



*The
Yellow
Circle*

CHARLES E. WALK

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THE YELLOW CIRCLE

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ALSO BY MR. WALK

**THE SILVER BLADE: THE TRUE
CHRONICLE OF A DOUBLE MYSTERY.**
Five illustrations in color by A. B.
WENZELL.

A. C. McCLURG & Co., *Publishers*
CHICAGO



“A strange man whispered in Dolly’s ear, . . . then thrust a gold bracelet into her hand.”

[Page 27]

The Yellow Circle

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

Author of "The Silver Blade," Etc.



WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS
BY WILL GREFÉ

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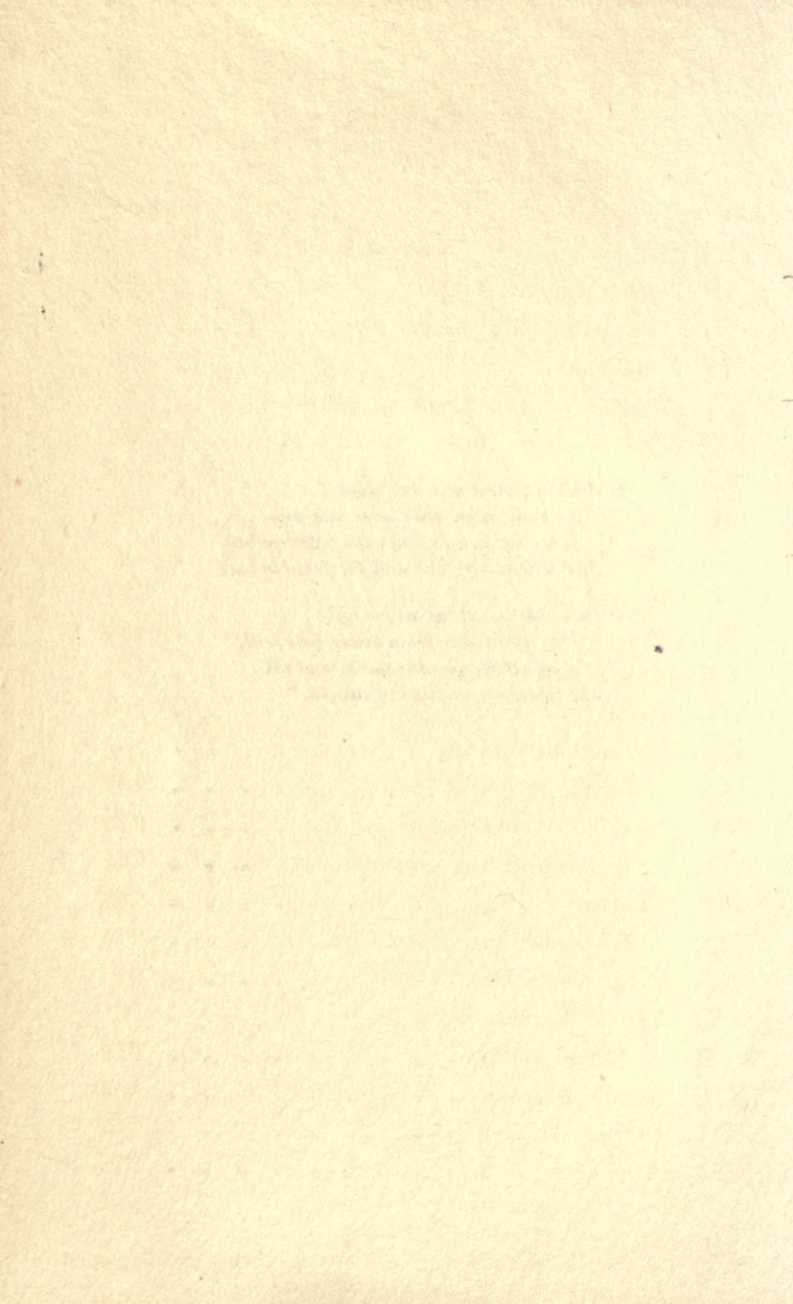
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TO
THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER
DAVID WALK

2133562

*“ A happy lover who has come
To look on her that loves him well,
Who 'lights and rings the gateway bell,
And learns her gone and far from home ;*

*“ He saddens, all the magic light
Dies off at once from bower and hall,
And all the place is dark, and all
The chambers emptied of delight.”*



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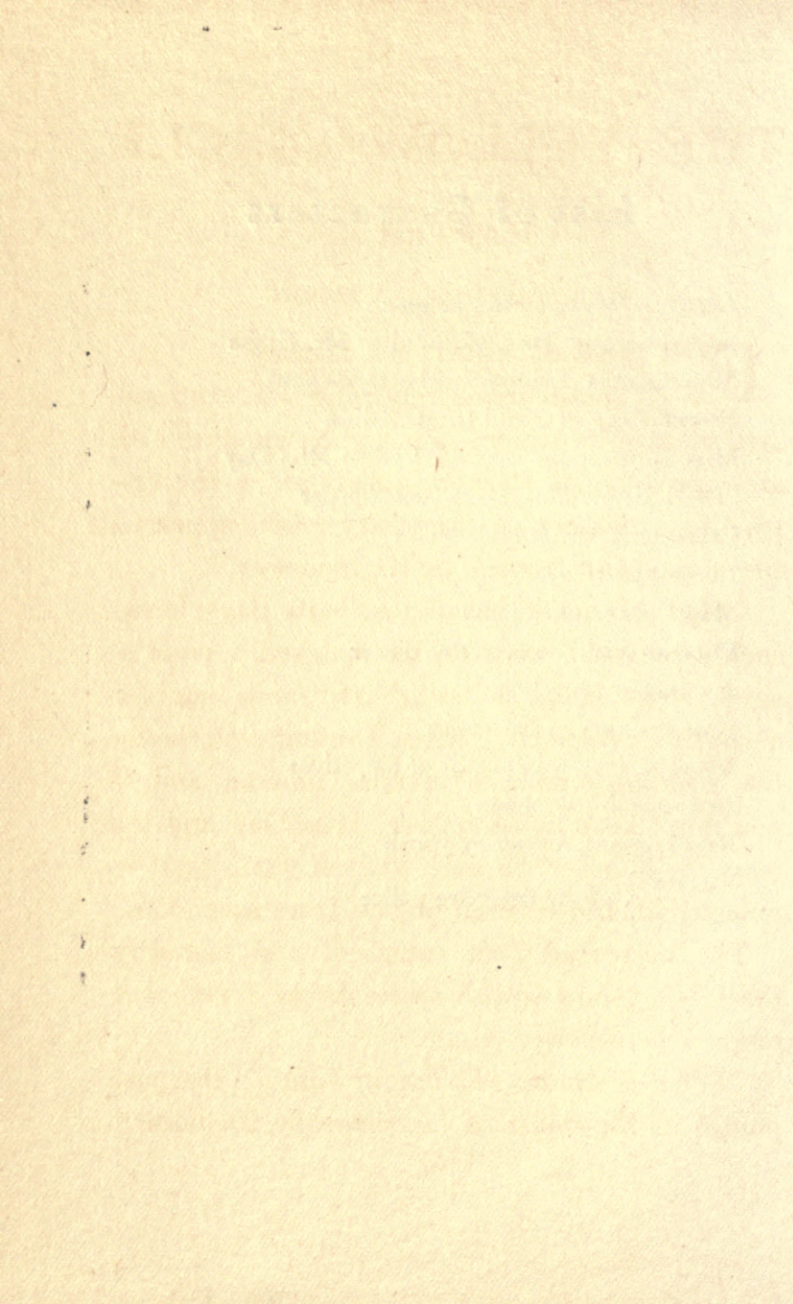
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Illustrations

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List of Characters

- LECOMTE GIBBS, a steel magnate
MISS DOROTHY DAY, affianced to Mr. Gibbs
MISS LETITIA LEONARD, Miss Day's aunt
FOSTER COLE, a friend to Mr. Gibbs
MISS EDITH GERVAISE, a friend to Miss Day
SARAH KEMP, Miss Day's housekeeper
CULLIMORE, Mr. Gibbs's butler
LEPORELLO, a seer
MARIE BARBIER, a maid
PHINEAS FLINT, a detective officer
JIM SAVAGE, a rogue
DAN FOGARTY, a bartender
KNOWLES SWIFT, inspector of detectives
SPOTWOOD, a patrolman
REECE JONES, a country youth
VAWTER } of the detective police
SPENCER }



THE YELLOW CIRCLE

CHAPTER I

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING

“FOR gracious’ sake, girls, silence!”

. A countenance reflecting an exaggerated sense of its owner’s importance, together with an expression of stern reprobation for the distracting confusion in the vestry-room, appeared for a moment framed in the doorway.

“My! I never in all my born days heard such a racket!” went on the speaker, a middle-aged, stout lady, as the chatter and laughter abruptly subsided. “Miss Dupont will begin the wedding-march in another minute, and if you don’t keep quiet in here, Miss Day and the maids will never be able to hear the signal — unless it should be fired at you from a cannon.”

The perturbed face vanished, and instantly the fresh young girlish voices broke forth once more with renewed vigor.

“What is so rare as a day in June?” the poet pauses in the midst of his rhapsody to inquire.

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Nothing, unless perchance it is a starlit June night. June! that happy season of drooping, languorous roses and of brides, when the very air whispers of love and Nature's pulse throbs with its ecstasy, when the perfume of love-madness enters like wine into the veins of Youth, whose harshest word sinks in wooing cadences to a caress. Ah, but 't is grand and glorious to be young in June!

And to-night it is June, the very heyday of the season's splendor of love-inspiring magic, and, as is proper in June, nuptial lights gleam from the stained-glass windows of St. Stephen-the-Martyr's. Yet there is a sombre tone to their radiance; the lights do not flash and coruscate with the aggressiveness and abandon that one might reasonably expect from so joyous an occasion. Rather, they shine through the high Gothic windows with precisely the proper degree of subdued brilliancy becoming in an edifice so dignified and imposing.

For be it known, when nuptial lights or any other sort of lights gleamed from St. Stephen-the-Martyr's, one must look for an assemblage of the ultra-fashionable and a corresponding

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING

gathering of the merely idle and curious — who, however, remain far in the background out of the way, where they are merely an indistinguishable blur.

All the wealth and fashion of Williamsburg are gathered here to-night, — a Tuesday, it may be well to remember, — and besides there are many notables from afar, from New York, and Washington, and Philadelphia, and even London. Now and then in the midst of the brilliant throng descending from shining equipages around at the church's front, one might be favored with a glimpse of ribbon or the jewel of an order adorning the bosom of some eminent individual, designating him of the diplomatic corps which inhabits the Nation's capital. For to-night Lecomte Gibbs is to marry Dorothy Day.

But the most of us are not in the habit of idling over the pages of our own particular Almanach de Gotha, and for the benefit of such it might not be amiss to record that the Lecomte Gibbs mentioned was no other than the Lecomte Gibbs whose name is inseparable from the country's iron and steel industry. As for Miss Day, she was preëminently the bright-

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est gem in Williamsburg's social diadem; and, quite appropriately, the ceremony was to be celebrated with a splendor never before known in the community.

At such a time, however, the first interest remains with the bride. So back we hark to the vestry-room, where she alone of all the gay, animated group remains tranquil and serene. A little color added to the pale cheeks might, perhaps, be desirable — but, no; why set ourselves up as carping critics to cavil at a bride's unblemished loveliness! When one may gaze upon a form and countenance so beautiful, so gracious, so altogether charming and lovely, should not one humbly gather these crumbs and remain thankful? She smiles, and lo! it is the pure white light of her heart shining for a space in the windows of her eyes. They are fine eyes, a wonderful blue, steady in the expression of their sincerity, unwavering always in their regard, and honest. After mature reflection, a dash of color in the pale cheeks would have added not a whit.

At eight o'clock precisely the first notes of the wedding-march reverberated from the lofty

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING

groined nave and rumbled in a thunderous diapason even into the over-crowded vestry-room. Miss Day, with an unstudied deliberation and grace of movement, bent her blonde head and turned to bestow the inevitable final look and pat to her train, when the pretty, vivacious, brown-eyed girl adjusting the bridal-veil was of a sudden thrust rudely aside, and a strange, shabby man was standing beside the bride. It had required but a second for him to elbow his way through the accompanying bodyguard of bridesmaids, to thrust some article into the bride's hand and whisper some words into her ear, and then depart as unceremoniously as he had appeared.

Miss Day scarcely had time to be startled before the man was gone. Then she went white to the lips, stared horror-stricken an instant at the thing in her hand, which at once she clutched convulsively to her bosom; next she muttered some words, unintelligible to the amazed bridesmaids, and, after tossing her train over one arm, hastened from the vestry-room and away.

A glimpse of the ribbons fluttering from her

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muff of bridal roses was the last seen of Miss Dorothy Day by her attendants at the church.

When the astonished bevy of girls recovered themselves there was a tremendous flurry behind the scenes. Word was carried to the bridegroom, waiting in the rector's study, and he was — after the first shock of amazed, stunning incredulity — more perplexed, if possible, than anybody else. There followed a period of anxious waiting, on the hope that Miss Day would immediately return. But one cannot wait long at such a time; weddings and funerals must not be marred by any hitch; they must proceed in an orderly, dignified manner; and when the bride chooses to absent herself just as the wedding-march begins, the other participants in the affair may be pardoned if they lose their heads.

Indeed, what could they do? A hurried search about the church premises revealed nothing whatever. And then, what explanation could be offered to the expectant guests?

None that was more satisfactory than any other. The notes from the great pipe-organ roll sonorously on, the minutes pass, and neither

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING

bride nor groom appears. The slightest delay at such a moment is significant; prolong the delay, and surmises become certainties. But when at last the vested rector, pale but composed, appeared to utter some indefinite words that had to do with "a sudden indisposition of the bride," the guests arose and went quietly away.

For it was a well-bred throng, and held its curiosity in check until hastened opportunity disposed its component parts into groups and duos of intimates; then, to be sure, there was a clattering of tongues, a buzzing of telephones, and a scurrying from house to house that had about it something surreptitious and clandestine. It is upon such occasions that one is afforded a striking example of the facility with which mere spoken words, the lifting of an eyebrow, the glance of an eye, or the eloquence of an elevated shoulder may become cruelty refined to its ultimate degree.

When it became certain that the bride was actually gone, Mr. Gibbs, a proud, sensitive man, was well-nigh prostrated. He was incapable of lending any aid — not that suggestions

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were of the least value coming from any source — and the search was taken out of his hands. At last the party were brought face to face with the sole remaining expedient — the police.

People of the class in which Miss Day and Mr. Gibbs moved usually shun police interference into their affairs as they would a pestilence. Indeed, are not the police the bulwark of their organization, the impregnable wall that stands between them and that dreadful monster, Crime, which haunts Society's frayed edges like a starving wolf skirting the sheepfold at dusk? A certain amount of intermingling between the monster and the police is, no doubt, necessary; but recognition of the guardian cordon from the other side is usually limited to the payment — or evasion — of taxes.

But there was nothing else for it in the present case. The police must be called in; purse-strings must be shaken out with no calculating hand, to the end that secrecy be maintained at all hazards, and the bride be immediately discovered and returned to the chagrined bridegroom.

And it is due Mr. Gibbs here to state that,

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING

overwhelmed as he was with mortification and extreme mental distress, he never for an instant betrayed any feeling nor uttered any word that might be twisted into censure of the fugitive bride. While professing an utter inability even to surmise a possible reason for her astonishing conduct, his attitude toward her remained one of unbroken loyalty and faith in her fidelity; and he reiterated again and again that she would return to clear up the mystery in a manner that would be satisfactory to all concerned. Only two other persons were one-half so sanguine.

CHAPTER II

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

WHEN the plain-clothes man arrived at St. Stephen-the-Martyr's it was close to one o'clock in the morning. He found the church deserted, save for Dr. Floyd, the rector, Mr. Gibbs, a Miss Edith Gervaise, the honor-maid, and perhaps Miss Day's closest friend, and a young man of the name of Foster Cole, who was to have been the best man.

The newcomer paused on the threshold of the rector's study and announced his identity to the group within. They presented a huddled appearance as they stared at him in tragic silence; but the stranger bestowed upon each merely a brief glance, lacking any special interest until it rested upon Mr. Gibbs. Then the man bowed and said respectfully, "Flint — from police headquarters."

It was Foster Cole, who seemed inexpressibly bored by the whole affair, who invited him in.

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

Mr. Flint, however, had recognized the steel magnate, and when he again spoke it was to the central figure of the little company.

“I am sorry you did n't send for us at first, Mr. Gibbs,” he now said, with a plural reference to himself which caused Cole to dart a startled glance into the corridor behind him, as if he half expected to behold the whole police department marshalled there. But the corridor was merely dark. “More than four hours have been wasted,” proceeded Mr. Flint, “and time is of prime importance in a case of this kind.”

“Just what kind?” complained Mr. Cole. “Anyhow, why should we consider it a case for the police at all?”

Flint turned to him a dull look. The detective was a slender, unassuming man, gray as a badger, and with a smooth-shaven face that was like tooled leather. He possessed a certain shrewd look about the eyes, and he was quite at his ease amid surroundings with which, very likely, he was not at all familiar.

“I don't know that it is yet,” Flint quietly returned to Foster Cole's question; “I daresay there will be no need for my services after you

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have had time calmly to consider the matter. Just what do you know about it, sir?"

Mr. Cole shrugged his shoulders and turned to Miss Gervaise. Thus directed, Mr. Flint's eyes also rested upon the young lady, who, it appeared, tarried at the church because she had witnessed more of the episode of the intruder than had any one else. Impelled by the concentrated attention, Miss Gervaise spoke.

"We had just received the signal, when the girls in the vestry-room subsided from a chattering, laughing group thronging about Miss Day, to one showing some regard for silence and order. There was a scramble for places as the bridesmaids separated from the attendant crowd of Miss Day's friends, and it was at the height of the confusion that I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder."

The speaker was evidently gifted with an active imagination; for, as she continued, she spoke with increasing animation, her eyes sparkled, the color grew in her cheeks; she portrayed the scene vividly, at times even dramatically.

"I was at once rudely thrust aside," she

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

pursued, "and next instant amazed to see a strange man whispering in Dolly's ear. He spoke no more than half a dozen words or so, then thrust a gold bracelet into her hand and hurried away."

"A gold bracelet!" exclaimed Flint.

The company were now watching him with a most intense interest, as if they believed an interpretation of this circumstance would at once solve the riddle. It was manifest that it had afforded a more fruitful theme for speculation than any other feature of the episode.

"Well," said Miss Gervaise, earnestly, "it looked more like a bracelet than anything else; yet, it was very thin, the opening was rough — without a clasp — as if it once had been a circlet, hurriedly cut or broken to release it from something it had bound. It was of dull or Roman gold, perhaps an inch broad, and I am sure held an inscription. I was, of course, unable to read it, but the engraving was not merely ornamental."

If Mr. Flint made anything of the bracelet he kept the result to himself, much to the disappointment of the others.

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“Can you describe the man’s appearance?” he next wanted to know.

“He was a rough, uneouth person, clad in a shabby, dark business suit; still, there was something in the way he carried himself that made me think of a soldier. He wore a soft black hat pulled down over his eyes, so that I could get no clear impression of his features.”

Dr. Floyd interrupted.

“Er — Miss Gervaise, are you sure — quite sure — your description is not — er — colored by prejudice?” he mildly inquired.

There was no doubting the young lady’s assurance on this point.

“Oh, no — no — no!” she cried, with a shudder. “His manner was that of a ruffian, and for a moment the girls were too frightened to stir. I myself was simply paralyzed with fright until Dolly had been gone for some moments.” Abruptly she turned again to Flint.

“One detail of the man’s appearance is very vivid in my mind,” said she; “before handing the gilt band to Dolly he transferred it from his right hand to his left, but not before I saw

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

that the back of his right hand was disfigured by a long white scar."

"Miss Gervaise thinks she has seen the — er — man before," the rector again interposed.

The detective was regarding her through narrowed lids.

Miss Edith Gervaise was an exceptionally pretty girl, with fine brown eyes and a vivacious manner which now fairly sparkled with excitement. Yet she was self-possessed enough to be keenly alive to every detail of the investigation. Occasionally she would glance at Foster Cole, whose nonchalant air seemed to exert a quieting influence over her. Apparently his sole interest in the affair was limited to the effect it produced upon her.

"That is true" — promptly confirming the rector's words; "but I can't remember where or when. He must be some familiar character about town whom I have encountered occasionally on the streets. The recollection is just one of those dim, hazy memories that one has when suddenly confronted with a person that one has simply seen before."

"What was Miss Day's demeanor?"

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“She was not aware of the man until his face was close to her ear; then she recoiled, startled. But something in his words must have riveted her attention, for at once she stared at him in utter horror, and stood like a creature suddenly stricken lifeless, even after he was gone. We were all too dumbfounded to move or utter a sound. Anyhow, the entire episode was over in two or three seconds. Dorothy abruptly muttered something inarticulate and every vestige of color left her face. I was impressed with the idea that the shock of the man’s whispered message, or some significance in the bracelet, made her really unconscious of what she was saying or doing. She glanced at the golden trinket; then, gathering up her skirts, fled down the corridor —”

“Pardon me, please,” broke in Mr. Flint, “how do you know in which direction she ran?”

“Why, if she had turned the other way, it would have led her to the sexton’s room, and through it into the auditorium; she was obliged to turn to her right in order to leave the building without passing before the very eyes of the guests. Of course, she did not do that.”

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

Mr. Flint nodded thoughtfully.

“So you didn’t see Miss Day after she passed through the vestry-room door?—you really didn’t see her running down the corridor?”

“No,” admitted Miss Gervaise.

“Then, whatever emotions the mysterious stranger may have excited in the young lady, fear of him was not one of them,” said Flint, with conviction.

“By what process of reasoning do you reach that conclusion?” Mr. Cole demanded.

“Think a moment,” the other replied: “you know that the side door offered the only available method of leaving the church; the man had just departed a second or two before; still, Miss Day didn’t hesitate to run after him. Under the circumstances she must have overtaken him by the time he reached the outside door.”

Mr. Cole and Miss Gervaise stared at each other, digesting this unexpected turn, until prompted by the detective.

“But go on, please,” said he; “tell what else you know.”

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“Nothing,” returned the young lady. “I followed quite closely after Dolly — as soon as I recovered myself — but saw nothing. The door at the end of the corridor opens upon the rectory yard, you know; it was standing open. No one was in sight when I arrived there; I heard no sound, except from the organ inside the church and the carriages around at the front.”

Whichever direction Miss Day had fled, it certainly had not been toward the front; it would have been impossible that her figure, in its shimmering white wedding-gown, could escape notice. Besides, she had carried a large bouquet of bridal roses and her golden hair had been crowned with a wreath of orange blossoms.

The alternative direction lay toward an alley traversing the rear of both the church and rectory premises.

Hence, it would seem, that the instant after the bride-elect stepped from the vestry-room she had vanished into thin air; this was the stage at which the consultation ended. Neither Miss Gervaise nor any of the others could tell more concerning the mystery; un-

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST

less it should be Mr. Gibbs himself, who, so far, had not uttered a word, although he had followed the talk of the others with an almost painful eagerness of concentration.

Flint, however, did not seem to think it worth while to question the discomfited magnate. He presently took his leave, after skilfully evading their anxious interrogations, and the party at once broke up — Dr. Floyd and Lecomte Gibbs departing on foot, while Foster Cole escorted Miss Gervaise to a waiting cab. As he handed her in, Gibbs laid a hand upon his arm.

“Hurry back,” he whispered; “I shall be waiting at the house.”

Cole nodded and pressed his friend’s hand, adding in an undertone:

“Don’t expect too much from that detective. This is a little out of his line. We’ll have to work it out together, my dear fellow, and I fancy we can do it successfully.”

When Mr. Flint returned to headquarters the night-sergeant, shifting an unlighted cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, elevated an eyebrow until it assumed the impor-

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tance and force of an interrogation mark. Then, briefly, Flint recounted the result of his expedition; the night-sergeant grinned.

“Pretty damn tough on Gibbs,” was his comment. “Any hint of the other fellow in the background?”

Mr. Flint sighed and shook his head.

“The real solution has n’t occurred to ’em yet. I did n’t tell ’em—what’s the use? Gibbs is a pretty decent fellow, and I hate to see him thrown down this way; but if he wants to get married he will have to pick another bride; a younger—if not a richer—man has beat it with his first choice.”

The night-sergeant laughed a wheezy laugh (for he was fat and asthmatic), and wanted to know if Miss Day was “a good-looker.”

To this phase of the problem Mr. Flint merely turned his back, not deigning an answer.

“Them money-bugs all are—to me,” remarked the unabashed sergeant. “Gimme a match.”

Thus, for the time being, was the matter disposed of by the police.

CHAPTER III

THE BRASS RELIQUARY

THERE is such a thing, however, as even the police jumping at conclusions with a cock-sureness destined later to bring forth "revised" and "modified" statements. In the present instance, to cite an example, Mr. Flint was wrong in concluding that the obvious explanation of Miss Day's evanishment had not occurred to the party he had so recently left; for it had, but in a light that made them shudder.

Sure knowledge of their intimate friend, a sense of loyalty and obligation imposed by their breeding, caused their faith in one of their number to remain secure, even if somewhat shaken. It is not the loyalty that never mistrusts that is most to be desired in our friends, but the belief in us which, though assailed by doubts and uncertainties, can yet remain steadfast, firm in the faith we have inspired.

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The phase of the affair from which Miss Day's friends shrank may be found in the probability that the rest of the world would not be so reluctant to advance opinions, and expatiate upon them *ad nauseam*; one and all, therefore, they closed their eyes to the promised publicity, and turned away their ears from the voice of scandal. The incursion of the police into their well-ordered concerns was bad enough; that false impressions and unlicensed gossip were sure to follow was infinitely worse.

During the ride to the Gervaise home very little was said by either of the carriage occupants. The events of the night were, of course, foremost in the minds of both, though they contemplated the matter from different points of view.

Miss Day was a particular friend of Miss Gervaise, while Foster Cole and Lecomte Gibbs presented to the world that degree of intimacy characterized as "chummy." They belonged to the same inner circle of the same fashionable set; they frequented the same clubs, hunted together from time to time in Montana or on the Chesapeake, and side by side yearly

THE BRASS RELIQUARY

whipped the same Canadian streams. The steel magnate was considerably older than Cole, but this made not the least difference in their attachment; of the two the younger man was perhaps the more sophisticated.

The ride was soon accomplished.

“I can talk no more to-night,” Miss Gervaise announced from the doorway; “come around in the morning — early.”

After the briefest of good-nights, Cole directed the driver to hasten to the new residence of Lecomte Gibbs.

In all of Williamsburg, a city noted for the magnificence of its palaces, there was no handsomer mansion than the one the millionaire had fitted up for his bride. As the cab stopped at the curb Cole looked up with a little start; in the dim figure that detached itself from a tree-shadow the young man recognized his friend.

