man.

"Look! look!" whispered Indiman.

From a drawer L. Hernandez had taken a second wig already furnished with curl−papers; the adjustment took but a minute or two; the door opened, and she reappeared, ready for the inevitable solitaire.

On the way home that night Indiman stopped at Police Headquarters, but he did not see fit to make the nature of his inquiries known to me. On the subject of the apparition in the mirror, however, he was more communicative.

"As you know," he said, "the partition that divides madame's private apartments from the shop does not extend to the ceiling; there is a gap of some three feet. I had previously noticed the cheval−glass in the bedroom; it was a natural presumption that L. Hernandez would take her stand in front of it while engaged in making her toilet. Now this glass is tilted at a sharp angle, and consequently the reflection must be projected upward to a particular point on the ceiling. Supposing a small looking−glass to be fixed at this point, the rays impinging upon it will be cast downward and ON OUR SIDE OF THE PARTITION, for the angle of reflection is always equal to that of incidence. We have, therefore, only to place in position a second cheval−glass, arranged at the proper inclination, to obtain a reproduction of the original image, although, of course, it will appear to us as upside−down. I have only to add that the day you escorted madame to Police Headquarters I took the opportunity to fasten a small mirror on the ceiling, trusting that it would not be noticed. Nor was it; the trap worked perfectly—an optical siphon, as it may be called— and the secret was mine."

"And now?"

"Wait until to−morrow," said Indiman.

For the fiftieth time the game of solitaire was in progress, and on this occasion it seemed as though the combinations were actually coming out. Remember, that in the final fall of the cards it was necessary that they should be in four packs, headed by the ace of clubs, king of diamonds, queen of spades, and knave of hearts. Already the first two ranks had been completed; it all depended upon the disposition of the few remaining cards.

"The queen of spades is buried," said L. Hernandez, with a sneer. "You have failed again."

"I think not," replied Indiman, calmly. "I am sure that the last card is the knave of hearts." This was my cue. I stepped to the door and made an imperceptible signal to Brownson, who, with two other plain−clothes men, was lounging in a door−way across the street. They seemed eternally slow in obeying; I felt the muscles in my throat

contracting with nervous excitement as I turned again to watch the solitaire.

But two cards remained to be played; they lay face downward upon the table. If the upper one were the queen of spades, the packets would be completed in their proper order and the solitaire would be made; if it were the knave of hearts, the game would again be lost. Slowly—oh, so slowly—Indiman turned the first card.

"Knave!" shouted L. Hernandez, exultingly. Then she stopped and went white. It was not the knave of hearts, but the queen of spades, and over it had been pasted a small carte−de−visite photograph—that of a man dressed in the coarse uniform of one of the Russian penal settlements. With lightning swiftness Indiman leaned forward and twitched the wig from L. Hernandez's head; the man himself sat there before our eyes.

Brownson and his bull−dogs stood at the door, revolvers in hand. But there was no need. The squat, ungainly figure had fallen forward upon the counter, crushing the horrible nightmare of a hat of which I have so often spoken, and which, quite by chance, as it seemed, had been lying there. Brownson sprang forward and raised the limp body. The red, waxen apple had been broken into a dozen pieces. Among them lay the fragments of a fragile glass phial, and the smell of almonds was in the air.

"Prussic acid," said Brownson, sententiously. "He wasn't the kind to be taken alive."

Indiman mechanically turned over the last card; it was the knave of hearts, and the famous solitaire of the "Bridge" had been made at last. He slipped the cards into his pocket and rose to go. "Brownson," he said, with a little catch in his voice, "I didn't think that it would come to this, but it had to be, I suppose. Have him put away decently, and send the account to me."

"Very good, sir. But ain't it a pity about that letter. However, we can take a good look now, and maybe we'll turn it up yet."

"Perhaps so," said Indiman.

"His real name was Gribedyoff, and he was implicated in the assassination of Prince Trapasky," said Indiman to me as we sat over our cigars that night. "A desperate fellow, one of the 'Blacks,' you know. I picked his picture out in a moment at Police Headquarters, after seeing his reflection in the mirror. I knew it was necessary to surprise him, and so I borrowed the photograph and used it to transmogrify the queen of spades card. Just for an instant he lost his nerve, but that was enough."

"But, as Brownson said, how about the letter?"

Indiman drew from his pocket the wig, to which the curl−papers were still attached. He unrolled one and showed it to me. I could see that the strip was written in French on one side of the paper and in violet ink. "It will be easy enough to piece it together again," he said. "Plain enough now, isn't it, why L. Hernandez cared not at all how often Brownson's men rummaged table−drawers and chair− seats. The letter was safe until the time should come to use it. Only it never came."

"I suppose you are going abroad?"

"I shall sail Thursday."

"And you will be gone how long?"

"That depends, doesn't it, upon the pleasure of that most gracious lady the Countess Gilda. I may be back in a fortnight, and in that case I will make an engagement with you. We will take a ride together on a trolley−car."

"Agreed," said I.

It was a warm afternoon in the middle of May, and I was lounging in the deserted common room of the Utinam Club when Esper Indiman walked in. We shook hands.

"You landed to−day?" I asked.

"Yes, by the Deutschland."

It was impossible for me to utter the inquiry that rose to my lips. Indiman hesitated just a trifle, then he went on:

"I delivered my letter to the Countess, and she was most obliged. She asked me to stay on, but I had a previous engagement to plead: you remember that I had agreed to go on a trolley−ride on or about this date?"

"I remember," I answered. "Let us interview Oscar, then, upon the subject of dinner; it will be cooler up at Thirty−fourth Street. Afterwards we will have our adventure on the trolley."

Well, we went and had our dinner, but, as you shall see, the trolley−ride had to be indefinitely postponed. We had started down Fifth Avenue, and near Madison Square we ran squarely into Indiman's cousin, George Estes. He was standing near a brilliantly illumined shop−window, and gazing intently at a small object that lay in the

hollow of his hand.

"Oh, it's you," he said, absently. Then, with a little laugh, "What do you think of this?" He held out to us a small button fashioned of some semiprecious stone like Mexican opal; it glowed with an elusive reddish lustre.

"It looks almost alive," commented Indiman.

"The vital spark, eh? Well, you're not so far out, for it means a man's life."

"What is it, George?" asked Indiman, gravely.

"Not to−night, old chap. It may be a mistake—probably is. Or say that I was kidding you."

"That won't do, George. You've said both too much and too little. Cab there!" he called, and a hansom drew up to the curb.

"You'll excuse me, Thorp—a family affair." He motioned to the boy to enter; he obeyed, sulkily enough, and they drove off.

VII. The Opal Button

Now, as a matter of fact, I had no part in the affair of the opal button; for on the very next day following our meeting with Estes I came down with typhoid and spent the next two months in the hospital. I saw little of Indiman during that time, but his seeming neglect was fully explained by the story he told me the night I was well enough to get back to 4020 Madison Avenue.

"You remember, of course," began Indiman, "that I went off with Estes that May evening with just an apology to you about a family affair. Really, I knew nothing; but the boy's manner struck me as peculiar, and, while the incident of the opal button was trifling in itself, I was sure that there was something behind it. But when I plumped the question squarely at Estes he had nothing to say except that the jewel had been slipped into his hand while he stood looking into a shop−window. Where it came from he did not know; what it meant he either could not or would not tell. So I had to drop the subject for the time. But it came up again of its own accord four days later, the exact date being May 15th. So much by way of preamble; the story proper I will read from my notes.

"'De Quincey was right, and murder should be a fine art. But the Borgias—only amateurs! The far−famed Aqua Tofana—pooh! Any chemist will put it up for ten cents. Only be careful how you use it. Chemical analysis has advanced somewhat since the day of the divine Lucrezia, and a jury would convict without leaving their seats.'

"'Rather rough on your business, I should think,' said Estes, speaking somewhat thickly, for the port had stopped with him overfrequently of late. 'Is poisoning really out of date?' he continued.

"'As absolutely as crinoline and the novels of G. P. R. James,' answered our host, lightly. But I, who was watching him closely, saw his eyes harden. Estes had said more than one imprudent thing that evening, and this time he had gone too far. I would have to get the boy away somehow.

"There were three of us dining with Balencourt that evening at his chambers in the Argyle—Estes, Crawfurd, and myself; and as usual we had had an excellent dinner, for Balencourt knew how to live. Who was Balencourt? Well, nobody could answer that precisely, but his letters of introduction had been unexceptionable and his checks were always honored at Brown Brothers. Moreover, Crawfurd had met him frequently at the Jockey Club in Paris, and there was his name on White's books for any one to read. A man of forty−five perhaps, clean−shaven, well set up, an inveterate globe−trotter, a prince among raconteurs, and the most astounding polyglot I have ever met. I myself have heard him talk Eskimo with one of Peary's natives, and he had collated some of his researches into Iranic−Turanian root−forms for the Philological Society. But let us go back to our walnuts.

"Crawfurd picked up the thread. 'Then the science of assassination is a lost art,' he said, tentatively.

"'Oh, I did not say that,' replied Balencourt, carelessly. 'There are other ways—better ones.'

"'You mean beyond the risk of detection?'

"'Perfectly.'

"'Eliminating the toxic poisons of all kinds?'

"'If you like.'

"'I doubt it.' said Crawfurd, with a little hesitation.

"'And I deny it,' interrupted Estes, rudely, and stared straight at Balencourt. A quick glance answered his challenge; it was like the engaging of rapiers.

"'Perhaps Mr. Estes desires proof,' said Balencourt, slowly.

"'I do.'

"'Let us say between—'

"'To−night and the 1st of August.'

"'That will suit me perfectly. My passage is booked on the Teutoninc for the following Wednesday.'

"'It is also the day set for my wedding to Miss Catherwood,' said Estes, quietly.

"Balencourt took it admirably. 'So you have obtained the decision at last,' he said, smiling lightly. 'My felicitations.'

"Crawfurd rose to his feet. The jovial flush had strained away from his fat cheeks, and his jaw hung loose and pendulous. 'For God's sake, fellows—' he began, but Balencourt stopped him with a gesture.

"'This is a private matter between Mr. Estes and myself, as he knows full well. So far as you and Mr. Indiman are concerned, call it what you like—a duel, or, better yet, a sporting proposition.'

"'The stakes?' put in Crawfurd, feebly, for, shaken as he was, he could still grasp at the definite idea included in the last−named alternative. Sport and a wager—now he understood.

"'The stakes?' repeated Balencourt. 'Well, they are hardly of a nature that either Mr. Estes or myself can intrust them to the keeping of a third party. But rest assured that the loser will pay; it is a debt of honor.'

"Up to this moment I had kept silence, but now I must make my one try. 'He is but a boy,' I said, leaning my elbows on the table and seeking to plumb the soul−depths in the cold, gray eyes of the man who sat opposite to me. But Balencourt only laughed amusedly.

"'Then he should not assume a man's—'

"'Will you come now, Cousin Esper?' interrupted Estes. He pushed his chair noisily back, and we all rose.

"'You won't wait for coffee?' said our host. 'Just as you please.' He touched the call−button, and Jarman entered to help us on with our top−coats. Par parenthese, how account for the anomaly of this scoundrel of a Balencourt possessing the most perfect of serving− men? There never was anybody who could roll an umbrella like Jarman, and I have been around a lot in my time. After the catastrophe I tried my best to locate him, but without success. He was gone; the pearl had dropped back into the unfathomable depths of ocean. Perhaps he followed his master.

"The door closed behind us, and we three stood in the street. 'A cab?' I queried, and a passing hansom swung in towards the curb.

"'I'd rather walk along with you, Cousin Esper,' said Estes. 'Jump in, Mr. Crawfurd, and we'll pick you up later at the club.'

"Crawfurd nodded and was forthwith driven away. I turned to Estes.

"'What is it, George?' I asked. 'Remember, there's Elizabeth to be considered in this.'

"Now, while Estes is a second cousin of mine, 'Betty' Catherwood is my niece, and so I considered that I had a double right to stick in my oar. But I wasn't prepared for the depth of trouble that I encountered in the glance George Estes turned on me. 'So bad as that!' I finished, lamely.

"'It won't take long in the telling,' began the boy, desperately. 'You remember that after I left Princeton I went to Germany for a two years' course in international law under Langlotz; it was a pet idea of the pater's.'

"I nodded.

"'Well, we all make fools of ourselves at one time or another, and here is where I donned the cap and bells. You have heard'—here he lowered his voice—'of the "Dawn."'

"'The revolutionary society?'

"'Yes; it's the active branch of the "Sunrise League"—the practical work, you know. I joined it.'

"I had nothing to say. George laughed a little dismally and went on:

"'Absurd, wasn't it? I, a citizen of the best and freest country on earth to be making common cause with a lot of crack−brained theorists who would replace constitutional government by the "Lion's Mouth" and the "Council of Ten"—a world ruled by a secret terror. But it seemed all right at the time. What was my life or any one man's life to the progress of civilization? It was only when I came to look at the means apart from the end that I realized the horrible fallacy of it all.'

"'You withdrew, of course.'

"'You don't quite understand. One doesn't withdraw from the "Dawn." He may cease to be identified actively with the propaganda, but he is still subject to be called upon for a term of "service"—that's the ghastly euphemism they use. You remember this and the night I received it?'

"He took a pasteboard box from his pocket and handed it to me. It contained a small, red button, fashioned out of some semiprecious stone resembling Mexican opal.

"'It was the first summons,' continued Estes, 'and within three days I should have been on my way to Berlin—to receive my instructions.'

"'You refused, then?'

"'There was Betty,' said the boy, simply.

"'You must understand,' he went on, 'that this "service" can only be demanded once of a member. He may refuse compliance, if he chooses, but in that case there is a forfeit to be paid, and it becomes due after the third

warning.'

"'Well?'

"'Must be paid, you understand. If not by the recalcitrant himself, then by the agent of the "Forty" through whom the summons comes. That makes it clear, doesn't it—Balencourt and his debt of honor?'

"'When did you know—about him, I mean?'

"'Here is the second button. Balencourt slipped it into my hand just before we went out to dinner to−night.'

"'It is incredible. Balencourt is a man and you are but a boy. To take advantage of an act of youthful folly—'

"'You forget that it is his life or mine,' interrupted Estes, quietly.

"'But, George, it is unthinkable. When he knows—but you did tell him—about Betty—'

"'That's just it, old chap. Balencourt asked her to marry him a week ago, just before I received the first red button.'

"The monstrousness of the thing struck me all of a heap. 'The police,' I said, vaguely, but Estes shook his head.

"'It is but postponing the bad quarter of an hour,' he said, gently, 'and I don't think that I could put up with this sort of thing indefinitely. Moreover, it wouldn't be fair to—to Betty.

"'No,' he went on, 'it's better to have a limit set, just as it is now—for at least Balencourt will keep his word. Once past the 1st of August, I am safe.'

"'We'll work within the limit, then,' I said, cheerfully. 'If we three—Crawfurd, you, and I—can't match wits with one polyglot son of the "Dawn," we might as well let the bottom drop out of the Monroe Doctrine and be done with it.'

"We had arrived at the club. For an instant our hands met. 'Not a word to Betty,' he whispered.

"'Of course.' Then we went up−stairs to the pipe−room, where we found Crawfurd sitting gloomily over his fourth Scotch−and−soda. The clocks were striking three when we took Estes back to his apartments, and we both spent the night with him. The issue had been fairly joined, and it was exactly two months and a half to the 1st of August.

"The rest of May passed absolutely without incident, and sometimes it was difficult to believe in the reality of the contest in which we were engaged. Yet we omitted no precaution, and during the whole fortnight Estes was never for a moment out of the sight of either Crawfurd or myself. But no; I'll correct myself there, for we had to allow him an hour and a half every evening with Betty, and I used to mount guard in the street outside, measuring the cold and unsympathetic flag−stones. And no thanks for it, either; indeed, Betty's manner was distinctly top−loftical whenever we chanced to meet, she being a young person of discernment, and perfectly well aware that we were keeping her in the dark about something. But it helped George to forget, and so I counted it in with the rest of the day's work and held my peace.

"As for the rest, there was nothing to be done except to keep a couple of 'shadows' on Balencourt, and we had a full account of his movements by eight o'clock every night—a regular ship's chart worked out with time−stamps and neat entries in red ink, after the accustomed fashion of Central Office men. So May and the first two weeks in June dragged uneventfully along; the period of stress was already half over. Then came Monday, the 15th of June, and with it a little shock. Our man—I mean Balencourt—concluded to disappear, and he did it as effectually as though there were no such thing as a 'shadow' in existence. When the head−sleuth came that night to report his discomfiture, I cut him short in his theorizing and asked for the facts. But there was only the one—Balencourt was certainly non est, and that was all there was to say. Whereupon we banished the 'shadows' to the outer darkness whence they had come and convened our original council of war.

"One thing was plain—the danger of remaining longer in the city. There are so many things that may happen in a crowd, and especially if our friend Balencourt formed part of that unknown quantity. There is always a chance of a chimney−pot tumbling about one's ears or of being run down by some reckless chauffeur. And who is to know the truth? Accidents will happen; they are wilful things and insist upon keeping themselves in evidence. Imprimis, then, to get out of town. But where?

"'Hoodman's Ledge,' began Crawfurd, a little doubtfully, but I caught him up with joyful decision.

"'The very thing,' I said. 'I'll send a wire to the caretaker to− night, and we'll be off by Thursday. I invite you all—for six weeks. Why, of course, George, that includes Betty and her mother; they were to come to me, anyway, in July.'

"Now, Hoodman's Ledge is one of the innumerable small islands that dot the Maine coast above Portland. A few years ago the fancy had taken me to buy the island—it was only three acres in area—and later on I had put up a house, nothing very elegant, but everything for comfort, a model bachelor's establishment. For our present need no better asylum could have offered. The island was small and occupied only by my own domestic establishment. It lay in the bight of Oliver's Bay, quite a mile from the nearest shore, and there was but one other bit of land anywhere around—an uninhabited islet known as 'The Thimble,' that lay a quarter of a mile due east. Surely this isolation promised security. Here, if anywhere, we might snap our fingers at the machinations of M. Balencourt and the mysterious 'Forty.' It would be rather cold off the Maine coast during this unseasonable summer, but there were fireplaces in plenty and stacks of drift−wood. The only real difficulty lay in persuading my estimable sister to cut short her Newport visit and come to me a month earlier than usual.