“I did n't care to go inside until you came,” said Gibbs, simply; by which Cole understood that he lacked the courage to do so.

And, indeed, there was something infinitely pathetic in the contrast between the reality of

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his entrance into this abode of elegance and what his rose-colored fancy must have painted it some hours earlier in the night. The great pile of masonry, of gleaming marble and plate-glass, was at this hour and in the present circumstances the hollowest mockery of a home; and Foster Cole could not help seeing the droop to his friend's shoulders, nor his ears fail to catch the sigh with which he was ushered into the rich hall.

However, as they paused before entering, Cole tapped with the toe of one shoe some yellow chalk markings which appeared on the top step.

“What's this?” he asked curiously.

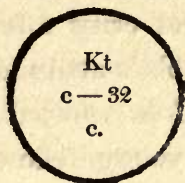
Gibbs glanced down indifferently at the spot indicated.

“Don't know. Some boys—” he vaguely muttered, plainly too preoccupied to heed, and passed on.

Cole, though, regarded the design as a bit too intricate, it was in too unlikely a spot, to be attributed to any possible boyish prank. A circle enclosed the letters and figures “Kt c-32 c.” suggesting strongly to the young

THE BRASS RELIQUARY

man's mind a cabalistic symbol, and appearing thus:



But he puzzled over the matter only for a moment, for at once he followed Gibbs into the house.

Cole was perhaps as familiar with the house's interior as was the master thereof himself; he had been consulted at each stage of the building's progress; and now he went directly to a luxurious apartment called—in deference to the prevailing fad in such things—"the den."

How many cosey hours were to have been spent in this room, every detail of whose furnishings was a direct inspiration of love! And now, how all the bright-hued dreams had been shattered by the hideous nightmare that had usurped their place!

So Foster Cole reflected, vaguely, though he summarized the sentiments thus evoked in one muttered expletive,—expressive, if inelegant,—“Rotten!”

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The two men sat for a long time silent, as only two sympathetic masculine natures can in the face of a great crisis affecting the welfare of either. Mr. Gibbs's attitude was one of utter dejection, while Cole scowled into vacancy.

By and by the young fellow began to betray some signs of doubt and uncertainty; he shot quick glances at his motionless companion, as if anxious to unburden his mind of some disturbing factor, and, furthermore, as if he were unable to hit upon the best means of doing so. After a while, however, he spoke.

"Lecomte, the road that detective chap will follow to clear up this mystery is pretty plain."

Gibbs started from his reverie.

"You think he will find her?" came eagerly from him.

Cole stirred uneasily, and cleared his throat.

"I hope so," said he, with a certain air of restraint; "I sincerely hope so. But that is not what I meant, exactly." He hesitated.

"Lecomte, old chap, forgive me, but we had better thresh this thing out together; it's better to consider every aspect of the matter than to have people shocking you with some

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fool suggestion every time you turn around. People are such blamed idiots in a matter of this kind, you know.”

“Out with it; what road do you think the detective will follow?”

“Well, he'll go to burrowing into Dorothy's past; and, Lecomte, just between us, don't you know — that's where we must look for an explanation.”

Lecomte Gibbs's refined countenance was deeply lined with worry. Yet it was clear that something in his friend's halting speech — so utterly foreign to the young man's habitual ease of manner — and the unmistakable note of seriousness that lay behind it, excited an unwonted apprehension in his mind. He looked at Cole with a curious expression, which the latter was at a loss to fathom.

“‘Her past’!” echoed Gibbs. “What do you mean? For Heaven's sake, speak out! My sensibilities cannot be further shocked, anyway. What do you mean by ‘her past’?”

“Why — er — this — I will put it in this way: some cause exists for her having vanished so inexplicably; it is self-evident that the cause

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was extraordinarily powerful to drag a woman like Dorothy Day — without the least resistance on her part, either — from the very side of the man she is about to marry. Now, a cause so potent could not have originated to-night; it could not be the creature of an hour or a day. Moreover, such a compelling influence could not come into her life at any time entirely without the knowledge of her friends and relatives.”

Gibbs pondered the force of this reasoning; it presented a quite simple demonstration in logic, and he could offer nothing to refute it.

“What a damnable state of affairs!” he presently burst forth; and then, more calmly: “And you, Foster, what do you think of this road? Do you —”

Cole’s head was shaking such a vigorous negative that the other did not proceed.

“That’s all tommyrot, old man; nobody knows better than I do that Dolly loves you. We all know it. If you want to bring Edith’s wrath down upon your head, why, you just hint to her that Dorothy Day cares the snap of her fingers for any other man alive. Nonsense! Rot!”

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Gibbs sighed and leaned back in his easy-chair; it was plain that the reassurance of his friend's warmth was very welcome.

"But what can it all mean!" he puzzled; "what else could impel the poor girl to flee from the very altar, without a word to her friends — without token or message for — for — me?" He bowed his head.

"Don't know," replied Cole, cheerfully now, since he had so successfully unburdened his mind. "I daresay the explanation will be simple enough when it comes. Women are such queer combinations — all paradox, you know; frightened to death by a mouse, but cool as you please with a lion. Why, the same woman that could face death without a quiver would scurry for cover, like a terrified bird, if she thought her shirtwaist was unbuttoned in the back."

"What the deuce do you know about such things?" asked Gibbs, without interest.

Mr. Cole spread out his hands and lifted his brows. Perhaps the gesture meant "intuition"; he did n't interpret it. Said he:

"Now, you can hold tight to this: after the mystery is cleared away you will find it hing-

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ing on some simple little thing that we, being mere men, would never dream of."

"No," Gibbs promptly contradicted. "Dorothy's not that kind. She is too level-headed to be thrown into a fright by a shadow."

Cole shrugged his shoulders.

"To be sure," said he, tolerantly, "she is more sensible than the general run of girls; she'd have to be, or Edith would never have been so drawn to her. Still, Lecomte, she's a —" If he was about to add "woman," he abruptly changed his mind; squaring himself in his chair, he resumed immediately, his tone more serious and direct.

"I say, this is not getting anywhere. Let's see if we can't really light upon something in Dorothy's past that will give us the hint we want. Don't squirm that way; I know the idea is confoundedly unpleasant; but such things have to be dealt with squarely. There *are* no closed passages in her life, are there?"

"Good Lord, how could there be!" in an outburst of exasperation. "Do you want to drive me crazy?"

"There, there, old chap," returned the other,

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sympathetically. "It could not be anything serious, I am positive — some little matter of sentiment, as likely as not, but a whole mountain of importance to her. That gold bracelet affair, no telling what significance it may have."

"Well, I have no idea of any such thing."

"Let me see," pursued the younger man, fixing a thoughtful look upon an ornamental Turkish lamp of hammered copper. The design was one of those grotesque conceptions, in scroll and arabesque, which helps so splendidly when one wants to concentrate the mind. "Let me see; she came to Williamsburg while I was away in Cuba, did n't she? — from out West somewhere? Just assume, Lecomte, that I have never heard of Miss Dorothy Day; tell me all you know respecting her."

"You know how long —" began Gibbs; and Cole calmly interrupted.

"But I don't. Begin at the beginning and tell me."

"Well, Miss Day has been in Williamsburg only about four or five years, and on the twelfth of this month she will be twenty-four."

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“Dorothy was never finicky about her age,” murmured Cole.

“She came originally from — from — what’s that California town,” Gibbs proceeded evenly, “where the lateen sails make it look like a Southern Mediterranean port?”

“Santa Barbara?”

“It was n’t Santa Barbara, but something like it.”

“How illuminating. Perhaps it was —”

“Santa Cruz! That’s the place. Her father was interested in mining, and most of his time was spent away from home. He must have been quite successful, for he left her a pretty comfortable fortune. But, hang it! one does n’t inquire into such things.”

“One ought to,” was the young man’s sententious comment.

“Anyhow, he’s dead; also her mother — never had any brothers or sisters. At least, I never heard of any.”

Cole elevated his brows when he comprehended that the speaker was through.

“You are certainly brief,” he remarked.

“Brief? The devil! what did you expect? —

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a history full of exciting adventure? There is no more mystery about Dorothy Day's life than you could find in the life of almost any Williamsburg lady I might name."

One corner of the young man's mouth twitched, but Gibbs did not observe it.

"But behind the four or five years she has been here —"

"I never inquired," curtly; "she was a mere girl — a child — then."

For a moment Cole speculated upon the possibilities involved in an elderly bachelor's conception of "a mere girl." Absently he sat tapping the upholstered leather arms of his chair, the while he counted the glass ornaments on the Turkish lamp-shade. There were just fourteen of them that he could see from where he sat, and they simulated rubies of a large size with more or less effectiveness.

Well, well, Lecomte was a chap that a fellow could n't help liking immensely, withal he was so innocent. Could it be possible, after all, that the flight of the bride-elect, occurring as it did before instead of after the ceremony, might be regarded as a lucky stroke of fortune for

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his friend? The thought was decidedly unpalatable.

Cole lowered his voice.

“Steady now, but we want to get to the bottom of this business,” bending upon Gibbs a level look. “To your knowledge, was Miss Day ever before engaged in a serious love affair?”

Lecomte Gibbs frowned and tugged nervously at his gray military moustache.

“Why the deuce do you ask that?” he bluntly demanded.

“Don’t answer it if you don’t want to; but you had better be prepared for a good deal of speculation along that line, on the part of well-intentioned but misguided —”

“Confound it!” Gibbs suddenly exploded, “you don’t think my affianced wife has run off with somebody else, do you?”

“Now we are getting to the point,” responded the unmoved young man. “I don’t think so; but that detective — Flint — does, and so will everybody else five minutes after the morning papers are on the streets.”

The harassed gentleman groaned. He made

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a despairing, impatient gesture, and, rising abruptly, began to pace to and fro the length of the luxurious apartment.

“You are right,” he presently muttered, his face white and set. “Good God, what a mess! What a stir there will be!” He stopped short. “Foster, I honestly believe there has never been another love affair. My faith was firm-rooted in the assurance that she loved me” — his voice shook with emotion — “I believe it yet.”

For another pause the young man was silent; his fingers ceased their noiseless tattoo on the fat, leather chair-arms; and Gibbs resumed his restless promenade. After a while Cole’s fingers commenced moving again, and he asked a question which caused the other to halt with a jerk, and stare at him.

“Just why did Dorothy come to Williamsburg in the first place?” was the question. And after an appreciable hiatus Gibbs responded with another interrogation:

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it seems odd, don’t you know, anybody coming all the way from California and

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deliberately choosing this smoky hole to live in, when there is such a place as New York — Heavens! What magnet drew her to this city? — what ties keep her here?”

Gibbs slowly relaxed from his strained attitude; then:

“Blest if I know!” exclaimed he; “the question never occurred to me.”

“Humph! You see, already we have touched upon a circumstance which will bear a little inspection. Now then — but wait. Did not Dorothy take a trip to Cuba during the war?”

The other slowly nodded an affirmative; he was busy thinking himself now, and Cole went on.

“Correct me if I don’t get this straight. She came here originally with her aunt, the timid, tender-hearted little Miss Letitia, and that old grenadier of a housekeeper, to whom she is so devoted — what’s her name?”

“Miss Kemp; Sarah Kemp.”

“After a few weeks of cloisterlike seclusion, during which Miss Dorothy Day and her household were the objects of much curious specu-

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lation on the part of her neighbors, she and the grenadier quite suddenly depart from the city. More speculation: why had she taken the grim housekeeper and left behind the timid little Dresden-china aunt? And, anyhow, where and why had she gone? Am I correct?"

"Very good, so far."

"Well, it presently became noised about that the oddly sorted pair had gone — to Cuba. Speculation now at fever-heat.

"And no wonder," Cole continued, with an air of mild astonishment. "Cervera's fleet had just been wiped out, and Shafter was making it hot for the Dons ashore; not just the time for a pleasure journey to the Pearl of the Antilles, eh?" The speaker paused and his eyes narrowed.

"What was the occasion of that trip?" he asked.

Mr. Gibbs merely shook his head; old, well-nigh forgotten topics of gossip were being stirred in a way that made it plain now why the incidents specified by Cole had piqued curiosity. And he was plainly troubled. Yet no one ever really knew the object of that jour-

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ney, nor why the housekeeper had been chosen as a companion instead of the aunt.

For a time the younger man remained deep in reflection; but in a minute or two he continued.

“If my memory amounts to anything, the pair returned in three or four weeks, or such a matter; and it was not long thereafter until Miss Day began to figure in this precious society of ours — hm-m-m.” He got slowly to his feet.

“I’m off,” said he. “I suppose last night was pretty hard upon the aunt?”

“Miss Letitia? Naturally. No use bothering her; she is completely upset.”

“Oh, I was just thinking of dropping in on her later —” In the face of a remarkable change in Gibbs’s expression he abruptly paused.

“What is it?” asked he, advancing a step under the stimulus of the other’s peculiar conduct.

Plainly oblivious of his friend’s last words, the magnate was staring in round-eyed amazement at some article reposing among a litter of ornaments, paper-weights, and bizarre *bric-*

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à-brac on the wide-topped writing-table. Gibbs singled out an object with a trembling finger.

“How came that here?” he cried hoarsely.

Following the unsteady guidance of the levelled forefinger, Cole advanced to the table, and laid his hand upon a small, hammered brass box, a quaintly ornamental reliquary.

“This?” inquired he.

“Yes. How came it here? It’s a trinket I picked up in Rome and presented to Dorothy more than a year ago. What’s the meaning of this mystery, Foster?”

The lid bore a tiny figure of some anonymous saint with hands piously pressed together over his stomach; Cole lifted it, and squinted inside.

At first he was merely puzzled; he drew forth a narrow strip of metal — gold, apparently — thin, and misshapen from having been crowded within its narrow confines. As, wonderingly, he straightened it out, a sheet of paper fluttered to the floor, which Gibbs picked up.

Then Cole’s wonder grew; gradually the strip of dull yellow metal began to assume a significance which, in a measure, he comprehended.

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It was just such a bracelet or gilt band as had been handed to Dorothy by the mysterious scarred stranger.

But a strange, unnatural cry from Gibbs centred his attention upon the sheet of paper at which the magnate was staring with blank, unseeing eyes. Cole glanced at it and beheld a number of typewritten words which, after the first wondering look, left him speechless with amazement. In the upper left-hand corner of the paper was a curiously familiar design, a small yellow circle surrounding a number of letters and figures, — “Kt. B-118,” — close beneath which was the curt direction: “For Gibbs.”

But it was the text of the message that held him spellbound. It ran thus:

“Do not try to discover Miss Day’s whereabouts; she shall return unharmed to her residence one week from next Wednesday — June 13 — *provided you make no effort to find her.* Fail to heed this warning, persist in an attempt to penetrate the secret of her absence, and *she shall be summarily removed. Beware!*”

For a long time the two men stared dumbly at each other, while it dawned and gradually

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grew in their minds that they were face to face with Mystery; a mystery involving tragedy.

For the time being they were overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness, a disheartening conviction of weakness; and it is not to be wondered at if, during those first minutes of stupefaction, they were downcast in the presence of the menacing dangers which stirred invisibly all about them, for they were ill-equipped to wage a warfare so unequal.

CHAPTER IV.

CULLIMORE

IN the brass reliquary and its contents Cole was first to appreciate the fact that he and his friend were confronted by a problem at once concrete and direct in the brevity of the first question it aroused in the minds of both: namely, how came an article of *bric-à-brac* belonging to a cabinet in Miss Day's drawing-room to be on the desk in Lecomte Gibbs's den?

The secondary questions which followed as a matter of course — those concerning the motives governing whoever was responsible for the transfer, the significance of the gilt band and the motive which inspired the typewritten warning — did not at once suggest themselves; the first was astounding enough, whether it meant a practical joke whose object was not yet apparent, or hid a meaning deadly serious in its import.

The thought of a joke, however, was not to be entertained for a moment; the gilt band,

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connecting the incident as it did directly with Miss Day's disappearance, provoked the most apprehensive feelings of dread and anxiety; and as soon as the two men recovered somewhat from their amazement, they at once set about seeking an explanation.

“Singularly enough,” said Gibbs, “I can positively assert that the reliquary was in Dorothy's cabinet as late as two o'clock this afternoon; or, to be exact, yesterday afternoon. I was then at her home, and for a minute or two we paused before the cabinet, while she pointed to a number of articles which she intended bringing to this house after the wedding. The few indicated were all presents from me, and this was among them.

“Wait a moment” — as he began recalling details of the incident — “she opened the cabinet and took the reliquary in her hand, expressing her delight over its oddity and speculating on its probable value as a rare bit of vertu.” Of a sudden the speaker started and paused, a look of surprised bewilderment overspreading his face.

“By Jove, Foster!” he went on in a moment, “I remember now, although the circum-

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stance did not strike me at the time: while she was holding the reliquary and talking — talking happily, too, I'll swear — why, all at once — quite abruptly, I mean — she became silent and her expression changed. She gave me a peculiar look and hurriedly put the brass box back into its place. Then she locked the glass door of the cabinet and drew me away from its vicinity. And, my dear fellow, I think — indeed, I am quite sure of it — that for some time — perhaps until we parted — she was not so animated, her spirits were less gay than they had been a few moments before.”

“I confess I'm stumped,” Cole gravely observed. “One thing I am certain of, however: the ugly little saint could not have come here without assistance. Suppose you rout out the servants — poor beggars!”

“So I will” — immediately suiting the action to the word by bearing down heavily upon the button near the door — “every last one of 'em.”

The butler responded promptly to the prolonged summons, heavy-eyed for sleep, but not permitting the slightest relaxation of his dignity for so common a cause.

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The master of the house curtly imparted his instructions.

“And, Cullimore,” was his final word, “give them to understand they have no time to primp; I want them at once.”

Cullimore was a model butler; for, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour and the consequent irregularity of such a demand, he departed on his extraordinary errand with the same air, at once deferential and imposingly dignified, with which he would have gone to fetch a brandy and soda.

Foster Cole, however, observed one circumstance which roused his curiosity: as Cullimore opened the door, the man's glance at once sought the wide-topped desk—a look that struck Cole as being both furtive and, in a way, apprehensive. Was the fellow looking for the reliquary?—perhaps to ascertain whether it had been disturbed? And if so, what was his interest in the thing?

At any rate, Cole continued to eye him keenly, but could discern nothing behind the fellow's smug dignity. He had never before been suspicious of Cullimore; indeed, he had often con-

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gratulated his friend on the possession of such an excellent major-domo; but now he was suspicious of every member of the household. What meant that sly, surreptitious glance bent upon the writing-table? Anyhow, to use a phrase of the streets, it was up to the servants to account for the presence of the reliquary and its mysterious contents.

As the door closed behind the butler Cole turned to his friend.

“I say,” said he, “while you quiz the rest of the servants in here, let me have Cullimore alone in another room — before he learns what you are after.”

“For goodness’ sake, you don’t suspect him!”

The young fellow’s shoulders rose in one of his expressive shrugs; it was clear that he was becoming terribly bored.

“I would pin my faith to no mortal in opposition to an appeal just powerful enough to sway his self-interest,” was the cynical reply.

“But I am no more suspicious of Cullimore than I am of the remainder of your *ménage*; he’s simply the brains of the outfit — though I fancy he is at some pains to conceal that fact

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— and I object to angling for suggestions in a suggestionless mental pond. Pitch into your dull-witted retinue to your heart's content — but Cullimore I have marked for my legitimate prey.”

“ Oh, very well. I presume you have an object; fire away.”

“ Indeed, my dear fellow,” — Mr. Cole stifled a yawn — “ all my undertakings are not purposeless. Any servant keen enough to play a game like the one we are up against to-night will have no particular difficulty in dodging the thunders of your wrath. — But here come the barbarian horde.”

Cole intercepted the butler in the hall. Behind that worthy came a troop of menials, from the prim housekeeper on down to grooms and gaping stable-boys, all more or less dishevelled, and all apparently stupid with wonder and the sleep that still befogged their brains.

“ Cullimore, you and I are not wanted in there,” said Cole.

“ Very well, sir,” returned Cullimore, betraying not the faintest flicker of curiosity at such ill-timed, such incomprehensible, proceedings. “ Shall I light the library, sir? ”

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“ Yes, do.”

For the first time Cole was struck by the silent ease that characterized Cullimore's actions. It was a trait that would tend naturally to keep the man unnoticed in the background; but now, when circumstances brought him suddenly under observation, the young man was impressed by the noiseless footfalls, the lithe fingers closing around the door-knob, the door itself opening without the faintest click of the latch, and the ensuing silent entry into the room. There was no sign of haste, yet it was all accomplished very quickly.

Unconsciously, Cole summarized the man's peculiarities in a half audible exclamation.

“ Stealthy, by Jove!” muttered he.

“ Beg pardon, sir?”

Cole thoughtfully regarded him.

“ Cullimore, were you ever ambitious to burgle?”

The lights in the large, handsome library, with its fine collection of bronzes, its rare paintings and engravings and endless array of books, were now switched on; and Cullimore, in the act of departing, paused with the door partly open.

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At first he regarded his questioner with a blank look; then he smiled in sudden comprehension of the other's humor. The smile was polite and discreet; it indicated a recognition by Cullimore of the guest's privilege to indulge his little joke at the expense of the butler, and, indeed, that it was very kind of him to notice the servants at all. Moreover, the smile suggested that the joke was, in a way, a compliment to the butler's ability to serve in the station of life where Fate had seen fit to place him. No, sir; his ambitions had never soared above *that*, and he hoped he would never forget his position.

"Then you consider a successful burglar to be on a level above a conscientious butler, eh, Cullimore?" observed Mr. Cole.

"How quick you are to take one up, sir," said Cullimore, still politely smiling. "Burglars is a distressing topic, if you please, Mr. Cole, to all good servants."

"To be sure. They are — or should be — sworn enemies. One would have no easy time getting in here without you knowing it, I daresay."

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Cullimore's countenance reflected a sudden consternation. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"You don't mean," anxiously — "it can't be possible, sir, that burglars has been in this 'ouse?"

"It appears that somebody has, Cullimore — somebody who had no business here."

"Mr. Cole — begging your pardon, sir — it is n't possible. Nobody could have come or gone this night and me not knowing it. I can name every one that has passed in or out of this 'ouse this blessed day — tradesmen and all."

"You can, eh? — But you mean yesterday."

"To be sure, sir; I forgot it was to-day. Past two o'clock, sir."

"You will not have to remember farther back than last evening. Who, besides Mr. Gibbs and myself, entered or left the house?"

"Only the servants, sir, and the usual tradesmen. Several of the former was at the church." He hesitated an instant before proceeding, and his eyes momentarily narrowed into a sidewise sly look. "I was unable to attend myself; but Mrs. Snodgrass — the 'ousekeeper, that is, sir,

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— she went; two of the maids — yes, sir, and 'Igdon, he went too."

"'Igdon?" Mr. Cole was puzzled.

"If you please, sir — 'Ig-don — Mr. Gibbs's new man from Lon'n."

"Oh," with sudden illumination — "Higdon."

"Yes, sir — 'Igdon. He's a very capable valley, sir; seen service among the nobility." Cullimore here paid the British peerage a tribute with a modest cough behind his fingers. "Mr. Gibbs employed him only yester —"

"Day before yesterday, Cullimore. I remember now, but I had forgotten the chap's name. And what of Higdon?"

"Why, sir, he's gone — to N'York, I believe, sir, to arrange his affairs in view of remaining permanent with Mr. Gibbs. 'Igdon was to meet Mr. Gibbs at the pier, and accompany him and his lady abroad."

"Then he was n't at the church?"

"Yes, sir, he was. But he came back to the 'ouse after his bag, meaning to catch a late train. He was only here a minute or two. He got his luggage, very civilly bade me

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good-bye, and departed. I daresay he will be wondering — ”

“ He shall not be forgotten. I’ll speak to Mr. Gibbs myself.”

“ If you will be so kind, sir.” Cullimore fairly radiated gratitude in return for the lifting of such a weight of responsibility from his shoulders, and beamed with solicitude for the absent Higdon; yet the feelings were so tempered by respect and deference that they can scarcely be said to have been expressed. It was as if the inner fires of goodness had burst all restraint in their exuberance and leaped to the surface to bathe their recipient in their beneficent glow.

Cole was sitting with hands clasped behind his head, his feet sprawled out straight in front of him — not a very elegant attitude, perhaps, but undoubtedly comfortable; moreover, it was in harmony with the half-closed eyes that so lazily studied the suave butler.

“ Cullimore,” he said abruptly, “ for what were you looking on Mr. Gibbs’s table when you came into the den a minute ago?”

Cullimore was not in the least taken un-

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awares, although, if the lifting of his astonishingly flexible eyebrows meant anything, he was considerably surprised and perplexed.

“I? — looking for something? I — I — don’t understand.”

“Oh, yes you do. The instant the door opened you looked pretty keenly at the desk; did you fancy it had summoned you?”

Instantly the man’s face cleared.

“Why, sir,” returned he, glibly, “begging your pardon, sir, but wonderfully observant you are, sir — when the bell rang so insistent, for just a second or two I was startled. I could not, just at the moment, recollect whether or not I had served Mr. Gibbs and you and neglected to remove the tray. It’s not like me, if you please, sir, to be so careless, and I was a bit anxious.”

“No, it is not like you to be careless, Cullimore. I believe you wouldn’t overlook anything.”

The butler once more beamed.

“Thank you, Mr. Cole,” murmured he, backing through the doorway. “I am very grateful for your good opinion; hindeed, it’s

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very kind of you. Do you wish anything else, sir?"

Foster Cole did not see how he could further prolong the conversation to any advantageous end. So he dismissed the butler, and sat meditating until certain sounds across the hall told him that the conference in the den had broken up. Then he arose and, in his leisurely way, went to rejoin his friend, devoutly hoping that his efforts had been more productive of results than had the interview with Cullimore.

They had not been, however — at least, not productive of the results aimed at. Some of the maids were in tears; the head groom had served notice; Mrs. Snodgrass was inarticulate with mortification, and the master of the house in a black, scowling rage. The perturbed servants flocked out in a body, pausing to protest vigorously among themselves, and occasioning a deal of confusion; while Cole, halting on the threshold, contemplated their departure, and took their inadvertent jostling with a mild amusement. Already Cullimore was silently removing the evidences of their presence.

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Advancing into the room, Cole remarked,

“Well, I know as much as I did before. You only have learned something,—if you could but take the message to heart: it never pays to browbeat the servants.”

“To the devil with your smug philosophy!” was the angry rejoinder. But the young man ignored it.

“There’s a contrivance recently invented by some college professor,” said he, “that I’d like to try on Cullimore. It is a lie detector; with its aid one can plumb the bottomless pits of a chap’s subconscious mind, and fathom all the mysteries of his subliminal ego. You set some wheels going, the chap lays his hands on a what-you-call-’em, and then you proceed to fire some words at him. It is like a game. The chap must say the first word that pops into his mind, suggested by the word you gave him; the machine measures the interval of thought, and if there is nothing to interfere with the association of ideas, the chap will answer prompt the first word that your word suggests. Hesitation signifies equivocation.