"Finally, I left it to Betty to manage. 'I can't explain myself any clearer, my dear,' I ended up, rather lamely, 'but it will be better for George. Will you do it?'

"'So you won't trust me with the secret? No; you needn't protest— there is a secret, and I ought to know it. But you have put it so cleverly that I haven't any choice in the matter. "Better for George" indeed! Very good, mononcle; I'll obey orders. But remember that it will be the worse for you later on, unless you can show good and sufficient reason for this ridiculous mystery. Poor, dear mamma! how she will hate to be plucked up—like an early radish.' And thereupon Miss Betty sailed away with her small head tilted skyward.

"But she did manage it, and by Thursday night the party was actually assembled at 'The Breakers.' There was a sou'easter on that night, but the drift−wood burned stoutly in the wide chimney− piece, with now and then a cheerful sputter as a few stray drops sought to immolate themselves in the green and purple flames.

"'Not so bad—eh, mamma?' said Betty, as she slipped another pillow behind Mrs. catherwood's back and handed her the last volume of 'Gyp,' with the pages neatly cut. And then she actually smiled over at me. I think I am beginning to understand Betty.

"Again I pass over many uneventful days. 'Nothing doing,' as Crawfurd put it, and laisser−faire was a good enough motto for our side of the house. The two children, of course, were blissfully happy.

"Three, four, nearly six weeks, and no sign or sound from M'sieur Balencourt. Not so surprising, after all, seeing that we were living on an island surrounded on all sides by deep water and no land within a mile except that little dot called 'The Thimble.' And while we didn't make any parade of our precautions, Crawfurd and I kept watch and watch, just as we used to do in the old Alert, on the China station, twenty−odd years ago. Moreover, the gardener and my boatman were men who could keep their eyes open and their mouths shut, and, finally, there were the four dogs—two Great Danes, a collie, and 'Snap,' the fox−terrier. It would have been a bold man who sought to visit Hoodman's Ledge, uninvited, during that particular month and a half.

"It was the morning of the 1st of August, and I was lounging on the piazza, Crawfurd being on duty at the time. The warm weather had come at last. The air was so soft and delightful that the scientific review I had been reading slipped from my hand and I gave myself up to indolence, gazing lazily at the white pigeons that were trading about the lawn, between the boat−house and a rustic pavilion overlooking the tennis−court. One bird I marked in particular, admiring his strong and graceful sweeps and dips as he circled about, possessed, as it were, with the pure joy of motion. I followed him as he sank down on a long slant to the lawn, swift as a bolt from the blue; then I rubbed my eyes in amaze. It was a pigeon of snowy whiteness that an instant before had been flying free; it was a coal−black nondescript that now fluttered feebly once or twice and then lay still on the gravelled path, close to the stone sun−dial. I ran down the steps and bent over the pitiful thing. Pfui!—the bird was but a charred and blackened lump of dead flesh. There was a disagreeable odor of burned feathers in the air. Mechanically my eye fell on the sun−dial; there was a spot the size of a silver dollar on the side of the pedestal where the stone had crumbled and disintegrated, as though it had been placed at the focus of some immensely powerful burning−glass. I stepped behind the sun−dial and looked out to sea. And there, in line with the pedestal of the dial and the dead bird on the path, lay 'The Thimble.'

"Now, as I have said, 'The Thimble' was a rocky islet only a few rods in extent, but densely wooded with spruce and blue−gum. The general shape of the rock was that of a lady's thimble; hence the name. Rather a picturesque object in the seascape, but, of course, utterly valueless except for occasional picnic uses—a bit of No Man's Land whose purpose in the economy of nature had hitherto remained unfulfilled. But now?

"I went back to the piazza and caught up a pair of stereo− binoculars that were lying on the table. There,

shining like a star through the close curtain of green that veiled 'The Thimble,' was the projecting end of a highly polished tube of steel. And even as I gazed a man's face peered out as though in the act of sighting— Aram Balencourt!

"Then I understood. The tube was the means of projecting some enormously powerful heat−beam whose nature must be akin to that of the so−called X−ray. The article I had been reading not ten minutes ago—what was the title?—'Radium, the Wizard Metal'—that incomprehensible substance, forever sending forth its terrible emanations, yet never diminished by even the ten−thousandth part of a grain—a natural force whose properties and functions were but imperfectly understood, even by the learned men who had succeeded in isolating it, an agent of such enormous potency that an ounce or two might serve to put a battle−ship out of commission—a couple of pounds and the universe itself were endangered. Even now from that steel tube, sighted so carefully on the pedestal of the sun−dial, billions of ions might be rushing, invisible to the eye, but certain death to whatever of animal existence they chanced to encounter. There was the pigeon lying dead on the walk.

"'Do hurry, George,' called out Betty's thin, sweet treble. She stood at the entrance to the pavilion and waved a tennis−racquet impatiently.

"'Coming,' was the cheerful response, and Estes turned the corner of the house. He took the gravelled path at full speed. In an instant or two at the farthest he would be passing between the sun− dial and the dead pigeon, in line with those deadly radiations.

"We had been playing a little single−wicket earlier in the day, and a cricket−ball lay on the wicker table at my hand. I could not have uttered a word or a cry to save my life—to save his—but instinct held true. With a full, round−arm sweep the ball left my hand, catching the boy squarely on the forehead. He fell within his stride.

"Betty was with us on the instant, but I seized and held her despite her struggles. Naturally, she thought I had gone mad. Then I looked over again at 'The Thimble,' just in time to see a sheet of palest−colored flame shoot up from the island. The dense mass of green foliage seemed to wither and consume away within the tick of a clock. Through the glass I caught a glimpse of a dark figure that rolled down to the water's edge, clutching feebly at the shifting shingle. Perhaps a log, after all—it lay so still.

"An instant later 'The Thimble' disappeared in a cloud of grayish vapor, the dull sound of an explosion filled the ear, and the ground under our feet trembled. There was nothing to be seen, even with the glass, save a light scum covering the water and some fragments of charred tree branches. But the air about us was full of a fine dust that powdered Betty's hair, as though for a costume ball, and made me cough consumedly.

"Naturally, there were quite a number of explanations to make to Miss Betty after George had been resuscitated—a slightly disfigured hero, but still in the ring—but I spare you. The dear girl listened quietly, but at the end she began to tremble, and I won't say but that she cried a bit. It doesn't matter if she did, and I think we all began to feel a little queer when we came to think it over. However, it WAS over—no possible doubt about that.

"'One thing I don't understand,' said Crawfurd. 'There were to be three warnings, and Estes only received two of the red buttons.' Whereupon Betty blushed, and drew a little package from her pocket.

"'It came last night directed to George,' she said, 'but I forgot to give it to him. It broke open in my pocket and it contained this.' She held out to us the third red button. That was decent of Balencourt—to have given the last warning.

"There is only one possible hypothesis to account for the catastrophe. Balencourt was dealing with a terrible force, whose nature was but partially understood, even by science. He had intended to use it to fulfil the vengeance of the 'Dawn' but something had happened, and in an instant the monster had turned and rended its master. That is all that we can know.

"Two days later George and Betty were married, for they stuck to the original date in spite of the fact that George, with a lump on his forehead as big as the cricket−ball itself, did not make a particularly presentable bridegroom. I carried an umbrella at the function whose incomparable rolling was remarked upon by all. Need I say that it was the same umbrella that Balencourt's man, Jarman, had manipulated for me that fateful evening when we dined at the Argyle. I shall never unroll that umbrella, even at the cost of a wetting. To me it is a memento."

"There's melodrama for you," said Indiman, a little shamefacedly as he finished. "But one feels differently, you know, about taking chances where a nice girl like Betty is concerned. Let me see; it's still early. Do you feel up to taking that long−deferred ride on a trolley−car? Good! We'll take the cross−town over to Eighth Avenue and

get into the heart of it at once."

"That's an unlucky number," said Indiman, as we boarded a car. "Sixteen hundred and twenty−four—the sum of the units is equal to thirteen."

"You're going to lose some money," I suggested.

"The tip points that way," he replied.

VIII. The Tip−top Tip

Do you know Abingdon Square? It is a small, irregularly shaped triangle of asphalt situated on the lower West Side, and at the intersecting−point of Eighth Avenue and Hudson Street. The houses that front upon it have seen better days. Many of them are now the quarters of cheap political clubs or centres of foreign revolutionary propaganda. It is a neighborhood that has finally lost all semblance to gentility and has become frankly and unreservedly shabby. A square, mind you, and not a park, for there is neither blade of grass nor tree in all of its dreary expanse. Half a block to the north lies a minute gore of land surrounded by an iron fence, and here are flowers and greenery upon which the eye may rest and be satisfied. But in Abingdon Square proper there is only the music−stand, that occupies the middle of the miniature plaza, a hideous wooden structure in which one of the city bands plays on alternate Sunday afternoons during the summer. However, open space counts in the city, and the air circulates a trifle more freely through the square than it does in the side streets—at least, that is the opinion of the neighborhood people, and they flock there on a hot night like seals at a blow−hole. Even the submerged tenth must come up to breathe now and then. During the dreadful passage of a hot wave from the West one may count them by the dozens, coatless and even shirtless wretches, lying prone on the flag−stones like fish made ready for the grid. Occasionally, a street−cleaning "White Wings" will be compassionate enough to open a fire−hydrant, under pretence of flushing the gutters, and then, for a few minutes, there is joy in Abingdon Square. Women line the curb, cooling their feet in the rushing flood; the men light their pipes and contentedly watch the children as they paddle about. There is the echo of mountain brooks in the gush of the water as it roars from the hydrant. With eyes tight closed one may conjure up the phantasma of green leaves waving and of meadows knee−deep with lush grasses and starred with ox−eyes. Such is Abingdon Square on a night in early August when first the dog−star begins to rage.

Now my friend Esper Indiman is a social philosopher; life in all its phases interests him tremendously. Consequently, he likes to take long rides on trolley−cars. He calls them his vaudeville in miniature, and sometimes the performance is amusing—I acknowledge it freely. But to−night the actors were few and the play dull. I began to yawn. The car, one of the Eighth Avenue line bound down− town, swung round a curve into Abingdon Square, and Indiman touched my arm.

"What's going on over there?" he said.

Although it was not a concert night, there was a crowd around the band−stand. It looked as though some one was haranguing the assemblage from the vantage−point of the music pavilion—a local political orator or perhaps a street preacher. "Salvation Army," I suggested.

"Shall we take a look?" I nodded, and we alighted and pushed our way to the front.

It was a young man who stood there, rather a nice−looking chap, with a broad forehead from which the thin, fair hair fell away in a tumbled wave. He was attired in evening clothes, assuredly an unusual sight in Abingdon Square, where they do not dress for dinner, and the expression upon his countenance was that of recklessness tempered with a certain half−humorous melancholy. "One dollar," he repeated, as we came within sight and hearing. "Do I hear no other bid? One dollar, one dollar. Will any gentleman make it a half?"

"I'll give fifty for your skull alone," spoke up a youngish, sallow−faced man who stood directly opposite the stand. "On condition," he added, in a lower tone, "that the goods are delivered at Bellevue before the end of the week. Foot of Twenty− sixth Street, you know."

The young man smiled with a pathetic quizzicality. "Now, doctor," he said, reproachfully, "there's no use in going over that ground again. I made the terms of the sale perfectly plain, and there can be no deviation from them."

"Well, if that's your last word," retorted the unsuccessful bidder, "I'll say good−evening."

He turned to Indiman, who stood at his elbow. "A fakir," he growled, disgustedly. "Now, I'll leave it to you, sir."

"If you will acquaint me with the essential particulars," said Indiman, "I shall be most happy to pronounce upon them."

"In two words. This cheap josher has been offering to sell himself, out and out, to the highest bidder. I make

him a cash offer and he takes water."

"Pardon me," interrupted the young man in evening dress, "but your bid is plainly for what the students in medical colleges call a 'subject.' Now, I expressly disclaimed any intention of terminating my material existence at any fixed period in the future. On the contrary, it is for the purpose of prolonging my life that I am driven to this extraordinary procedure. It is myself, my talents, and my services of which I desire to dispose. My skull, in which you seem to take such an interest, goes, of course, with the bargain. But I do not guarantee immediate delivery."

"Your services," sneered the student of medicine. "May I inquire into their nature and nominal cash valuation?"

"I am an experienced leader of the cotillon," answered the young man in evening clothes, with a sweet and serious dignity.

"Umph!"

"I play a fair hand at Bridge, and have an unexceptionable eye for matching worsteds."

"G−r−r!"

"That about sums up my list of accomplishments, but I dare say that I could learn to dig, for I have my full complement of limbs. Finally, a rare and pretty talent for losing money and a penchant for the unlucky side of everything."

"Well, gentlemen," declared the student of medicine, with a snort, "it's quite evident that we're all playing the fool together. I wish you a very good−evening, and the devil take all crawfishers." And with that he marched off, evidently in high dudgeon. A little ripple of laughter swept over the upturned faces of the crowd. "One dollar," repeated the young man, his voice full of a polite weariness. "Do I hear no other bid? I offer myself, a human chattel, at absolute sale; no reservations; warranted sound and kind; no objection to the country; not afraid of the Elevated railway."

"Five dollars," said a voice at the rear, and a short, stout man, with little, black, beadlike eyes, held up his hand to identify his bid. "Joe Bardi," said a man to his neighbor. Both turned interestedly.

"And who is Joe Bardi?" inquired Indiman, blandly.

"Business of shipping sailors. There's big money in it, they say."

"Ah, yes, a crimp—isn't that what they call them?"

"Right you are, mister. A hard one, too. It'll be a sharp man that does for old Joe Bardi."

"Five dollars," came again from the squat figure with its ratlike eyes, and the young man in evening dress paled a little. He had over−heard the colloquy between Indiman and the native Abingdonian, and it is difficult to regard with equanimity the prospect of a trip before the mast—to China, let us say. In an American ship, too, more shame to us that it must be said.

But the young man was thoroughbred. He had sat down to play a desperate game with Fortune, and he could not withdraw with the cards on the table.

"Five dollars," he repeated, mechanically. "Five dollars. What am I offered? Five dollars."

"Want me to buy you dat, Mame?" said a half−grown boy of the unmistakable tough type. "Whatjer soy? Five cases for dat mug! And Tuesday ain't bargain−day, nuther."

"Well, it looks like thirty cents," said Mame, critically. "In Chinese money, too—thirty yen−yen. What you say, John?" The crowd laughed again.

"Five dollars."

"Five dollars," repeated the young man, and there were little drops of sweat on the broad, fair forehead. "Five dollars, five dollars. Do I hear no other bid? Five dollars—going—going—"

"Six."

It was Indiman who spoke, and this time the crowd gaped in good earnest. An indescribable emotion possessed for an instant the face of the young man in evening clothes. Then he fell back upon his first manner, half−petulant, half−mocking. "Six dollars I am bid," he announced, briskly, and looked straight at the shipping agent.

Joe Bardi hesitated. "And a half," he said, tentatively, as an angler who feels the mouth of the fish that he fears may be insecurely hooked.

Indiman capped the bid promptly. "Seven dollars," he said.

The crimp scowled. "Make it eight," he retorted.

"Ten."

The Italian hesitated again. This had the appearance of a contest, and he was not of the sort who love a fight for its own sake. But his cupidity had been powerfully aroused. There was a pretty profit in advance money to be made if he could get this young fool's signature on the ship's papers of the Southern Cross, outward bound for Shanghai, on the morrow. He must make at least another try. It might be that the intrusive stranger from the silk−stocking district was only amusing himself and would presently withdraw.

"Twelve," he said, and "fifteen," answered Indiman.

The crowd laughed, and Joe Bardi's vanity was sorely touched. It was not pleasant to be badgered in this unseemly manner while engaged in beating one's own preserves. Discretion forsook him forthwith.

"Twenty−five," he bellowed.

"Fifty."

"A hundred, and be damned to you!"

"Two hundred."

There was a pause; the crowd held its breath in silent and joyous expectancy. Joe Bardi passed a hand over his wet forehead and pulled irresolutely upon his cigar. A severe−looking old man expressed his entire disapproval of the proceedings. "It's against the Constitution," he said, loudly. "How about the Fourteenth Amendment? Well, the number doesn't matter anyway. Officer, I call upon you to stop this unlawful and outrageous farce. A human being selling himself on the auction block! The slave−market set up again in this Christian city of New York! It's a crime against the Constitution."

But the policeman was a prudent person, and as yet he had seen no cause to interfere. The proceedings were unusual, no doubt, and they might be against the Constitution; he wouldn't like to say. It was none of his business anyway; HE went by the code.

"Bah!" snorted the old gentleman, and rushed away to find a city magistrate.

"Two hundred dollars," repeated the young man in evening clothes. "Two hundred dollars. What am I bid? Going, going—"

The shipping agent made a hasty mental calculation—there was no profit in the transaction at anything over his last bid of an even hundred. But he was tempted to go a little further and run up the price on his adversary, thus punishing him for interfering in a man's private business. Very good, but suppose the stranger suddenly refused to follow the lead; then it would be Joe Bardi himself who would be mulcted. Revenge would be sweet, but it was too dangerous; he would stop where he was.

"Two hundred, two hundred—going, going—" The crowd began to banter the crimp.

"Lift her again, Joe," called out one voice. "Open up that barrel of plunks you've got stored away in your cellar," exhorted another counsellor. "A nice, white slave—that's what you're needing in your business," advised a third. But Joe Bardi kept his eyes on the ground and said nothing.

"Gone," said the young man in evening clothes.

Indiman took four fifty−dollar bills from his wallet and handed them to the young man. The latter glanced at the notes and stuffed them carelessly into his waistcoat−pocket. Then, turning to Indiman:

"Sir," he said, with a profound seriousness, "I am now your property. Ah! Pardon me—"

Like a cat he had sprung between Indiman and the crimp. With a dexterous upward fling of his arm the knife in the Italian's hand went spinning into the air. This was something that came within the policeman's accustomed sphere, and he took immediate charge of Mr. Joe Bardi. It was all done in a most methodical manner, and ten minutes later we were free to depart. A "cruiser" cab rattled by and the three of us squeezed in.

"To the Utinam Club," ordered Indiman.

Seated at a table in the big dining−room of the club, we drank a formal cocktail to our better acquaintance.

"But I am afraid that you have made a bad bargain," said the young man to Indiman.

"Frankly, now, I doubt if I can be made to pay even three per cent on the investment. That's no better than a government bond and not half so safe."

I have already collected one satisfactory dividend," said Indiman, courteously. "That was cleverly done—to force the knife out of his hand and into the air."

"It's a part of the Japanese science of defence without weapons," said the youth, blushing ingenuously.

"Jiu−jitsu, you know. I took some lessons of a chap in Tokio."

"Moreover, there is your story," continued Indiman. "Will you favor me with some particulars regarding yourself and the circumstances leading up to our late meeting? The situation was an unusual one, and the explanation should be interesting."

"On the contrary," answered the young man, with a faint smile, "my narrative is of the most commonplace character imaginable, save only for the final chapter. But judge for yourself.

"My name is Luke Harding, and, so far as I know, I have not a single blood relation living—at least, none nearer than a third cousin. Two years ago I inherited my paternal estate. It was too small to support me in the manner of life to which I had been accustomed, and at the same time it was large enough to effectually deaden any inclination towards real work. As an inevitable consequent, I became a speculator. Little by little my fortune has disappeared in the abyss of stock gambling; now it is gone entirely. To add to my misfortunes, my apartments were entered last night by burglars and literally cleaned out. I must have been drugged, for when I awoke this morning, with a bad headache, I could remember nothing of what had happened; there were only results to speak for themselves. The loot had been complete; the scoundrels had even carried off my ordinary garments, leaving me— what exquisite irony!—only this suit of evening clothes wherewith to cover my nakedness. Being somewhat sensitive to the proprieties, I was obliged to remain within doors until darkness fell, and I spent the time meditating upon my future course of action. As I have said, I have no relatives to whom I could apply, and my friends had already taxed themselves beyond reason in my behalf. It was clear, then, that I was born unlucky, and I concluded that I had no longer any right to a separate and independent existence. To one of my temperament suicide is a difficult proposition. Finally, I lit upon the idea which you have just witnessed in execution. A healthy, intelligent young man—surely there must be some market for his exclusive services? Fortunes used to be made in the African slave−trade.

"It only remains to add that I immediately started to realize upon these reasonable expectations. I went to the plaza at Fifty−ninth Street and Fifth Avenue and asked for bids. Unfortunately, no one seemed to take me seriously, and a policeman obliged me to move on. I had the same disheartening experience in front of Delmonico's and again in the Turkish room of the Waldorf−Astoria. It is August, you know, and the town is empty, but I was a bargain; I can say that without affectation. Merely to have bought me on speculation, with the idea of unloading on one of the Adirondack or White mountain hotel resorts—it would have been impossible to lose. But I could not get a bid, and so I shifted along down−town—Madison Square, Union Square, then westward by Jefferson Market and West Tenth Street. Ever edging a little closer to the river, you observe, and yet, upon my honor, I was not conscious of any definite volition in the matter; it was as though some one were gently pushing me along. Then Abingdon Square and your entrance upon the boards of my little drama—you and Mr. Bardi. Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention."

"I should say, Thorp," said Indiman, "that Mr. Harding is well qualified for membership in the Utinam Club. Will you put him up and I'll second him? The club," he added, by way of explanation to our guest, "is an association of the unsuccessful in life—the non− strenuous, the incapable—above all, the unlucky."

"Rest assured that my eligibility is beyond question," answered Mr. Harding, with a smile. "In a society where misfortune confers a certain cachet I may confidently expect to attain distinction."

"Do you really consider yourself an abnormally unlucky person?" said Indiman, seriously. "I have a reason for asking."

"Upon my soul," returned the young man, warmly. "I verily believe that I have a genius for getting on the wrong side of things. If I should wager you that I am alive at this moment there would be a bolt out of the blue before the money could be paid over."

A heavily built man of elderly appearance entered the dining−hall. He was accompanied by a friend who might be a banker or broker. The pair picked out a table on the opposite side of the room and immediately plunged into earnest conversation, their heads close together and speaking in guarded undertones.

"The gentleman with the gray hair," said young Mr. Harding, eagerly, "that is Senator Morrison, chairman of the committee on foreign relations. He must be just in from Washington. Congress, you know, is in extra session."

"Ah, yes; an able man," said Indiman, politely.

"He would know—he would know," muttered Harding, disjointedly. His burning gaze fixed itself upon the two men at the distant table, as though by sheer will−power he would surprise the secret of their whispering lips.

"He must—he does know."

"What?" asked Indiman.

"Man, man, it's a matter of millions! Panama Trading Company common stock is quoted at 70, and everything depends upon the passage by the Senate of the canal treaty. The committee must have come to a decision, and Morrison knows. I tell you he knows—he knows. One word—it would be enough—Wall Street—Panama common—"

Indiman did not answer; he seemed preoccupied, indifferent even, his chair pushed back from the table and his eyes half closed. Let me explain that the small side−tables in the Utinam Club dining− room are not set flush against the wall, as is usually the case, but at some little distance from it. Consequently, when there is a party of three at a table, one man sits on the inside with his back to the wall, a sensible arrangement in that it allows the waiter free access by the unoccupied outer side of the table. It so happened that Indiman had this inside seat.

Harding's lips moved mechanically. "The treaty, the treaty!" he repeated again and again. "The committee reports to−morrow; the Senate is certain to act upon its recommendation. If I only knew!"

The conference at the other table was a brief one; its continuance had been measured by the consumption, on the part of the Senator, of a couple of biscuits and a glass of spirits−and−water. The two men rose and left the dining−room,

"Of course you are going back to−night, Senator," said the younger man as they passed our table.

"At midnight. A hard trip."

"But a profitable one; don't forget that." They laughed and walked on.

For a little while we sat in silence over our cheese and salad. Then Indiman spoke up, suddenly:

"Mr. Harding."

The young man looked at him dully.

"The story of your persistent ill−fortune has interested me. But I find it difficult to believe in the consistency of bad luck; it must change sooner or later."

"Not for me," answered the young man, with quick conviction.

"I have a fancy to put that to the test. Take this card to my brokers—you know them, Sandford Sands, of New Street. I have instructed them to place at your disposal a credit of one hundred thousand dollars. You will be at their office to−morrow morning, and at precisely ten o'clock you will receive from me a sealed communication containing certain information upon which you can rely absolutely. Use your credit according to your best judgment, and report the results to me at eight o'clock to−morrow evening. The address is on the card, and you will dine with me."

"I thank you," said the young man, simply. "If such a thing were possible—" He stopped and shook his head.

"Nonsense!" said Indiman, bluffly. "You must believe in yourself, man; it is the first requisite for success. To−morrow evening at eight, then."

Sitting over a final cigar in Indiman's library, he made me a sharer in the mystery. "It is simply that the canal treaty will be reported unfavorably to−morrow by the committee, and consequently it will fail to pass the Senate. How do I know? I heard it from Senator Morrison's own lips."

"Well?"

"As you know, the dining−hall of the Utinam Club is of a circular shape, and it happens to possess certain peculiar acoustic properties. In other words, it is a whispering−gallery, and it so chanced that Senator Morrison sat at one of the definite points— they call them vocal foci, I think—and I at the other. That is the whole story."

"You are quite sure—there can be no mistake?"

"Not the slightest doubt. The man with Morrison is a broker, and he has the Senator's order to sell ten thousand Panama common at the market to−morrow. When the news of the treaty's failure to pass reaches Wall Street, by the regular channels, the stock will break sharply and the profits on the deal should be enormous. No wonder that Senator Morrison's flying trip to New York should be worth the taking."

"And Harding?"

"It remains to be proven whether the fault lies in the man himself or in his alleged bad luck. I am sending him the bare fact as to the canal bill's fate, and it is for him to seize the skirts of chance. I'll write the note now and deliver it at the office myself in the morning. Then we will see."

"We will see," I echoed, and we parted for the night.

At one o'clock the following afternoon Indiman and I stood watching the ticker in an up−town broker's office.

"The Senate rejects the canal treaty," read out Indiman. "Now for the next quotation of Panama common; the last sale was at 70 1/2. Will you take the tape, Mr. Barnes?"

There was an instant's pause in the click−click of the instrument, the heart−gripping lull before the breaking of the tempest. Then the wheels began to revolve again, and the white tape, our modern thread of the Norns, sped through the twitching fingers of the young chap to whom Indiman had yielded place.

"Five hundred Pan. com., 68," he read out. "One thousand, 67 1/2; four hundred, 67; two thousand, 65. I guess I've seen enough, gentlemen; it's my—my finish." He gulped down something in his throat and walked over to the water−cooler,

"And enough for us," whispered Indiman. "Let us go."

"It's the way of the world," I philosophized as we gained the street. "One man up and another down. He is young; he will have his chance again."

"It is Harding's day," said Indiman.

Panama common had closed at 50, a drop of twenty points; there was a fortune to be made in selling even a few thousand shares short of the market. It was Harding's day, indeed.

Eight o'clock and Indiman and I sat awaiting his coming. The electric bell rang sharply, and Bolder ushered in our protege. He came forward, shook hands, accepted a cigar, and sat down.

"You received my note?" said Indiman.

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I bought five thousand Pan. com. at 70."

"Oh, the deuce!" and Indiman stared blankly at his guest.

"You see, it's no use—" began the young man, apologetically, but Indiman cut him short.

"No use! And with my message in your hand before the market opened− −the exclusive, the absolute information—"

"Here it is," said Mr. Harding, and handed Indiman his own note. The latter glanced at the contents, and suddenly his face changed.

"Read that, Thorp," he said, and tossed me the message. The letter contained these words:

"The canal treaty will pass the Senate. Use your own judgment."

"In some inexplicable absence of mind I left out the all−important 'not,'" said Indiman, ruefully, "and it has cost me one hundred thousand dollars. Mr. Harding, I beg your pardon. You are the unluckiest man alive," and he went on to tell him of the whispering−gallery and of the secret obtained in manner so extraordinary. "And then, through my stupidity, worse than wasted," he concluded. "I can't understand it; I read that note through twice before I sealed it up. It is incredible."

"No, it is my luck," said young Mr. Harding, and took a fresh cigar. "Or, rather, your luck," he corrected himself, smilingly. "Have you forgotten that I am now your property?"

"God forbid!" said Indiman, hastily. "I give you back yourself— consideration of one dollar. You're a witness, Thorp. And now shall we go in to dinner?"

A position in a wholesale business house was secured for young Mr. Harding, and for a month or two he seemed to be doing very well. Then one day he resigned; a letter to Indiman gave the explanation.

"He's going to marry a wealthy widow," read out Indiman. "They sail on the Lucania next Saturday."

"Then luck has turned for him," I said, heartily. "I'm glad of it."

"Hym!" said Indiman. "Perhaps so."

From the street came the sound of a hand− organ. It was playing Verdi's "Celeste Aida," and so lovely is the aria that I could have listened to it with pleasure, even when thus ground out mechanically. But, unfortunately, an atrocious mistake had been made in the preparation of the music cylinder. In the original the final note of the first two bars is F natural, while in the third bar the tonality is raised and the F becomes F sharp. The transcriber had failed to make this change, and so had lost the uplifting effect of the sharped F. All the life and color of the phrase had been destroyed, and the result was intolerable.

I fished out a quarter and rang for Bolder. "Send him away," I said, somewhat impatiently.

The servant returned looking puzzled. "The organ−grinder said I was to give this to the gentleman," he said,

and handed me a small object. It was a brass baggage−check issued by the New York Central Railway, from Cleveland to New York, and bore the number 18329. I passed it to Indiman, ran to the window, and looked out. But the organ−grinder was gone.

IX. The Brass Baggage−Check

It is not every day in the week that a hand−organ plays "Celeste Aida" under one's window with an F natural in the third bar where the music rightfully calls for F sharp. Nor is it usual to send out a quarter of a dollar to the man as an inducement for him to retire, and then to receive in return a New York Central baggage− check numbered 18329, and reading from Cleveland to New York. Esper Indiman and I exchanged smiles.

"This looks like the real thing," said my friend. "My dear Thorp, there must be some rare element in your chemical make−up that serves to precipitate these delightful mysteries. Adventures fairly flock about us. We shall have to screen the doors and windows or be overwhelmed. Seriously, I am infinitely obliged to you, for I had started on my eleventh game of solitaire, and was beginning to feel a trifle bored. But now—now there is something doing, as Mr. Devery would remark. Let us start the ball rolling by giving Bolder the third degree."

Bolder, recalled, was disposed to be cheerfully communicable. Certainly he would know the man again; he had a good look at him. The sun was shining brightly, and it had fallen full on the fellow's face.

"Describe him, then," said Indiman, note− book in hand.

Put to the test, Bolder was not so good a witness as we had hoped for; he wandered and grew confused in his statements. Light hair? Yes, it might have been that—though, now that he thought of it, the shade was rather on the darkish order. An old man? Well, not noticeably so; perhaps thirty−five or a little younger.

"Or a little older—say fifty−five?"

"Well, it might have been fifty−five, sir. I couldn't swear to it exactly."

"That will do, Bolder," said Indiman, and our witness retired abashed.

"Check number one," commented Indiman. "Suppose we try the Grand Central now. We won't take out the carriage; the day is fine and I want the walk."

It was a beautiful morning in August, cool and clear, and we strode along briskly. A hand−organ began playing in a side street, and we stopped to listen. "It's the same aria," I said, excitedly— "'Celeste Aida.' What tremendous luck! No, it isn't; deuce take it!" I went on, dejectedly.

"But you just said it was the same," persisted Indiman.

"With a difference," I hastened to explain. Now, Indiman is not musical, and I had some trouble in convincing him that within the compass of a semitone a veritable gulf may yawn. This particular organ played the phrase in the third bar correctly—F sharp and not F natural—and consequently it could not be the same instrument that had vexed my ears half an hour ago at No. 4020 Madison Avenue.

"There is a real difference, then?" said Indiman, thoughtfully. "One that you would recognize again?"

"At any place or time," I answered, confidently. "It is an absolute means of identification, quite as much so as a glass eye would be in a man's face."

"Very good. We'll find that hand−organ, then, if we have to go through 'Little Italy' with a drag−net. How beautifully the problem is working out!—almost too beautifully."

At the incoming baggage−room Indiman presented the check numbered 18329. A porter appeared with a large trunk loaded on a truck. "City transfer?" he asked.

"No, I'll take it with me," said Indiman. "Thorp, will you get a hack."

We were about to drive off, and I felt for my match−box. Provoking! I must have left it at home, and I wanted a cigarette. "One moment," I called, and jumped out, having caught sight of Ellison, who had been with me in college. He was hurrying into the station. I should be glad to have a word with him and secure a match at the same time. But somehow I missed him in making my way through the swinging doors. Ellison was nowhere to be seen, and I had to content myself with getting a light at the cigar counter. I went back to the carriage and climbed in.

"It was Ellison," I explained. "A good chap, and I should have liked to meet him."

"Some other time, perhaps," said Indiman, politely, and we drove off.

"So you've got it," I said, staring up at the trunk that occupied the box at the hackman's left. "It looks ordinary enough."

"The porter told me that it came in last night on the Lake Shore Limited," said Indiman. "Nothing remarkable about that, either."

A sudden thought struck me. "By Jove! we're no better than thieves," I said, frowningly. "The possession of a baggage−check doesn't necessarily carry with it the ownership of the parcel for which it calls. The rightful proprietor may be even now at the Grand Central explaining the loss of the check and trying to identify his property."

Indiman looked a little blank. "Of course, your obvious theory may be the true one," he said, slowly. "The hunting of mare's−nests is a weakness of mine. But what are you about there?"

"Telling the driver to take us back to the station," I answered, with my hand on the check−cord.

"I don't know about doing that—just now. There might be some awkward explanations to make to your hypothetical owner. Or, failing him, to the police."

"It doesn't absolutely follow," he continued, "that there is an owner or that he is anxious to claim and recover his property. He may have substantial reasons for wanting to get rid of it. Remember that the baggage−check was handed in at my door with the express direction that it was to be given to the gentleman of the house. We'll have to see it through, I think."

I had nothing more to say, and shortly afterwards we pulled up at No. 4020 Madison Avenue. Bolder and the hackman carried the trunk in, and Indiman directed that it should be placed in the library, the front room on the first landing. The cabman was paid and dismissed, and we were left alone.

"Now for it," said Indiman, gayly. "I have always preferred mutton to lamb."

The trunk was of the cheap variety, covered with brown paper that vaguely simulated leather. It was perfectly new, and this was probably its first trip on the road. The lock was of simple construction. It should be easy to find a key to fit it, and one of mine, with a little filing, did the trick. The bolt shot back, and Indiman unhesitatingly threw up the lid.

There was no tray in the trunk, and the interior space was filled with some bulky article that had been carefully shrouded by manifold layers of cloth wrappings. I know that the same thought was in both our minds, but neither of us spoke. A keen−bladed ink− eraser lay on the desk before me, and I handed it to Indiman. He made a swift cut in the wrappings and drew the severed edges apart− −a naked human foot protruded. To this hour I have only to shut my eyes to immediately recall that horrid vision. I remember particularly the purplish hue of the swollen veins, the unmistakable rigidity of the joints and muscles.

Indiman shut down the lid and turned the key in the lock. We looked, white−faced, one at the other, then at the maid−servant who stood not ten feet away. Had she been any nearer?

"What is it, Mary?" said Indiman, sharply.

The girl, confused and stammering, explained that she had come in to sweep; she had no idea that Mr. Indiman was in the library. No, the door was not locked, and she had just that moment walked in. Indiman cut short her apologies, and, with a tolerable assumption of indifference, dismissed her to her duties elsewhere.