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“The possibilities are obvious. If you lead him unsuspecting over a prepared course, why, pretty soon he begins to shy; the machine notes the time, and — Where’s the little brass saint?”

Cole’s tone changed so abruptly from a lazy drawl to one of eager, surprised inquiry, that his inattentive hearer started from the moody reverie into which he was drifting under the soporific influence of the younger man’s aimless chatter.

“There it is, confound — why, where is it?”

Astonishment overspread Gibbs’s face, as he stared at the *bric-à-brac* on his desk. In another moment he cried aloud:

“Good Lord, Foster! am I going insane? I would swear the thing was — But you know yourself it was there not over ten minutes ago. Where — how could it have gone?”

For the second time this night the two stood staring blankly at each other, for once Cole’s air of ennui effectually routed.

Although they hunted high and low for it, the reliquary, together with the slip of paper and the gilt band, was not to be found.

CHAPTER V

EPISODE OF THE SPEEDING MOTOR CAR

IF two men were ever perplexed by a sequence of incomprehensible occurrences, why, those two men were Lecomte Gibbs and his faithful Achates, Foster Cole.

Despite the former's great wealth and the fact that he was at the head of one of the Nation's greatest industries, his life had not been particularly eventful. Williamsburg is a city of wealth, and, consequently, a certain kind of subdued splendor stamps all its different phases, the whole having been built upon a solid foundation of coal and iron. Every day in the year, without interruption, the chimneys and blast-furnaces belch forth dense clouds of black, obscuring the heavens and polluting the landscape for miles around; at night their glare is lurid, never dying away. The smoke has been likened to incense, the glare to the perpetual fires, on the high altar of Mammon.

Still, it was all quite commonplace to those

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who had been reared in the city's murky atmosphere; and Gibbs, with some scores of his kind, lived a rather humdrum existence, diversified by the customary social happenings, an occasional brief trip abroad, or, perchance, a rare day or two snatched from the dull course of business to shoot or fish on a nearby club preserve. Therefore we may the more readily sympathize with him when, without warning, he was hurled from this familiar routine into a labyrinth of mystery, where he was menaced by unknown perils on every hand. He was left helpless, stupefied; for experience offered no suggestion that might avail him.

Besides, contrary to the universal belief that marriages in his sphere are affairs of the purse rather than of the heart, no sentiment other than love, and that disposition of the mind toward the beloved which follows as a matter of course, had entered into his relations with Miss Day. And furthermore, Lecomte Gibbs was a man of fine sensibilities which were capable of adapting themselves to innumerable delicate shades of feeling, to whom the divine emotion was indeed no small matter.

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All of which is set down at some length because Foster Cole was fully alive to the many complexities of his friend's suffering, and, being indeed a true friend, the least he could do was to devote his best endeavors to finding Miss Day and returning her to her distracted lover, if — the reservation must be added — the end of the search justified him in so doing. Maybe she had been foully dealt with; God grant that she had not; but in the event that she had, somebody would be made to suffer, and he was quite willing to lend himself as an instrument of vengeance. He was able to consider the possibilities and arrive at the conclusion named with cold-blooded deliberation; therefore he became an adversary by no means to be despised.

Choosing to walk through the still night from his friend's mansion to his own modest club lodgings, Cole reviewed in his mind all the circumstances. He too felt that he was groping in a fog of mystery impenetrable and amazing; yet he was not without hope in seeking a solution.

If Lecomte Gibbs's life had been humdrum, his own had not; it is no part of this narrative

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to enter into the whys and wherefores; but the thought brought to his lips a satirical little twist, a bit of sardonic humor confided to the night, which faded before the bright image of Edith Gervaise. This image, let it be confessed for him, was with him pretty constantly.

He went over again that young lady's account of what had occurred at the church, concentrating his attention upon each detail in turn.

First of all, the gilt band received by Dorothy conveyed an intelligible message to her; it had stung to life some bitter, poignant memory. This could argue only a previous acquaintance — a very unpleasant one, it might be taken for granted — with an identical or similar article. One second's hesitation, and then the potency of what the thin strip of metal stood for had outweighed every other consideration; she fled without a word — at any rate, without a word that anybody understood.

Assuredly there can be no more important crisis in a girl's life than her marriage to the man she loves. Still, Dorothy Day had been prevailed upon, in some nameless, some terribly mysterious manner, to forsake her waiting lover,

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the brilliantly lighted church, the assemblage of invited guests; she was stricken deaf to the notes of the wedding-march, and she had vanished from off the face of the earth as completely as if she had been enveloped in the folds of an invisible mantle. Verily, it was an uncanny power that could instantly blot from her mind a sense of her highest obligations.

Had it not been for the very serious aspects of the case, Cole might have laughed at the extravagantly fantastic stage-business represented by the gilt band, the jugglery with the brass reliquary, and the anonymous warning with its scarcely veiled threat. The last was absolutely bizarre — *outré* — but withal, after what had gone before, deadly sinister. Who was warned — Gibbs? And from what was he warned? Why, from making any effort to find Miss Day. As if any man with red blood in his veins could be deterred by such a method! Rather, its immediate result was to inspire both him and Cole to greater efforts, to redouble their resolve and fire them with that degree of determination which ignores all obstacles. Only they knew not where to begin, in which direc-

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tion the first step in the search should be taken.

But then, the warning applied to Cole with equal, if not added, point; for he was determined to clear away the mystery in the face of any danger that might present itself.

“*Cave canem,*” said the young man with a smile, as he sauntered slowly along the deserted walk. “I will; but I wish I knew where the beast was kennelled. Still, I am in a way forearmed.

“Great Cæsar!” in impatient exclamation, “how I should like to have been in the vestry-room when that chap forced his way in. And Dolly, what was she running from? — or to?”

Mentally he constructed a kinetoscopic picture of her blind, terrified flight down the corridor, from the vestry-room to the side door. He halted with a sudden start.

“By George!” marvelled he. “That detective brought it out that Edith did n’t see Dorothy run down the corridor; could Edith have missed anything? Dorothy must have passed within a half-dozen feet of where Lecomte and I were waiting for the signal in Dr. Floyd’s

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study. I recollect now, a second door opens from the study upon a short passage — a sort of entry — leading to the corridor, which it joins at the side door opening into the yard; that's the way the dominie's callers get in to see him. Why, if that second door had been open we would have seen her when — but no, there is a curtain — a *portière* arrangement separating the entry from the corridor. We could n't have seen her unless that curtain was looped back."

The spot where he now stood was at a street corner, in the bright glare of a sizzling arc light. One short block to his left, down the intersecting thoroughfare, reared St. Stephen's lofty spires and ivy-clad *façade*; and for a time he remained motionless, thoughtfully staring through the darkness, which, by reason of the numerous shade trees, was dense enough.

Presently the silence was broken by the sound of leisurely footsteps and the clatter of a policeman's night-stick upon the cement walk. The sounds were approaching, and without moving Cole waited.

"Hope it's a copper I know," muttered he; for his few minutes' revery had crystallized into

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a determination which he was impatient to put into execution.

At last the policeman appeared. He advanced, peering curiously at the silent figure on the corner. And then quite suddenly he halted; one hand rose to the brim of his helmet in a salute unmistakably military.

“Why, if it ain’t Lieutenant Cole!” cried he.

“Look here, Spotwood,” returned that young man, with affected sternness, “how often do I have to point out to you fellows that I am no longer a lieutenant? When we were mustered out we one and all became private citizens again; the glory of our military careers was merged into the dull grind of — of — er —” Unable to round his period, he dropped from dizzy rhetorical heights to a manner more confidential; thrusting his hands into his trousers’ pockets, he concluded:

“I say, Spotwood, lend me your flash-light for a few minutes, will you?”

Spotwood stared for a moment; and then, tucking his night-stick under an arm, laughed.

“Why, I will — yes,” said he. “But that’s

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a funny request, coming from you this time of night."

"And while past experience of me," Cole whimsically took him up, "inclines you to regard my request with suspicion, still, you want to be obliging. You're a good scout, Spotwood, and you're deucedly curious to know what I'm after — what?"

"Here's the lamp, Lieu — Mr. Cole. You know how to work it? — just keep your thumb on that button there when you want a light. And where shall I —?"

"There's nothing secret about this," interrupted the young man. "Come past the church yonder in — oh, say a half-hour; I'll be through with your lantern by then."

"Sure I couldn't be of service, sir? You had better let me go with you."

"Don't want you. You know what happened to-night?"

"Just from casual talk. Has the lady been heard from?"

"No; there's not a clew to work on. By the way, Spot, what time did you come on duty to-night — last night, rather?"

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“ You mean on my beat? Why, it was the usual time — seven o’clock.”

“ Were you near the church at the time the wedding was to have occurred? ”

Cole’s customary air of indifference was for the moment forgotten. He watched the patrolman keenly.

“ Well — no,” the latter replied, after a moment’s consideration. “ A couple of extras were detailed to handle the crowd about the church, so I just kept to my beat, knowing I would n’t be needed there. You want to know, I suppose, if I saw anything out of the way? ”

“ Spotwood, your perspicacity is beyond criticism.”

“ Then would you mind telling me at just what time the young lady disappeared? ”

“ So near eight that all accurate clocks must have been chiming the hour. Out with it; you did see something, I know.”

The blue-coat hesitated.

“ Why, yes,” admitted he, haltingly, after the pause; “ but it’s rather more in the way of an experience, and one that I’m not overly proud

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of. It's only while I've been talking here with you — particularly since you mentioned the hour the lady disappeared — that I regard my adventure in the light of a possible clew. There may be nothing in it at all, but — ”

“ Well, for the love of Heaven, Spot, tell it! — tell it! ” interrupted his hearer, impatiently. Spotwood laughed once more and obeyed.

“ Well, sir, at eight o'clock I was on this very street, coming towards St. Stephen's, but something over two blocks east of it. All at once I saw the lights of a big auto and heard it bearing down on me at a forty-mile clip, coming from the direction of the church. What it was doing to the speed ordinance was a plenty.

“ I stepped out in the middle of the street under an electric light. Ordinarily I would n't have paid any attention to them at that time of night, but the neighboring streets were sprinkled pretty thick with carriages — on account of the wedding — and I meant simply to stop and caution 'em.

“ Of course they could n't miss making me out

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in the glare of the light, nor what I was after; but do you think they slowed down? Not a bit! In a second I saw they meant to dodge 'round, and that roused my Irish.

“ ‘Here, you, stop!’ I yelled, making a bluff at my gun. That brought them up, for they saw I meant business. It was a big, handsome touring-car, with three people in it, — a man driving, another in the rear, and a third figure so bundled that I could n't tell whether it was a man or woman.

“ I commenced giving it to 'em pretty rough, when the man behind broke in in a way that made me listen to him. His voice was trembling, and he seemed fair beside himself.

“ ‘For God's sake, officer,’ said he, ‘don't stop us; we're taking a sick lady — ’”

“ By Jove!” burst involuntarily from Cole.

“ Wait,” said the other. “ This fellow did all the talking, and there was no doubt about him being eager to go on. He said they were hurrying with the lady to a hospital; that the chauffeur was the lad that could speed blind-folded through a crowded street as easy as he could an empty one with his eyes open; and I

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would have passed them on with a 'Good-luck!' if it had n't been for two things — there was no number on the front of the machine, where the law requires there must be one as well as the rear; and, after squinting at that third party until my eyes ached, I could n't tell whether it was a sick woman, a dead one, or a bundle of rags.

"As for the other two, I was unable to get much of an idea of them on account of leather auto fixin's, goggles, and so on.

"All this time the man on the front seat had n't stirred. He sat there like a wooden Indian, staring straight ahead, his hands grasping the steering-wheel, and the engines humming away for dear life. I looked from one to the other of that bunch, and then I was n't over two seconds making up my mind.

"'I'll just go with you,' said I; and the fellow on the front seat all at once came to life.

"'Get up here with me,' says he, real short, and without even turning his head my way, 'and be quick about it.'

"There was something about that fellow —

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his voice — manner — I don't know just what — that made me hesitate and try again to get a look at him; but it was no go.

“Then, Mr. Cole, I got the surprise of my life. I was no more looking for it than I am looking for these trees to walk away; consequently, I was an easy mark.”

The patrolman laughed a bit ruefully.

“I had one foot off the ground and was just gathering myself to spring in, when that silent stiff threw on the speed till you 'd have thought the gears would have been stripped smooth. At the same time he gave a little twist to the wheel that tossed me to one side, and before I stopped rolling they were gone.

“You can bet, I was n't proud of that feat. There I was, ditched, and I had n't the least idea what game they were up to; although I finally made up my mind that the lady had perhaps taken a drop too much, and as they were all swells they did n't want to be recognized. Anyhow, after I had thought it over I did n't see why I should report the matter at headquarters; but I hope it may be of some use to you.”

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Marvelling considerably over Policeman Spot-wood's adventure with the speeding motor car, Cole was presently headed toward St. Stephen-the-Martyr's, bent upon prosecuting a bit of detective work on his own account.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCARRED HAND

WHILE Cole stood peering down the dark street toward St. Stephen's, and just prior to the appearance of Officer Spotwood, it had occurred to him that he might learn something by an inspection of the premises adjacent to the church; hence his request for the blue-coat's dark lantern. Moreover, as his imagination conjured up a mental picture of Miss Day's flight, several other ideas had taken shape in his mind, and he was impatient to confirm the conclusions reached by his reasoning.

In the alley behind the church, thus ran his reflections, there had been a vehicle of some kind without lights: whence had it come? whither had it gone? It was not surprising that he had started and exclaimed at Spotwood's reference to the lady in the motor car. The oft-tried process of elimination had, it would seem, been successful in this instance in focusing his attention upon the alley.

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For in what other direction could she have gone? She could not have progressed far without attracting attention; and, in her bridal array, to have attracted attention would have meant the provoking of a lively curiosity and a lasting remembrance of the circumstance in the minds of those who had encountered her. At the front of the church there had been numerous carriages with their attendants; others were constantly arriving and discharging their human contents, and all the neighboring walks were being paraded by that class of people who are always attracted to a wedding in polite society, and who are ever alert to miss no detail of such an affair that may hint at the unusual or afford a topic for scandal.

Furthermore, if Dorothy Day had been as agitated as Edith's account would lead one to believe, it was not within reason that she would have carried both the bouquet and the gilt band any considerable distance while she ran. A woman could never break a running-record in a gown with a long train, and it was a safe guess that she would discard such impedimenta as she could.

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The church was closed and dark, of course, when Cole arrived there. Perhaps this circumstance was unfortunate, for he would have liked to traverse the corridor from the vestry-room to the side door, and to inspect the short passage connecting Dr. Floyd's study with both the corridor and the door mentioned. But he was obliged to confine his search to the outside; and he soon had his entire attention completely engaged.

The hour was now close to dawn of Wednesday morning, and no light was shed upon the scene save the pale glimmer of starshine and the insignificant spark from the electric pocket-lamp.

Cole began at the side door. A cement walk led around to the front, another directly across to the rectory; but the remainder of the yard consisted of closely trimmed lawn, except for one or two conventional clumps of shrubbery and a solitary large maple tree. It was clearer than ever that Miss Day had not departed by either of the routes indicated, and the sole remaining one lay to the rear.

A high board fence, painted brown, divided the church and the rectory premises from the

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alley, and toward this Cole directed his steps, flashing to and fro the single eye of light as he advanced.

He noted with some disappointment that the well-kept turf was too dry and close to bear for long any record of a hasty passage across its surface; but presently he arrived before a gate giving access to the alley, and here he found his first tangible clew.

The gate was held shut by a weight, which he had no sooner observed than the roving light paused on a spot of white fabric protruding from a splinter on one of the posts. It was a bit of chiffon.

The intent investigator was in the act of releasing it when his ear caught a peculiar sound; instantly he became rigid. Across the alley an arbor-vitæ hedge marked the boundary of the property on that side, and it was from this hedge that the sound — a rustling, as of leaves; a straining and parting of branches — seemed to come. But the light, cautiously directed after a moment up and down the row of greenery, revealed nothing.

Probably a wandering cat or a disturbed bird,

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concluded Cole, as he turned again to the bit of chiffon to examine it more closely.

Yards upon yards of the same material, without doubt, might be obtained from any dry-goods shop in town; but this circumstance was of slight consequence in view of the fact that an identical fabric had been a conspicuous part of Miss Day's attire the evening before.

The young man's glance darted restlessly about, following the beam from the flash-light; and presently he passed through the gate, which, all this time, he had been holding open. Almost at once he uttered a little exclamation, for there lay the muff of bridal roses, bound with yards of broad, white satin ribbon.

He stooped with extended hand to pick it up, the action bringing nearer the rays from the lamp until they converged to a diameter no greater than that of a dinner plate. But again he paused and waited apprehensively; once more the unseen cat, or whatever it was, stirred restlessly in the hedge. The night was so silent and tranquil, Cole's attention was so keen upon his search, that the trifling noise was startling. But, as before, the young man saw nothing to

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justify his vague uneasiness, and the beam from the lamp was presently bent again upon the bouquet.

The circle of light was sharply defined; within its circumference the white and green of the roses was vivid; immediately beyond was a darkness dense and impenetrable.

And now, just as Cole's hand was about to close upon the muff of roses, another hand darted into the moon of light. It too became suddenly vivid within the circumscribed area of illumination. For all that Cole could see, it might have been a disembodied hand; but, however that may be, he was afforded the scantest moment for wonder and reflection. The hand's action was brief and direct; it appeared beneath his astonished eyes and firmly seized the bouquet which he himself was on the very point of picking up. Next instant he was stunned by a crushing blow on the head.

As he sank with a groan to the brick-paved alley, he carried into his semi-unconsciousness a glowing mental picture of that mysterious hand.

Across the back of it was a long white scar.

CHAPTER VII

MISS GERVAISE RECOLLECTS

IT has already been briefly mentioned that Miss Edith Gervaise was an exceptionally pretty girl; indeed, she was so pretty that the fact is well worth repeating and emphasizing. Moreover, she was very bright, quick at deducing conclusions from the details which her handsome, clear-seeing brown eyes perceived, and confident in her judgment after she had once made up her mind.

As we all know — or think we know — the feminine mind is as uncertain as a stick of frozen dynamite thawing in a hot stove; to Foster Cole this perplexing uncertainty was one of Miss Gervaise's chief characteristics; and while it afforded a source of endless charm and a wealth of delightful surprises, at the same time it was capable of producing phases that filled him with anxiety.

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But deep down in his inner consciousness, had he been qualified to search there with an unprejudiced desire for exact information, he would have found a conviction that she was absolutely dependable in moments of crisis, and capable of any amount of self-sacrifice at the call of friendship — or should we say, of love? To use a catachresis inspired by one of his very rare bursts of enthusiasm, and triumphantly confided to himself after certain occasions when she had been unusually kind to him, Miss Edith was “a brick.”

After arriving home from St. Stephen-the-Martyr's Tuesday night, she had entered upon a long period of wakefulness, during which her active brain was feverishly, though vainly, striving to find some plausible solution to the mystifying problem presented by her friend's evanishment.

Like Mr. Gibbs, she had no word of censure for Miss Day; she could not banish from her thoughts the image of that swift transition in the bride's lovely countenance, from joy ineffable to tragic horror; and if there is a light supernal, visible to mortal eyes, where is it to be found if not in the face of a willing bride?

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But the pinched, anguish-stricken look, which had so rapidly succeeded the other, remained with Miss Edith, as persistent as the curse of Kehama, —

“ And sleep shall obey me,
And visit thee never,
And the curse shall be on thee
Forever and ever.”

And so she had remained wakeful throughout the long, silent watches of the night.

Loyalty at once influenced her to reject the obvious explanation: she would not for an instant entertain the idea of an unknown lover. Furthermore, their intimacy precluded the very possibility of another lover's existence, unless — and here she paused — unless that lover bore a part in the portion of Dolly's life that had been lived before she came to Williamsburg. Miss Gervaise was bound to admit, very reluctantly, that some pages of that distant period had never been turned for her perusal.

She reviewed the facts as she knew them.

Dorothy's mother had died when her daughter was a mere babe; Dorothy retained but the dimmest remembrance of her; while her father had

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passed away a few months prior to her arrival in Williamsburg.

At this stage she asked the identical question which Foster Cole had put to Mr. Gibbs: Why had she chanced to select Williamsburg as a place of residence? — and received no more satisfactory an answer than Cole had. Dolly herself had laughingly said that the city had appealed to her by reason of its dirt and soot, since there was some credit attached to cleanliness in a place where nobody expected to keep clean; and Williamsburg's soot and resultant dinginess were proverbial throughout the rest of the country. Even the two rivers took on the flavor and hue of coal smoke.

Neither did Miss Edith hope much from the police. Thoroughly sophisticated, as she was, in all the ways of the polite world, she was nevertheless very ignorant concerning the ways of detectives, never having met one before last night; and, indeed, her lack of faith on this point was not without warrant, since the police were, for the present, out of the game. It remained, then, for Dolly's friends to find her and clear away the fog of mystery.

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Her cogitations were interrupted by a servant announcing Mr. Cole.

That young gentleman's appearance bore no indication of his recent strenuous adventure. A cold plunge and a leisurely breakfast at the club had combined to set him to rights again, and the donning of a painstakingly correct costume had further operated to imbue him with placid self-satisfaction and to fill his soul with good-will toward all the world.

It is perhaps worthy of note that such was the frame of mind with which he customarily approached Miss Edith, and that it was invariably put ingloriously to rout before he had passed ten minutes in her coveted society.

But to return, briefly, to the alley behind St. Stephen's. A few minutes after the felling blow from the unseen aggressor, Officer Spotwood, in quest of his lamp, was considerably astonished to encounter at the alley's mouth a gentleman in a dress-suit, clinging dizzily to the fence with one hand while he nursed his head with the other, and swearing with a picturesque and graphic volubility that obviated the necessity of any questioning on the part of the patrolman. The

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latter, after a moment of surprised listening, propped the dazed Cole more securely against his support, and darted away in a short, futile search for the scarred unknown. Not only was there no sign of him, but the bouquet had vanished, too.

Still, one small circumstance is of sufficient consequence to record.

Spotwood found a business card on the sidewalk some dozen feet from the alley.

“Is this of any account?” he asked, handing it to the young man and bringing the flash-light to bear upon it.

Cole read aloud: “‘Leporello, Seer, Clairvoyant; Revealer of the Past, Present and Fu —’ Oh, the devil!” he broke off, flipping the bit of pasteboard into the street. “I hoped you had found something, Spot.”

Not many hours later he was to deplore the fact that he had not retained that card; or, at least, that he had not examined it more closely for any written word or clew it might have contained.

However, the blow had sent his wits wool-gathering; his head ached horribly, and he was

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incapable of dealing with any deeper problem than lay in following the shortest way home — or what signified home for him.

Now he stood in the presence of Miss Gervaise, immaculate as to attire, strong and clean-limbed; in reality forceful and masterful, and glowing with good, healthy red blood, but hiding it all behind a depressing *blasé* mask, which, unfortunately, had been stamped upon him — to resort to a Hibernianism — before he was born.

“Oh, so you have come at last, have you?” was Miss Edith’s petulant greeting.

“Really, Edith,” expostulated he, “I did not want to disturb you too early. After last night —”

“There, that will do,” she interrupted. “After last night you might have known that I would be particularly impatient until you arrived. I am out of sorts, and I have no one with whom to divide my ill-humor. Draw up a chair; I want to talk to you.”

And in the twinkling of an eye his buoyancy evaporated, his cheerful self-esteem vanished. He obeyed, meekly, but without undue haste. He was extremely anxious at all times to please

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Miss Gervaise, but was perpetually in doubt how to go about it; consequently, although he affected a bored expression, he was constantly alert, while in her presence, to anticipate her wishes.

“I suppose you have heard nothing,” murmured he, merely by way of something to say.

Miss Gervaise ignored this remark. Thoughtfully she took in the details of her visitor's costume, was a bit nettled that she could find nothing therein to criticise, and then announced, quite calmly and without preamble:

“I recollect where I saw the man with the scar.”

A flicker of interest might have been discerned in Mr. Cole's countenance; but he waited in silence for further enlightenment.

“Yes.” Her head nodded with a pretty, bewitching air of wisdom. “I've thought and thought until I believe my poor head is ready to burst; and this morning — just at daybreak — it came to me like a flash.”

“What did?” Mr. Cole innocently asked.

A spark of disapproval in the brown eyes discouraged further trifling.

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“If you would devote one-half the effort to finding Dolly that I have,” said she, severely, “you would n’t have time to be so silly.”

Cole subsided. “I daresay,” he muttered.

“And you do not even attempt to defend yourself!” the little lady suddenly flared. “You can’t. Gracious! how I should enjoy shaking you!”

“I sha’n’t object,” complacently from the man.

“Oh, I shall not lay the tip of my fingers upon you. But I mean to stir you in some way.”

“Perhaps if you would tell me what came to you — after your head commenced aching, I mean,” suggested Cole; while Miss Edith regarded him with suspicion.

Presently she sighed, resignedly, and relaxed from her attitude of reproof.

“Dear me, Foster, I am afraid you are hopeless. If I thought you would listen, I would tell you.”

His manner quickly altered.

“Do,” said he, with quiet earnestness; “I have a particular reason for acquiring all the information I can concerning that worthy.”

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“Well, I am glad to learn that you are interested even to that extent.

“One day last week,” she pursued, “Dolly took me for a ride in her new runabout. We returned to her house for tea, and just as we drove up to the gate that man was standing on the curb, staring at her in the rudest way imaginable. All at once Dolly saw him too. She started, clutched my arm, and whispered excitedly, ‘See that man, Edith? Who is he?’

“I assured her that I did not know. She then told me that for more than a week she had not been able to stir from the house without encountering this strange man, and that he always watched her in the same peculiar, intent manner, until she passed out of sight. His conduct had begun to worry her; but when I suggested that she mention the matter to Mr. Gibbs or the police, she laughed and said that, after all, perhaps the man did n’t know any better, and that she would place him on the list with her unknown admirers.”

“And she did n’t know the beggar?” inquired Mr. Cole. His mask of indifference now hid a very lively interest, of which Miss Gervaise was

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doubtless sensible. She shook her head vigorously, and continued:

“No. But, Foster” — she regarded him speculatively — “I mean to find out —”

“Ah,” and, with a look of resignation, he settled deeper in his chair.

“— with your help,” proceeded Miss Gervaise. “You boast pretty often of your familiarity with the city. Very well; find the man with the scar; you know where to look for him.”

Foster Cole came as near emitting a gasp as his admirable self-control would permit.

“Indeed — but I assure you I don’t. Do you suppose he’s waiting about town to be nabbed? Hardly!”

“What could he be ‘nabbed’ for?” asked the young lady, shrewdly.

“Well — er — hm-m-m —” was the lucid reply.

“That is an addition to the category of crime of which I have no knowledge,” observed Miss Gervaise.

“Hang it, Edith! do you really mean that you want me to go prowling through the purlieus

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of Williamsburg, searching for a chap with a scar on the back of his right hand?"

"Oh, no; not at all, if you find it so inconvenient. I thought — perhaps —"

"You know I'll do it — if you really want me to."

"I would not now think of troubling you so much. I daresay Charlie Hughes will do quite as well."

"Oh, I'll go — and you knew all along that I would. What shall I do with the beggar if I find him?"

Miss Edith smiled with quiet enjoyment.

"Why, keep him in sight. Better still, take an officer with you and let him do the — shadowing, I believe that is the technical term."

The bored look settled down upon Mr. Cole like a cloud; but he rose without further demur, as if he meant to start the search immediately.

The girl stopped him.

"One moment, Foster. Have you ever heard of a fortune-teller called Leporello? Certainly you have; he's quite a fad among the women."

"Leporello," repeated he, trying hard to remember in what circumstances he had seen or

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heard the name. "I believe I have, but I cannot recall where or when. What about him?"

Lines of gravity deepened in the girl's fair face, as she seemed to consider. At last, —

"It is all very absurd," she suddenly said. "I am not a bit superstitious, nor do I believe in any fol-de-rol like this seer-mystic-magician business; but —"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Cole under his breath; in a flash of memory that shook his self-possession he recollected the business card which Officer Spotwood had found, and which he had so carelessly thrown away.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

Cole did not answer.

"Foster, what is the matter with you?" she now sharply demanded.

"Why — it's nothing — much. Or, rather, I don't really know. Is this Leporello chap a — a — what the dickens is he?"

Miss Gervaise viewed this display of incoherency with considerable surprise.

"A seer," replied she, with some constraint, "a mystic, a palmist, a crystal-gazer —"

"There, there, that will do," interrupted the

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young man; "I have sufficient data, I believe, to gauge his calibre correctly. Does this modern Merlin know Dorothy?"

"If you will let me tell you what I started to, you may decide for yourself."

Mr. Cole quietly sat down again.

CHAPTER VIII

A MAGIC REVELATION

“**A**S I said, Leporello is a fad with the Williamsburg women,” resumed Miss Edith, “and it is quite the thing to secure a reading. He has never had an opportunity to pry into my past or to open up my future for me — it is owing to Dolly, though, that he did n’t — but from all accounts he is able to perform wonders.

“One day Dolly and Sallie Kittredge prevailed upon me to accompany them to this wonderful seer. It was all by way of a lark, you know, and I consented. Perhaps I was just a wee mite curious, too; at any rate, I went.

“A peculiarity about Leporello is that he will not show himself; nobody has ever seen him. The room in which he gives his readings is draped in black plush, dimly lighted, and curtains are so arranged about a small alcove where he sits that he appears only as a dim, indistinguishable shadow. It is very mysterious, done

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for effect, I suppose; but the fact is that none of his callers has ever seen enough of him to gather any idea of his personal appearance. Before the alcove a brass tripod on a tiny ebony table supports a crystal, and while a shaft of light shines directly upon it, neither the alcove beyond nor the rest of the apartment shares in the illumination. In fact, that radiant crystal sphere is in a way a barrier — a veil — between the seer and his callers. You sit on one side of the table and are sensible only of a shadowy, mysterious presence confronting you on the other.

“ Well, that is what we three girls were ushered into. For a time we stood breathless, holding tight to one another, in the midst of a blackness that was relieved only by the shining crystal.

“ But by degrees our eyes became accustomed to the dim light, whose ghostliness was emphasized by the funereal tapestries and the unbroken stillness of the place, and we could see what I have attempted to describe to you — all except Leporello. We were not aware of his presence until he addressed us.

“ His first words — he spoke so unexpectedly and in such a matter-of-fact way from the dark-

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ened alcove — made us all jump. Sallie, the idiot, screamed, and then fell to giggling so that the seer rebuked her. He said something about a disturbing element that negatived the positive influence of the ether waves, and Sallie, poor child, almost cried when she comprehended that she must leave the room.

“ ‘I am *en rapport* with Dorothy Day,’ he suddenly surprised us by saying, — we had n’t given our names to the pretty soubrette who received us, you must know — and then he went on:

“ ‘The invisible forces manifesting themselves through the violet end of the spectrum indicate an extraordinary message which I think can be more satisfactorily imparted by means of the crystal than the trance: shall Miss Day choose?’

“ ‘The crystal, by all means,’ gasped Dorothy.”

“This is immensely interesting,” Cole interrupted; “but has it anything to do with Dorothy’s disappearance?”

“Dear me! where is that admirable imperturbability of yours? Can you not wait? I do not know that it has anything whatever to do

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with last night; but it is at least curious in the light of what has happened, and I want somebody else besides myself to puzzle over it. Pray do not interrupt me again.”

“Pardon me,” said the young man. “I am free to confess that my curiosity is soaring close to a hundred in the shade.”

“Well, now, you have made me forget where I was,” complained the girl.

“Dorothy chose the crystal—” prompted Cole.

“Oh, yes. Then Leporello said: ‘I would suggest that Miss Gervaise withdraw, for the thought vibrations are so perfectly attuned that I apprehend a most searching revelation. It is better to eliminate all discordant influences. But it is for Miss Day to decide.’

“Foster, after that I would not have deserted Dolly for worlds. Besides, the dear girl would not hear of it. And, anyhow, I am not a ‘disturbing influence,’ like Sallie Kittredge—am I?”

Miss Edith paused for a reply, but none was forthcoming. Cole merely stirred uneasily, and in a moment the girl asked,

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“Does n't that describe her to a dot?” implying an opinion which he did not now hesitate to endorse promptly.

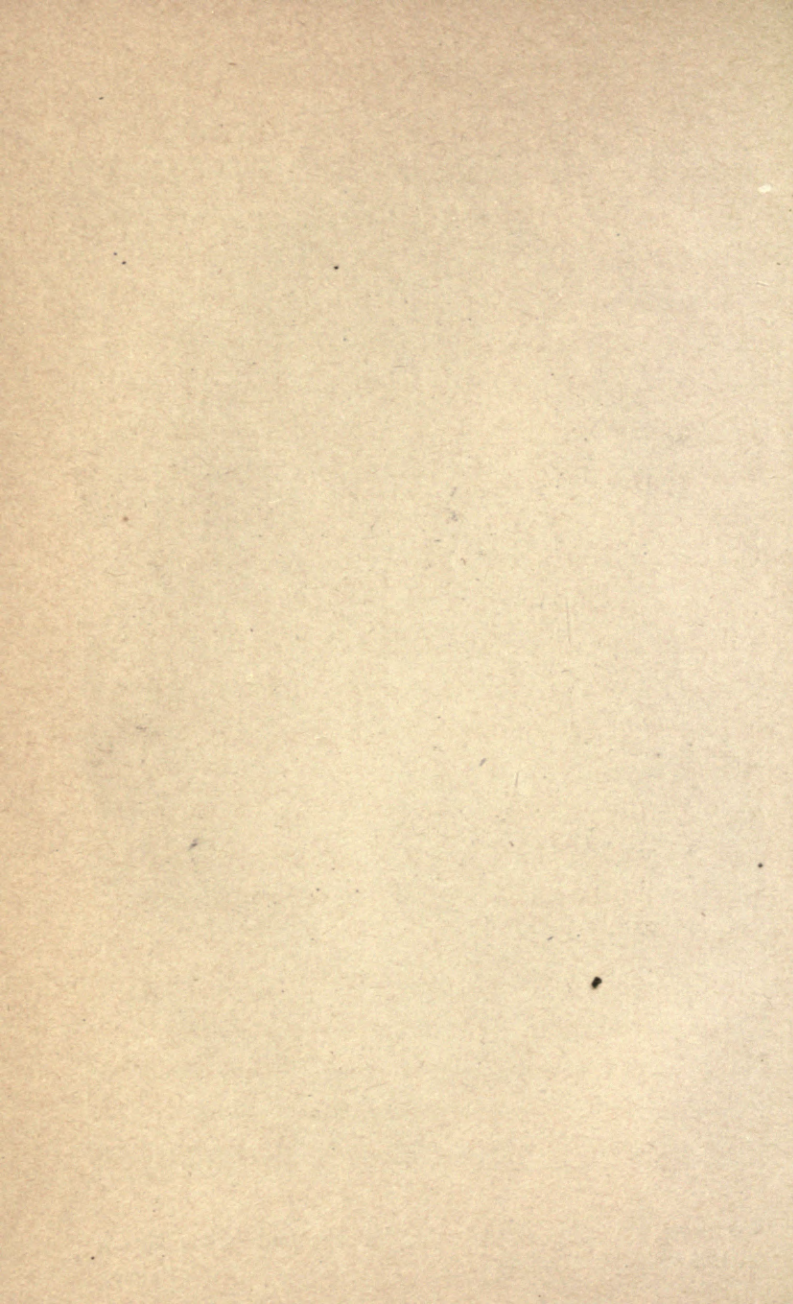
“So Dorothy took a chair before the crystal,” proceeded Miss Edith, apparently satisfied, “a big carved chair — black, like everything else — the arms of which were wrought all over with outlines of hideous scaly dragons with gaping jaws, and the legs with their claws. I was then admonished not to stir or utter a sound under penalty of being sent to join poor Sallie and the pretty little French creature in the receiving-room.

“I was as still as a mouse during the long silence that followed. And, Foster, you should have seen Dolly in that fantastic chair. Her beautiful blond head and pale face against the high back, the dragons' fangs beneath her delicate little hands, the creepy light and all, produced a contrast that would have delighted the soul of a painter.

“Well! The pause that ensued was as lulling as a nocturne. I was not drowsy — not at all; but I was content simply to sit there motionless and watch Dolly — and wait.



“Lecomte, old chap, forgive me, but we had better thresh
this thing out together.”



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“After a while the mystic spoke again. Now his voice was dreamy, low, peculiarly musical, as of one unconsciously uttering his thoughts. To me his words were the merest gibberish; I suppose they conveyed an allegory, but without the key it is meaningless. Besides, I was more intent on watching Dolly than listening to what the mysterious man had to say, and he did not fix my attention until all at once I realized that something in his queer recital had startled her. She suddenly leaned forward, tense, alert — almost alarmed, I should say — and was striving to penetrate the gloom that hid Leporello.”

“But what was it the beggar told her?” queried Cole, with no pretense now of hiding his interest.

“Let me tell it in my own way, Foster; if there is really any important significance in the episode, you must have all the details just as they occurred.

“He painted a vivid word picture of a sort of enchanted garden — an Eden — in the midst of which was a beautiful young girl who was uplifted by longings and aspirations which could never be realized until a certain thing happened;

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what that was — if his fanciful imagery really alluded to it — I do not now know. Then the scene changed.

“The girl was at college. She was no longer alone, for a young man had become her constant companion, and it was through him that her ambitions were to be fulfilled.

“It was at this point that Dolly suddenly manifested a quickened interest, and my recollection of the rest of the so-called revelation, up to the time she stopped it, is much clearer.

“‘Again the scene shifts,’ said the seer. ‘We are now among high mountains, and it is night. I see a cave whose mammoth proportions the fitful gleam of a myriad torches does not define. A fire burns upon a stone altar, and all about it, in a wide circle, stand many strange figures in cloaks and masks of yellow. They are featureless — motionless — silent — phantasmal.

“‘The girl and her companion approach. She is trembling, and he is trying to quiet her, to calm her fears —’

“At that instant Dolly abruptly rose to her feet, laughing nervously and clinging to the back of the chair.

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“‘This is too utterly ridiculous!’ she exclaimed. ‘You have told me quite enough, Sir Mystic; I—I—don’t care for any more.’

“Foster, I never saw Dolly’s self-possession so shaken.

“‘Just as Miss Day decides,’ Leporello returned, as indifferently as you please. ‘But I would advise her to hear me out.’

“I knew that Dolly was anxious to get away. She laughed again, in an agitated way, saying,

“‘I have no wish to, even if I had the time’; and turning to me, — ‘Come, Edie.’

“We moved toward the door until the voice from the alcove checked us.

“‘Just a moment, Miss Day,’ said the seer, ‘and you may depart.’ Dolly hesitated, holding my hand in a tight grasp — her own was trembling — and Leporello went on:

“‘The manifestation is so persistent that it is really to be deplored that sympathetic conditions cannot prevail until the message is imparted; the invisible forces, however, are unable to overcome antagonistic influences of the mind, and I cannot perform the impossible.

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“ ‘ However, Miss Day, I must not let you go until I have disclosed one thing more.’

“ Listen closely now, Foster.

“ ‘ Throughout the reading,’ Leporello went on, ‘ I have been sensible of an atmosphere of danger — perhaps of warning; it is difficult to define. Had you permitted the forces to consummate the purpose for which their humble servant invoked them, I might — aye, certainly would — have been more specific on this point. Still it is very clear that a warning was intended, which is exceedingly rare unless the danger impending is extraordinary.’

“ At his last words Dolly swayed closer to me and her grasp on my hand tightened. You may believe that I was all attention now, though I did n’t understand a thing of what was going on; but I passed my arm around her waist to assure her that the goblins would n’t get her while I was with her, whatever else might happen.

“ Of a sudden the seer’s hand was extended into the beam of light that played upon the crystal. It was an unusual hand, Foster, — light brown and slender, while the fingers were

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remarkably long, tapering, and sensitive. Then abruptly the radiance in the crystal turned to a blood red, and the voice said:

“‘Is there any serious obligation laid upon you? Then do not seek to avoid it. If there is a duty to be performed, do not hesitate, or a very great and immediate danger threatens — perhaps yourself, perhaps some one very dear to you. I cannot say. Farewell.’

“In another moment we were with Sallie, and, oh, it was good to see the sunlight again! Sallie immediately bubbled over with questions which Dolly answered lightly, though her lips were white, her face pale, and her eyes unnaturally bright.

“‘A warning!’ she cried, with affected gaiety, to one of Sallie Kittredge’s foolish questions; ‘a great danger threatens me.’ She laughed; but she shivered, too.

“‘*Dieu vous en garde, Mademoiselle!*’ exclaimed the pretty little French maid, making the sign of the cross. ‘If Monsieur Leporello has said it, it is true.’

“She was so solemn that I laughed.

“‘Do you really believe that?’ I asked her.

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“ ‘*Certainement que j’y crois* — it is always so,’ she replied so soberly that all desire to laugh just oozed right out of me. Even the ‘disturbing influence’ forgot her indignation and quieted down.”

“And what do you make of it all?” inquired Mr. Cole, when she had finished.

“Nothing, I am afraid. The details which brought the episode forcibly to mind after last night’s occurrence are that this fortune-teller, however sceptical we may be of his methods, assuredly touched upon something affecting Dolly of which even her intimate friends are ignorant, and conveyed a warning which, in spite of all her efforts to laugh it away, nevertheless impressed her profoundly. I wonder whether she would have allowed the seer to complete the revelation if she had been alone?”

Cole was in a deep study, and he did not accept this invitation to theorize. After a long wait the girl stirred impatiently.

“Goodness, Foster! don’t sit there like a bump on a log. Say something!”

He looked at her gravely.

“Edith, this is the queerest mess I ever heard

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of," said he, wonderingly; "let me have time to think it over."

"Very well. I trust the process will not be too intricate. I suppose, then, I shall have to send for Charlie Hughes after all — if I want to find my man with the scar."

All of Cole's admirable indifference had vanished. The two had moved toward the door, and now he caught both her hands in his.

"Let me make an effort at clearing up this thing," said he. "You have confidence enough in me, have n't you, to know that I can accomplish something if I try?"

She returned no answer, but searched his eyes with her own — a little wistfully, if Cole had but known it.

"You are thinking that I have never tried to do anything," he went on in a moment; "but I am going to — now — for you."

With a sudden movement she freed her hands, and, laughing, gave him a little shove away from her.

"Silly! If you stand here all day I certainly *will* have to call on — call on some one else."

He hastened down the steps and away.

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Cole had not proceeded far until he encountered a prowling taxicab, which he deflected to the curb with a motion of his stick.

“Go straight ahead till I tell you to turn around and come back,” he directed. Filled with a high spirit of resolve to do, but by no means clear in his mind as to how he was going to start about doing it, he dropped upon the cushions.

“Confound Charlie Hughes!” he savagely growled. “And dashed if I take any officer with me, either! Why, if I can’t play this hand alone I might as well keep out of the game entirely.” And he settled down to a period of good, hard thinking.

CHAPTER IX

MISS GERVAISE TAKES A HAND

THE surprising developments of the past few hours, the unforeseen divagations characterizing the events during that time, had so filled Cole's mind that he quite forgot his determination to pay Miss Letitia Leonard, Dorothy Day's aunt, a call.

It was, doubtless, just as well that he did forget this particular detail of the rather vague programme he had mapped out for himself earlier in the morning; for Miss Gervaise had formed an identical determination. The undertaking by her would be more likely to yield results of value, and the instant Cole departed she prepared to go out.

But right here must be mentioned at some length a condition affecting Miss Edith's resolve to call upon the maiden aunt.

While Lecomte Gibbs, Foster Cole, and the remainder of Miss Day's acquaintances had never

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been inspired by the elderly duenna with any considerable regard for her importance, quite a different impression had been produced in Miss Edith Gervaise's mind. It was natural, the obvious thing to do, to regard the delicate appearing little lady, with the bobbing gray curls and tremulous manner, simply as a necessary adjunct to Miss Day's *ménage*; her presence or the mere assurance of her being somewhere in the background was a sufficient deference to the proprieties, and this constituted the sum total of her consequence.

Miss Edith, however, had been affected far differently by Miss Letitia. Perhaps because she was Dorothy Day's closest friend she had been afforded greater opportunities of observing the older lady, and what she had observed had produced a peculiar, if not a surprising, result; the two were barely civil to each other. Women are quick to read one another where their interests are concerned: Edith Gervaise had turned her luminous eyes upon Miss Letitia, and what she read had made her uneasy.

It may be that she read wrongly; but in frail Letitia Leonard she discerned a force, an im-

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pulse, inimical to her friend; a potentiality none the less dangerous by reason of its being veiled.

That timid, nervous little old body a menace to Dolly? It was, in all conscience, too absurd to think of. Yet Miss Edith had thought of it a good deal in the past, and now, since last night, the disturbing idea had returned to color all her meditations; in her fancy Kehama frowned at her from behind Letitia Leonard's features.

Every one of us has at one time or another met individuals with whose words and conduct we can find no definite, plausible fault, yet whom we instinctively distrust; we constantly maintain in their presence, even without being conscious of so doing, an alert vigilance; and we can read in their eyes that they are just as constantly alert, biding their time with infinite patience, to catch us off our guard. It may not be so, but such is the feeling that some people provoke.

And so it was with Edith Gervaise and Miss Letitia.

Indeed, why should the old lady wish her niece ill? The problem was unfathomable. Edith could only think of envy; granting the

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woman's disposition as being bad, a mercenary motive would never be controlled by moral obligation alone. Once, in the privacy of Dorothy's boudoir, Miss Gervaise had ventured a hint of her misgivings; but the scornful glee that met the attempt silenced her tongue forever after on this one topic.

And now another curious circumstance: while she and Dorothy were descending from that confidence, it was neither nice nor pleasant to think that she had been spied upon; but how else was she to account for the hostility in the faded blue eyes when they met hers?

However that may be, from that moment she was poignantly sensible of the fact that the woman's attitude was one of extreme caution and watchfulness when in her presence.

Edith had resolved to discover, if she could, whether Letitia Leonard knew aught of her niece's disappearance. Being able now to surmise the frame of mind in which these two ladies were likely to meet, it is fair to hazard that Miss Edith's task was not to be a simple one.

But events fell out differently from what she could by any possibility have anticipated.

MISS GERVAISE TAKES A HAND

There was one other member of Miss Day's household whose presence there was always reassuring whenever Miss Edith was assailed by doubts of the aunt. This was an elderly spinster, Sarah Kemp by name, and — if the numerous signals which she constantly displayed were to be believed — a virago by nature. She was the very antithesis of Miss Leonard. Tall, gaunt, big-boned; with eyes deep-set, black, and burning, a forbidding countenance and a waspish utterance, Sarah Kemp was an awe-inspiring figure likely to strike terror to the hearts of timid souls.

It will be sufficient here to state that this extraordinary woman's association with Miss Day began with the girl's birth; she had been her mother's playmate when the latter was a girl.

In a very short time after Mr. Cole's departure a smart scarlet runabout was waiting at the front door; in no time at all worth mentioning Miss Edith sat with the steering-wheel in her small gauntleted hands, and the gay equipage was purring merrily away over the inviting asphalt toward Miss Day's.

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Sarah Kemp herself opened the door, and the instant she recognized the caller the forbidding look melted from her eyes, the sternness from her harsh countenance, and she surprised Miss Edith by bursting suddenly into tears.

“Why, Sarah!” exclaimed that young lady. “What’s the matter!”

Miss Kemp was much too strong-minded to yield to any ordinary emotion, and Miss Edith had never regarded her otherwise than as an exemplar of austere inflexibility, with maybe one tender corner in her heart which she never for an instant permitted to reveal itself.

So she stared at this new, this unfamiliar Sarah Kemp until the old lady reached forth a hand and drew her, not very gently, across the threshold.

“Excuse the liberty, Miss Gervaise,” the gaunt housekeeper articulated between sobs, “but I could n’t stand there in the open door and make a holy show of myself for the benefit of Mrs. Whitelock’s Rogers across the way, watching not to miss anything that goes on in this house.

“And — say what you will, Miss Gervaise — this is a house of sorrow. I have managed to

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keep a bold front — just as though everything was as it should be — till I saw you, and then I simply could n't help it. Oh, it's hard for an old woman like me! I'm so glad, so glad you've come, Miss Gervaise — *so* glad!"

Edith strove sturdily to quiet the poor soul, though she was very near to tears herself.

"Do not worry, Sarah; we cannot help matters at all in that way. I and all the rest of Dorothy's friends are doing everything we can to find her and bring her back again — or at least to discover what took her away so strangely — and I am sure we shall succeed. You must help us — you and Miss Letitia. Where is she?"

Tears were so foreign to Miss Kemp's nature that she quite succeeded in calming herself by the time Miss Edith had finished, and at the mention of Miss Letitia the severe features fell into grim lines.

"What is it?" cried the girl in alarm at this sudden change.

Now Sarah Kemp's conduct before replying was of a nature further to inspire fear in her caller. She peered over her shoulder down the

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hall and tiptoed with infinite caution to the foot of the stairs, where she paused, her gray head cocked in a strained attitude of listening. After a pause, during which Edith could almost hear her own heart beat, she tiptoed back again to the girl and whispered into her ear:

“She prowls!”

“Prowls!” gasped Edith, her own voice subdued to a whisper by the other’s manner.

Sarah Kemp, after another furtive glance over her shoulder, nodded with vigor.

“Prowls,” she repeated, “like a cat; she’s at it all the time. If you will come to my room with me, Miss Gervaise, I’ll tell you about it.”

CHAPTER X

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

TOO astonished to speak, Miss Edith signified by a slight inclination of the head her willingness to follow the housekeeper. Sarah Kemp conducted her up to the third story to a cosey, snowy-curtained room overlooking the street, where, after closing the door and making sure that it was fast, she invited the girl to be seated.

“It is n’t often that I have Dorothy’s friends up here,” she began, by way of apology, “but I know you won’t mind it, Miss Gervaise. . . . Oh, I want my baby!” she abruptly wailed. “My poor lamb! Where is she! where is she!”

“Try not to fret so, Sarah,” Miss Edith said soothingly; “for Dorothy is not a baby, but is quite capable of taking care of herself. Explain about Miss Letitia.”

Miss Kemp’s recoveries of her composure were quite as abrupt as her outbursts. She folded her

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hands primly in her lap and her thin lips closed in a straight, uncompromising line. Had it not been for the grotesque anomaly of the conception, Miss Edith would have imagined that the bare mention of the timid little old-maid aunt's name was sufficient to strike terror to the austere housekeeper's heart. Her agitation could not be attributed to nerves; rather, it was Miss Letitia who was perpetually thus afflicted. Still it was patent that some other worry besides anxiety for her young mistress preyed upon the old lady's mind. That it had to do with Letitia Leonard only served to whet Miss Edith's curiosity.

The housekeeper's harsh voice was measurably lowered when she spoke again.

"There's the strangest goings on in this house, Miss Gervaise. It's not for me to criticise or find fault — Heaven forbid! — but I am free to say that if my poor lamb only knew some of the things that happen behind her back, why, they would be different, so they would."

"Oh, Sarah, please try to be more explicit!" It was becoming no easy task for Miss Edith to hide her impatience. "Tell me what things you mean."

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But Miss Kemp, her intense eyes smouldering fire, her lips tightly compressed, her hands still primly folded in her lap, merely nodded her head with an air of vast knowledge, which was exceedingly exasperating to the curious girl.

“Come, Sarah,” Edith coaxed, “tell me. You know I love Dolly, that I would do anything in the world for her. If we mean to help her now, we must act solely on our own judgments, without consulting her probable wishes. If matters of a private nature are to be touched upon, is n’t it far better that they should be confided to those who have her interests nearest at heart? Surely! Oh, Sarah, pray keep nothing back!”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Miss Ger-
vaise,” came in response to this warm-hearted appeal. “Dorothy thought a sight of you, and I’d sooner tell you than anybody else. But what are we going to do?” she fervently demanded. “What *can* we do? Why, that — that old *cat* has already been hinting that I had better go — I! Think of it!”

The girl drew a long breath and, leaning forward, clasped her hands around one knee.

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“Now see here, Sarah, you must tell me all about it,” she said with sudden decision — “what do you mean by ‘prowlings’ and ‘queer goings on’?”

“Well, Miss Gervaise, it’s terrible hard to do. Somehow the things that appeared so suspicious to me don’t seem so when I start to tell about them. It was for the same reason that I never said nothing to Dorothy; I was afraid she’d laugh and think me a fussy, nervous old busy-body, like some others I might mention. I reckon it’s because one thing alone don’t amount to much; but taking them all together, why, they do.

“You know Miss Leonard is not very strong. Leastwise she is always complaining of her nerves, or one thing and another; so I can’t say I was much surprised the first time I caught her snooping around after everybody else had gone to bed.

“It happened away back early in the Spring. I had had a bad night myself, and along about two o’clock in the morning I slipped downstairs after the camphor bottle. I had got into my felt slippers, as I didn’t want to disturb any-

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body, and I didn't make as much noise as a mouse would.

"I found the bottle in the second-story bathroom cupboard, where I knew it ought to be if it was n't, but thank goodness it was, and I had just stepped into the hall again, when of a sudden I stood stock-still and listened. Miss Gervaise, I would have taken my solemn oath that I heard the click the front-door latch makes when the door is closed to.