"Unfortunate," he remarked, with a frown.

"I doubt if she could have seen anything," I answered, reassuringly. "I should have heard her if she had come any nearer, and the trunk was only open for a second or two."

"Quite long enough for anything to happen," said Indiman." I say, Thorp, but this is a go," he went on, cockily enough. Then suddenly the steadiness went out of his voice, like a match−light in a high wind, and he finished with a little, choking gasp, "Just the very— rummest go."

I don't remember that we had a drink on the strength of it, but it's more than probable. Then we sat down to consider.

The natural, the obvious, and the only proper course of action was to go at once to Police Headquarters and make a frank statement of the case with its attendant circumstances. True, we were undistinguished citizens, with neither pull nor influence, but surely respectability must count for something, even as against charges of admitted theft and suspected murder. If we owned up now we should be subjected, doubtless, to more or less annoyance growing out of the affair, but the position would be infinitely less difficult than if we waited for events to force it upon us. "Murder will out," I quoted.

"So they say," answered Indiman, and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

And yet in the end we abandoned this eminently sane conclusion, deciding that we would keep our own counsel and let the matter work itself out. For such a crime as murder does not end with the actual deed; the rupturing of the thousand and one ties that bind even the most insignificant of lives to the general body of human

existence cannot be accomplished without some disturbance; a circle has myriad points, and at any one of them the interrupted current may again begin to flow. Perchance the message falls upon indifferent ears or is too feeble and incoherent in itself to compel attention. In this event the signals must necessarily grow weaker and more infrequent until they finally cease altogether—the crime is now an accomplished fact, the chapter is finally closed. Or, again, the call may come as plangent and insistent as the stroke of a fire− alarm; the whole community hears and instantly understands; the murder is out.

Now either of us could presume to measure the precise quality of odic force inherent in the grisly mystery that lay under our hand; the affair might range from the dignity of a cause celebre to the commonplace of a purely commercial transaction—the economical transportation of a medical college "subject." It was this very uncertainty that fascinated our imaginations and so allowed the sober judgment to be deposed. Our ostensible argument was that the police would be sure to make a mess of the affair. If that idiot, Detective Brownson, took hold of it, the goddess Justice might throw up her hands as well as close her eyes. And inwardly we desired to cherish our secret out of the same sense of fearful joy with which one listens to a ghost story—we had tasted the coal− black wine pressed from forbidden grapes, and we craved a yet deeper draught. Finally, a connoisseur does not willingly relinquish a good find, whatever the circumstances; there are bibliomaniacs who will not hesitate to steal what they may not otherwise procure. I myself know a charming woman who collects Japanese sword−guards AT ANY COST (I have her husband's authority for this statement).

But, seriously again, the grip of the mystery was upon us; the inclination had become irresistible to see the thing out, or at least to let it run a little further, just as a child amuses itself with fire—the desire to see what will happen. Later on it might be necessary to pull up sharply, but the contingency would doubtless provide for itself. The ultimate fact remained that here was a genuine adventure, and as connoisseurs of romance we were bound to exploit it to the utmost limit of our ability. So be it, then.

"The finding of that organ−grinder is our first and obvious procedure," said Indiman, slowly. "And the clew to his identity lies, as you have explained, in his instrument."

"The organ itself is a criminal; it murders 'Celeste Aida.'"

"I believe that most of these instruments are rented from one company," continued Indiman. "We can find out definitely at the city License Bureau, and we might as well make that the starting− point of our investigations. We have plenty of time before luncheon; it is barely twelve o'clock."

"But shouldn't we begin with—with the thing itself," I objected, and glanced nervously at the big trunk standing in the middle of the floor. The identity of the victim—it may be possible to establish it—a most important point, surely."

"I'll have to pass up that part of it—at least for the present," said Indiman, frankly. "But we must get the box out of sight somewhere. The weather"—and here he gave a little involuntary shudder—"is getting warmer. We'd better get it down into the cellar. I'll see if the way is clear."

The servants were all busy in the upper part of the house, and we succeeded in getting the trunk down into the cellar unobserved, stowing it away temporarily in an empty coal−bin. On our way up− stairs we encountered the maid, Mary, and something in the hasty way in which she stood back to let us pass stirred again my vague suspicions. But there was nothing to say or do; we must trust to luck.

Then there was no difficulty in finding the office of the company that leases hand−organs to itinerant musicians, and the manager, an Americanized Italian, was most courteous in answering our inquiries. It appeared that this particular aria of "Celeste Aida" was only included in the repertoire of some half−dozen of the older instruments. It chanced that they were all in stock at the present time, and it would be no trouble at all to let us hear them play. "Our incomparable maestro—he is no longer remembered," said the manager, mournfully. "The public—now it is that they demand what you calla hot stuff—'Loosianner Loo' and the 'Lobster Intermezzo,' Per Bacco! if they would but open their ears—la—la—there it goes—

"'Ce−le−ste A−i−da, For−ma di−vi−na'—

Ah, gentlemen, THAT is musica."

An amiable person, but we were wasting both his and our time. Each one of the six organs reproduced the original notation of the aria, and the imperfect instrument must therefore be in private hands. So we returned thanks to Mr. Gualdo Sarto for his courtesy, and went away somewhat disheartened. Haystacks are large places and needles small objects.

Two days went by—days spent in aimless wandering about the streets waiting for a distant hand−organ to give tongue. Then a hot chase, only to draw another blank.

On the third day I came home alone about five o'clock. The weather was really hot again, and I was tired out with tramping. Yet a little chill ran down my spine as I happened to glance across the street and caught sight of a man's face in an areaway. He had been watching me; of that I was certain.

I went up to the library and sat there waiting for Indiman. The man in the areaway waited also.

At half after six Indiman appeared. He, too, had been unsuccessful; I could see it in his face before he spoke. I told him of the suspicious loiterer across the street. Together we kept close watch on the areaway, and after a while the fellow came out and strolled off with what was intended to pass as jaunty indifference. But we were not deceived.

"That fool of a girl has talked," said Indiman. "Looks like it."

"See here, Thorp, that thing in the cellar—we'll have to do something at once."

I nodded.

"The flooring in the coal−bin is brick; it won't be difficult to take up a section large enough for—"

I nodded again.

I shan't forget what we did that night—the stealing down into the echoing cellar—the flickering of the candle−light on the white− washed walls—the sound of the spade clinking against a casual stone.

How we worked! Like slaves under the lash—an actual lash of terror. For we were afraid, frankly and honestly afraid, of what we had done and of what we were doing. I know that the sweat fairly poured off me. My word! but it WAS hot, and there was a fearful significance in the thought that urged us on to even greater exertions.

It had to be done, and at last it was, the bricks neatly replaced and the surplus earth packed away in gunny−sacks to be removed at the first favorable opportunity. Then in the gray dawn we drew ourselves wearily up−stairs, and, separating without a word, went to our rooms. Was it pure, malignant chance that the maid, Mary, passed me on her way down−stairs and glanced, with a curious, shrinking repugnance, at my earth−stained and dusty clothes? I did not care; I was dog−tired and I wanted but one thing—bed. I reached my couch, fell sprawling upon it, and slept for seven hours straight.

It was a relief to awake from the phantasmagoria of horrors that crowded my dreams. It was nearly two o'clock, and I had written to my friend Ellison asking him to luncheon at that hour. The meal was rather a silent one for two of us, but Ellison talked incessantly. He was in high spirits, having just been appointed to a university professorship in physiology—his specialty. "I've been busy getting my lecture material together," he explained, and "I had a beastly piece of bad luck the other day. My own fault, I suppose, but it illustrates the point that our American baggage system is still far from perfection. Now the European idea—"

"Shall we go into the library for coffee," said Indiman, a little abruptly, and I could see that Ellison's chatter was beginning to get on his nerves; my own were vibrating like harp−strings. I walked over to one of the library windows and looked out, just in time to catch sight of a man backing quickly into the shadow of the areaway opposite.

From down the street came the sound of a childish voice singing. Great Heavens! It was Verdi's aria "Celeste Aida," with F natural in the third bar instead of F sharp.

"I am going out for a few minutes," I said, carelessly. "Just around the corner to get a special−delivery stamp. Of course you'll wait, Ellison," and I gave Indiman a quick glance. He understood.

Perhaps I was shadowed by the watchers in the areaway. I neither knew nor cared. My one idea was to catch up with the child, and this time luck was with me.

The little girl acknowledged shyly that she had learned the tune from a hand−organ. "It belongs to my uncle Bartolomeo," she explained, proudly. "It is a good organ, signore. There are little figures of men and women under the glass front, and when the musica plays they dance—so."

Uncle Bartolomeo was fortunately at home, and I persuaded him to accompany me back to 4020 Madison Avenue. He spoke English perfectly, and looked both honest and shrewd. Well, we would find some way of getting the truth out of him.

A police−officer opened the door for me. So the blow had fallen already. I went on up to the library, taking Bartolomeo with me. At the door I waited a moment.

Brownson sat at the long table, the picture of the zealous and efficient guardian of public safety. The maid−servant, Mary, had just been interrogated—of course, it was she who had betrayed us, and Brownson was evidently her young man. What infernal luck!

"Now, Mr Indiman—" said Brownson, sternly, "but be careful what you say; it may be used against you."

Indiman told the whole story without reserve, and Brownson listened with cold incredulity. But Ellison seemed interested.

"A baggage−check handed in at the door," commented the detective, with judicial impassivity. "Where is this organ−grinder?"

"Here," I answered, and entered with Uncle Bartolomeo.

But the examination, severe as it was, revealed only the bare fact that Bartolomeo had found the brass baggage−check lying on the sidewalk in front of No. 4020 Madison Avenue. He was an honest man, and, moreover, the acticle was of no use to him. He had given it to the servant at the door to be handed over to the gentleman of the house. That was all he knew. By the Holy Virgin, he had spoken the truth!

Brownson rang the call−bell. "Bring in the trunk," he said, curtly, and forthwith two policemen appeared with the fatal box, just as it had been exhumed from its resting−place in the coal−bin. "Hullo!" blurted out Ellison, in vast surprise, and somehow my sinking spirits revived with the word.

"Who is this gentleman?" demanded Brownson, frowning at the interruption.

"Dr. Ellison," I answered.

"Medicine?"

"Yes."

"Hum," said Brownson, importantly. "I will ask him to kindly take charge—"

"I should think so," broke in Ellison, cheerfully, "seeing that it's my own property. I lost baggage−check No. 18329, from Cleveland to New York, the night of my arrival in town, and somewhere in this very neighborhood. The next morning I went to the Grand Central to prove my ownership, but the trunk had been claimed and carried away."

"You are aware, Dr. Ellison," said Brownson, "that this trunk contains—well, we all know what."

"Oh, do we!" retorted Ellison, smartly. "Just stand back there." He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the trunk. An irresistible curiosity drew us forward again. Ellison seized the wrapping and jerked it forcibly apart. I turned my eyes away, and Mary screamed outright.

"Did you never see an anatomical manikin before?" asked Ellison, scornfully. "Made out of papier−mache, you know, and used for demonstrations in physiology before college classes. They used to come from Paris, but they're making them in Cleveland now, and better than the French ones. I tell you I'm mighty glad to get my 'old man' back; he's just out of the shop and cost me a hundred− dollar bill."

Mr. Detective Brownson walked over to the trunk, gazed intently at the manikin, and gingerly poked it once or twice in the ribs. He turned red and swallowed at something in his throat.

"So you wish to make a charge against these gentlemen?" he asked, with almost a note of appeal in his voice.

"Not I," answered Ellison, cheerfully. "It's all between friends, and they can settle the matter with me over a petit souper at Delmonico's. Good−day, officer."

How quickly the echoes of the strenuous life die away. After the storm and stress of those dreadful four days one would suppose that peace at any price were the one thing worth while. And for a month or more we were quite content with the humdrum of ordinary existence. And then just because a game of patience would not make—

X. The Upset Apple−Cart

Indiman was playing solitaire and I was idly looking on. It so happened that an important card, the ace of hearts, was buried, and Indiman had tried every legitimate means to get it out without success.

"You can't do that," I said, decidedly, as Indiman was about to make a move. He looked up, caught my eye fixed upon the game, and colored deeply. Then he frowned and swept the cards into a disorganized heap.

"I really believe that I was on the point of cheating myself," he said, soberly. "That argues a shameful flabbiness of the moral fibre, doesn't it? A 'brace' game of solitaire! What a hideous picture of degeneracy!"

"Lay it on the weather," I suggested. "These gray November days with their depressing atmosphere of finality may be held responsible for anything."

"Even my own pet extremity—the upsetting of an apple−cart. Really, I'm getting dangerously close to it. Let's go out for a walk."

Now, why did Tito Cecco, dealer in small fruits, choose this precise day and hour to halt his barrow at our corner? Push−carts are not allowed in Madison Avenue, anyway, and five minutes earlier or later he would have been moved on by the policeman on the beat. But in that mean time Esper Indiman and I had left the house. The cart piled high with red and yellow apples confronted us, and a dangerous glint came into Indiman's eye.

"Indiman!" I implored.

Too late! With the mischievous agility of a boy, Indiman seized the hub of the near wheel and heaved it into the air. A little ripple of apples swept across the asphalt roadway, then a veritable cascade of the fruit. The light push−cart lay bottom up, its wheels revolving feebly. Tito Cecco had become incapable of either speech or motion. Then he caught the glimmer of the gold piece in Indiman's fingers, and grabbed at it eagerly.

It is a poor sort of catastrophe that does not attract the attention of at least one pair of youthful eyes, and the vultures are famous for their punctuality in the matter of invitations to dinner. Where did all the boys come from, anyway; the street was jammed with them, and reinforcements were constantly arriving. Tito Cecco, having pouched Indiman's gold piece and righted his cart, had hastily departed. He had made a good thing out of the transaction, and explanations to policemen are awkward things— always so.

The pile of fruit had disappeared with incredible swiftness, but the boys themselves departed slowly, as though reluctant to leave a region of such extraordinary windfalls. One little chap had fared particularly well, for both his coat−pockets were stuffed and each fist grabbed a big specimen of the beautiful fruit. A young fellow, fresh−faced and country− looking, had been looking at the scene from a little distance down the street. Now he walked up and spoke to the small boy.

"Give you a nickel, bub, for one of the red ones. They look just like the apples up in Saco, Maine. Lord's sakes, how I wish I was there!"

The boy signified his willingness to make the bargain, but he wanted to give a sporting color to the transaction. "Right or left?" he asked, his hands held behind his back.

"Left, of course," answered the yokel.

"'Ain't I always been that?"

The boy handed over the apple, received the promised nickel in return, and departed with a joyous whoop. The young countryman held up the apple and looked at it sentimentally.

"Now, what under the canopy's that!" he exclaimed. There was a piece of paper tightly twisted about the stem of the fruit. He unfolded it carefully, for it could be seen that it bore a written message.

When a man with a complexion like a new red wagon turns pale it means something. Indiman and I stepped up, for we really thought that he was going to faint.

"Much obliged, gentlemen. I'm all right now," said the young chap. "But for the minute I was that struck. Say, gentlemen, you'll think I'm a liar, but it was my own girl, Miss Mattie Townley, who wrote that there letter and twisted it around an apple−stem. And she wrote it to me—me, Ben Day. What do you think of that?"

"This is a world of infinite chance," said Indiman, politely.

"Look for yourself. I don't mind, and neither would Mattie."

Indiman took the little scrawl of paper and I looked over his shoulder. It read:

"Ben Day, if you're not an altogether born fool, come back to Saco, Maine. I never meant a word of what I said—you KNOW that. M. T."

"S'pose you'd call it a lovers' quarrel," explained Mr. Ben Day. "I just piked out of Saco, Maine, like a bear with a sore head, and come down here to New York. For three months I 'ain't sent sign nor sound to the home people, but she was bound to catch up with me. And, by jinks! she just did. Wonder how many other Baldwin pippins are taking the glad tidings round the country. I'd give a nickel apiece for a million of 'em." An actual tear glistened in the young fellow's eye. It was impossible not to sympathize, and we both congratulated him heartily.

"Of course, you're going back to Saco at once?" said Indiman.

"If I could get the five−o'clock express there's a through connection up north. I'd do it, too"—his voice fell suddenly— "only for—"

"Only for what?"

"This," and he held out a small package that he had been carrying. It was box−shaped and neatly wrapped in light−brown paper. The parcel was addressed to S. A. Davidge, 32 Edgewood Road, Exeter, England, and it bore a pasted label that read, "From Redfield Company, Silversmiths, Maiden Lane, New York City." It also carried the label of the Oceanic Express Company, marked, "Charges Paid" and "per S.S. Russia" with the package number, 44,281, in indelible pencil.

"Well?" said Indiman, interrogatively.

"You see, I was in a scrape on account of that thing, and I wanted to put the matter straight. Up to ten o'clock this morning I was in the employ of the Oceanic Express Company—one of the messengers, you know, sir, who go out with the wagons. It was our first trip of the day, and we had a big load of small stuff for the Russia, When I had unloaded and checked up my sheet, No. 44,281 was missing. I went back to the office, reported the loss, and was discharged on the spot—they're hard as nails on anything like that. Well, I went home pretty blue, for it's hard work finding a job nowadays, and I didn't know which way to turn. I'd been keeping bachelor hall with the driver of the wagon. He's a foreigner named Grenelli, and claims to be an Italian. Maybe so, but he looks more like a German, and he can talk half a dozen languages. I used to go with him to the socialist meetings over on the East Side, and the Tower of Babel isn't in it with those fellows.

"An anarchist? Oh, I don't think so. Liked to shoot off his mouth about the rights of man, and he was always down on taxes. But I shouldn't call him an anarchist. Why, he was the driver of an express wagon, and the two things don't jibe.

"I should have said that Grenelli had been suspended during the investigation into the loss, and of course we went home together. We talked the thing over from end to end, but we couldn't explain the disappearance of the package—neither of us. Of course, it was me who was the real responsible party in the business, and Grenelli, who naturally wanted to get back on his time, felt pretty grouchy about it. Finally, I got mad, told him to go to blazes, and cleared out of the house.