"Of course I thought right away of burglars. I knew everybody was in the house, for, as you know yourself, the last thing I have done at nights for these many years has been to try all the doors and windows to make sure they were fast.

"I blew out the little night-lamp I was carrying, and right away I saw on the stairway the reflection of a moving light in the hall below. The light bobbed and grew dimmer, as though whoever was carrying it was walking down the hall towards the rear of the house.

"Next I stole to the head of the stairs and peered over the banisters, and I was mightily relieved to see that it was only Miss Leonard.

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“ That is to say, Miss Gervaise, I was mightily relieved at first. I had only a glimpse of her, for she was opening the blue-room door when I peeped down at her, and that same instant she disappeared into the room, closing the door behind her and leaving me in darkness.

“ But when I got back to my own room once more some things that I had n't thought much of at the time kept whirligigging around in my mind.

“ First of all, there was the click of the front-door latch; I've heard it too often not to know it, and it was quite as strange that Miss Leonard should have had the door open as if it had really been done by burglars. I remembered, too, that she was fully dressed for the street; where had she — of all persons — been at that time of night? And then, what did she want in the blue-room? It's used only when Dorothy has a houseful of company, and I could n't think of a single thing that would call one of us in there in the middle of the night. I became so wrought up that I could n't go to sleep till daybreak.

“ But still, Miss Gervaise, I might have for-

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gotten the queerness of what I had seen and heard if it had n't been for the way Miss Leonard took it when I mentioned it next morning.

“ ‘ Did you pass a comfortable night last night, Miss Leonard?’ says I; for, after all, she's a part of my own dear lamb's household, and I've always made it a point to be civil with her.

“ ‘ No,’ says she; ‘ I don't know what it means any more to pass a comfortable night.’

“ ‘ I've heard say,’ says I, ‘ that a walk in the night air is good for wakefulness; but if I had n't seen it with my own eyes,’ says I, ‘ I would never have believed that you would venture from this house alone at two o'clock in the morning.’

“ Well, she looked at me that queer and flustered that I thought for a time she was going to have one of her attacks. She did n't, though; she sat there with her mouth open like a fish's, and her eyes as round as pennies.

“ ‘ Mercy!’ says she after a bit, in a sort of gasp; ‘ I? — outdoors? — last night?’ Then she fairly screamed at me: ‘ Sarah Kemp, do you mean to say you found one of the doors open while we were all asleep?’

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“She seemed so frightened over the bare idea that I really thought I might have been mistaken after all.

“But since that time, Miss Gervaise, I have caught her prowling about long after the house was supposed to be decently asleep. Once or twice when I have dared to speak to her she has gone off in such a flutter that I was always sorry for it afterwards, because I was blamed for the spell that kept her in bed all next day.”

The speaker paused, and her next words were uttered with an air of stern condemnation.

“Miss Gervaise, it is my opinion that a body one-half as timid as Miss Leonard lets on to be could not get up spunk enough to go roaming around this big house in the dead of night.”

“It does indeed seem very strange,” the girl admitted.

But, she questioned herself, what has all this to do with Dolly running away? Was her aunt the cause of it? The idea was too utterly ridiculous. Still it was plain that Sarah Kemp's sole anxiety was for the missing girl, and that she, at least, had reasons for attributing the cause of

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her disappearance to Miss Leonard. That is, she had reasons satisfying to her own mind; they merely mystified Edith when she ignored the alternative; which was that the housekeeper's naturally suspicious disposition had been inflamed by hostility against the aunt. The related circumstances, however, were peculiar enough in themselves to warrant a dismissal of the latter view of them, and, instead, to invite the closest scrutiny. It was unfortunate that some person trained in solving puzzles could not hear this extraordinary recital.

But the old lady is speaking again.

“That is not all, by a jugful. She receives letters which she takes mighty good care no one else shall see—not even the envelopes. The postman's whistle never sounds but what she is right there, standing on the top step, waiting to get the mail ahead of everybody else. Why, if she was a young girl expecting letters from a lover, instead of a sickly, fussy old maid, she could n't be more anxious to meet the postman. I've tried to get in ahead of her. Perhaps she would n't be within sight or hearing when I'd see him coming; but no; he'd no sooner turn

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toward our stoop than she'd glide in front of me, her hand outstretched to get whatever there might be. Then she'd stop and make a great show of looking through it.

“ ‘There's nothing here for *you*, Sarah,’ she'd say in a surprised way that made me feel awful little. Of course there would be nothing for me; there never was; and that was her sly way of taking a dig at me for what she thought was my meddling curiosity.

“ But the queerest thing of all, Miss Gervaise, happened a fortnight or so ago. I am not ashamed to say that for some time I have been keeping my eyes open. It was not every night, or every week either, that I'd be paid for my pains; but the time I refer to I could n't make anything at all of what I saw.

“ I was listening, and I heard the click of the front door. There was not a sign of a light, and in less time than it takes to tell it I was in the lower hall, feeling along the wall for the light buttons. Pretty soon I found them, and waited for whoever it was to come in again.

“ Seemingly the house was sound asleep; but this night I could n't mistake the sound I'd

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heard, for it was as plain as if I had opened and closed the door myself.

“It was n’t above a minute or two that I had to wait, when the door opened without a sound, then closed again with the click, and I could hear somebody breathing. I snapped on the hall light.

“Sure enough, there stood Miss Leonard, clutching a shawl about her skinny shoulders and feeling with her other hand for the newel — to get her bearings, I reckon. The light made her squeal like a rat. Something dropped from her outstretched hand and rolled on the parquetry, and she fell back against the wall, panting.

“‘Oh, it’s you, Sarah, is it?’ says she in a whisper. ‘What a start you gave me. I have n’t slept a wink this night, and a while ago I was nearly paralyzed with terror when I thought I heard the front door open. Oh,’ she says, ‘I am so relieved to find it’s only you.’

“‘But you can’t hear the door *open*,’ says I, with meaning.

“‘Sarah,’ says she, ‘when one’s nerves are stretched to the tension that mine perpetually are no sound is too faint for one’s hearing.’

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“ ‘ Still,’ I kept on, ‘ you were n’t so frightened but what you could come alone through the dark to see for yourself if the door was open. S’pose it had been?’ says I.

“ Well, she shrivelled and gasped and shrunk and wrung her hands at the very idea. ‘ Gracious goodness!’ she says. ‘ I would have died with horror; I would have died in bed, lying there fancying some one was stealing in. Pray don’t suggest such a possibility, Sarah!’

“ What do you think of that, Miss Gervaise? There she was trying to make me believe that she had n’t been out at all, when I knew as well as I know you’re a born woman that she had. She had a right to go, if a woman of her years and station in life can be said to have a right to go tramping about the streets at such ungodly hours; so why should she pretend to be so scarey and try to make me think she’d not been outside at all?

“ ‘ Well,’ says I, finally, ‘ some folks may like to go prowling around looking for open doors and burglars, but as for me, I’d rather die — if so be it I have to — with the covers tucked decently over my head.’

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“She fairly ran upstairs to her room after that.

“Now then, early last night when everybody was supposed to be at the church, who should come slipping in but Miss Leonard. I could n't go myself because no hands but mine could touch my dear lamb's things, and I was busy packing them against the going away. And I know, Miss Gervaise, that she tried to get in without me hearing her. She went to the blue-room, as I'd seen her do once before, and then pretty soon she came tiptoeing out with something hid under her wrap. She was terribly flustered. She kept looking around to see if she was watched, while she hurried to the front door and away again.

“‘Did you ever in your life!’ thinks I; ‘is the woman crazy?’

“Then I went down into the blue-room myself. I saw only one thing out of the way, — the door to one of the cabinets where Dorothy keeps the knickknacks and trinkets she has picked up here and there was open a little way, but I could n't tell whether anything was missing.”

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“Perhaps she had something hidden there — something with which to surprise Dorothy?” suggested Edith.

Miss Kemp sniffed her disbelief of such a possibility.

“Then why has n’t it shown up since?” she demanded. “The Lord knows, there is no reason for keeping it hidden now.”

After a moment’s reflection the girl could offer no plausible one. Then, on a sudden impulse of memory:

“Sarah,” said she, “that time you turned the hall lights on — you said something dropped from her hand —”

“To be sure; I had almost forgotten. I picked it up after she flew upstairs, and before shutting off the light again. Miss Gervaise, you’d never in the world guess what it was.”

“I suspect not, Sarah. My head aches now from guessing.”

“A piece of yellow chalk.”

“A piece of yel —!” the girl was repeating in bewilderment, when Miss Kemp checked her with a warning “*Sst!*” Then, swiftly, the old

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lady hurried over to the door, and in one quick movement unlocked it and threw it wide open.

In the hall stood the cowering figure of Miss Letitia Leonard.

CHAPTER XI

PERSUASIVE METHODS OF SARAH KEMP

FOR an instant there was silence profound. Edith, surprised by the result of Miss Kemp's rapid and unexpected manœuvre, merely sat motionless, staring at the shrinking figure in the hall.

As for the housekeeper, her rugged features were for the moment stern and accusing, the deep-set eyes sparkling with anger; but almost at once her expression changed to one of grim satisfaction, not unmixed with triumph.

"Come in, Miss Leonard," her harsh voice uttered derisively; "come in and explain to Miss Gervaise — if you can — why you are eaves-dropping outside my door."

A shudder convulsed the fragile figure, but otherwise she gave no heed to the ironic words or inhospitable manner. She betrayed no sign of mortification or embarrassment at having been detected in the act of listening at the keyhole.

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Her faded blue eyes were fixed on Edith with a look of dumb appeal, which of a sudden struck through the girl's astonishment; she read tragedy in the look, a misery too abject for words. Rising quickly to her feet, she placed a restraining hand upon Miss Kemp's arm.

"Don't!" she entreated. "Cannot you see the poor creature is suffering?"

The other laughed her incredulity; but the girl knew Miss Letitia's manner indicated something more serious than shock from anything she may have overheard before the door was opened.

In an instant she was at Miss Letitia's side. All softness and gentleness, she caught one of the aimlessly moving hands and placed a firm supporting arm around her.

"What's the matter, Miss Letitia?" she asked, trying bravely to hide her own agitation. "Is it about Dorothy?"

The woman startled them with a sudden scream which was as suddenly checked, and she would have slipped to the floor, had it not been for the girl's restraining arm. As it was, Edith was obliged to struggle desperately with the limp figure.

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“Help me, Sarah!” she sharply commanded.

But already the housekeeper had slipped a hand beneath Miss Letitia’s free arm. Thus together they managed to get her into a chair; but it required the support of both to keep her there.

Edith knelt on one side, while Sarah Kemp, tall and rigid, stood austere on the other. It was now patent, however, that Miss Letitia was well-nigh crazed by whatever emotion possessed her.

Presently, with palsied, twitching fingers she tore wildly at her throat, as if she were suffocating.

“Dorothy!” she panted, her frenzied look skirting the room, only to return each time to the sweet, sympathetic face so close to hers. “Sparks told me you were here, Miss Gervaise; I telephoned; I—I—just had to see you. . . . Oh, God help me!” the last a despairing moan.

But Edith uncompromisingly brushed aside all extraneous issues, holding the overwrought woman to the one thing uppermost in her own mind.

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“What of Dorothy?” she demanded.

“She” — the thin lips twitched — “she’s dead!”

With a horrified intake of breath, the girl recoiled.

“Dead!” she blankly echoed.

“Aye” — Miss Letitia’s voice rose shrilly — “dead — murdered — her innocent young life’s blood bathing forever and ever these guilty hands!”

For a moment she struggled as if the obsession were exerting a physical force to subdue her.

“No,” — meeting by turns their stupefied stares, — “I’m — I’m not — mad; I — I know. She’s — gone — the same way — her — her father went.”

“My God, Sarah!” whispered Edith, tragically, “what does she mean by that?”

But a change had come over the housekeeper. She did not answer Edith’s question. Her powerful right hand closed in a grip of iron upon Miss Letitia’s shoulder, and she forced the frail body back against the chair; with flaming eyes she caught and held the wandering look, and in a

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voice in which there was a compelling, masculine note, commanded:

“Letitia Leonard, while the spirit is wrestling with you to confess your wickedness, tell me what you mean by these wild words of blood and death. Tell me where Dorothy Day is.”

All at once the bony fingers slid with a swift motion from the woman's shoulder to her throat; with terrifying suddenness all of Sarah Kemp's passionate nature seemed to concentrate in her harsh features and voice, a well-nigh insane fury that yet was not without a certain dignity; and the ominous voice again boomed forth:

“Speak! or I'll not leave enough breath in your body ever to utter another word!”

Edith leaned back upon the floor, supporting herself with one arm, transfixed with horror at the scene going on before her eyes. Had there been any doubt of Sarah Kemp's purpose she might have found the initiative to interfere; but the woman's intent was manifestly deadly, and the girl could only gaze, fascinated.

And, too, the critical nature of her plight must have dawned dimly upon Miss Letitia; for she clawed with feeble, ineffectual fingers at the in-

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flexible arm until of a sudden, without another adjuration, the hand at her throat closed.

Miss Kemp was not only in earnest, but, it would seem, she did not intend to wait.

The purpling visage, bobbing ludicrously against the chairback, acted like magic upon Edith. In an instant she was upon her feet, and in the next had flung herself upon the terrible, Medusa-like figure.

“For shame!” she cried. “Sarah!”

The woman reeled back to the wall before the impact of Edith’s body, where she stood, sombre eyes aflame, glaring at the indignant girl like a tigress robbed of her prey. It had been an easy matter to have brushed Edith aside; but, nothing daunted, all her outraged feelings up in arms, she interposed her slight figure between the two women.

By degrees the wicked light died out in Sarah Kemp’s eyes, her bony fingers ceased twitching, but her expression remained hard.

“You saved me from doing something desperate, Miss Gervaise,” she said quite calmly; “but you ’d better have let me make her speak out.”

“Sarah, this is too terrible,” returned Edith,

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with a quivering voice. "If you cannot control yourself, I shall call for help. This poor woman is not responsible for her wild words, but you are for your amazing conduct. Contain yourself; if there is any reason in her madness, I am sure I can find out what it is."

"Something's stirred her, all right," retorted Miss Kemp, closing and unclosing the fingers of her sinewy right hand with a significance that was not lost upon Edith. The woman's face was like flint; her thin lips barely moved. "There was always a suspicion as to the cause of Chauncey Day's death; it's always troubled Dorothy — at one time nearly drove her crazy — but never before did I have the glimmer of an idea that this woman knew even of the suspicion. Why should she? My Dorothy has always kept it to herself. Miss Gervaise" — with an abrupt, fervent eagerness — "that woman must be made to tell what she knows: if you can't draw it out of her, why, I can — and will."

Breathing deeply, Edith strove to calm herself. She was not a little unstrung, for her experiences since coming here were far beyond any she had ever before undergone, or even dreamed of, dur-

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ing her somewhat pampered existence. It was a considerable tribute to her strength of character that she faced the situation so bravely.

Then, too, she was able to think collectedly and to some purpose. She realized that a critical juncture was presented, and that whatever means were to be adopted to meet it, they must be gentle, else nothing at all would be accomplished. It was plain that Sarah Kemp's savage method of inducing Miss Letitia to speak could only defeat its own purpose.

So, presently, after a glance at the almost insensible woman huddled in the chair, she said, —

“First of all, Sarah, we must get her to her own room, undressed and in bed. Will you help me? — or shall I seek for help elsewhere?”

“Oh, you won't have to do that,” muttered Miss Kemp. “I'll help fast enough.” The deep-set eyes bent a look upon Miss Letitia, the sombre fire again glowing momentarily in their depths.

“And you must be gentle,” the girl firmly insisted; “I shall bear with no more such outbreaks, Sarah.”

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“I’ll be gentle, Miss Gervaise. I—I don’t want to kill her.”

Edith hastily covered her ears with her hands.

“Good gracious!” she exclaimed. “I should hope not! For pity’s sake, Sarah, do not talk so.”

And then, quite suddenly, the girl became sensible of a peculiar expression working in the woman’s rough visage. She could not define it further than that it was the evidence of a powerful inward struggle, and doubt as to whether the emotions thus engaged were soft or otherwise, attracted and repelled her by turns. By-and-by, however, her own indefinite thoughts and feelings crystallized into wonderment and pity at a devotion so strong as was Sarah Kemp’s devotion for Dorothy Day. For now Edith thought she had the key to this strange woman’s conduct. Not many days were to elapse before she was to know and understand, and, when she looked back upon this scene, to marvel all the more.

She turned toward Miss Letitia.

“Sarah,” said she, more gently, “come.”

With a queer sound, that might have been either an abruptly suppressed sob or an angry growl, Miss Kemp hastened between them.

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“You leave her to me,” she said brusquely, but not unkindly. “This is no work for you, Miss Gervaise. I’m strong — Heaven knows I’m strong — and I’ll handle her as I would any baby. You just come along and talk to her.”

True to her word, she gathered the now helpless Miss Letitia into her arms with all the gentleness that Edith could have desired, albeit the girl was moved by some misgivings as to the genuineness of the old housekeeper’s pacific moderation — the transition had been so swift, the contrast was so startling.

Edith, as she followed down the stairs, was too preoccupied by the thoughts that whirled through her brain to wonder at the ease with which the powerful, grizzled woman bore her burden. To all appearances Miss Letitia was unconscious — lifeless, Edith feared; her face was so white, so bloodless as to be almost transparent. Surely, cheeks could not be thus devoid of color and hide even a dormant spark of life.

Arrived at Miss Letitia’s chamber, Miss Kemp carefully eased the motionless form to the bed, and in a short time had her between the sheets.

“Now, Miss Gervaise,” said she, rising from

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her stooping posture and standing with knuckles on hips, "you sit with her, and I'll go call the doctor."

The door had no sooner closed behind her than the girl became aware of two terror-stricken, pale blue eyes fixed upon her from among the pillows. Immediately Miss Letitia addressed her in a whisper that was strained and unnatural with fear.

"Has she gone?"

"Yes," said Edith, quietly, laying a hand upon the coverlet. "But you had better remain still un —"

"No!" The woman suddenly developed an utterance vibrating with passion, yet she spoke scarcely above a whisper. "Miss Gervaise — you must answer me — now — at once. Last night — at St. Stephen's — just before Dorothy ran out of the vestry-room, did some strange man appear and hand her a — a — hand her something?"

Much astonished, both at the nature of the question and the impatient eagerness with which it was asked, the girl could merely exclaim,

"Dear me! did n't you know? Why do you ask?"

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“What was it?” Miss Letitia promptly demanded, in the same passionate manner.

“A bracelet,” returned the perplexed girl, “a gilt —”

She was not permitted to finish.

“Merciful God!” the woman on the bed cried, in a tone so tragic, sounding depths of such utter despair, that it thrilled Edith through and through. She clasped her hands and pleaded, tearfully:

“Oh, Miss Letitia! Miss Letitia! Do — *do* explain yourself. Whatever it is your allusions signify, it cannot be so desperate, so terrible, as your manner makes —”

Again the older woman interrupted, but now in a voice so weak and broken that her hearer scarcely comprehended what she said.

“It’s — it’s the sign. What I said is true: she — she’s dead.”

“Oh, no — no — no!”

Edith trembled on the verge of tears; but there was a subtle something about the quietness into which Miss Letitia all at once relaxed that froze the words upon her lips.

CHAPTER XII

THE MARK ON THE POST

MR. COLE'S taximetric reflections were pursued diligently until the cab arrived at the end of the wide boulevard, some miles distant from the Gervaise residence, where he was aroused by the chauffeur inquiring, "Which way now, sir?"

"Thunderation!" ejaculated he. It was annoying thus to have the fact brought abruptly home to him that he was no nearer a feasible plan of action than when he started. After a moment: "Turn around and go back," he commanded.

He could not continue this aimless riding about town all day, however conducive it might be to that tranquil condition of the mind which is a first essential of dispassionate, logical thought. Under such a soothing influence he might meditate and ride forever — or until his bank account gave out, anyhow. But he had spent enough time and money thinking; he must get busy.

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How?

First of all, find the man with the scarred hand. That maimed member seemed to offer the most promising inducement; for a man so marked should not be hard to come up with, if he was in the habit of mingling at all with his fellows. Besides, Cole was animated by a personal grievance to run this particular individual down, and if he succeeded there was no telling to what the capture might lead.

Suddenly his mind was made up.

“Are you acquainted with Pat McFerren’s place?” — this to cabby.

“To be sure, sir,” was the surprised reply.

“Drive there”; and Mr. Cole settled back among the cushions once more.

The cabby’s surprise was but natural. How anybody could be in Williamsburg an hour and *not* know “Boss” McFerren’s “place” signified a degree of unsophistication with which cabby’s imagination was utterly unable to cope.

In many respects McFerren’s was a peculiar institution. The ground floor sheltered a palatial bar-room, back of which were a number of little rooms celebrated amongst the elect for their ab-

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solite privacy; upstairs, mystery. Occasionally, when driven to it by the activities of various reform leagues, the police would swoop down upon the "place," hammer in a few doors, and demonstrate to the world that the charges that Mr. Patrick McFerren conducted a gambling-den were merely aspersions, inspired by political jealousy and envy, upon the good name of a useful and high-minded citizen.

On other nights, singularly enough, the whir of the roulette-wheel, the rattle and clatter of dice and chips, and the shufflings of chuck-a-luck went on uninterrupted, although there was no discernible discrimination exercised in defining the patronage. In fact, it was an open boast of McFerren's that the only limit to the play in his establishment was imposed by the roof, and that its doors were never closed save on "bank holidays." What sort of a cabby would it be, anyway, that did n't know McFerren's "place"!

A motor cab with a faultlessly attired fare, like Mr. Cole, arriving in that neighborhood before noon excited much speculation and comment; departing, it would have gone its way unnoticed. But Cole cared not a whit how much he provoked

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the curiosity of the idle. The stained-glass doors of the "place" opened before him and swung to behind him, and — it must be confessed — the solitary bartender required by the light duties of the early hour, saluted him with the assurance of an old acquaintance.

Mr. Cole merely nodded.

"Nothin' doin', Mr. Cole," the white-aproned young man confided; "they were n't strong last night." The last was pronounced simultaneously with a lifting of the eyebrows, a knowing glance from the eyes themselves, and a jerk of the head and one thumb, all in the general direction of the ceiling. Under the combined influence of so many indications that the "they" referred to dwelt in some mysterious realm above, it was a wonder that Mr. Cole did not at least look up; but he did not.

"So?" returned he, without apparent interest.

"Pat be down soon?"

"The boss's been — and gone. Anything I can do?"

He seemed willing enough, and Mr. Cole appeared to reflect. In a moment, —

"Well, Dan," he hesitated, "I don't know;

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perhaps you can. We are alone; suppose you drop that rag, and come over here to the table."

The young fellow obeyed, first inquiring (as a mere matter of form, for he had never known Mr. Cole to order a drink at the bar) if his caller would "have somethin'."

"Dan," began the latter, "I am trying to find a certain man. He is a tall, military-looking chap, wears a black slouch hat, and has a scar across the back of —"

Up to this point Dan's attitude had been one of polite attention, merely; at the word "scar" he started and betrayed an enlivened interest. Mr. Cole paused, therefore, hiding an incipient yawn behind one tan glove.

"I am glad to see I struck the right place the very first time," concluded he, smiling agreeably at the startled bartender.

Dan sat staring at his *vis-à-vis*, the while the latter glanced lazily from bottle to bottle on the back-bar; but presently, impressed by Dan's silence, his regard met the young man's and settled into a steady, compelling look.

"Out with it, Dan," said he, affably.

Dan was more than a trifle disconcerted; he

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realized that his caller's air of indifference had led him into betraying himself before discovering whether the information sought could be imparted without injuring his "boss." All of Pat McFerren's tools were just that careful. And now Dan could not deny — especially beneath the potent look levelled at him — that he was ignorant of the characterizing scar.

"Mr. Cole — if you don't mind," began he, confusedly, under the fillip of that gentleman's unwavering look — "er — ah — would you be mindin' tellin' me why you want to know?"

Foster Cole managed, in some indefinable manner — for it was by no inflection of voice — to impress Dan with the idea that he was immensely surprised.

"Oh, I say, Dan; come now. Do you always make it a point to acquaint yourself with a man's reasons for inquiring another man's name, before you will consent to tell him?"

The bartender was greatly distressed. But at this juncture he was temporarily relieved by the entrance of a customer who showed unmistakable signs of having been up all night and not caring a hoot who knew it. As it at once transpired

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that this individual merely wanted to know if he was "good for one" until he could get a cheque cashed, he was unable to hold Dan's attention for long. He departed, gloomily, and Dan returned to the table.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Cole," he now protested, "but you steered me right up against it before I had a hunch what was comin'. You know how the boss is; he don't care how much hot air a fellow may let off, so long as he don't go to givin' none of *his* business away — understand? So —"

Cole calmly interrupted.

"Then to tell me this chap's name would be giving away the boss's business — eh?"

"Well, you see, it's like this. The boss has let him hang 'round here the past week or so, and you know yourself, Mr. Cole, that ain't the old man's way when a fellow don't turn himself loose now and then. This ain't no shack for moochers.

"Yet I must say this gazabo does punish a sight of booze. Not that he's ever soused — he always stops short of that, if there is any stoppin' place for him — but he keeps his tin leg pretty well filled up to the overflow.

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“He don’t buck any of the games, though. He’s got somethin’ on, for times he’s loafing in here he always seems to be waiting for somebody or for something to happen. Once in a while he meets somebody in one of the wine-rooms,” — Dan shook his head, — “but I swear I don’t know what’s doin’.”

“Do you know his name?”

For a time Dan remained silent, scratching his nose in perplexity. Presently he said, with obvious reluctance,

“Yes, sir, I do. But for God’s sake, Mr. Cole, don’t ever let the boss know I’ve been shootin’ off me mouth, or it will be twenty-three for Dan Fogarty and crape on me door the next time you call.”

“Certainly not, Dan; you can trust me, I hope.”

“I do, Mr. Cole — I do — or I’d close the face of me tighter than that cash-register there.

“Listen. I’ll tell you. I’ve heard the old man call him ‘Jim,’ and then sometimes ‘Savage’; so, puttin’ one and one together, I make it that his name’s Jim Savage.”

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“Hm-m-m — not a Williamsburg man, then, I take it.”

Again Dan shook his head.

“Can’t say as to that, sir,” said he, philosophically. “These old lushers and tin-horns, they comes and they goes; they blows in from nobody knows where, they makes a little noise for a day or two, and then they beats it for the next town, or are doin’ time, or mebbe takin’ their last ride in the dead-wagon. I don’t aim to keep any tab on ’em; what’s the use?”

Mr. Cole rose to go.

“What would be the most likely time to meet this — er — Mr. Savage?” asked he.

“Oh, most any time after supper. When he ain’t with somebody in a wine-room, he’s generally sittin’ at that table in the far corner, where he can see everybody that comes and goes.”

“Thank you, Dan. And please don’t mention that I’ve been here inquiring —”

“Sure not,” Dan emphatically interrupted. “Trust me, Mr. Cole; I’m wise. You just come back here about eight or nine, and you’ll find him all right — if not to-night, to-morrow night.”

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Cole directed cabby to take him to Lecomte Gibbs's number — he knew his friend would not be at his office — for he wanted to report, not only Edith's and Dorothy's experience with Leporello the seer, but to lay before the magnate several ideas that had taken shape in his mind as a direct result of that morning's conversation with Edith. He also wanted to know whether his friend had heard any news of the missing lady.

However, he and Gibbs did not meet that morning. When next he saw him Cole had a wealth of information to impart, of infinitely greater importance than the episode with the seer and the few half-baked hypotheses now floating hazily in his brain.

“Deuce take it!” he impatiently muttered, “I hope Lecomte is keeping nothing from me. But he has such high and mighty ideas about women that I am by no means positive — regular Chevalier Bayard.” Mr. Cole frowned. “Last night, though, when I first mentioned Dorothy's past — h'm-m-m-m, he looked at me mighty queer.”

At this stage of his reflections, however, they

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were abruptly broken in upon and, in a moment, directed into a new channel.

He happened to look up just in time to perceive a familiar figure disappearing around a corner of the cross street which the cab was approaching.

“Now, what the devil!” he ejaculated under his breath.

The figure was Cullimore’s.

He leaned eagerly forward and took in with a swift, sweeping glance that portion of the walk which Lecomte Gibbs’s butler had just traversed, and was given another start. At that instant the cab was passing a lot whose front was enclosed by a large bill-board, above and beyond which Cole discerned the upper story and roof of a ramshackle old building. It had once, doubtless, been a handsome residence, but was now little more than a wreck.

However, it was not these details that held his attention. Between the huge sign-board, with its glaring advertisements, and the walk was the remnant of an ancient picket fence; on one disreputable gate-post somebody had drawn a yellow circle.

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What was it doing there?

His surprise had been occasioned, not so much by having seen Cullimore so unexpectedly, as by the neighborhood in which the *rencontre* had occurred. It was far from being a nice part of town; the vile odors of the street were also significant of the locality's moral atmosphere, and that the staid Cullimore should be parading its thoroughfares at any time of the day or night was a circumstance of a nature to make one wonder.

In a second or two the cab was at the corner, and Cole looked earnestly in the direction whence Cullimore had disappeared; but in spite of his eager scrutiny of street and walks, the man was not to be seen.

Immediately nearby pedestrians lingered curiously when he shouted to the chauffeur to stop. He sprang out, and with a curt injunction to the man to wait, hastened back to the gate-post with its mysterious symbol.

But his perplexed frown betrayed an inability to make anything at all of it. Like those other markings he had seen marring the whiteness of Lecomte's top step, this one had been drawn with yellow chalk, — quite recently, too, it was plain

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to be seen, — but instead of the letters and digits enclosed by the first, this circle contained only the single letter “ M.”

The symbol appeared thus:



Cole was profoundly impressed by the strangeness of it all. What did it mean? What import was to be educed from the coincidence of Cullimore's presence in the neighborhood and that yellow circle recently drawn on a rotting gatepost? Groping for an answer to these riddles, his mind remained a blank.

He advanced between the two ancient posts and, oblivious of the many pairs of eyes which followed his singular movements with a quite natural curiosity, peered around one end of the bill-board.

He beheld a yard overgrown with weeds and littered with ash-heaps, empty tins, broken bottles, and all sorts of refuse, and beyond, the house. It was a sorry wreck of a structure. Windowless

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and doorless, it gaped at him like a grinning skull. One corner of the porch sagged perilously for want of a support; all signs of paint had long since disappeared, and boards and shingles were stained to a uniform shade of gray by time and weather. Mortar and bricks from the chimneys lay on the roof, where the few remaining shingles were curled like birch-bark.

The peep around the bill-board was enough for the fastidious young man; he balked at essaying the filthy yard and the treacherous steps and floors of the abandoned ruin.

Returning again to the walk, he noted the number opposite and learned from his cabby the name of the street. The view of the littered, weed-grown yard and the gloomy old ruin — perhaps once a home of which its owner had been inordinately proud — had dispirited him.

“What a dismal spot!” muttered he, with a shrug, as if he would free himself of the depression.

Glancing back, he saw the yellow circle glowing like an oriflamme.

CHAPTER XIII

COMPARING NOTES

UNTIL dinner — which he had alone at his club — Mr. Cole put in the rest of the afternoon in an ineffectual effort to find, first, Mr. Gibbs, and, failing in that quest, Miss Gervaise.

But neither was that young lady at home, nor her father, who was in Philadelphia, nor her mother, who might have been at any one of a dozen or so different places — so Sparks, the Gervaise factotum, informed him, loftily, as if the dozen or so places were the only desirable ones in the universe.

So there was nothing left for him but to return to the club, there to kill time over a dinner for which he had no appetite, until the hour arrived for repairing to McFerren's. Although his thoughts were by no means comforting, yet he wanted to be alone with them; so he avoided the overtures of some half-dozen idlers of his

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acquaintance, escaped a dreary game of billiards, another of euchre, and refused a number of invitations, to accept any one of which would have taken up his time for the whole evening.

One little incident, however, caused him temporarily to forget his discouragement. As the heavy plate-glass door of the club swung noiselessly to behind him a painfully rigid little "buttons" imparted the information that a telegram awaited him at the desk. He paused long enough in the reading-room to take in its import. It was dated at Philadelphia and was from Gibbs.

"On a false scent. Home to-night."

"Some grafter after a wad of Lecomte's money," was Cole's disgusted conclusion, as he crushed the yellow slip to a ball and tossed it into a waste-paper basket. And it later transpired that his conclusion was more or less correct.

Next he spent several unsatisfactory minutes with Mr. Flint, the detective, over the telephone.

No, Mr. Flint had heard nothing definite, but he was giving the Day case his attention. Mr. Flint was following closely a number of clues,

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but as yet nothing had developed that Mr. Flint cared to discuss. Promising clues? Of course they were promising clues, else Mr. Flint would not be wasting his time following them. Mr. Flint, however, begged to be excused from telling what the clues were; it would not be professional, and, besides, nothing might come of them, in which case it was not advisable to excite hopes that might be disappointed. What if the clues did lead to nothing, did Mr. Cole say? Oh, in that case, Mr. Flint would unearth other clues—and presumably follow them.

Cole hung up the receiver with a sardonic smile.

Surely the fates that night were against him. Although, under various pretexts, he haunted McFerren's until near midnight, the redoubtable Mr. Savage did not appear; and then, much worn out in both mind and body, Mr. Cole returned to his club and went to bed.

Next morning he arose with unshaken determination. Before falling to sleep the preceding night he had bethought him of a certain acquaintance high up in police circles. So, early

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as it was, he meant first of all to find Edith, and then see Inspector Swift.

At a much earlier hour than he had ever before dared to devote to the same purpose he presented himself to Sparks. That worthy had the temerity to indulge in a surprised stare. But the young lady was at home and had issued instructions that Mr. Cole was to be ushered into her presence the instant he inquired for her.

And he did not have to wait on Edith ten seconds — which must be set down to the credit of her sex, whose delinquencies in this particular are said to give newspaper humorists their characterizing expression of ghoulish glee. The young man was in the act of seating himself in his favorite chair, when, with a catch in his breath, he suddenly stood erect again.

The vision that swept toward him through the *portière*, hands outstretched, face eager, brown eyes solemn, was new and delightful — aye, thrilling. The thrill ran through him just as she thrust her hands into his.

“Foster!” murmured she. “I have the most to tell you! It is so strange — and horrible.”

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He, however, apparently had nothing at all on his part to relate, strange, horrible, or otherwise; his countenance remained unchanged, though his gray eyes yielded up a light of content with the situation just as it was.

Yes, indeed, this was a new Edith to him. Greatly as he coveted her society, and as pleased as she usually was to see him, heretofore his calls had been marked by a dismal formality; they approached each other only near enough to chat and exchange airy persiflage over the barrier. But there was something so intimate in the meeting this morning that for a moment the young fellow's head swam.

Edith was once more the girl he had known — well, he did not want to be specific, but the period his memory flew back to was ever so long ago. The skirt of her pink batiste frock was short enough to display frankly the white canvas shoes, and now and then a glimpse of white stockings, while her brown hair was caught up in one massive braid and held with a single bow of pink ribbon. How much more beautiful it was than when twisted and puffed into the elaborate coiffures with which he was familiar.

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And what a quantity of it! And how wavy and shiny with a light all its own! And how his heart did thump! She was infinitely sweet and lovely, her whole appearance bespeaking a toilet deferred — for him!

He restrained an impulse to draw her closer to him. For it was all at once borne in upon him that, while the pulse-stirring, unconventional freedom of her greeting signified a boundless trust and confidence, her mind was nevertheless occupied with thoughts in which he played but a minor part. Therefore, after a final little squeeze, he released the slender white fingers and turned again to his chair, the same emotionless individual who had entered but a minute since.

“Very well,” said he. “Begin with the strange part and lead by degrees to the horrible. I rested only indifferently well last night.”

“Do be serious,” she expostulated, drawing forward a stool. “I have had an experience that was really dreadful. Perhaps Dolly’s dead.”

He glanced quickly at her as she sat down, propping her elbows upon her knees and lean-

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ing one cheek against her clasped hands which held a wisp of lace handkerchief.

“I think not,” said he, quietly. “But relate your experience.”

And she did — from the time Sarah Kemp drew her across the Day threshold yesterday, until she departed from Miss Letitia, who was by turns hysterical and in a stupor. That lady was now in the care of a nurse, and the doctor had pronounced her condition critical.

Cole remained strangely still as she repeated Miss Letitia's wild avowals that Dorothy was dead; but now and then, during the recital of Sarah Kemp's narrative, he turned to the present narrator as if he would interrupt, though he did so but once. That was when Edith mentioned the bit of yellow chalk which Miss Letitia had dropped in the hall. Truly this young man was gifted with a superb self-control.

“Yellow, did you say?” inquired he.

“Yes. Is there any especial significance in the fact that the chalk was yellow instead of red, or blue, or green, or any other color?”

“There is; but I cannot tell you what.”

“How provoking you are!” complained she;

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but the words were accompanied by a glance from the handsome eyes and a pout of the red lips that eclipsed all reproach.

She moved her clasped hands to the arm of his chair. Her face was below his and turned up to him. How girlish and lovely she was with that braid, thick as his arm, he thought, looped up and tied with a pink ribbon!

“Where is the old net you used to carry your books in?” said he. “Red, it was.”

“Goodness me!” marvelled she, “do you remember that old net? I fear it has gone with the books that made so many journeys between here and the High School.” But Miss Edith was in no sentimental retrospective mood.

“Tell me what you have learned,” she concluded decisively — “what you have discovered.”

“The most desirable woman in all the world,” returned he, still looking thoughtfully down at her. “I believed I had always known her, but — now —”

The color rose to her cheeks and she drew suddenly back.

“Don’t move,” he pleaded — “please!” He

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waited till she leaned forward again, doubtfully, a trifle hesitatingly, and replaced her clasped hands upon the chair-arm. "There!" said he. "I did not answer your question, did I? But for a moment I came near to giving way to an impulse —"

"The idea!" she interrupted, reprovingly. "You! — to own to an impulse!" But, calmly waiting until she was through, he concluded:

"— an impulse to lay my hand upon your head."

"Nonsense!" crisply. "Foster Cole, if nothing more weighty than that brought you here at this heathenish hour of the morning, why, you may go again. I am serious. Think of Dorothy!"

"I have thought of but little else for two whole days. . . . I would have placed it there very tenderly; had you not been looking, you would not have known."

"If you think I am going to stop watching you for a single instant you are very much mistaken." But notwithstanding the firmness of her tone, the color slowly deepened in her face, and all at once she could no longer endure the

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look in his eyes. Her head drooped slowly forward until it rested upon her hands.

“Just one moment then,” she whispered; but he heard it, and his eyes gleamed.

His thin, nervous fingers were instantly lost among the wealth of sunny tresses; stooping down to her, he brushed them with his lips and closed his eyes, intoxicated with the sweet perfume that swept up from her and enveloped him.

The delectable spell lasted indeed only for a moment; the next, as elusive as thistledown in the June breeze that hummed so happily that morning, she was up and away from him, her cheeks rosy, her handsome eyes sparkling, her bosom heaving.

She was the first to recover her equipoise, for the man's look followed her hungrily. Deftly she smoothed the disarranged locks, as much as they would consent to be smoothed, standing the while well out of his reach. She did not yet dare to meet his look; the one or two brief glances she shot in his direction revealed an expression which she had only glimpsed now and then in times past, but which now transfigured

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his features and made her heart leap strangely and her color come and go. It was not right, she tried to assure herself, to be so stirred; it was unfamiliar, and she was afraid; yet joy glowed within her and her self-assurance was without confidence.

“How ridiculous!” murmured she, gracefully bending her head this way and that, while she continued to adjust the disordered tresses which no power on earth could ever make smooth. “I have done my best to put off this moment” — her hands dropped before her and she faced him — “you can’t say I have not —”

“I can’t truthfully say you have not,” he humbly agreed.

“— but ” — her bosom rose in a sigh — “I suppose it was bound to come. We have been such good chums, Foster, you and I; I loved so to talk to you, to seek your advice — you are so wise when you want to be — and now —”

“And now?” He watched her eagerly.

“Now it can never, never be like that again. And I am so sorry.”

With an obvious effort he looked away from her.

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“If wisdom follows the desire for it,” said he, “then at this moment I am Solomon and Daniel rolled into one. I promise not to transgress again, and I protest that nothing has occurred to prevent us being chums — er — forever.”

“Foster,” plaintively, “why are you so silly?” His attitude became judicial. He returned, “If to love your chum with an undying devotion signifies silliness, then am I constrained to admit the soft impeachment. As to why it should be so the invoked wisdom answereth not; I cannot tell you.”

Whether his mood were serious or whimsical she could not determine. For some reason she wanted to sob; but the desire quickly passed, and with a dubious shake of her head and a final suspicious look at the immobile figure in the big easy-chair, she seated herself in her accustomed place some distance away from him. And, in some incomprehensible manner, the atmosphere of formality which he deplored seemed to drop between them like an invisible, but effectual, curtain.

“You have told me nothing,” said she, cross-

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ing her slim ankles and arranging her skirts over them; her composure was now admirable. "You have not even expressed an opinion on the remarkable story which I have just told you."

"Pardon me; I avowed the belief that Dorothy was not dead. It would require more than the irresponsible outburst of an hysterical invalid to convince me otherwise. As for the rest of your story, I can make very little of it — as yet. But we are gathering together a number of clues that are going to direct us to something — some development — and that right soon. Like the estimable Mr. Flint, we shall follow them diligently, whether or not they lead us anywhere."

"Who is Mr. Flint?"

Mr. Cole waved a hand.

"Such is fame," said he. "Mr. Flint is the humble disciple of Sherlock Holmes who sought to entertain us at St. Stephen-the-Martyr's Tuesday night."

"Oh — he! If we were obliged to depend upon a person like that to find Dorothy, I am afraid she would remain lost to us forever" —

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and after a pause she doubtfully added — “if she is not already.”

“Your tone implies a lack of faith in Mr. Flint. But he assures me he is following certain clews; in fancy I can see him, red and perspiring, as he runs at top-speed, this way and that, in pursuit of the nimble and elusive clew; so do not disparage his modest efforts. Perhaps he is even now quite winded and collapsed. However, let us return to our own clews.”

“You seem to relish that word; I detest it; I think it horrid,” said Edith, her lips assuming a distasteful curve.

“My dear Edith, it is classic. Without a clew we could not successfully penetrate this labyrinth — or, at any rate, we might not find our way out again.

“For example,” pursued he, discursively, “there is the yellow crayon. It is indubitably used for some purpose by Dorothy’s enemies — as a means of communication, I have reason for believing; therefore, anybody addicted to the yellow crayon habit is open to suspicion. I must admit, though, a reluctance to suspect

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Miss Letitia of complicity in such a plot as we are now confronting.”

He told her of the yellow symbol on the top step of the Gibbs mansion, the yellow circle on the message in the reliquary, the yellow circle on the gate-post of the abandoned house, and of his unexpected view of Cullimore so near the latter.

“And now,” he inquired in conclusion, “what do you think of this idea: the yellow circles are merely crude representations of a —”

She clapped her hands with sudden enthusiasm and took the words out of his mouth.

“A gilt band!” she cried.

“Exactly.”

“But what do they mean?”

Cole shook his head.

“Let us revert a moment to Miss Letitia,” said he. “Is she unconscious? — raving?”

“No, not unconscious, and scarcely raving in the sense that she is delirious. Her manner was wild, frenzied to an extreme, when I left her; but she comprehended all I said to her. After her last dreadful assertion that Dorothy was dead, though, I could draw no more from her.

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My persistence seemed to make her condition worse, and I was obliged to desist, even before the doctor arrived."

Cole was now convinced that it was Miss Letitia who had procured the reliquary from Dorothy's cabinet. There must have been an intermediary, however, for she herself had not carried it all the way to Lecomte's.

But the fact that Dorothy's aunt was responsible for the reliquary served only to make the riddle more insoluble than ever.

"I will get you a piece of yellow chalk," he resumed. He produced his card-case and took out a card, and with his fountain-pen drew three circles on the back of it. In one he wrote "Kt c-32 c" — the symbol discovered on Gibbs's doorstep; in the second, "Kt B-118," which had been enclosed by the small circle on the typewritten sheet in the reliquary, and in the third a capital letter "M."

"As soon as you have an opportunity," said he, "try Miss Letitia with these. Spring them upon her suddenly; take her unawares; and observe the result. Can you do that?"

"Yes-s-s," she faltered. "But it seems so

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clandestine — so like taking an unfair advantage.”

“I do not believe Miss Letitia deserves such nice distinctions of honor. Anyhow, we must not be squeamish — if you want to find Dorothy.”

“Would n’t water-colors do as well as chalk? My box will provide the shade.”

“I don’t see why not. Any shade will do — so it is a brilliant, glaring yellow; the hue that assaults the eyesight like a lightning flash. Will you attempt it?”

“Yes,” said she, with decision this time.

“And now,” complained Cole, “you have not evinced the least curiosity concerning my adventures.”

“Why!” with unfeigned surprise, “have you experienced any?”

His lips curved ruefully.

“Indeed,” said he, with an injured air, “did you think I was still absorbed in thought? You seemed to apprehend yesterday morning that the process would be somewhat complicated, but I assure you I have come successfully through that ordeal. I have since been quite active; I have accomplished quite as much as you have.”

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She lifted her brows in polite incredulity.

“Did some horrid truckman spatter you with mud? Or perhaps Freddie Dupont sat down on your hat — exciting indeed!”

He smiled tolerantly.

“If Freddie Dupont had sat upon my new Fedora, the sequel would have been much more exciting, I am sorry to say, than any episode of my adventures. But, as it is, the chronicle of the past twenty-four hours will be spirited enough.”

With an assumption of ennui that almost deceived Mr. Cole, Miss Edith stifled a yawn and remarked:

“I daresay I shall not be bored — if it does not take too long.”

“Then I shall be concise,” said the imper- turbable young man. “I have found the man with the scar.”

Nor did he so much as smile when she at once dropped her mask of indifference and turned excitedly to him.

“Foster!” cried she, “you have really found him?”

“I have — ”

She exclaimed again delightedly.

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“ — and I have n't,” concluded he, with irritating deliberation.

“ Oh!”

The interjection was so eloquent of disappointment that he relented and hastened to add:

“ He is like the Irishman's flea: when you place your hand upon him, he is n't there — but I fear I am boring you.”

“ Oh, *do* go on!” with eager impatience. “ I know you are the most tormenting creature that ever breathed the breath of life.”

“ Well, at any rate I know where to find him. Unless something has transpired to scare him away, I think he can be produced at any time. How will you have him served?”

She continued to look at him doubtfully. In a moment, —

“ Foster, are you in earnest?” she demanded.

“ Indeed I am. I made a particular effort — as soon as I comprehended that you were really interested — to convey the matter exactly. I hope to see him to-night.”

“ Oh, do tell me all about it!”

She was animated enough now, and the young man went patiently into details — of his long

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cab ride and his interview with Dan Fogarty. Before he rose to depart he disclosed his plan to call upon his acquaintance who was high up in police circles.

“Inspector Swift,” said he, “is a man of wide experience and has a vast knowledge of human nature. Besides, he is uncommonly intelligent — a type quite different from Mr. Flint. Now, between us, we have the clues — pardon me, the facts — and Inspector Swift is the man — if anybody is — to weave them together so they will mean something. If I get time, I intend dropping in on that Leporello chap, too.”

Although he was obliged to call upon all his self-restraint, he managed to part from Edith without again transgressing. He found considerable satisfaction in the circumstance that she did not again allude to the termination of their chummy intimacy.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE THRESHOLD

INSPECTOR SWIFT was a very busy man. From his office at police headquarters he exercised a supervision over Williamsburg's detective force, distributed by means of branch stations over a wide area, that was well-nigh perfect. In fact, it was generally believed by his subordinates that the Inspector was omniscient, for certain it was that the least dereliction from duty, or negligence, occurring at any of the sub-stations was known at headquarters almost as soon as it happened. As a consequence the men entertained a wholesome fear of their chief, but a fear moderated by respect, because they also knew that he was ever just. He was, indeed, saved from being a martinet by his strict adherence to a wise code of justice.

Personally he was a large, handsome man, some fifty-odd years of age, with iron-gray hair and a white, curling moustache which, together

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gave him an air of distinction, and an eye whose unwavering metallic regard stamped him as an individual of extraordinary force of character. However, unless deliberately called into play, the man's masterful personality was tempered by a courtly air and a polite manner of speech which marked his customary bearing. Yet he was regarded as a taciturn man, unless the occasion to talk was obvious.

Cole was immediately shown into his office. Inspector Swift gave him one quick glance of recognition, waved him to a seat placed *vis-à-vis*, and then assumed an attitude which suggested that he was ready to pay close heed to whatever his caller might have to say. Cole was pleasantly impressed with the fact that this self-contained man did not offer to shake hands.

"I do not want to appropriate more of your time than is necessary, Mr. Inspector," began the young man, as soon as he was seated, "but I believe I can excite your interest in a case toward which the police have been rather lukewarm."

The Inspector waited to hear what case.

"I refer to the Day disappearance," was Cole's reply to the unspoken question.

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Instantly Inspector Swift pivoted around to a sheet-iron filing-case, and in a moment produced therefrom a long manilla envelope. It contained one folded sheet of paper covered with typewriting.

While he was thus engaged Cole continued:

“By saying the police have been lukewarm, do not understand me as intending a reflection upon Mr. Flint. Apparently it was not a criminal case, and there was nothing for him to take hold of. I can see that his report was brief”; the young man glanced at the envelope and smiled, — “I can even surmise its nature.

“Miss Day, however, did not run away with anybody — I mean, voluntarily — and in trying to discover what did become of her, I have turned up some mighty queer things.”

Inspector Swift thrust the typewritten sheet back into the envelope, which he tossed upon his desk.

“Do I interest you?” inquired Cole.

The other inclined his head.

“You called the turn on that report,” said he, his eyes crinkling in a smile. “Mr. Gibbs is an intimate friend of yours, I take it for granted.”

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“He is; Miss Day also.”

“Proceed — from the beginning — and take your time.”

This invitation Cole promptly obeyed. He first repeated Edith's story of what had occurred at the church, he recounted the episode of the brass reliquary, Officer Spotwood's adventure with the speeding motor car, his own with the scarred stranger, Edith's experience with Sarah Kemp and Miss Letitia, the Leporello episode — everything, in fact, which he thought might bear even remotely upon the case.

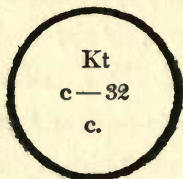
But in the telling he refrained from mentioning the yellow symbols until the last. He was governed by a well-defined reason for so doing: he observed that the Inspector, at those stages of the narrative which he considered especially significant, permitted his eyes to apprise him of the fact, although otherwise he sat as motionless as a sphinx; and the frequent mention of the gilt band elicited no such gleam of appreciation.

“Now, then,” said Cole when he got to this point, “after I had seen Miss Gervaise safely home Tuesday night, I went to Lecomte's house.

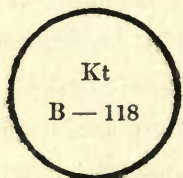
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The entry steps are white marble, and on the top one somebody had drawn this figure."

With the last words he produced from his pocket a stick of yellow crayon, with which he had provided himself for this very purpose, and drew the symbol upon the floor:



"The warning in the reliquary bore in the upper left-hand corner a small symbol like this."

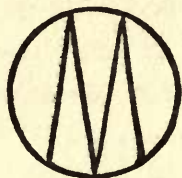


No exclamation escaped the Inspector, but the atmosphere became fairly galvanic with his interest before Cole had completed the second loop. He took the crayon from the young man's fingers.

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“I have never before seen just those,” said he, his composure unruffled; “but I am familiar with this.”

And he quickly drew beside the two figures a facsimile of the one Cole had seen on the gate-post:



“And I have seen that, too,” remarked Cole; “had you given me time, I would have drawn it myself.”

“Have you seen it recently?” Inspector Swift turned upon him keenly.

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Where?”

“On the gate-post of an empty house that faces number seventy-one B—— Street.”

For a long pause the two men sat silently returning each other's look. That of the Inspector was peculiarly penetrating. At last the latter broke the silence; he wheeled his chair around to the desk and pressed a button, remarking, quietly:

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“Mr. Cole, I’m glad you came to see me to-day.”

Then the office door opened, and to the person standing there the Inspector said:

“Tell Vawter to come here.”

“But there is one little detail that seems not to have occurred to you,” observed Cole, as the figure vanished from the doorway; “Miss Ger-vaise was quick to see it —”

“You mean a possible connection between the yellow circles and your gilt band?” Swift interrupted. “I’ll tell you something, Mr. Cole; you deserve to know it, and I shall trust to your discretion that it goes no further.

“For some months the police in every important city in the United States have been aware of the activities of what is perhaps the shrewdest and most unscrupulous gang of criminals with which we have ever had to cope. Their operations, apparently, cover every branch of crime.

“Now, during the past two weeks we have been repeatedly coming in contact with them right here in Williamsburg, and that is about the most I can say of what we have accomplished in

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the way of running them down — a task which the police of the country are united in. A number of recent local crimes have been traced to this Yellow Circle crowd; but the abduction of a young lady of Miss Day's standing is, I'll declare, quite the limit. I pledge you the assistance of the entire department, Mr. Cole, in your efforts to clear up this mystery of Miss Day."

The possibilities opened up by this amazing information almost took away the young man's breath; Miss Letitia's assertion that Dorothy was dead did not seem so absurd in the light of it.