"Well, about an hour after that I went home, and met Grenelli coming out; he said that he was going down to the company stable. At two o'clock he come back all out of breath, and he had the package with him—yes, sir, that identical package that we'd been looking for. Told me that it had been found under the driver's seat wrapped up in one of the horse− blankets. Seems funny, too, for we had hunted through that wagon−body a dozen times.

"However, that makes no difference; we had the package, and I had just started down−town to turn it in when I stopped to look at the excitement here. Lucky for me, or I'd never had a bite of this particular red apple, the sweetest pippin that orchard ever grew. Excuse me, gentlemen, if I do the saphead act—by jinks! I FEEL like it."

"The sentiment does you honor, Mr. Day," said Indiman, gravely. "You ought to take that five−o'clock train."

"Wouldn't I like to!" sighed the enamoured youth. "But I can't go down to the company office in Bowling Green and get back in time to make it. It's three o'clock now."

"You would not care to intrust the delivery of the package to me?"

"Well, hardly," was the frank reply. "You see, mister, I've been living in New York for three months, now, and I've cut most of my eye−teeth. No offence, of course."

"Certainly not."

"You look straight goods, and I b'lieve I'd run almost any risk to catch that train—well, by jinks! here comes Grenelli now; that makes it all O.K."

I did not like the looks of the man who presently joined us in response to Ben Day's hail. I distrust, on

principle, people with thin, bloodless lips and obliquely set eyes. Yet the fellow spoke pleasantly enough, and he readily undertook to clear young Day's name and reputation with his former employers. The boy handed over the parcel to Grenelli, and then, as he turned to go, begged the honor of shaking hands with Indiman and myself, a permission graciously granted. After all, we had borne no inconsiderable share in the later developments of his good−fortune. Suppose Indiman had NOT upset the apple−cart?

"And now," said Indiman, turning to Grenelli and speaking with great suavity, "I am going to ask the favor of a short interview. My house is only two numbers away."

Grenelli shook his head. "I've nothing to say to you—" he began, defiantly.

Indiman stepped quickly to the fellow's side, took his arm and pressed it closely. He said a few words in an undertone, and to my surprise Grenelli instantly submitted. We entered the house and went to the library on the first floor front. Indiman took from his side coat−pocket a cocked revolver and laid it on the table. So that was the kind of persuasion that it had been necessary to apply to secure Mr. Grenelli's attendance. One is apt to yield the point when he feels a pistol−barrel prodding him in the ribs, and it is no great trick to set a trigger−catch with the weapon in your pocket.

"Stand there," said Indiman, pointing to the far end of the table, and the man obeyed.

"And now, Grenelli," continued Indiman, bluntly, "I want the truth about this affair. Bah, man! don't begin to shuffle about like that. This isn't the original package delivered by Redfield Company to the Oceanic Express for shipment to England. You know it and I know it, so we'll just acknowledge a true bill and go on with the evidence.

"A counterfeit, then, of the real thing. But why? That's what we're after now. Simple robbery? Or is there another reason why this particular package was intended to be shipped on the steamship Russia, sailing to−day at four o'clock sharp? You see the point, don't you?

"I admit, Grenelli, that you are a clever man. Since the dynamite outrage on the Icelandic six months ago great care has been taken in the supervision of shipments, for the fast steamers and the Oceanic Express Company require that the contents of every package shall be visibly made known to them before it can be accepted. But once it is inspected and officially labelled it goes through without further difficulty, the steamship people being content with the express company's guarantee.

"And now be kind enough to give me your very best attention. This morning, at ten o'clock, one of these officially registered packages disappeared from the wagon that you were driving. At half− past two this afternoon the parcel is returned to messenger Day, coming through your hands. Now, how long did it take you to make up this dummy—seal, stamp, and all? Of course, you had stolen what you needed for the forgery from the company office—all but the Redfield Company label, and that you soaked off the original package and reaffixed to this one.

"It wasn't a plausible story that you told Day, but you knew the boy wouldn't be particular over trifles. All he cared about was the cloud upon his honesty. You figured that the package would be returned, perfunctorily examined for identification, and immediately sent on board the steamer. How much picrate or dynamite does it take to knock out the biggest steamship afloat? You could get enough of the stuff in a box of this size—couldn't you? And how were you going to set it off? Clockwork, of course. But why were you so stupid as to use a clumsy mechanism whose ticking could be heard a block away? Listen to it now."

In the succeeding silence the measured beat of the escapement was plainly audible. There was a sinister significance in the sound that I, for one, shall not easily forget. The man Grenelli paled and took an involuntary backward step.

"The steamship Russia" continued Indiman, in his calm, inflectionless voice, "was booked to carry an unusually distinguished company on this particular trip. The International Peace Congress has been in session in New York during the past fortnight. It adjourned Tuesday, and some thirty of the European delegates had engaged passage on this boat. Now, consider for a moment, Grenelli—what a catastrophe to the cause of universal peace should anything happen to the Russia! For example, the destruction of the ship and the consequent loss of life through the explosion of an infernal machine smuggled into the cargo! What confusion, what dismay, what terror! Then the poison of slow suspicion, the dull but deadly undercurrent of racial resentments, the question, growing daily more insistent, 'Who has done this thing?'

"It was an exquisite stroke of irony, Grenelli. I am connoisseur enough to admire really good technique

wherever I find it. The nations assemble for a council of peace, and an invisible hand hurls a firebrand into the very centre of the august circle! Puff! The resolutions, with their well−rounded periods, go up into smoke and the tramp of armed men is heard throughout the world. Excellent! Oh, excellent, my good Grenelli!

"But chance always takes a hand in a round game, and at the psychological moment I come out of my house and upset an apple− cart—your apple−cart, my good Grenelli. What incredible bad luck!− −to be bowled out by a shiny, red−cheeked pippin from Mattie Townley's orchard in Saco, Maine. You will remember a somewhat similar incident in the Garden of Eden several thousand years ago. Apples are certainly unwholesome fruit for the masculine digestion. But I beg your pardon—you were about to say—"

The man Grenelli glared at his tormentor. "What more do you want of me?" he asked, sullenly. "There's the police—why don't you turn me over to them and have done with it?"

"For the very sufficient reason, my dear Grenelli, that the evidence against you isn't strong enough. The package never reached the Russia, and how are we going to prove your intentions. Besides, in a matter of this sort, the question of tools is of small importance compared with the identity of the intelligence that employs them. Who and what is back of this affair? You, Grenelli, are going to tell me."

"Never!"

"Don't be too hasty. Think it over. We have plenty of time before us."

"I don't understand."

"You will presently. Thorp, my dear fellow, will you see that the servants are cleared out of the house at once. Let them all go to the show at the New Academy—at my expense, of course—and they needn't return until noon to−morrow. Make them understand that these are their orders. Then come back here, if you will."

When I returned to the library I found Grenelli seated at one end of the big centre−table and Indiman opposite him. In Indiman's right hand was a revolver, and the express package, addressed to S. A. Davidge, Exeter, England, lay on the table between them. The arrangement looked studied. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling—a well−founded one, as I was immediately to learn.

"Take my place for a moment," said Indiman. He went to the clock on the mantel− piece and stopped it. When he came back to the table he had his watch in his hand; he laid it face downward by the pistol. "Do you carry a timepiece?" he inquired of Grenelli. The prisoner shook his head. "Very good," continued Indiman. "We are now ready for our little experiment. Let me again have your best attention.

"The box containing the infernal machine lies on the table there. Mr. Grenelli knows at what hour the exploding mechanism is set to act; I do not. But seeing that the Russia sails to−day at four o'clock, we may assume that the explosion must be timed for to− morrow morning, when the vessel would be well out to sea. Certainly, not earlier; possibly some hours later. It makes no particular difference, for we are going to sit quietly here at the table with that curious box between us until something happens. Either Mr. Grenelli is going to give me that information or—he isn't. But in the latter case it will be of no further use to either of us. Do I make myself quite clear?"

The ticking of the mechanism concealed in the box sounded like the blows of a trip−hammer. Grenelli lit a cigarette with a poor affectation of bravado. "I can stand as much of it as you can," he said, insolently.

"You have the advantage of KNOWING how much," retorted Indiman. "But we'll wait and see who's the best man. And in the mean time, Thorp, old chap, I think you'd better cut your stick. Just bring up some biscuits and a bottle of Scotch, and we'll get along as comfortably as you please."

But I declined to be sent away in this fashion for all that I was horribly afraid. "I can't sit down at that table," I explained, "but I'll keep coming in and out of the room as the spirit moves me. Now, don't say a word; I've made up my mind."

"Well, I sha'n't forget it," said Indiman, simply. Then, in an undertone: "As a matter of absolute fact, the fellow is a coward, and he'll weaken at the end. There isn't the slightest danger—be sure of that."

Hour by hour the early evening dragged away, and then began that interminable night. I spent most of the time in the dining−room at the back, smoking and pretending to read. Twice the book slipped from my hand, and I woke with a horrid start from my cat−nap. Then I would go softly to the library door and peep in. Always the same tableau—the two men sitting opposite each other, alert, silent, watchful, and between them the shaded lamp and that little box lying in the circle of its light.

At about four o'clock I came in and mended the fire in the grate, for the house was growing chilly. Indiman

looked over at me and smiled brightly. "Well, it's good to be out of the old ruts, isn't it?" he said. "'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay,' as some one has truthfully remarked. He was a philosopher, that fellow. Wish we had him here with us to−night; we'd teach him a thing or two more about what living really is."

After that I walked up and down the dining− room floor pretty steadily until the dawn began to steal over the chimney−pots of the houses at the back. It wasn't a pretty sky that the light revealed, dull and streaky looking, with a suggestion of coming rain. I stood looking at it in an absent−minded, miserable sort of stupor; then I heard Indiman calling me.

"I'm out of cigars," he explained. "There's a box in the buffet; and just put out the lamp, will you."

Grenelli looked haggard in the gray light that streamed into the room as I drew the curtains. He started, too, when he saw that the day had come—it was quite perceptible.

"I should like to know the time," he growled. "It's only fair."

"To be sure," assented Indiman, and he pushed his watch, face upward, into the middle of the table. The dial indicated half−past seven, at which I was somewhat surprised, for I had not thought it so late. But my own watch had run down, and it will be remembered that Indiman had stopped the mantel−clock the night before. Half− past seven it was, then, for all that the hour again struck me as being rather advanced for a cloudy morning in mid−November. And evidently Grenelli thought so too. He could hardly suppress the exclamationtion that rose to his lips as he glanced at the dial.

Ten minutes passed, and then Grenelli spoke.

"If I tell you what you want to know," he said, "am I to be allowed to leave the house at once?"

"Yes."

"And I am to be safe from arrest? At least, sufficient time will be given—"

"Bah!" interrupted Indiman, scornfully. "Come and go as you will. I can break you like a rotten stick whenever it pleases me."

Grenelli drew in his breath with a vicious hiss. "At five minutes to eight I will tell you," he said, in a loud, overbearing voice.

"Very good," answered Indiman, placidly.

But the fellow's courage deserted him at the pinch, in accordance with Indiman's prediction. He sat there dry−lipped and wet−browed, a half− burned cigarette in his yellow−stained fingers, and his eyes fixed immovably on Indiman's watch. It was barely a quarter to the hour when he gave in. He wanted to cut the corner as closely as he could, but his nerve was gone. "I will tell you—" he began.

He stopped as abruptly as he had started. Suddenly the ticking of the clock−work had ceased, and it was succeeded by a pause infinitesimally brief and withal infinitely extended. Grenelli half rose from his chair, his hands beating backward at the air. Then came a curious premonitory whir of the hidden mechanism. The metallic rattle of the gong was magnified in my ears to the dimensions of a roll of thunder; then I saw that Indiman had torn the wrappings from the box and had opened it. There was no mistaking the object that lay within—a common American alarm− clock. Grenelli looked at it, wide−eyed, then he rolled off his chair in some sort of a fit, and Indiman and I were left to stare each other out of countenance.

"Plain enough, I think," said Indiman. "There WAS another box containing the infernal machine, but Grenelli made up the dummy so successfully as to deceive even himself. He got the two mixed up, and this, the original and harmless package, was the one that should have reached the Russia if Ben Day hadn't stopped to buy a red apple. Of course, it was the ticking of the clock escapement that misled him—and me.

"The alarm mechanism must have been wound up and set just before the clock left Redfield Company's yesterday morning. Possibly a practical joke on some clerk's part, but that doesn't matter. You see, there is a twenty− four hour dial for the alarm, and it was set at a little before XIX, corresponding to about a quarter of seven."

"But your watch says a quarter of eight," I objected.

"I set it an hour ahead," answered Indiman. "I'm not altogether a fool, and although I was certain that Grenelli would weaken, I wanted some leeway for myself and you. Undoubtedly, the infernal machine was timed for eight o'clock, and Grenelli knew it. He tried to hold on long enough to insure our destruction, and yet get away himself, but he couldn't be sure of those last few minutes. By−the− way, the box containing the bomb must be at his house. It ought to be put out of business at once. Can you get the fellow on his feet?"

But it took some time to bring the man around, and it was more than half an hour later before we got away, the three of us together in a hansom. I should say that the lodging occupied by Grenelli and Day was the loft of a disused private stable, situated in a side street, three or four blocks off, and the driver was instructed to get there as quickly as possible. As we passed a jeweler's place Grenelli glanced at the electric−clock dial in the window and saw that it was twenty−five minutes of eight. He had been deceived, then; he knew it instantly. "But it worked both ways," he sneered. "I have my secret still."

"Quite so," answered Indiman, and smiled.

At the corner we were halted by a hail from the sidewalk. It was Brownson, of the detective bureau.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Indiman, but I want that man with you. Charged with larceny of a package consigned to Oceanic Express Company. I've been waiting for him all night."

"By all means, officer," and the three of us got out.

"I managed it pretty well, I think," continued Brownson. "Searched every nook and corner of the stable where Grenelli and Day lived, and finally I found the parcel. It answered precisely to the description, and I sent it down by Officer Smith to the RUSSIA not more than an hour ago."

"To the RUSSIA! Why she sailed yesterday afternoon at four o'clock."

"Slight accident to her low−pressure cylinder," explained Brownson. "She was delayed for several hours and was to sail early this morning. I beg your pardon—why, excuse me, Mr. Indiman—"

There was a public telephone in the corner shop, and Indiman dashed into the booth, upsetting Officer Brownson into the gutter as he rushed past him. The clerk at the pier of the Cis−Atlantic Company answered that the RUSSIA had sailed a little before seven, and must be in the lower bay by this time. Impossible to reach her, as the morning was densely foggy and she carried no wireless apparatus. An indescribable expression came into the man Grenelli's face as he realized what this new turn of the kaleidoscope meant. But Indiman and I involuntarily looked the other way.

Officer Smith had returned from his mission, and apparently his superior was not pleased with its outcome.

"Block on the Elevated!" he exclaimed, disgustedly. "Always some excuse. Then you missed the Russia?"

"She had just been pulled into the stream when I reached the pier."

"Where's the package?"

"I brought it back with me."

Now, to be honest, I jumped at that. It was possible that the booby had the box under his coat, and it was now ten minutes of eight. But Brownson, who didn't know, went on imperturbably. "You should have handed it over to the representative of the express company. What did you do with it?"

"It's at the stable where Grenelli lived," explained Officer Smith. "I locked it up in a bureau drawer, and here's the key."

Brownson looked at his subordinate patronizingly. "You have much to learn, young man—" he began. "Much to learn. Hallo! Something's blown up down the block."

Well, to sum up briefly, there was no stable left. Fortunately no one had been injured by the explosion, and the outside damage was confined to a few broken windows. We all went poking about in the ruins looking for a clew to the mystery.

"Here's that box, Brownson," said Indiman, suddenly. "The cover is somewhat torn, but you can make out the address easily enough. It's the lost property, certainly, and you've got the thief, too." He handed the officer the package containing the alarm−clock.

"That I have," answered the gratified Brownson. "Keep close eye on Grenelli, Officer Smith, and I may be able to overlook your shortcomings of this morning. I say, Mr. Indiman, but there's a regular miracle in this 'ere business. Now, how do you suppose this blessed little twopenny box ever come through an earthquake like that there."

"I'll never tell you," said Indiman.

We had been dining with Ellison, the deferred settlement of that little account which we had been owing him since August. However, we made it up, interest and all. The occasion had been an undeniably cheerful one, and it was close to midnight when we finally separated. Ellison went on his way up−town and Indiman and I stood on the corner waiting for a hansom, for as it chanced there was not a single disengaged one in the rank before the restaurant. "Here we are," said Indiman, and raised his stick as a four−wheeler was about to pass us. But the driver

made a negative sign and drove on. "He has a fare, after all," said Indiman, with some annoyance. "But look, Thorp!"

The rolling shades at the doors had been closely drawn, but just as the carriage came opposite us a sudden jolt displaced the spring catch of the curtain and up it flew with a snap. There were two persons in the cab, and the electric light from the corner shone full upon them. The one nearest us was an undersized, swarthy−faced person who wore a Turkish fez; his companion was a portly man attired in evening clothes and having his head entirely enveloped in a bag of some dark material gathered at the neck by a draw− string.

With an exclamation that might pass for a blood−curdling Levantine oath the man of the fez seized the window−curtain and pulled it down; the carriage rolled on.

"An extraordinary spectacle," I remarked. "There ought to be a big story behind that."

"I admit," said Indiman, calmly, "that it is not usual for gentlemen to drive about town with their heads done up in black bags. Nevertheless, I doubt if there is much in the mystery worthy of a connoisseur's attention. It strikes me as smacking of the made−up, the theatric; it has something of the air commercial about it—an advertisement, perhaps."

"Nonsense!" I retorted, warmly.

"Well, let the event decide. The cab's number—did you note it?"

"No."

"It was No. 872," said Indiman.