It was indeed startling that an association with avowed criminal purposes and of such magnitude could come into existence at all; it was positively alarming that it could continue for any considerable length of time, and that the police of the entire country should remain absolutely baffled before its evil power.

"There is a master mind behind it," the Inspector broke in upon his reflections, "a giant intellect, a veritable prodigy of crime and organization. Mr. Cole, I would be almost willing to sacrifice my position, jealous as I am of it, in

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return for meeting that man face to face." The speaker pointed to the floor.

"That yellow circle," said he, impressively, "is their trademark."

Full of wonder, Cole failed to hear a light tap on the door, or the door opening. He was unaware of another presence until he saw a man standing motionless beside Inspector Swift's desk.

"Vawter," Swift was saying, "tell Mr. Cole about the B—— Street house — all that is known up to this minute."

"It is very little more than was known at the time of finding the body —"

Cole's aplomb utterly forsook him.

"Body!" shouted he. "In Heaven's name, what body?"

"That we don't know, sir, no more —"

Here the Inspector interrupted.

"Mr. Cole knows nothing about it, Vawter; I told you to begin at the beginning."

"I beg your pardon; I did n't understand.

"It was this way," turning again to Cole: "last night Patrolman Riley heard considerable talk about some young fellow in a motor cab

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having stopped at the B—— Street house the day before, and acting in such a way as to attract everybody's attention. It's a pretty tough neighborhood, and as a rule the people living there mind their own business; but the man in the motor cab certainly created something of a stir."

Cole and the Inspector exchanged knowing glances.

"Well, Riley could n't make much of the gossip," Vawter went on; "but some time after midnight a fellow told him that a wagon had driven up the alley at the rear of the empty house, and that two men had unloaded something and carried it inside. Then Riley made up his mind to investigate.

"It was mighty ticklish business walking around over the rotten floors, and luckily Riley did n't have to go far. In the kitchen he stumbled over the dead body of a man."

The speaker produced a card and handed it to Cole.

"This was pinned to his coat," said he.

The card was blank save for one word, printed in capitals with a lead pencil:

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“TRAITOR!”

— and beneath it a yellow circle.

By the time Cole was ready to return the card he had recovered his composure.

“Not a nice epitaph,” observed he. “Am I to understand that you do not know the victim?”

Vawter shook his head.

“So far,” he supplemented, “we have failed to identify him or to determine where or by what means he met his death. There are no marks on the body — that is, none of any special consequence. Yet we have reasons for believing the man was murdered — ”

“He has in mind the yellow circle on the gatepost,” the Inspector interpolated.

“True,” said Vawter. “That is all I can think of.”

“Oh, no, Vawter,” suggested his superior.

“You mean the condition of his clothes?” Vawter returned, after which he turned to Cole. “That has been a very puzzling feature, Mr. Cole. The man’s left sleeves — of the coat, shirt, and undershirt — had been cut with some sharp blade clear to the shoulder, leaving the entire arm bare. On the upper arm were the only

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marks we were able to discover on the body — a few trifling scratches.”

Inspector Swift watched Cole with an intent but illegible expression while Vawter proceeded with his recital.

“At this same point an expanse of skin an inch or such a matter wide, which was much whiter than the adjoining surface, encircled the arm. The white strip was so plain that it amounted to a conspicuous mark. Slide that ring down on your finger, Mr. Cole — that’s it. There, where the ring has been worn, — that is just the way the man’s arm looked.”

The young man whistled. He slid the ring back to its place, leaned back in his chair, and noted the Inspector’s intent regard.

“Well!” he said. “The gilt band that I saw would just about encircle an average man’s arm; the uneven ends could be accounted for by the fact that it had been roughly cut or filed in two.”

Inspector Swift brought the palm of his right hand gently down upon the desk top.

“Good!” he breathed. “And the few trifling abrasions on the victim’s arm can be accounted

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for by the hurried filing and cutting." Then for Vawter's benefit he told, briefly, the intelligence brought by Cole respecting the bands.

"What a rum idea," remarked Vawter, contemplating the fastidiously attired young man with an added interest and respect.

"Perhaps, sir," he suggested, "you might be able to identify the remains."

"I am willing to try, at any rate," Cole acquiesced.

"You shall have the opportunity presently," said Swift. "Vawter, you may go."

As soon as the two were once more alone, the Inspector went on:

"Now then, Mr. Cole, I want to put you on your guard. The warning of those fellows is not to be ignored. The bizarre appearance and disappearance of the little brass box containing the gold band was done for the purpose of impressing you with their earnestness, and to demonstrate that their machinations could reach easily even into the privacy of your homes. If they only knew how keen you are on their trail, I would n't give that" — he snapped his fingers — "for your life. Be careful."

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“Thank you, I shall,” returned Cole. Then, with abrupt eagerness: “But look here,” cried he, “there are some details I am unable to reconcile with the amazing revelation you have just made. Why, for instance, should the gilt band have produced so profound an effect upon Miss Day? It is preposterous to associate her with anything criminal; waste no gray-matter over that idea.”

“From your own statement, Mr. Cole, the article was not unfamiliar to her.”

“True,” admitted the young man. “But please to bear in mind that the thing struck her with horror.”

Swift gravely inclined his head, saying:

“The horror of remorse, perhaps.”

“Remorse? Rot!” Cole was vehement. “What, then, of Miss Leonard? Am I to conclude that she too is a member of your precious Yellow Circle? Pshaw! you don’t know those ladies, Mr. Inspector.”

“I am glad you have raised this question,” returned the Inspector, in his reserved way. “There is something queer there, Mr. Cole; something in the relations of those three women

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— Miss Leonard, Miss Kemp, and Miss Day — that requires light.”

“Miss Gervaise has always been somewhat suspicious of Miss Leonard,” murmured the young man, meditatively, “but I don’t know why.”

“Is that so?” Inspector Swift appeared interested. “I would bank more on the intuition of a good woman than personal opinion educed from observation. I have been married a good many years, and I know.

“However, there is something in this connection that I cannot understand; yet at the present moment I will venture to say that one or all of those three ladies could give us a good deal of information about the ringleaders of this gang. Understand me: by making such an assertion I do not blame or reproach the ladies; these fellows are no common malefactors; maybe the ladies, you yourself, or Mr. Gibbs, have rubbed elbows with them socially, and if that’s the case, why, the possibilities for getting three unprotected females into their power are practically unlimited.”

So far the Inspector spoke with a grave and

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impressive earnestness; now his manner abruptly altered and he asked sharply:

“By the way, what was Miss Day’s father’s name?”

“Chauncey.”

Inspector Swift produced a huge scrap-book from a drawer of his desk, and opening it upon his knees, ran through its pages until he found what he sought. It proved to be a newspaper clipping.

“Perhaps you know something about this,” said he, handing it to the young man.

The clipping was plainly an old one, and had been cut from some paper’s classified columns. It read:

PERSONAL.—Chauncey Day’s heirs. If relatives of the late Chauncey Day will communicate with Lawrence Winterburn, 88 Board of Trade B’ld’g, Williamsburg, Pa., they will learn something to their advantage.

“Queer,” returned Cole. “I know this much about it: Winterburn is Miss Day’s attorney, and has been during her residence in Williamsburg.”

“Was there any trouble over settling her father’s estate?”

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“None that I ever heard of. She was an only child. Where did you get this clipping?”

“It was sent to me something over four years ago by a California correspondent. He found it in a San Francisco paper, and, believing as you do about the estate, he was very curious to know what it meant — wanted to know whether I could throw any light on it at this end. Day, as I understand it, died rather suddenly and under circumstances that should have invited inquiry, although I believe none was ever made. What do you know about that?”

“No more than that he died suddenly; but I don’t believe any particularly suspicious circumstances surrounded his death.”

“Well, that, of course, is off my beat — a long way—but I carried this clipping to Winterburn.”

“Well?” said Cole, much interested.

“He very politely gave me to understand that it was none of my business.” Swift smiled. “It was n’t, and I came away again.”

The young man scowled at the bit of paper as he handed it back.

“It puzzles me,” he said; “I cannot even evolve a hypothesis that might account for it.”

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Inspector Swift rose and donned his uniform cap.

“Don’t neglect my warning, Mr. Cole; be constantly on your guard.

“And now,” he went on, “suppose we take a look at the body. It’s at Bramley’s private mortuary. The man’s apparent station in life, and the fact that we found considerable money on him, made me feel that we would n’t be warranted in exposing him in the public morgue. News of finding the body came in too late for the morning papers, therefore very few people have viewed it so far. It is only a step to Bramley’s.”

“You have been unable to determine the cause of death?” inquired Cole, as they walked along.

“Yes. I’m pretty good at that sort of thing, too; but I confess this case has beat me so far. I have requested Dr. De Breen to look at the body; if the cause of death can be determined at all, he’s the man that can do it.”

In a few minutes Cole was standing beside the sheeted form on its marble slab. An attendant switched on a cluster of lights immediately overhead, and then handed the Inspector a card.

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“Dr. De Breen has just left,” he explained. “He told me to give you this, if you called.”

The officer glanced at the card, and a curious expression appeared on his face; he then passed the card on to his companion.

The bit of pasteboard bore one word written thereon in a large, angular hand: “Aconitine.”

“What does it mean?” asked Cole, uncomprehendingly.

The Inspector nodded toward the still figure beneath the sheet, replying:

“It is the name of the most powerful known poison — and perhaps the hardest to detect.”

Then the attendant turned back the sheet, and Cole was unable to restrain a start.

“Higdon!” he exclaimed in a horrified whisper; and, facing Inspector Swift: “It is Arthur Higdon — Mr. Gibbs’s valet.”

CHAPTER XV.

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BEFORE taking his leave of Inspector Swift, Cole gave him all the information he was possessed of concerning the unfortunate Higdon, which was indeed very little. The man had been in Mr. Gibbs's employ only a few days, and as he had presented himself armed with excellent credentials, the magnate had not troubled to go behind them.

Next he and the officer considered the potentialities of Miss Day's disappearance, and the two men — the novice and the expert — finally agreed upon the following supposititious details as supplying the most credible theory.

When Miss Day sped down the corridor from the vestry-room she had been seized as she ran by the short passage leading to the rector's study, her cries muffled, and immediately conveyed to the motor car which was waiting in the alley. The lights, doubtless, had been masked, and were

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allowed to remain so until the car cleared the alley. To be sure, the plan had been an extraordinarily bold one; but having before them the power to draw the girl into their trap, it had been comparatively easy to spring the trap itself. The daring of the undertaking had made its execution simple.

The abductors, undoubtedly, had been thoroughly conversant with the night's programme; they knew that the corridor would be dimly lighted, and that even should they encounter any one, their presence would pass unnoticed among the many who were coming and going about the church. Moreover, they had been confident that the corridor would be empty as the time approached for the ceremony, and, lastly, that the heavy plush curtain which hung at the entrance of the short passage leading to the study might harbor them indefinitely, their presence unsuspected.

A glance at the appended rough chart will make plain the facility with which such a plot could be executed.

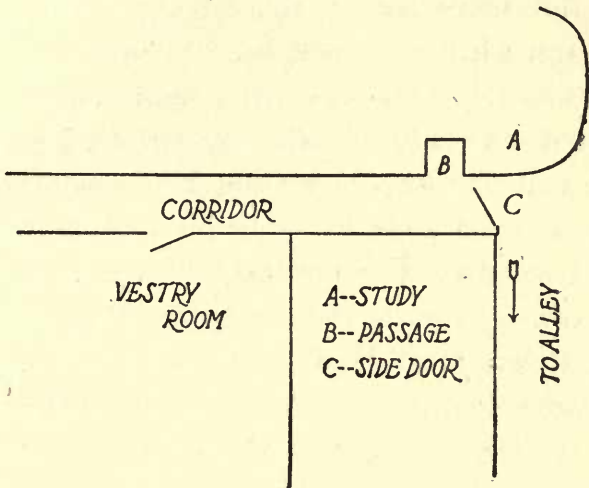
“To sum up,” said Cole, after the foregoing hypotheses had been carefully weighed, “the

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three important questions to solve are: What was the nature of the message brought by the intruder? Who were the perpetrators of the outrage? and, Where is Miss Day at present?"

The officer nodded, adding,

"You might also have included an inquiry as



to the motive for abducting her at all; as I understand it, the deed was committed without any forewarning."

"Unless Miss Day was brave enough not to mention any threats that might have been made before Tuesday night."

"But the question uppermost in my mind is,"

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said Swift, "Who killed Arthur Higdon? And I think when your questions are answered, mine will be too. Mr. Cole, we are in the midst of a very pretty mystery."

In this last sentiment the young man heartily agreed.

"But don't bother Mr. Savage until I am through with him," said he. "I owe that ruffian something on my own account, and as you are not yet ready to make any arrests, I pledge you that I will wring from him whatever he knows — if I have to wring his neck first."

"I count on you for that," returned the Inspector. "I wish you were one of my force, Mr. Cole; you missed your calling by not becoming a detective. But I'm going to set Flint to watching Savage; it won't do to take any chances with that adroit gang, and I don't propose to have them slip through my fingers at the last moment.

"I think, though," he reflected, "you will not get much from Mr. Savage; the probability is you will find him to be only a tool."

"Well, I shall dull the edge of his usefulness. And also I have an idea which I want to carry

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out in connection with Leporello: have you a flash-light you would lend me?"

"Certainly. But I don't see what is to be gained by flashing a light upon him."

"Neither do I—yet. There's a reason, though, besides a desire to mystify and impress susceptible women, for him keeping his identity so secret. Maybe if I glimpse his features, I shall know what that reason is."

"Maybe. But be careful, Mr. Cole."

With the Inspector's parting injunction ringing in his ears, Cole went directly to Leporello's studio.

The seer's apartments were in a fashionable quarter of the city, but in a very unfashionable building. The house was an obsolete, mansard-roofed brick, and dreary looking in its slate-hued paint and severe squareness of outline. It represented a quite common type of shabby gentility, missed, as it had been, by the wave of improvement which had swept over the remainder of the neighborhood. There was a well-kept lawn with flowers, an iron fence enclosing the front, and a brick walk connecting, in a straight line, the gate with the porch steps.

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From the neat black and gilt sign fastened to an iron rod on the lawn, the visitor concluded that Leporello occupied the entire house.

A dainty maid — Parisian from the tips of her ridiculously small, high-heeled slippers, to the contrast between her black, short-skirted dress and the white apron and cap — admitted him. He smiled at her as he recognized Edith's soubrette.

Yes, Monsieur Leporello would doubtless see him presently. If so, he would make known his willingness; if not — well, *soit!* Monsieur might as well go away again. No, she required no card; Monsieur Leporello would know Monsieur's name.

Cole was sceptical; but he was not particularly desirous of thrusting his card upon a man whom he believed to be a charlatan and a cheat.

Nevertheless, he was just a trifle startled a few minutes later when a voice from the alcove addressed him by name, and considerably more so when the mystic fished up from his bag some details of his army life which he had hoped were forgotten.

It had been Cole's intention suddenly to flash

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the light while the seer was in the midst of his patter, in the hope of catching him unprepared; but he became so interested in the voice and what it was saying that he stood irresolutely fingering the tube in his coat pocket and hesitating from second to second to draw it forth.

He could perceive no shadowy outline of a human form in the darkened alcove, as Edith professed she had. The gleaming sphere of crystal seemed to blind him, for between the looped, ebon-hued curtains beyond there was nothing but utter blackness, and in the midst of that blackness a hollow, uncanny human voice telling strange things. The young man presently admitted to himself that the experience was positively weird.

However, when Leporello mentioned Edith's name he interrupted.

"You will please refrain from mentioning any lady's name," said he, pleasantly. "It is quite enough to take so many liberties with mine."

"As Mr. Cole chooses," returned the voice, with the arid disinterestedness of third-person address. "That being the case, the reading is at an end."

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Cole gripped the lantern, his thumb on the button. But still he hesitated; the voice did not pause.

“Mr. Cole has heard enough, however, to be convinced of my ability to bring hidden things to light.”

“What!” surprised, “in this Stygian darkness? Light in here, my dear Voice, can be but a figure of speech; that being true, any gossip might honestly make the same boast.”

A pause followed; then Cole detected an angry note.

“I resent your frivolous attitude of mind,” said the voice; “my calling is a dignified one, worthy the most profound respect. Indeed, I demand that —”

Cole interrupted. The shrug of his shoulders was, of course, lost in the darkness, but the contemptuous tone of his voice was not. He had the electric lamp out of his pocket now and was holding it behind him.

“That is all owing to the way one may look at it. If it is honorable to spend one’s time delving into other people’s past lives for the purpose of startling them later on by flinging petty,

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personalities into their faces — if to be a scavenger of one's peccadilloes is dignified — then you command my profoundest respect. Have you any more of my idiosyncrasies to air?"

Not a sound came from the alcove. Cole, smiling in the darkness, waited perhaps one second; then he brushed aside the small round table which supported the crystal, the globe falling with a muffled thud upon the heavy carpet; he lifted the drapery and directed a beam of light into the alcove.

It was empty.

Nor was there any sign of trap-door or secret passage. Cole flashed the beam of light this way and that, chagrined, half expecting to hear a mocking laugh flung back at him from some invisible source; but the place was utterly silent and empty.

He was in the act of sounding the walls with his knuckles, when the outer door was thrown violently open, the room was flooded with daylight, and the maid addressed him angrily from the threshold.

"*Qu' est que vous faites donc?*" cried she.
"*Sortez!*"

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“I am not familiar with your language, my dear,” returned he, with a smile; “but I surmise I am invited to — er — depart. How about my request to *see* Monsieur Leporello? I shall be overwhelmed with disappointment if I fail in my errand.”

The pretty figure was drawn up primly stern. She ignored his manner.

“The charge for a reading is twenty dollars,” she said.

The young man’s uplifted brows expressed surprise at this exorbitance, but he protested only mildly.

“I am expected to pay for my fun, I see,” said he. “I have been much amused, mademoiselle, but not to that extent. I would much rather remain with —”

“If monsieur cannot afford it,” she calmly broke in, “of course he will be considered a guest, and treated accordingly. Monsieur Leporello is of a beegness of heart that turns no unfortunate away.”

Cole chuckled.

“Why, if you put it upon that high ground, my dear, I suppose my hands must go up. I

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would never have stooped to bargain with one so fair if I thought the money would not go beyond your pretty fingers. Those eyes are more potent and persuasive than a brace of six-shooters; here's a trifle more — for yourself. And now, which way must I turn in this maze of fantastic corridors to find the hidden oracle?"

The "pretty fingers" closed decisively upon the money, but further than that the girl merely looked her bewilderment.

"I mean Monsieur Leporello," he explained — "although 'Signor' would be a more appropriate title of courtesy, my dear — how may I see him?"

"*C'est difficile* — impossible! That is a pleasure I have nevaire myself enjoyed."

Cole stared his amazement.

"What!" exclaimed he. "Do you mean to say you have never seen your employer?"

"It is true," returned the girl, simply. "It is his *secrétaire* who instructs me."

After another moment's scrutiny of the petite figure and small, piquant face, Cole concluded that she did speak truth, or else she was the most admirable dissembler he had ever encountered.

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“Well then, the secretary,” said he, “where is he?”

“Ah,” was the response, “he is only here on occasions.”

Cole considered. It presently began to dawn in his mind that the seer had been at some pains indeed to keep his identity concealed; why, if the girl did not lie, she might pass him right there in the hall and not know him! A man who hid himself with such diabolical cleverness was not to be got at easily, and the young man at last concluded that it would be quite useless to persist in his attempt—for the present, at any rate.

As he sauntered along the street some blocks distant from the studio, his communings were of a sudden broken in upon by wheels grinding against the curb beside him. He looked up quickly and beheld a closed carriage. The glass nearest him was down, but the curtains were drawn so that he could not see the interior. Instantly the horses were brought to a standstill, a hand was thrust through the curtains, and a bit of folded paper held out to him.

He took it in a dazed way, half mechanically;

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at once the driver whipped up his horses, and in a moment more the vehicle had disappeared.

As soon as he recovered from his astonishment at this amazing *rencontre*, he unfolded the paper and read the following typewritten words:

“The writer does not willingly resort to violence on any occasion. Violence is always deplorable. But if you do not desist from the quest upon which you are now bent, you will be put out of the way as inevitably as the stars pursue their courses. In your ignorance you are interfering with something you know nothing of. Stop before it is too late. This is the second and last warning; you have only to persist in your present undertaking to learn the sequel. *Beware!*”

“Oh, to the devil with such tommyrot!” was Mr. Cole’s disgusted comment as he crushed the warning in his hand. But then the Inspector’s advice to be on his guard came as a second thought, and he carefully smoothed the paper out again.

“Perhaps he would like to see it,” he reflected. “Well, I shall be vigilant; but I am going right now to see if I cannot unearth Mr. Savage by daylight. Why be idle till night?”

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

MR. COLE was constitutionally averse to walking; therefore the determination to go to McFerren's made necessary the procuring of a cab; and, the cab once well on its way, his last thoughtful ride was brought forcibly to mind and, by and by, Inspector Swift's suggestion that he should have been a detective.

He smiled in huge enjoyment. "I am not so bad for an amateur," reflected he; "the game is decidedly more exciting than bridge or golf, so why not? I may, with propriety, assert that I am at least a dilettante in the exacting (if not exact) science of criminal investigation. Wonder what the deuce Edith would say?"

He grinned, and then his brow darkened: it was not very difficult to imagine — perhaps not precisely what Edith would say, but the tone in which she would say it. It was a tone that he

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discouraged because it made him ill at ease; mentally, he referred to it as his conscience.

The possibility, therefore, was not to be thought of, although he had stuck to the matter in hand with more pertinacity than he had manifested in many a day. There was a particular zest to be found in this man-hunting game that he had never experienced before, and were it not for the fact that in the present instance a deep and personal interest was at stake, he felt sure the stimulation of his faculties, the constant systematic mental effort, could not be otherwise than broadening and upbuilding, to say nothing of the exhilaration to be derived from having to be perpetually on his guard against the unexpected. Yes, indeed, it would be immense fun.

Afternoons usually found McFerren's place one of considerable activity. At such times Dan Fogarty was reinforced by a white-aproned replica of himself, and the twain frequently found their time entirely occupied dispensing liquid refreshment and repartee, both with cheerful impartiality, to the throng in the bar and to certain other invisible customers back in the wine-rooms.

So it was a busy hour when Cole entered. He

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ran an eye over the various groups — some of whom were very noisy; while others were morosely still — but it encountered no one who even remotely corresponded to his concept of Jim Savage.

He took a seat at one of the circular tables and settled himself for a long wait, if necessary; but after a while the crowd thinned sufficiently for him to have a few words with Dan.

The latter came over to him and began wiping imaginary spots of wetness from the table-top.

“Saw your party this morning, Mr. Cole,” said he in a confidential undertone; “too bad you was n’t here. He did n’t stay long, though; seemed to be kinda nervous — could n’t sit still.”

“Well, I have been unlucky,” returned Cole; “but, with unabated ardor, I am still pursuing Savages.”

Before he had uttered the last word he was struck by an abrupt alteration in Dan’s manner, and at the same time became aware of somebody standing not a great distance behind his chair — somebody who stood with the frozen rigidity of one who has been startled and suddenly filled with apprehension. Dan had become all at once



“Dorothy took a chair before the crystal.”

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constrained, and after a final perfunctory dab or two at the table, he started to move away. Simultaneously the man behind moved forward to where, by craning his head around, he could command a view of Cole's features.

The young man found himself face to face with the very individual whom he had sought so eagerly.

If he was taken unawares, there was nothing in his manner to show it. Remembering his bad pun on the fellow's name, he even smiled. Then, after a calm survey of the newcomer, he remarked pleasantly:

"Introduce me, Dan, will you?" And Dan announced — gruffly, to hide his embarrassment,

"Mr. Savage — Mr. Cole."

The former recoiled a step, and his bewildered glance travelled rapidly, suspiciously, between the bartender and the fastidious young society man.

"The devil!" muttered he, presently.

"No — Cole," the owner of the name smilingly corrected. "I think Mr. Fogarty enunciated it quite distinctly."

Savage contemplated the tall, clean-limbed

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figure confronting him as if in doubt whether to set it down as merely an animated fashion-plate, or as representing a force to be reckoned with. There was a suggestion of youthful ingenuousness in the delicate, impassive features of a nature to disarm suspicion. If Dan Fogarty had been of a mind to interfere, he could have called Mr. Savage aside and whispered a word in his ear that would have caused that worthy to consider; but he did nothing of the kind, and after a moment Savage grinned, then laughed — a manifest effort at cordiality — and extended a hand. It was not the right one.

“What can I do for you?” he said in a rumbling bass.

Mr. Cole, stooping, scratched an imaginary speck of mud from one of his pearl-gray spatter-dashes, and thus did not see the hand outstretched to him. As he once more sat upright, however, he managed to observe the man’s right hand; and, sure enough, across the back of it was a white cicatrix, so deep that it well-nigh deformed the member.

At the deep-voiced question he rose.

“Er-ah — suppose we retire — one of the

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private rooms, you know?" He waited with brows expectantly uplifted, absently tapping one gloved hand with the head of his stick.

Dan coughed suggestively; but when Cole shot a look at him he was busy scouring the bar-top with a cloth, technically known as a "sour rag." Savage had already started toward the rear, and now, just as the young man turned to follow him, Dan Fogarty abruptly abandoned his task and called after him,

"I say, Mr. Cole, before you get busy would you just mind writing down that address for me?"

Savage stopped and scowled in an ugly manner, all his suspicions at once alert; but Cole's mien was one of such easy, careless indifference, he appeared to be so blind to the fact that he was helpless in the hands of the enemy, that the first-named's maleficent expression relaxed into another which was scarcely more pleasant, albeit he was once more grinning.

"Sport!" he contemptuously muttered below his breath, as Cole reached the bar. "Easy picking."

Dan had laid a piece of paper upon the bar-

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top and was holding out a bit of pencil. Cole seized the latter, and under a sudden inspiration wrote. While he was doing so he heard Dan whisper cautiously:

“For heaven’s sake, Mr. Cole, be careful! By the looks of him, that husky was not misnamed. And remember — if anything happens — I can do nothing.”

“Yes you can,” Cole whispered back, without looking up. “If anything happens, read this.” Then aloud: “There you are, Dan; if you need him he will come at once.”

He had written Inspector Swift’s telephone number, choosing to assume that the officer had been neglectful respecting this rogue with the scarred hand. Cole had considerable to learn regarding the Inspector’s promptness.

“Thank you, sir,” said Dan, folding the paper and tucking it into a pocket of his white jacket.

Cole returned to the waiting Savage, saying politely:

“Now then, if you please, I would like to have a few minutes of your time. What would you like in the way of refreshments?”

Savage stared insolently a moment; then —

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“Whiskey,” growled he. “Dan knows. . . . Same kind, Dan.”