XI. The Philadelphia Quizzing−Glass

Knowing that the number of the four−wheeler was 872, it was not a difficult matter to begin the inquiry. But to secure any real information—that was different. The driver, a respectable albeit somewhat thick− headed Irishman, could offer only vague recollections of his business for the night of November 16th. He had been lucky enough to secure several fares, but there had been nothing in the appearance of any of his passengers to attract his attention. A gentleman in evening dress with his head tied up in a black bag and accompanied by a man wearing a red fez! Certainly he would have taken notice of anything like THAT. "Niver in my cab," asseverated honest Mulvihill. "I've been hacking it for twenty years and carried some quare cargoes. But of that sort—no, sorr!"

Clearly there was nothing to be learned from the cabman, and he was undoubtedly sincere in his protestations. The little peculiarities of costume that had originally caught my eye were obviously unsuited for public wear. The fez and the black bag had probably been brought into use after the men of mystery had entered the cab, and it was only through the accident of the suddenly released window− shade that Esper Indiman and I had seen what we did. "No thoroughfare" stood out plainly on this particular road. Then the humor took me to try conclusions with Chance herself, the method a la Indiman. I chucked a silver dollar to the cabman. "Whatever it's worth to you in time and distance," I said. "Don't ask me any questions—go as you please."

Hackman Mulvihill was a humorist in his way and he wanted to spare his horse. Six times in succession we made the circuit of Madison Square and never once off the walk. I was on the point of protesting, but I remembered the rules of the game and held my tongue. Finally, we started down−town by way of Fourth Avenue. Near Sixteenth Street and Union Square the cab pulled up to the curb, an intimation that my chartered voyage was over.

"And now which way?" I inquired, smilingly.

Mr. Mulvihill regarded me with compassionate and somewhat unflattering interest. "Be glory!" he said, frankly, "it's Bellevue that ye'll be wanting afore long, and badly, too. Come, now, jist jump in again and I'll rowl ye up there quiet and peaceable like. A touch of liver, sorr. I know how it takes them. Maning a drop too much of the 'red−eye,'" he added, under his breath. "Quiet, there, Noddy, ye black divil."

It was with some difficulty that I convinced this good Samaritan of my mental and physical equilibrium. Finally he drove off, wagging his head doubtfully.

"But which way?" I shouted after him. He would not answer in words, but pointed eastward with his whip−stock. Eastward then it was.

Between Union Square and Second Avenue there are several blocks of dwelling−houses—a once fashionable and still highly respectable residential neighborhood. The particular street does not matter, but I was proceeding in the general direction of Stuyvesant Square and had crossed Third Avenue.

Being on the lower or shady side it was something of a surprise to receive a flash of sunlight directly in the eye. I stepped back. On the pavement at my feet there floated a blot of quivering yellow light; it danced directly towards me, and again I was blinded by its dazzle.

The reflection from a mirror, of course, but it took me several minutes to determine its location.

Ah, there it was—a peculiar combination, in polished copper, of triple glasses fixed to the sill of a second−story window in the house directly opposite. The device is in common use in Philadelphia and Baltimore, but here in New York it must be classed as an exotic. Its very name is unfamiliar, and I dub it the "Philadelphia Quizzing−Glass" for want of a better term. You understand, of course, that the mirrors are hinged together and adjustable to any angle. It is consequently possible for an observer sitting in the room to remain entirely out of sight and yet command a view of all that passes in the street below. An ingenious contrivance, then, for keeping one's self informed upon the business of the neighborhood. But New−Yorkers, if not less inquisitive, are more energetic than their Quaker cousins, and prefer the direct method of leaning out of the window, or, if need be, going down into the street itself. Still, there is something to be said for the "quizzing −glass," for we may look upon it as the range− finder of the domestic fortress, forewarning us of the approach of the bore and the process− server. Obviously, the ability to look round a corner may save us from many of the minor complications that embitter modern life.

I was under surveillance—that was certain. Now, should I submit to the impertinence? It was easy to put an end to it by walking away. But I had aspired to be a disciple of Esper Indiman, gentleman adventurer, and here was a chance to take out a letter of marque on my own account—one must look Fortune in the face to catch her smile. And so I stood there immovable, until the dazzle in my eyes cleared away signifying that the ordeal was at an end. Then I lifted my hat and walked on, taking note of the house number—23l.

The next day, Wednesday, it rained, but Thursday was clear, and it was inevitable that I should pay a second visit to the house of the quizzing−glass, as I had mentally christened it. Again I submitted to a long scrutiny. Evidently the result was satisfactory, for the door of the house was opened and a man ran quickly down the steps and came towards me. He was a small man with an Oriental cast of features and he wore a red fez. It sounds incredible, I admit, but such was the fact. He addressed me civilly, but in somewhat imperfect English.

"Morning, sar. It is a fine walk−day."

"Delightful," I assented.

"My mistress, sar—the Lady Allegra—she will be obligated of the honor to have your company dinner. You have no engagement anticipatory?" He stood with his head cocked a trifle to one side, smiling amiably.

"To−night?" I asked.

"That, sar, is my counselment. To−night, at clock nine."

"Very good. I'll be here."

Red−Fez shook his head deprecatingly. Finally, and after much circumlocution, I gathered that I was not expected at No. 231. My instructions were simply to be in waiting at the Worth Monument in Madison Square at half−after eight; for the rest Red−Fez would hold himself responsible. And upon this understanding we parted.

"The Lady Allegra," I said, under my breath, as I walked home. "The Lady Allegra."

Up to this point I had kept my own counsel, but now I felt it my duty to make a confidant of Indiman. He listened to my story with grave attention.

"It promises well—decidedly so," admitted Indiman. "Confound it! If it were not for this unlucky accident of a sprained ankle—" and he glanced ruefully at his injured limb encased in its plaster−of− Paris form.

"I like the name," I went on, somewhat irrelevantly. "The Lady Allegra."

"There are possibilities in it," assented Indiman, grumpily. "Will you hand me my solitaire cards—and, for Heaven's sake! stop kicking the lacquer off the andirons."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Of course you understand what I mean. It isn't the andirons, but the sight of your aggressively vigorous legs that moves me to childish wrath. To be tied down here like a trussed pigeon! Better leave me to my solitaire. I'll be more civilized after luncheon." Whereupon I smiled and went out.

Half−past eight o'clock; the Worth Monument; Red−Fez in a four− wheeler; the carefully drawn window−curtains; the production of the black silk bag with which to envelop my head—it all happened in accordance with the playbill. At first I tried to keep some idea of distance and direction, but I soon got confused and had to give it up. I could only conjecture that the course was a long one, for I heard a clock striking nine just as the cab stopped, and our pace had been a rapid one.

"Thisaway, sar," whispered my guide, and I yielded to the gentle pressure of his hand on my arm. The street door closed behind me, I felt myself guided up a pair of stairs, a sharp turn to the right, and we had arrived. But where? Then I realized that the black silk bag had been removed from my head and I was free to use my eyes. An ironical permission, truly, for I found myself in absolute darkness. Strain my vision as I might, not a ray of light met the sensitive surface of the retina. The blackness stood about me like a wall, immaterial, doubtless, but none the less impenetrable.

Deprived of sight, every mental faculty was instantly concentrated upon the single sense of hearing. My conductor had left me. There was the sound of a closing door and of padded foot−falls that trailed off into nothingness; then silence.

Out of the void came a sharp click as of a well−oiled gun−lock. It was followed by the first notes of a piano−forte accompaniment. A soprano voice began singing Schubert's "Fischermadchen." What a delicious timbre! The clear resonance of a crystal bell.

The beautiful melody ceased, but still I seemed to hear the faint, sweet overtones born of its final breath, thin auditory flames that flickered for an instant against the blank wall of the subconscious sense, and then in their turn

were gone. Entranced and motionless, I waited.

A sudden burst of light flooded the room, the radiation being indirect and proceeding from electroliers sunken behind the ceiling cornice. The apartment was of medium size, evidently the middle one of the ordinary series of three rooms characteristic of New York City houses, and it was furnished most simply—merely a table of Flemish oak with two leather− backed chairs to match and some rugs. The walls and door spaces were hung with red velvet draperies, which contrasted brilliantly with the gorgeous, gold−leafed plastic−work of the cornices and ceiling. A convex mirror, framed in massive silver gilt, hung on the side wall. A second look showed that it was really a bull's−eye of crackled glass, opal−tinted and translucent. It glowed as though illumined by some inward fire (doubtless a concealed electric−light bulb), and the shifting play of iridescent color was exquisitely beautiful. One could compare it only with an imprisoned rainbow. I looked and wondered.

"I have kept you waiting. A thousand apologies," said a voice at my back. I turned to face a gentleman who must have entered from the front room; so at least the draperies, still slightly swaying, attested. A tall man, gray−haired, and of an extraordinary thinness—a caricature of Don Quixote himself, if such a thing were possible.

"The Lady Allegra," he went on, "is unfortunately indisposed. She begs me to tender her apologies and regrets. I am her ladyship's resident physician, and my name is Gonzales." His eyes, hidden behind smoked glasses, examined me attentively.

I murmured some words of conventional regrets, and, truth to tell, I was bitterly disappointed. I turned as though to go.

"It is the Lady Allegra's wish that you should dine here this evening," continued Dr. Gonzales. "Solus, it is true, but the disappointment is a mutual one; of that you may be assured." Again I bowed and intimated my willingness to obey.

The dining−room was an apartment of unusual size, panelled in Santo Domingo mahogany, the rich color of the wood standing in admirable contrast to the dark−green, watered silk with which the walls were covered. A magnificent tapestry, representing Dido's hunting−party in honor of AEneas, filled nearly the whole of one side wall, and on the chimney−breast opposite hung a mirror similar in appearance to that in the drawing−room. The illumination of the room was peculiar but effective—four bronze female figures, each holding in her hands a globe of translucent glass through which a mellow radiance diffused itself.

The table, large enough to accommodate King Arthur and his knights, was beautifully set with plate and crystal, but only two covers had been laid. Red−Fez, who had now assumed the functions of a butler, showed me to my place, and then took up his stand behind the empty chair of his mistress. The two serving− men began immediately upon their duties.

It was an extraordinary repast, for to both my eye and my palate the viands were utterly unknown. In fact, every dish had as its basis a peculiar substance that in appearance faintly suggested isinglass. But it had no taste, that I could discover, other than the flavor communicated to it by the various sauces and dressings with which it was served. It appeared first in the soup, and then, omitting the fish course, I recognized it as the foundation of an excellent vol−au−vent. It served again as a substitute for meat, compressed and moulded in the form of French chops. There was even a passable imitation of a green goose. I had a slice from the breast, and it tasted very well. The philosophers tell us that there is an infinite power in suggestion. That may account, in part at least, for the complacency with which I accepted these remarkable perversions of the ordinary menu. If ideas are the only realities, my green goose might have come straight from Washington Market itself.

The two vegetables, cauliflower an gratin and boiled potatoes, were good to look at and good to eat, although neither of them had ever seen a garden. There was a salad, too, with an incomparable dressing. Finally, an excellent pudding. The wines and mineral waters, the liqueurs and the coffee, were genuine. The fantastic cuisine of my hostess extended only to the solid portions of the repast, and for this I was secretly thankful. I don't like chemical burgundies, and the "health−food" mochas and javas are only surprisingly good imitations of exceedingly bad coffee.

The chair opposite me remained unfilled, but each course was served at the cover as scrupulously as though the Lady Allegra were actually present. It made me feel a trifle uncomfortable at the first—the sight of that vacant chair set back a little from the table, the napkin half unfolded, the full wineglasses, the plate with its untouched food. And once, when the foot− man offered the cauliflower to my invisible vis−a−vis, it seemed as though she declined it. The man hesitated a second and then passed on without putting a portion on the plate. For the moment

I was foolish enough to contemplate a similar refusal, but I reconsidered—I am very fond of cauliflower.

At the conclusion of dinner I took my cigar into the red drawing− room. The lights had been lowered, and only the opalescent bull's− eye glowed with undiminished brilliancy. I sat staring at it, and the outrageous perplexity of the situation began to get on my nerves. I must get out of here, and I half rose. Then I sank back, forgetting everything but that marvellous voice. Again the Lady Allegra was singing, and could I doubt that it was for me! David's "Charmant Oiseau," and then the gay little gavotte from "Manon."

What an astonishing repertoire—Chaminade, Schumann, Grieg, Richard Strauss. Finally Schubert, and Schubert only, the last and the best given, as it is meet, to him who is the master of all. The rainbow− tinted orb of the wall mirror continued to hold my eyes; they drooped and fell as the radiance grew fainter and yet fainter.

When I awoke Red−Fez was standing at the bedside, hot−water can in hand. "Morning, sar," he said, with gentle affability. "Will you permit me to shaver you?"

I jumped out of bed and went to the window. It was closed, although a ventilator at the top admitted plenty of the outside air, and the glass was of the opaque bull's−eye variety through which it is impossible to see. I tried to throw up the sash, but it would not budge.

I submitted in silence to the ministrations of Red−Fez, not choosing to enter into any discussion with a servant. But I was sorely tempted to protest when he proceeded to array me in an extraordinary robe of cardinal silk in lieu of the ordinary masculine habiliments. Certainly I could not leave the house enveloped in this ridiculous garment. My dress clothes would have been bad enough, but there was no trace of them to be seen. Evidently I should have to call Dr. Gonzales to account, and having descended to the now familiar red drawing− room, I sent Red−Fez with a request for an immediate audience. A few minutes later he appeared.

"Am I a prisoner here?" I asked, abruptly.

"You await the Lady Allegra's pleasure," he answered, imperturbably. "She is still indisposed. Possibly by to−night, but I cannot say definitely."

"I do not wish—"

"Chut!" he interrupted, irritably. "It is a matter not of your wishes but of her will. That is inevitable. Can you not understand?"

I looked at the immovable figures of two footmen at the door and then walked out to breakfast. An excellent meal it was, although I recognized that the food was only an ingenious variation upon the theme of the night before; that mysterious substance resembling isinglass was the basis of everything set before me. It was the same with luncheon and again at dinner. And, as on the previous night, it was an empty chair that confronted me. Well, what did it matter, after all. Can you even imagine what Schubert's "Linden− Tree" might be when perfectly sung?

Is it an hallucination, then, that possesses me—some subtle disturbance of the nerve−centres sapping the sources of will−power, enfeebling even the physical energies? I do not know. Sometimes I am ashamedly conscious that I do not greatly care. It is now a week since I entered this house, and I have made but one attempt to reassert my personal rights. Yesterday a sudden passion of resolution seized me; at all hazards I must break the bonds imposed upon me by this invisible enchantress. As I passed the door leading to the red drawing− room I put my fingers in my ears—Ulysses and the sirens. But when I reached the lower hall I walked plump into Dr. Gonzales, who fixed me with a penetrating look. "Go back!" he said, authoritatively. "The Lady Allegra sings—and for you." I listened; it was, "Ah, fors e lui."

I divide my time between the library on the third floor and the red drawing−room, where the strange beauty of the opal−tinted mirror holds me possessed for hours together. Remember that the Lady Allegra still maintains her tantalizing role of inviolable seclusion. It is through her voice alone that she impresses her personality upon my senses. That seems ridiculous, does it not? But then you have not heard her sing "Ah, fors e lui."

Yet, after all, the end came quickly. I shall be equally succinct in my chronicle of the events leading up to it.

As usual I had dined alone, and had afterwards submitted to the customary examination at the hands of Dr. Gonzales. Why he should deem it necessary to take my pulse and temperature and then ascertain my weight and power of grip with such scrupulous exactitude I never troubled to inquire. Indeed, it seemed such a puerile proceeding that I have hitherto refrained from even mentioning it. To−night he seemed ill−pleased with the results of his investigation. "You are losing weight," he said, severely, "and you don't begin to grip within ten pounds of what you registered a week ago."

"What does it matter?" I answered, as in− differently as I felt.

"You ought to eat more. No steam without fuel."

"I am not hungry."

"Bah!" he snorted, indignantly. "It is always the same story. Another failure! But no, I will not suffer it. Sooner than that I will have you penned and stuffed as though you were a Strasburg goose." But I only laughed at his petulance and walked on to the drawing− room.

I laughed, I say, and yet I had begun vaguely to realize that something was wrong. My head felt strangely light. I stumbled over a corner of the rug, and would have fallen out of pure weakness if I had not caught at the table for support. My respiration seemed more rapid than usual and the sweat from the slight exertion beaded my forehead. Then I forgot everything but that the Lady Allegra had begun to sing.

The desire, the impulse, they had crystallized into resolution. I would wait no longer. This very night the walls of the fortress should fall, unveiling the secret of this insolent loveliness, the desire of all the world. Ah, my lady Allegra, was it chance alone that led you to choose Isolde's "Liebestod" for this the supreme enchantment?

The music fell away into nothingness and I stepped forward, my hand on the knob of the folding−doors that led to the front room. I knocked twice—firmly, insistently. "Open!" I cried, and immediately the door−knob yielded to my touch.

"Stop!"

Dr. Gonzales stood at the hall entrance to the drawing−room. I saw something that gleamed like polished metal in his uplifted hand. Then he fell back and disappeared. It seemed as though some invisible force behind the portiere had taken sudden and irresistible possession of him. What did I care. I went forward and into the room, absolutely empty save for an upright cabinet of mahogany placed on a central pedestal. It was tall enough to conceal a person standing behind it, but it was not the Lady Allegra who came forward to meet me.

"Indiman!" I said, weakly. "Esper Indiman!"

"The carriage is waiting," he said. "Come."

"Never!" I retorted, passionately. "You don't understand—the Lady− −Allegra—"

Well, I suppose I must have fainted from sheer inanition, and so Indiman explained it himself that next morning.

"You had been half starved for over a week, and no wonder you keeled over. No; you can't have another mouthful of that beef− steak. You'll have to wait for luncheon."

I sank back among the cushions of the couch rather resentfully. "Well, at least you can go on and tell me," I said.

"Certainly. There are cranks of all degrees, as you know. It was your luck to fall into the hands of one of the king−pins of the confraternity—Dr. Ferdinand Gonzales, alias Moses the Second.

"He wanted a new subject for his experiments upon the physical regeneration of the human race, and he caught you in his drag−net. It was a close call for you, old chap."

"I don't understand."

"You have been starving to death for ten days, and yet eating three meals a day right along. Nothing peculiar about that, eh?"

"It WAS rather curious stuff. It looked like isinglass."

"Perhaps it is. All I care about is the fact that the food you have been eating doesn't contain a particle of nourishment for the human system. But Moses the Second imagined that he had invented, or rather rediscovered, the one perfect nutriment for the race— nothing less than manna."

"Manna!"

"Don't you remember the manna in the wilderness, the children of Israel, and the forty years they fed upon it. Dr. Gonzales, who was really a fine chemist before he went dotty, got the idee fixe that all human ills were due to improper food. He tackled the problem, at first scientifically, but later on he had a vision that he was really the reincarnation of the Prophet Moses. Moses and manna—the connection is obvious and the secret was soon in his possession. He manufactured the stuff in his own laboratory and lived on it himself—at least to the verge of physical extinction. Then he went gunning for subjects, and you know the rest. The rubbish fills you up without nourishing you, and what you lived on was really stimulants alone—the wine and coffee."

"But will you tell me—how did you chance to find—"

"For the first few days I didn't dream of interfering—it was your own adventure. But on Monday—that's yesterday, you know—I determined to look things up a bit. So I walked into No. 231 and scared Mr. Red−Fez into a few plain truths. His real name is Dawson, you know."

"Yes."

"It was simply an immensely improved sort of phonograph that Gonzales had invented. None of the harshness and squeakiness of tone that you associate with the ordinary instrument. Partly a new method of making the records and partly a system of qualifying chambers that refine and purify the tones. It is wonderful enough to deceive anybody, and, of course, he had all his records ready to hand."

"Then the Lady Allegra, the Lady Allegra—"

"'Vox et preterea nihil,'" quoted Indiman. He left the room quietly, and I lay there on the lounge staring up at the ceiling. "'Vox et preterea nihil.'"

Two months have passed and I am slowly recuperating in body and mind. But there are some things not to be forgotten—for instance, "Ah, fors e lui," when sung by the most beautiful voice in all the world.

Indiman proposes that we shall go to the Utinam Club, dine, and spend the night. Well, we don't often indulge in that rather questionable amusement, although we are accustomed to use the club freely throughout the daytime. All the more reason, then, that once in a while—I need a distraction and there are some interesting psychological deductions—But hang casuistry; it is enough to say that we did go.

It is undeniably pleasant to be sitting here in the club dining− room sharing a ruddy duck and a bottle of burgundy. Yes, and to feel the cares, the disappointments, the burdens of life dropping off one by one; to be able to dismiss them with a nod as one gives an unfortunate beggar his conge. Ills that one need not bear; evils that it is no longer necessary to endure—they have all been eliminated by the simple process of excluding from the spectrum the ultra blue−and−violet rays. A palpable evasion, of course. Call it immoral, if you will, and I shall not lift the gauntlet. Why should we quarrel over phrases when it is only required to return thanks to the good Dr. Magnus for his beneficent discovery? That is enough for me at least. Carpe diem, or, more precisely, noctem.

It was Dr. Magnus himself who later on introduced us to Chivers in the common room—Chivers, a little man of Semitic physiognomy, with a hard, knobbed face and a screw of black beard. He addressed himself effusively to Indiman, while the doctor and I remained spectators, silent but interested.

"A dealer in adventures, a specialist in the grotesque—ah, I like that, Mr. Indiman. The rest of us"—this with a gesture inexpressibly mean and fawning—"prefer to haggle over the lion's skin after it has been cured and dressed. It's a mere question of temperament, dear sir."

"What have you to say to me?" inquired Indiman, abruptly. I could see that he wanted to kick him.

"I have an adventure—of the first class. I desire to dispose of it."

"Yes."

"A noble, a surpassing adventure. Moreover, a commercial opening that is not to be despised—fifty per cent on your capital every six months."

"Yes."

"I offer you, then, my well−established business of adjuster of averages, good−will and office fixtures included."

"But I never even heard of such a profession. I know nothing about averages and their adjustment."

"What difference! It is the adventure that particularly concerns you, is it not? The business—pouf! it runs itself." "And the terms?"

"I make them ridiculously easy. You are to take over the business, including the lease of my offices in the Barowsky Brothers' bank building, William H. Seward Square. In return for this accommodation I am prepared to pay you the sum of ten thousand dollars." Mr. Chivers grinned cheerfully as he concluded this astounding proposition. He pulled ten new one−thousand−dollar bills from his waistcoat−pocket and laid them on the table.

Indiman regarded the little man thoughtfully. "You have been in business for your health?" he inquired, with an affectation of polite interest.

"You have hit it exactly," returned the imperturbable Chivers. "I was pretty rocky when I first went to William H. Seward Square. But the air in that Yiddish country—wonderful, dear sir. Regard me; punch, poke, pound where and how you like. Sound as a bell you'll find me. Now I pass on. I yield place to you. The honor, dear sir, is mine."

"I confess that I am interested," said Indiman. "The conditions are simply—"

"Your personal day and night tenancy of the chambers in the Barowsky Building for a period of not less than three months. I should have explained that the rooms really form a bachelor's suite, all furnished, of course."

"There are papers to sign?"

"Only the assumption of the office lease, and I'll give you a bill of sale for the furniture." Mr. Chivers laid the documents before Indiman; the latter glanced them over and drew out his fountain− pen. A quick look, one of satisfaction and understanding, passed between Chivers and Dr. Magnus. I caught it and tried to convey a warning to my friend. But he had already affixed his signature to the lease of the offices in the Barowsky bank building. Chivers did the same for the bill of sale.

Indiman gathered up the ten one−thousand−dollar bills and stuffed them into his pocket. "Want a receipt?" he asked.

"It is not necessary."

"Well, at least, we must have a bumper to celebrate the conclusion of the transaction. Waiter."

We took a cab in the gray of the dawning hour and drove home. As might have been predicted, my spirits had dropped to the zero−point again.

"I don't like it—frankly, I don't, old man. What if it should be a trap?"

Indiman laughed heartily. "Why, of course, it's a trap," he said. "That's plain as a pike−staff, whatever a pike−staff itself may be. It's the particular kind of a trap that interests me. The why and the wherefore."

Arrived at the house, Indiman handed a bill to the driver and we ascended the steps. But the cabman seemed dissatisfied with his treatment. "Hey, there!" he called once, and then again. Indiman turned impatiently.

"Well, what is it?" he asked

"You can see for yourself, guv'nor. A mistake, ain't it?"

It was one of the thousand−dollar bills that the honest cabby was holding up. What a phenomenon in the way of a hackman! And yet the New York night−hawks are no fools and thousand−dollar bills are easy to trace. Indiman gave the man fifty dollars as a reward of virtue and he was more than satisfied. But something still remained on his conscience thus agreeably stimulated.

"'Scuse me, guv'nor," he went on, "but here's another little job in the same line of business. I drove a gentleman to your club early in the evening, and he must have left it accidental in the cab. Maybe you know him."

It was a plain white envelope bearing the typewritten address:

Mr. Orrin Chivers, Nos. 13−15 Barowsky Chambers, Seward Square, New York.

The envelope had been opened, but the enclosure still remained in it.

"Thank you," said Indiman. "I'll take charge of it." The cabman touched his hat and drove away.

We went up to the library and proceeded to examine the treasure trove. It consisted of a long strip of thin bluish paper less than a quarter of an inch in width and containing a succession of apparently arbitrary and unmeaning characters written in ink. I reproduce a section of the strip, which should make my description more intelligible.

Indiman looked at the hieroglyphics musingly. "Important—if true," he murmured.

XII. The Adjuster of Averages

It was on December 21st that Indiman took up his tenancy of the offices in the Barowsky Building. I should have been glad to have accompanied him, but he would not have it. It was the dealer's hand at bridge and must be played alone. And owing to the accident of a slight attack of grippe it was some ten days later before I was able to call upon him in his new quarters.

William H. Seward Square has its unique features. Lying in the heart of the East Side, it is outside the regular lines of north and south travel. There are thousands of otherwise well−informed New−Yorkers to whom its very name is unknown. And yet it is an important political centre, the capital of the Yiddish country, and the recipient of many special favors at the hands of a paternal municipality. There are still streets in the up−town districts whose pavement is the antiquated Belgian blocks or even cobble− stones, but none in Yiddishland; here everything is asphalted. You may trust the district leader to take care of his own.

A fine, stone building forms the principal architectural feature of the square on the west side. It contains the free baths and would be a credit to any part of the city. Most of the remaining space is given over to the children for a playground. There is a semi− enclosed gymnasium for the boys, hand−ball and tether−ball courts, a separate enclosure for the girls and smaller children—in a word, every form of amusement and exercise that is practicable in a public institution of comparatively limited area. The children enjoy it, too. They come in droves, and the swings and flying rings are in constant use.

It is like going to a foreign country. The shop signs, written in Hebrew characters, suggest a combination of horseshoes and carpet− tacks, and you may walk for blocks without hearing an English word spoken. Ask your whereabouts of a street boy and he will quite likely turn pale and edge away. He does not understand. You are an alien, a foreign devil.

The Barowsky Brothers' bank building is the show−place of the district. It is a staring white structure covered with gilt business signs and adorned with abortive minarets that give it an air distinctly Oriental. The entrance hall and the banking−rooms are sumptuous. They recall the Arabian Nights and the word−painting of a circus poster. Mirrors, gilding, mosaics—it is all a dream of luxury and impresses one with a realizing sense of the financial standing of the Barowsky Brothers. You must have a good front in the Yiddish country if you expect to handle other people's money.

Esper Indiman, adjuster of averages, occupied a suite of rooms on the fifth floor. I proceeded thither and found him in. We sat down and smoked amicably.

"How is business?" I asked. "Have you adjusted many averages to− day? And, by−the−way, I'm rather taken with the title of your new trade. 'Adjuster of averages'—there's an imposing note of omnipotence in the words."

"It's a perfectly legitimate occupation. You'll find it listed in the business directory."

"Of course, and never mind the details. I'm satisfied with its face value, a brevet of vice−gerency. God knows there are plenty of averages to be adjusted in this weary old world."

"Well, I may have some accounts to balance before I take down my sign," said Indiman, with a grim little smile. "I'm glad you came in to−day, Thorp; I've been wanting to have a talk with you."

"Fire away," I answered, flippantly.

"Come into the back room," and he led the way.

The suite ran through the building. There was a good−sized room facing on the square, fitted up with ordinary office furniture; back of that a bath−room, and then the rear office, which had been turned into a bachelor's living−room. There were bookcases, rugs, pictures, a big mahogany writing−table, an open fireplace, easy− chairs—everything to make life comfortable. "And the couch over there is my bed," concluded Indiman. "I'm pretty well fixed, you see."

"Decidedly so."

"Intellectual diversion in abundance; even the artistic element is not wholly wanting."

He stepped over to a table in the far corner; a phonographic machine of some kind stood upon it. Indiman touched a lever, and again I heard that unforgettable melody, "Ah, fors e lui," and in her voice—her voice! A cry escaped me. Indiman pushed me back into my chair. "Be good enough to listen," he said, and I obeyed.

"While you have been laid up," he began, "I have been amusing myself with a little theory building. I had taken the liberty to sequestrate the remarkable phonographic apparatus of your quondam friend Dr. Gonzales; in fact, I carried it away in the same carriage with your honorable self from the house of the Philadelphia 'quizzing−glass.' The police didn't notice—that was all.

"Dr. Gonzales was a genius, and his instrument is a revolution in phonographs—purity of tone, perfect enunciation, and all that. But the really interesting thing (to me as to you) was not the machine, but the records that it used. To whom belonged the voice that these little disks and cylinders so faithfully reproduced? It was a real woman who had poured the passion and sorrow of life into this insentient mechanism. And the medium had been sufficient; your heart had responded.

"You were my friend, and I could not be indifferent to aught that concerned you. We are, neither of us, sentimental, so the bare statement of the fact is sufficient. You were on your back, and so it was my part to go to work. I did.

"It is unprofitable business looking for a needle in a hay−stack when you can buy a packet of the best helix No. 8's at any shop for a nickel. But after spending a blank week interviewing the makers of phonographic records I began to feel doubtful of my economic theory. Nowhere could I find the slightest trace of this particular job of record−making. And then one day I ran across a chap named Hugens, who was in the business in a small way. His place was three blocks east of the Bowery, but I've forgotten the name of the cross street.

"It was the usual experience at first—no information—but something told me that the man was lying. Finally, I pretended to give up the inquiry and left the shop. It was after dark on a snowy January afternoon, and I started to walk over to the Madison Avenue cars. I dawdled along purposely so as to give the telephone time to get in its work, and the affair turned out exactly as I had foreseen. At Elm Street a couple of fellows jostled against me, and when the mix−up was over the parcel containing my two sample records was gone. That was all that had been wanted; my watch, pin, and money had not been touched.

"It was plain, then, that some one had an interest in preventing my tracing up these particular records. Not Hugens, of course, but his client, whoever he might be. Well, at least, it made the case more interesting—yes, and more promising. Two nights later the house in Madison Avenue was entered by second−story men while I was at dinner. But the records and repeating apparatus had been removed to the safe−deposit vaults, and my unknown opponent had drawn another blank.

"Getting exciting, wasn't it? And then for a month or more nothing happened. You continued to convalesce and I kept on thinking.

"This impersonal opposition—well, there had been something of the same sort once or twice before. You remember, in particular, the affair of the private letter−box. A devilish intelligence had been at work there, and some day, as I told you, the mystery would be cleared up.

"Then did we ever know who Mr. Aram Balencourt really was? An agent of the 'Forty'? Well, perhaps so, but I can't help thinking that there was always a bigger man behind him. The same conclusion would apply to the case of that poor wretch Grenelli in the affair of the Russia and the box of dynamite. Some one with brains pulled the strings to make all these marionettes dance.

"Finally, there was your own adventure with the amiable Dr. Gonzales. Did he ever remind you, even indefinitely, of some one else whom you had known? Think carefully. Well, it doesn't matter. I was deceived myself, and when I afterwards went to the Bellevue insane pavilion to make some inquiries I found that he had long since been discharged as cured.

"There was just one hypothesis—the existence somewhere of a strong and alert personality; a genius along mechanical and scientific lines; a creature of abnormally developed mentality and correspondingly defective ethical nature; an intelligence absolutely passionless and ruthless, playing the game entirely for its own sake, and equally indifferent to the end and to the means used to attain it—in other words, a monster. Quite an elaborate theory, you observe; but the difficulty was to fit it to the individual. Looking back on the problem, I accuse myself of being rather slow−witted. Right under my eyes and yet only an accident opened them.

"Well, you recall the night at the Utinam when we met Mr. Chivers and I accepted his very liberal proposition to become an adjuster of averages. Of course, it was a trap, but what connoisseur of the adventure grotesque could refuse such a bait? All I wanted to know was with whom I was expected to match wits.

"Of course, the thousand−dollar bills were counterfeits—stage money? Not at all; every one was as good as

the gold it called for at the sub−treasury. Bribery? From whom and for what? Doubtless I should know later. As it happened, I found out a little ahead of time.

"You remember the incident of the honest cabman and the hieroglyphic letter which he turned over to me? Here it is, addressed, as you observe, to Mr. Chivers."

Indiman drew from a locked drawer in the big centre−table the long strip of bluish paper covered with its incomprehensible dashes. "One of the oldest of devices for secret writing," he remarked. "This slip of paper was originally wrapped about a cylinder of a certain diameter and the message traced upon it, and it can only be deciphered by rerolling it upon another cylinder of the same diameter. Easy enough to find the right one by the empiric method— I mean experiment. Once you recognize the fundamental character of the cryptogram the rest follows with ridiculous certainty. Behold!"

Indiman took a long, round, slender stick from the mantel−piece and proceeded to wrap the ribbon of bluish paper about it, touching both ends with paste to keep the slip in place. It read in part:

"He will not find the girl, but so long as those records remain in his possession the possibility continues to exist. I leave it with you to make the bargain, and if he is not altogether a fool he will be content with his ten thousand dollars, and Nos. 13−15 Barowsky Chambers will be again without a tenant. Otherwise—and it is generally otherwise with these meddlers—there will have to be a new adjustment of averages—what a felicitous phrase!—and this, as usual, I will take upon myself. One way or the other, and, personally, I don't care a straw which it is."

The name signed to this curious epistle was David Magnus.

"Our Dr. Magnus of the Utinam," explained Indiman, but I hardly heard him. One overwhelming thought obscured everything else—there was a real Lady Allegra, after all. That was it—to find her, and I had the clew. I must go at once. But Indiman restrained me.

"Yes, that is precisely what I want you to do, only let us first understand the situation thoroughly. I intend remaining here during the progress of the investigation, and if anything should happen—"

"What do you mean?"

"Pleasant rooms, aren't they?" and he looked about him approvingly. "And yet three men have been found sitting dead in the particular chair that I am now occupying."

I only stared at him.

"No marks of violence," continued Indiman. "Nothing to indicate foul play; nothing, mind you. 'Dead by the visitation of God,' according to the coroner, but I should call it an 'adjustment of averages.' That is a felicitous phrase. I got my facts, by−the−way, from the janitor. He is rather proud of the affair Barowsky, as we may call it."

"A monster, indeed!" I exclaimed, warmly.

"Oh, we mustn't misjudge our good Dr. Magnus," said Indiman, indulgently. "I used the word 'monster' in a purely psychological sense. You can't call such a being immoral; he is simply unmoral."

"Not even a criminal lunatic."

"Certainly not. But I acknowledge that society would be justified in protecting itself from such a creature. And it will."

"But why should you remain here, exposed to danger?"

"My dear Thorp, I want to play the game. I'm sure it's one worthy of my best attention."

We argued it out for an hour or more, but Indiman was not to be moved from his position. So it came back to his original proposition. I was to take up the search on the outside for the Lady Allegra, and Indiman was to hold the fort at Nos. 13−15 Barowsky Chambers. I rose to go.

"You don't need these, do you?" he asked, a little doubtfully, picking up one of the phonographic cylinders. I shook my head. As though I could have forgotten the smallest inflection of that voice! So we parted.

It had resolved itself into the needle in a hay−stack, after all. Where was I to look and for what? A voice! "Vox et preterea nihil," to quote again that beloved Vergilian line. To the unprejudiced mind it would seem hopeless enough, and yet I never doubted for an instant but that I should find her. If a man is sure that the world holds the one woman intended for him he may be equally confident that their paths will somewhere, somehow, sometime intersect.

It was the middle of the musical season, and I attended everything from grand opera to music−hall. For the

first and most obvious procedure was to assume that the Lady Allegra was a professional singer. Either that or in the very front rank of amateurs. As to the latter, I had always been more or less in with the musical set, and I knew of no one who came within a mile of filling my bill of particulars.

A professional, then, but not necessarily high up on the ladder. Merit may wait a long time for its due recognition. So I did not despise the humble field of vaudeville and of the continuous performance houses.

Week after week passed without result, and it was now the 1st of March. I saw Indiman every few days and the game dragged equally with him. Chivers had called half a dozen times, and was now openly negotiating for the possession of the phonographic cylinders. But Indiman fenced skilfully and kept him hanging on.

One night I was strolling through East Houston Street. A transparency caught my eye. It announced that a performance of high−class vaudeville was in progress. I paid my dime and entered.

A long, low−studded room, dim with tobacco−smoke and redolent of stale beer. At the far end a small stage with faded red hangings. The card read No. 7, and the programme informed me that the turn was "A Bouquet of Ballads." A slight, fair−haired girl appeared on the stage. Her cheeks were burning, and she kept her eyes fixed on the floor. The piano jangled, and she began her song, Schubert's "Linden−Tree." Her voice shook and quavered as she went on, but I knew it. I had found the Lady Allegra.

The audience listened indifferently. This sort of thing did not appeal to East Houston Street sensibilities, and there was no applause at the end. The girl essayed a few bars of her second number, a popular air in trivial waltz time, but with even poorer success. Then she broke down altogether and retired distressfully. Cat−calls and jeers, of course.

But one turn had been allotted to "Mavis," as she was called in the bill, and I assumed that she would shortly leave the place. I went outside and waited. Within ten minutes I saw her emerging from the performer's entrance, cloaked and deeply veiled. But I could not be mistaken. I stood stock−still like any fool as she passed close to me. What was I to do?

Then good−fortune smiled for once, and in gratitude for that surpassing indulgence I hereby relinquish all claim upon the lady for favors to come, now and forever. As the girl passed down the street a couple of pasty−faced young men stepped forward. I saw her stop and shrink away. A half−dozen steps and I had shoved in between them. The presumptuous youths sprawled to opposite points of the compass and I had drawn her hand through my arm. I could feel it tremble, but I carried her onward exultantly, masterfully. A man takes his own when he finds it. Then at the next street−lamp I stopped and released her. Within the circle of the light we stood and gazed into each other's eyes.

The Lady Allegra who was! It seems odd to think of her now as Alice Allaire—a pretty enough name but not particularly romantic. And when she changes it to Thorp, as she has just promised to do—But perhaps I am going a bit too fast. However, her story is simplicity itself.

My dear girl is an orphan, and six months ago she went to live with her guardian and uncle, David Magnus. But the situation quickly became intolerable. The attentions of the odious creature Olivers were openly encouraged by Dr. Magnus, and the child, although friendless and in a strange city, had no recourse but to run away. Surely, her voice would secure her a living! But the weeks passed and her store of money was running dangerously low. The Houston Street vaudeville had been the one chance that had offered, and she had hoped to make it good. But that first appearance had been her last. After the fiasco of which I had been a witness she had been discharged on the spot. We smile as we recall it now, but it had been a terrible catastrophe to contemplate at the time. What would you have done?

We went straight to Indiman, and he listened with close attention.

"You have property, then?" he asked.

Miss Allaire looked troubled. "There is money. I even think it must be a large estate. But I don't know; my uncle never spoke of my affairs."

"One of those cases where it is virtually impossible to prove anything," said Indiman to me. "Nevertheless, Magnus would be quite satisfied to have the absence of his niece made a permanent one—it saves the bother of making any explanations whatever."

"The phonographic records were the only clew," I observed. "At least he thought so."

"Yes, and consequently he has been working all this while to get them away from me. We're ready now to make a deal, but I'd like to know what stakes are on the table before playing a card."

"There was an ante of ten thousand dollars, you remember."

"Quite so. Well, Miss Allaire, if you are willing to have me play the partie in your behalf—"

"I could ask for nothing better," said the girl, quickly.

"Agreed, then. And, really, I think it is the only chance. Magnus is too clever a man not to have covered his tracks, and in an ordinary legal battle you would probably be worsted. But he doesn't want a fight if he can help it, and that is the club I propose to use. Now you'll have to go, for I expect Chivers at two."

I am glad that I glanced back for that last time as we left the room. Indiman was smiling, his head thrown back and his eyes aglow. The fight was on, and he was awaiting it as another man might his bride. To be remembered at one's best; I know I should wish that for myself.

A fortnight passed. I had not heard a word from Indiman, and I dared not intrude upon him without an invitation. I had taken Miss Allaire to the Margaret Louise Home for Women, but two weeks is the limit of residence there. What was to be done now? My own slender funds were exhausted and Alice had not a penny. So we did the wisest possible thing under the circumstances—or the most foolish, whichever you care to term it. An hour after we had been married I went down to Printing House Square and literally forced a city editor's hand for an assignment to general reportorial work. At least we should not starve. I informed Indiman by letter of the event, but received no reply.

On the afternoon of the 21st of March I was in the city room of the Planet. Mr. Dodge, the city editor, beckoned to me. He spoke quickly:

"Our representative at Police Headquarters has just telephoned that a man has been found dead in the Barowsky Brothers' bank building, and there's some yarn to the effect that he is the fourth to die alone in that particular office. Better go down and take a look at things. May be a good story in it."

So there was, but the Planet never published it; they accepted my resignation in lieu of an explanation.

I tried to think of indifferent matters as I hurried over to William H. Seward Square, but my heart kept pounding against my ribs. Could it be that Indiman—that he had lost the game?

There was the usual crowd of curiosity−mongers hanging about the bank building, and of course the police had taken charge. But the sergeant happened to be well disposed towards newsmen, and my Planet badge procured me instant admission to the scene of the tragedy. I passed into the back room. I could see the rigid figure sitting in the big chair. I forced myself to look at him squarely.

The dead man was David Magnus.

I went straight from William H. Seward Square to our boarding− house. A bulky package had just come for me through a special− delivery messenger. It contained negotiable securities to the amount of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars; also a half−dozen sheets of letter−paper in Indiman's handwriting. I transcribe the latter:

"Congratulations, my dear Thorp, on your marriage. They're a bit belated, I know, but I haven't been in the mood for writing of late. Moreover, I wanted to make sure of Mrs. Thorp's dowry. I enclose the proceeds of the campaign, and fancy that the settlement isn't so far out of the way. But then our good friend Magnus never expected that he would be called upon to pay it. Here's the story as I wrote it down from day to day.

"March 1. It's plain enough that Magnus has been embezzling the fortune of his niece, Miss Allaire. From what the girl could tell me of her late parent's mode of living I put them down as being comfortably off, if not rich. So I have intimated that I might consider an offer of fifty thousand dollars for the phonographic records in my safe−deposit vault. At least I will now draw the enemy's fire.

"March 3. Chivers has called and affects to regard my proposition as absurd. I have riposted by raising my price to seventy−five thousand dollars. He protested angrily, and I immediately made it one hundred thousand dollars.

"March 8. Five days of silence and then another call from Chivers. I met him with the statement that now I would not take less than one hundred and twenty−five thousand dollars. He seemed flurried and said that he would have to consult his principal. 'As you like,' I remarked, carelessly, 'but it will then cost you one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.' Magnus is evidently alarmed and is wondering how much I really know.

"March 9. No word from the hostile camp. The inference is that I may now look for a move on my antagonists' part, 'Otherwise,' as he says in that precious note, 'there will have to be a new adjustment of averages.' Precisely.

"The position is probably a dangerous one, and I must take the obvious precautions. To begin with, I shall not

leave these rooms until the affair is over, and I have made arrangements with an up− town restaurant to supply me with my meals in sealed vessels. I am thus insured against a street assault and poison. But all this is probably useless. The Magnus method of attack will be far more subtle.

"I have just written to Chivers that two hundred thousand dollars will now be necessary if he wants those phonographic records.

"March 11. I have had a talk with Louis, the janitor, about the Barowsky 'affairs.' Three men found dead in the big chair that faces the centre−table in my living−room. The date in every case was the 21st of March. If not an extraordinary coincidence there is food for reflection in this plain statement. It gives me ten clear days, and I can eat my dinner to−night in comparative comfort.

"March 12. I have assumed that the psychological moment is scheduled for March 21st, but both the direction and the nature of the blow are still unknown. I have made a minute examination of the rooms and all that they contain, but can discover nothing in the nature of a trap. There are no secret doors, no collapsing walls, no hidden tubes for the dissemination of poisonous vapors. My windows are not overlooked from any outside point of vantage, thus eliminating the silent bullet of the air−gun. In a word, the machinery of the melodrama seems to be entirely non−existent. And yet I know that unless I can get the end of the clew before the 21st of March I shall sit dead in the big chair over there, just as the three who have gone before me.

"March 18. Still no answer from Chivers. I have sent him a final communication fixing my price at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and saying that unless the proposition is accepted within three days further negotiations will be broken off.

"March 19. The offer is accepted. At noon on Friday, the 21st, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in negotiable securities will be placed in my hands, and I am to give in return an order on the safe−deposit company for the phonographic plates. But there is one paragraph in the letter that puzzles me. It reads:

"'My client will come in person on Friday to conclude the business, but only in the event of the day being bright and sunny. If rainy or cloudy you may expect him at a somewhat earlier hour on Saturday or the next clear day whichever it may be.'

"Now what does this mean? On the face of it, a disinclination on the part of an elderly gentleman to expose himself to these chill March winds. But Magnus is not very old, and he does not look in the least rheumatic.

"I have forgotten to mention the one pecupeculiarity that I discovered in the furniture of my living−room. The big chair is immovably fixed to the floor, its heavy pivot−base being riveted down to an iron bed−plate. And the chair itself is not made of mahogany, as I had supposed, but of an unknown metallic alloy that simulates the wood very closely. Well, I was prepared for something like this.

"Another interesting point. The windows in the living−room face in a southerly direction, and the sun is now every day getting a little farther round, penetrating a little deeper, at every noon hour, into the room. On the 21st it will cross the line, and at least one ray will illumine a spot that for several months has not been touched by the difect sunlight. What spot?

"It is nearing twelve o'clock, and as I sit in the big chair I can see the bar of golden light creeping steadily onward. It reaches the chair, and half−way around the pivot−base. Then the heavenly clock begins its retrograde movement, and the ray of sunlight is forced to retreat. But to−morrow it will come a little farther, and so again on the day after.

"Around the sash in the big window the architect has inserted a row of glass bull's−eyes, a style of ornamentation suited to the semi− Oriental tastes of William H. Seward Square. I go up and examine them closely. They seem ordinary enough—but stop! The third from the bottom; it has a peculiar depth and clearness. It might very well be a lens—a burning−glass, to use the old−fashioned term. How close has the sun drawn to this particular bull's−eye? To−morrow I will take note.

"March 20. At high noon the sun has reached within a hair's−breadth of the third bull's−eye from the bottom. To−morrow it will surely shine through my suspect, and if the latter be a true lens it will concentrate, for several minutes, a high degree of heat at the particular spot upon which its rays are focussed. That spot I have found, by experiment, to be one of a series of small bosses set in the pivot−base of the big chair. I applied the flame of a match and immediately the metal boss began to soften. I understand now. The boss is made of a fusible alloy that melts at a certain prearranged temperature; it is simply a variation of the common safety plug used in all the systems of mechanical protection against fire. At noon to−morrow, March 21st, the rays of the sun will be

concentrated by the lens in the window−sash and will fall upon this boss of fusible metal. The plug will melt, releasing a spring, let us say, and a train of action will be set in motion.

"The precise nature of that action I shall probably not discover. I incline to the belief that it is of an electrical nature. A connection is to be thereby established with one of the deadly currents that can be tapped for the asking here in New York. It may be objected that the men who died in the chair over there showed no external marks of death by electrical shock. But the autopsy, if it had been performed by Coroner Lunkhead, might have told a different story. Magnus is as good an electrician as he is a chemist, and he could easily rig up some kind of transformer reducing the power of the current just enough to paralyze the victim—death by a myriad of small shocks instead of one big one. Now it is plain why the spider will not come to spring his trap unless the sun shines on the 21st of March. If it doesn't, the play goes over to the next clear day, only that the curtain will rise a minute or so earlier in correspondence with the onward march of the sun−god, the executioner in the cast of our drama. Well, I have made my preparations to counter−check. To−morrow we shall see what we shall see.

"March 21. I have still an hour before the expressman will come for the clock−case, and I must take the opportunity to finish my notes. The dead man sits opposite me at the table, but that does not matter. There is plenty of room for us both.

"The day dawned clear and fine, and at ten o'clock the sun was shining brightly. He will come then.

"At eleven I began to wonder how Dr. Magnus proposes to witness my last agonies without risk of suspicion attaching to his precious self. If he is seen entering and leaving my room this morning he may be called upon for an explanation later. One cannot be too careful in playing the delicate role of the amateur assassin.

"But I have wronged my excellent friend. He has foreseen the difficulty and provided against it. At precisely half after eleven a couple of expressmen delivered what purported to be a clock−case at my outer office. It was addressed to me and I receipted for it without hesitation.

"'I understand that we are to call for it again at two o'clock,' said one of the men. 'That'll give you time to pack up the other clock?'

"'Very good,' said I.

"'And Mr. Gill said that you would set the case out on the landing if you had to leave the office before we got back. I'll put the receipt under the door.'

"'I understand,' I answered, carelessly. 'Get yourself some cigars,' and I slipped a half−dollar in the man's hand. He thanked me and withdrew. I sat down and waited.

"The lid of the case was removable from the inside. I watched the screws fall one after another to the floor. Then the lid followed, and Dr. Magnus stood before me. His eyes, distorted horribly by the extra powerful lenses of his spectacles, fixed me with a steady look. He came close as though to assure himself that there was no mistake. His face almost touched mine. He put on his second and third pair of glasses, and again I felt like the fly under the microscope.

"We did not go through the farce of exchanging salutations. This was war and we should both know it. It was now nearly noon and the sun was rapidly approaching the zenith. I led the way into the rear room.

"'Here are the securities,' said Magnus. I looked them over and announced myself as satisfied.

"'Kindly sit down and write me out an order on the safe−deposit company,' he went on, in rather a petulant tone. He was standing by the big chair. He bent forward as though to turn it in my direction.

"The psychological moment had come, but the trick was even easier than I had anticipated. Being in a stooping posture, he was partially off his balance. A sharp jerk at his coat−collar and he was seated in the big chair. He bit at my hand savagely as a dog snaps, but I had been too quick for him. Then a couple of turns of stout window−cord put everything secure.

"The man seemed dazed. He made no attempt to release himself. He did not even speak. But then his lips were dry. They opened and shut mechanically. His eyes, staring through their triple glasses, were turned towards the window. The sunlight, shining in full strength, was creeping steadily towards the row of bull's−eyes on the right of the sash. It lay in a broad, golden band on the polished floor.

"A decrepit fly crawled out of a crack and made feebly for the welcome warmth. The prisoner's feet were free and he advanced one of them slowly, stealthily towards the miserable insect, then smashed ruthlessly down upon it. In my turn I looked away, gazing steadily at the window and the sun beyond. A few minutes now and we would know.

"A little cloud no bigger than a man's hand. It was travelling directly towards the sun's disk. Suppose now that its veil obscured, at the final moment, the fatal ray. He saw it too. Together we watched it slowly drifting through the brilliant blue of the sky—a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand.

"The currents of air in the upper regions first accelerated and then retarded the progress of the vaporous island. It seemed to stop; then it hung for an instant directly on the lower limb of the great ball of light. A sensation of intolerable cold pervaded my entire body. Involuntarily I shut my eyes.

"I forced myself to look. The cloud had disappeared. Its imponderable essence had been absorbed into the clear ether as a drop of water sizzles into nothingness on a red−hot stove. The sunlight, shining through the third bull's− eye from the bottom, was instantly transformed into a single concentrated beam. The heat−ray impinged upon the boss of fusible metal. I saw the alloy begin to melt. I turned and ran into the other room.

"Twenty minutes of silence and then I re− entered. I was horribly afraid, but he sat there quiet and still. I unwound the cord and threw it out of the window. It was clouding over in earnest now. These March days are so changeable.

"It is close to two o'clock, and I must be getting ready to depart. I have set the clock− case out in the passageway, and the lids and screws are in readiness. The expressman will doubtless be punctual. He will carry the case down−stairs and load it on his wagon. I shall be delivered in due course at my destination. What is it to be? Well, I shall have plenty of time in which to reflect upon the possibilities of the journey that lies before me.

"One moment in which to seal up these notes, together with the bundle of securities. Fortunately, I have a special−delivery stamp in my pocket, and I can post the packet in the mail−chute. Best wishes, my dear Thorp, for the future happiness of yourself and your charming wife. You have now given a hostage to fortune and will no longer care to sail on uncertain seas. But the Wanderlust in my blood seems to be ineradicable. Again the gates of chance are opening before me and I am eager to enter in. Good−bye."

Here the record ends abruptly. And there has been no sequel. Not the slightest sound nor sign has been vouchsafed from the void. He who was Esper Indiman is gone, like a stone dropped into the gulf, and I have lost something that is not easily replaced—a friend. But since it is his wish, there is nothing more to be said. He may return—a message may come—

The gates of chance! Well, it is exactly a year and a day since that eventful afternoon when Esper Indiman's visiting−card was thrust into my unconscious hand. I have travelled along some strange ways in the course of that twelvemonth, and henceforth I shall be content to trudge along the common high−road of life. The gates of chance—for me they are closed forever. But I look over at my wife's dear face and know that it is better so.