“Open a fresh bottle for Mr. Savage, Dan,—bring the bottle and a siphon of seltzer.”

Such reckless munificence tended further to allay whatever doubts may have disturbed Savage, for he grinned again, disclosing through his stubble of beard and mustache a double row of yellow, uneven teeth.

In a moment they were seated in one of the private rooms, a round-topped table between them. Savage lost no time in pouring himself a drink from the freshly broached bottle.

“Here’s how,” said he, amiably, in his *ore rotundo*.

“You must pardon me, Mr. Savage, but I never drink before dinner.”

Savage scowled and set down his glass.

“Oh, well,” said Cole, carelessly, pouring himself a portion and diluting it without stint, “just for sociability.” He touched the glass to his lips; the other drained his at a gulp, scorning the “chaser” of iced seltzer.

Cole came at once to the point, but he spoke so pleasantly and seemed to have so mild an

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interest in the inquiry, that a second passed before the full significance of the words pierced the other's comprehension.

"What have you done with Miss Day?" said the young man, smiling.

Savage stared; then his face grew black.

"So that's your game, is it?" he uttered thickly. "You've been stalling me all along, have you? You're a damned elbow, is what you are!"

"Elbow?" with brows inquiringly elevated — "meaning a detective? I assure you I am not."

"Looky here, 'bo," rumbled the hoarse bass, "I can bite you in two, just like that."

He deliberately crushed the whiskey-glass between his teeth and spat the particles out upon the floor. Cole seemed to be profoundly interested.

"You're a deuced amusing chap," said he. "Let's see you bite the bottle."

Savage snorted and crashed a fist — the right one this time — down upon the table. The scar was livid.

"What you after?" he angrily demanded. "You think you're pretty wise, don't you?"

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You are — I don't think! Young fellow, you don't want to play foxy with me. Come now — out with it; what you want?"

Quite unmoved, Cole leaned back and, carefully arranging his trousers with the double aim of avoiding wrinkles and preserving the crease, crossed his legs. This accomplished to his satisfaction —

"I will repeat my interrogation," said he, calmly. "What have you done with Miss Day?"

The other's mouth closed with a click.

"I don't know what the devil you mean," bluntly.

"Oh, yes, but you do. How do you suppose I found you so quickly if you had not been recognized when you thrust yourself, in the ungentlemanly way you did, among those ladies Tuesday night? That was the act of a ruffian, Mr. Savage."

The man leaned forward toward the imperturbable speaker, his ill-favored countenance a mirror of fury.

"Cut that out!" thickly. "Who there ever saw me be —"

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Abruptly he checked the question. Instead of completing it he noisily clapped an open palm upon the table, by way of emphasizing his next words.

“Don’t you get gay with me, young fellow! I’ve slipped a knife into more than one guy for less than you — ”

“I daresay. But the guy wasn’t looking when you did it.”

“What’s that?”

“And in Williamsburg they think twice before slipping knives into guys — not that I am afraid of you, Mr. Jim Savage; this bad man from Bitter Creek role fits you like a glove, but it is only mildly amusing. It soon becomes tiresome, however. Suppose, now, you keep cool until you hear what I have to say. Don’t be an ass.”

Blind fury now gave way to open-mouthed astonishment. Cole proceeded, the while Savage sat and glowered at him, apparently speechless.

“Perhaps you are not aware of the fact, but Mr. Knowles Swift, chief of our efficient detective department, is particularly desirous of laying you by the heels. I happened to get in

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ahead of him, and, having done so, propose to give you an opportunity to square yourself — if you can. Look at your gratitude. . . . No, don't interrupt; it is not polite, and besides, I am not through. If you do not hear me out, you will manage to wriggle into a far deeper hole than you are at present.

“Why did you want Miss Day out of the way? What magic did you exercise to accomplish your end? What potency lay in that golden charm you employed?”

“My word, Mr. Savage! if you knew how curious I am to have these questions answered you would not hesitate a second to relieve my impatience.”

Savage did, though; in fact, he did not speak at all. In a moment Cole asked casually,

“By the way, Savage, do you happen to know what the penalty is for desertion from the army in time of war?”

“What do you mean?” muttered Savage, darkly. The look that transfixed Cole had become evil unalloyed. He snatched up the glass containing the seltzer and dashed its contents viciously to the floor; then the scarred hand

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reached aimlessly for the bottle, and, having found it, unsteadily poured the glass brimming full. "What do you mean?"

Foster Cole smiled, rocking easily to and fro on the rear legs of his chair; but had Savage known him better he would have recognized in the cool figure the alert vigilance of a hawk.

"Oh, I simply wished to inquire. I have no intention of pursuing the subject further—providing you are willing to be frank concerning Miss Day. If not, why, we shall take up the matter of army desertions."

Savage sat twirling the bottle and sliding it back and forth on the table. The look of the man was deadly.

"Damn you!" he sputtered, panting—almost inarticulate, "I'll tell you nothing. You know too much already!"

Instantly Cole brought his chair forward with a bang. His own eyes narrowed; a dangerous light gleamed from between the contracted lids, and his air of easy indifference vanished. He was no more the insouciant, rather vapid young beau.

"Yes, I do." The words came forth with the

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crisp incisiveness of a cracking whip. "I did not place you at first, Jim Kelsey; but I know you now. You did not have that scar when you were in Cuba — you never acquired it in any worthy battle, or the War Department would add it to your description. Savage, eh? Humph! an apt — er — *nom de plume*, for I doubt not that it is on the record of more than one 'pen.'

"You and Cantarini were a sorry pair of dogs, and I must say that when he was drowned, and you deserted from our company, we did not mourn him, nor were we over-anxious to have you back. You had not forgotten Lieutenant Cole, though, you —"

He dodged just in the nick of time, and the heavy quart bottle splintered against the partition. Next instant table and chairs went over with a crash, and, with fingers closing gradually tighter upon the younger man's throat, the pair threshed furiously about, Savage snarling like an infuriated animal.

Out in the bar Dan Fogarty was swearing into the telephone because Central was so slow about replying.

CHAPTER XVII

A KNIGHT OF THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

AS the combatants lurched to and fro there was this difference in their purpose: Savage — or Kelsey, to give him his proper name—was animated solely by a meaningless fury, the deadly fury that is inspired by panic terror; while Cole's every movement was a part of a carefully calculated design. The grip on his throat was temporarily shutting off his wind, but he had not been taken entirely unprepared; he had not missed the least of Kelsey's movements, and while rocking so carelessly on his chair-legs, had weighed every chance for and against himself. He had anticipated the savage spring, and, furthermore, that every ounce of the fellow's strength would be behind it.

Within ten seconds the high-pressure began to tell. Kelsey was panting, distressed; his eyes were red, and all at once — he never knew how it happened — Cole was no longer in front

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of him, helpless in his cruel grip. With a lithe movement the young man suddenly freed himself; the same movement placed him beside his antagonist, and then Kelsey was given a demonstration, one that he would not forget for many a day, of the deceitful muscular development of a Harvard ex-stroke-oar.

A stinging right-hander behind one ear sent him crashing face forward against the partition, and as he recovered himself, more than half-dazed, Cole's left hand shot straight from the shoulder to the point of Kelsey's chin. That settled it. It was all accomplished so quickly that a spectator, had one been present, could scarcely have followed the action, and he certainly would have been much surprised at the result. Both blows were clean and lightning-like, and Kelsey collapsed like an empty sack, falling in a huddled heap in one corner. When he recovered some minutes later he was as tractable as a whipped spaniel.

Meanwhile, the disturbance had not passed unnoticed by the *habitués* of the bar. At the first crash of table and chairs they paused only long enough to locate the tumult's source, and

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then began to press rearward. The sounds proclaimed that a spirited fight was in progress near at hand, and if there was one thing more than another in which the frequenters of McFerrer's revelled, it was a fight, whether spirited or not. The present one, however, gave indisputable tokens that it was exceedingly spirited.

But their course was stayed. A circumstance so unusual as to excite wonder—even to the extent of dividing the crowd's attention with the combat; two blue-coats were barring the passage, while a quiet, unassuming, gray-haired man, whose face was smooth-shaven and like tooled leather, was slipping hurriedly along from room to room until he determined which one was the scene of the lively fray. Then he opened the door and peered in, and quietly closed it again.

When he turned away a little smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes; and it remained in evidence until after he had returned to the two policemen, to each of whom he whispered a few words. Next he went over to one of the tables and seated himself, seemingly indifferent to the excitement which quickened the interest of the

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pushing, elbowing crowd. Speculation was loud and clamorous; but the quiet man simply sat — and watched.

When he opened the door Kelsey was lying senseless on the floor, while Cole was leaning carelessly against the wall, his arms folded, and surveying his supine adversary with a bored look. The rattle of the latch caught the young man's attention. He looked up, recognized Mr. Flint with a reassuring nod, and the door closed once more. Now that he was the victor, he knew that he was not to be interfered with.

He made some effort to smooth his rumpled collar — the only evidence of the conflict to be remarked in his appearance — and nodded cheerfully at the door.

“Thanks, Mr. Inspector,” said he, “for your kind solicitude; but I have n't required it yet.”

After a while certain twitchings and sounds on the part of the prostrate Kelsey proclaimed returning consciousness. Cole's features instantly hardened, and, stooping, he caught the man's collar and aided the process with a by no means gentle shake.

Kelsey groaned and tried to sit upright. Cole

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jerked him to a sitting posture and propped him against the partition.

“Well,” said the young man, calmly, “I have counted you out four times; I suspect that left jab will detain you for a period — eh? If not, get up and we shall start the next round.” Then he jeered: “Time!”

But there was no more fight in Mr. Kelsey — a fact which he made known, indubitably, by a wild glance toward the door, and an involuntary movement in the same general direction. Cole promptly placed his back against it.

“Suppose you tidy up the room a bit,” suggested he, grimly; “it looks and smells like a pigsty.” Then, as Kelsey hesitated, his eyes suddenly narrowed, his thin lips tightened. “Move!”

Kelsey obeyed.

“Set the table and chairs upright again, you dog.”

All hesitation was now gone from the fellow's actions; indeed, save for a slight shakiness of the legs, he bestirred himself with a certain alacrity.

“Now sit down,” went on Cole, as he resumed

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his own chair. "What have you done with Miss Day? This is the third time I have put the same question, and the last; so get your wits together and answer up promptly."

There was a hard look about Cole's eyes and a crisp curtness of intonation that seemed to inspire his hearer with terror. The man's jaw was dropped and he stared with a sort of awe at the menacing figure confronting him across the table. He exerted an effort, however, to do as he was bidden.

"Gimme a drink," gasped he, hoarsely. The rumbling bass was ludicrously tremulous and uncertain. "I'll talk — so help me! — if you'll only gimme a drink. What did you hit me with? Gawd! it nearly put me out for keeps."

The inquiry was ignored. Cole did not remove his stern regard from the other's features. As the end sought was to make the fellow tell whatever he had to tell, if a drink would aid him any, he was perfectly willing that he should have it. So he curtly directed him to press the indicator button.

Except for Kelsey's groans and uneasy stirrings, there was silence while the order was being

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filled. A measure of liquor, however, inspirited him wonderfully. He set down the empty glass with a steadier hand.

“S’ help me Gawd, Lieutenant, I don’t know where the lady is.”

“What did you do with her?”

“Nothing.”

“Come now, Kelsey, do not lie. I am not to be trifled with another moment.”

“Lieutenant — s’ help me! — I — I — I ’m telling the truth. I never set eyes on the lady after I give her the bracelet — strike me dead if I did! I did n’t even know she was gone till I heard ’em talking in here about it next morning, and I looked it up in the papers and seen I was suspected of having made way with her. That’s the truth, if ever I told it in my life.”

Cole studied the repulsive features, and considered. Truth and Kelsey, doubtless, were scarcely on speaking terms; but the more he conversed with the man it became increasingly certain that he and Dorothy could never have had anything in common. And there was an intensity of earnestness in the fellow’s tone that was un-

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mistakably convincing. But had he not intruded upon the company in the vestry-room at a time when the most daring of outsiders would have hesitated to do the same thing? Assuredly he had. What, then, was Cole to think?

“Why did you give her the bracelet?” he presently asked.

Kelsey started to shake his head, but stopped with comical abruptness and fell to feeling his jaw gingerly with one hand.

“I—I don’t know,” stammered he. “Lord, man! that was a swinger you handed me.” And he added wistfully: “Wish I knew what you hit me with.”

“Look here, Kelsey,” said Cole, scowling, “you pay attention to the matter in hand. I have had enough ‘don’t knows’; I want what you do know—and be pretty quick about it, too. Are you aware that an officer is waiting in the bar for word from me? Now, about one more minute of this trifling, and I shall hand you over to him. Make your choice.”

“Lieutenant—I swear!—I make solemn oath!—I’m doing my best; though if it was known I was squealing, I’d be murdered for it

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as sure as you 're a-setting right there in that chair."

"But you talk like a crazy man," insisted Cole, rapidly losing patience.

"Gimme time to get my wind. I done just what I was told to do — no more, no less."

"Ah" — light suddenly broke — "and who told you to do it?"

"The Master."

"Who is the Master?"

"Dunno."

The inquisitor leaned forward upon the table, his absorbing interest indicated solely by a glint in the narrowed eyes and a tenseness about the sensitive lips and nostrils.

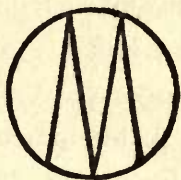
"How, then, did he tell you to do it?" asked he.

"Why, the sign — it would always let me know when I would be wanted; I 'd wait here till word came, and then I 'd do what I was told. Sometimes one and sometimes another would bring me the message or the money — nobody I ever knew, though. I had no kick."

Cole's lip curled in disgust. So, then, the Inspector had been right: the fellow was a mere

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hireling dog. Apparently, however, the young man was on the right track; the catechism was becoming absorbing, and the catechist's eagerness mounted by leaps and bounds. He produced the yellow crayon. Quickly he drew a circle upon the table, a capital "M" inside it.



"Is that the sign?" he asked.

But the question was not needed. Such of Kelsey's features as were visible through the stubble of beard became suddenly ashy, and he stared at Cole like one fascinated. Presently he half rose and pushed his chair back.

"You!" the word rattled in his throat —
"you!"

Cole merely sat motionless and waited. For one fleeting instant the idea of posing as "the Master" — whoever that mysterious individual might be — possessed him, but at once he dismissed it as being wholly impracticable.

As "the Master" he would be supposed al-

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ready to know everything concerning Kelsey's movements on the eventful Tuesday night; besides, there were without doubt certain signs by which members of the villanous fraternity made themselves known to one another. And, moreover, unless Kelsey were bound by an oath more potent than his present fear-inspired willingness to yield up whatever he knew, there was no necessity for assuming any role at all. Cole was gratified by the unmistakable indications that the shot had told; in all likelihood, the effect produced by the symbol was sufficient to serve his ends; so he would let the fellow remain in ignorance as to how much he might or might not know.

"Sit down, Kelsey," said he, quietly, after the pause. "I make no pretensions to being your infamous 'Master'; but you see, I am conversant not only with his sign manual, but of at least one occasion when it was used to direct you to the perpetration of a criminal act. An attempt to hide anything from me will not pay."

Kelsey slowly sank back into his chair, completely cowed and apparently stupefied with wonder.

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“That — that’s the sign, all right,” muttered he. “Where did you get it?”

“Never mind. Where did *you* get it?”

“From Alec Cantarini — in Cuba — before he was drowned.”

“Cantarini!” marvelled the young man.

And then his memory flew back to the days when he was first lieutenant in a company of volunteers that had seen some pretty rough service in Cuba. And it was a rough lot of material that had gone to the making of that company, too. Kelsey had been of it, while Cantarini had carried a Krag in the same regiment but in a different company.

Cantarini!

Heavens, how he had hated the man! He had been the *bête noir* of every one of the regiment’s officers.

There had always been something strange, even mysterious, about Alessandro Cantarini. Without ever committing himself to any overt act, or laying himself open to a charge of fomenting trouble among the men, still it was an indisputable fact that he had possessed some secret, well-nigh uncanny, power of stirring up discon-

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tent and dissatisfaction in the regiment, which at times amounted almost to rank insubordination. There was no denying that the fellow's potent magnetism had been a force to sway his comrades and bend them to his will.

Had his influence been for good, he would have proved an invaluable ally; but as his only impulses seemed to have been evil, he remained a constant source of trouble and vexation to his officers who, on more than one occasion, had good reasons for believing him even dangerous to the army's well-being.

When it was reported, therefore, that Cantarini had been drowned, the news was received with feelings of relief, none the less sincere because they were not expressed. True, the body had not been found; but there had been no time then to search for the bodies of privates who were foolish enough to get themselves drowned. The man's name and appearance had been Italian — to the best of Cole's recollection, at any rate, he had been of the Latin type — but he had always claimed to be an American-born citizen.

“ So Cantarini showed you the symbol and

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how to use it, did he?" said Cole after a while. "How much more did you learn from him?"

"Well, it was n't me alone that he initiated into the Golden Circle; a dozen or more of the men of our regiment joined and were given the grips and passwords, and told how to get word to 'the Master.' They had to pay for it, too. Cantarini told us we were 'Knights of the Circle,' and he soldered a little brass band on the arm of each, which we were not to take off unless we wanted to be killed. The band had each man's number engraved on it."

"Your number is C-32, is it not?"

"Yes."

"And what was Arthur Higdon's number?"

"Higdon? I don't know him."

"Well, that can rest for the present. All the bands were not brass, were they?"

"No. By paying twenty dollars more, you had a solid gold band give you. Some of the men paid the money, and were to get the gold bands when the army returned home. Oh, Cantarini had 'em going, all right. After we were all hard and fast sworn, he told each of us different places in New York, Chicago, 'Frisco — a lot of towns

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where, if we were in trouble or wanted to let the Master know that he could reach us, all we had to do was to draw a yellow circle with our number in it. It always worked, though I somehow never got to see any of the other knights.”

The principle of the system began to show clearly to Cole, and he could not but admire the cleverness with which the arch-criminal made use of his dupes, keeping himself well concealed in the background meanwhile, and the different members unknown to one another. Beyond peradventure the common rascals were well paid for their services, too.

In a moment he went on with his inquisition.

“Tuesday night, then, you were simply acting on instructions from the Master: is that correct?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you about it. Five weeks ago I was in Chicago. I was broke, and had left my sign on a dock-stringer just west of Clark Street — on the river, you know — and the very next day word came to my shack for me to blow to Williamsburg. I had already learned never to wait long when I got the high sign with that circle and letter ‘M’ tacked to it; so I beat it here on a freight, and reported as I was told.

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“Well, the same day I was handed a piece of money that looked good to me, and then the guy what gives me the money takes me out to a swell neighborhood. We hangs around a big house for a good bit, and pretty soon the lady what I handed the band to comes out. The guy tells me to watch her, to see if she leaves town, which I does till last Monday. Then the same guy comes to me, takes me to St. Stephen’s church, tells me how to get in and a whole lot more. When we gets back here he tells me about a swell wedding — the lady and some millionaire stiff — the next night. That was last Monday when he tells me this.

“I ’m to get inside the church and watch the rehearsal — that ’s where I seen you, though there was n’t much light — and then on Tuesday night I ’m to wait at the corner of the church till eight sharp. Right on the dot — if I don’t hear different before — I ’m to walk fast down to the side door, into the little room where the lady was and give her the gold band, which this guy hands me. Then I ’m to whisper something in her ear and make my get-away as quick as I can.”

“What was it you whispered?”

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“I had it wrote on the back of a card, but I lost it somewheres.”

“Card!” said Cole, sharply — “what sort of card?”

“Why, just a plain card — some kind of fortune-teller’s; I disremember his name.”

“Ah!” breathed Mr. Cole, with satisfaction. “And you lost it — somewhere about the church, perhaps?”

“Dunno.”

For another pause Cole surveyed the evil features; then, —

“Have you forgotten what was written on it? — what were you to whisper to Miss Day?”

“Well, it was something like this: ‘The instant Lecomte Gibbs’ — that’s the guy the lady was to marry, ain’t it? — ‘the instant Lecomte Gibbs steps through the study door he’s a dead man. Remember, Death never misses the Circle’s victims!’”

“I suspect not, poor devils!” muttered Cole, with a look that made Kelsey involuntarily recoil.

“What did you do then?” he next asked.

“Why,” said Kelsey, “I beat it — I comes

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here to wait, as I was told to do, for another piece of money.”

“Kelsey,” said Cole, contemplating him from beneath gathered brows, “if that’s true, why were you back in the neighborhood of the church just before daybreak?”

The question obviously astonished Kelsey.

“Was you the guy in the alley?” asked he, and when Cole vouchsafed no reply he went on:

“When I quits the church, I comes straight here. You see, we counted on the disturbance, which my coming in in the way I did stirred up, making the whole bunch not think to follow me till I had plenty of time to fade. Nobody followed me, and when I made sure of that, I heads straight for here.

“By and by the guy comes — about one o’clock, I reckon it was — and hands me my money. Then he tells me to get back to the church and hunt for the bouquet and gold band. He says it’s somewhere in the yard or alley, and when I finds it I’m to bring it to him here, which I does.

“He told me, though, there would n’t be nobody at the church — that everybody’s gone —

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but a fellow was in the alley with a glim, nosing around for something. He comes pretty near copping the bouquet with the band inside it, and I has to rap him easy with my blackjack to make him forget it."

"Easy!" exclaimed Cole.

"Sure. I did n't want to croak him; he was just some mutt that did n't know no better than to be buttin' in where he had n't no business."

"Well," said Cole, dryly, "I helped square that individual's account with you, at any rate. By the way, Kelsey, what is the meaning of that second letter 'c' in your circle?"

"That means I wanted to get a message to the Master."

"'Communicate'? — I see. And you never experienced any trouble doing it?"

"No."

And that was the sum total of Kelsey's knowledge concerning Miss Day's disappearance — not a hint as to motive, or that would throw the least light upon the conspirators.

Still, considering all the disadvantages under which he had worked, Cole believed he had ample reason for feeling gratified at the progress made.

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When he rose to depart the fellow became almost tearful, beseeching his protection.

“I’ve peached,” breathed he, heavily, “and they’ll fix me. It’s all up with me, when the Master knows it. For Gawd’s sake! don’t let ’em get at me. I’d rather be pinched and have it over with.”

“You shall be ‘pinched,’ all right, Sir Knight of the Golden Circle; but as to protecting you — h’m-m-m.”

Cole fell to pondering a suggestion prompted by the other’s appeal. For Kelsey he entertained not the slightest pity or sympathy; blackest of all, in his estimation, the fellow was a deserter, and on top of that, he had even betrayed his fellow-rogues.

But he represented a link — and a highly important one, too — in the chain that would lead to the arch-conspirators of the plot, who were also, very likely, responsible for poor Higdon’s death.

Now, if he could lay hands upon Kelsey’s “guy” — the go-between — another link, and one still more important than Kelsey, would be in his possession. After joining Flint in the bar,

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he tersely recounted everything he had learned from the ruffian, to which the detective listened with the closest attention. The two then arranged the details of a scheme whereby Kelsey was to be used to bring the intermediary within Flint's reach.

"You will take care of Kelsey?" said Cole, rising to go.

The only response was a smile, but it was sufficiently significant. Flint produced a memorandum-book, which he opened upon the table, and a pencil.

"Spell Cantarini's name," he requested — "Alessandro Cantarini, did n't you say?"

Cole did so. "But he's dead, you know," he supplemented.

Once more Flint smiled, as he methodically inscribed the name in his book. Then he returned book and pencil to their respective pockets.

"Mr. Cole," said he, quite irrelevantly, "did you ever read 'The Count of Monte Cristo'? If not, do so; allow me to recommend it as a highly amusing and instructive tale."

CHAPTER XVIII

TRAPPED

FOSTER COLE'S conversation with Le-comte Gibbs, after leaving McFerren's, was, as may be imagined, a very long one; what the younger man could not on the instant recall his friend was not long in reminding him of, for Gibbs was fertile in detail-eliciting interrogations touching upon a subject fraught with such poignant interest for himself. Therefore the most of their talk may simply be passed over.

“I feel as if my hands were tied,” said the magnate shortly before Cole took his leave; “I have had no experience that might guide me in a case of this kind; but I have not been altogether idle. Money usually accomplishes wonders,” concluded he; “we shall see what it can do for us in the present instance.”

His features and bearing were beginning to betray the great burden of his anxiety; he had the appearance of a man very tired, mentally

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as well as physically; and his young friend bent upon him many a curious sidewise glance. Cole manifested a sudden interest at this allusion to the power of money. Money is usually the motive at the bottom of all criminal acts.

“What do you mean?” inquired he, quickly.

“Why, the idea was suggested by my trip to Philadelphia. A young lady who answers in a general way to Dorothy’s description was injured there yesterday morning in a street-car accident. She was removed unconscious to one of the hospitals, and there was nothing on her person by which she might be identified. It was not Dorothy, however,” he listlessly ended.

He was once more pacing to and fro in his luxurious den, while Cole sat as before, from time to time thoughtfully regarding the Oriental bronze lamp with the ruby-like ornaments.

“You were sent for?” the young man now said.

Gibbs nodded, supplementing, — “Hired a special train as soon as I got the word.

“But on the way,” he went on, “the idea occurred to me to have several thousand copies of Dorothy’s photograph struck off, both pro-

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file and full face; which I did, mounting them upon one card and appending to each a minute description and the offer of a substantial reward for any definite information concerning her. They are being sent broadcast.”

“Well!” was Cole’s comment. “You were certainly thorough. Lecomte, what is a ‘substantial reward’?”

“Oh, I thought ten thousand would perhaps be sufficiently inviting to produce results. If not, I shall double my offer.”

Cole hid a smile.

“My word, Lecomte! I am almost persuaded to wait until you double it. But results will be produced, all right — as long as that offer stands — though probably not just what you might expect. Do you think I have accomplished nothing?”

The older man paused in his promenade long enough to place an affectionate hand upon the speaker’s shoulder.

“Indeed you have, Foster,” said he, gravely. “But” — he resumed his restless pacing — “to what does it all lead? Your yellow circles and gilt bands and fisticuffs with bar-room loafers

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are quite confusing to me. Am I to believe that I am the object of seething plot and intrigue? And if so, who are the plotters? It is all utterly incomprehensible."

"Lecomte," said Cole, very quietly, "Tuesday night — in here, after I had returned from seeing Edith home — why did you give me such a queer look when I first mentioned Dorothy's past?"

Gibbs dropped into a chair, but did not answer.

"Come," urged the other, "don't be pig-headed; you know you ought to tell me. What did you keep back?"

The magnate's brow gathered in a scowl, and he sat drumming the arms of his chair with impatient fingers.

"I suppose I should not suppress anything that may be instrumental in clearing away this cloud of mystery," he presently said, when Cole interrupted.

"I should hope not!" exclaimed he.

"But," the other went on evenly, "one shrinks from attaching any importance to an anonymous communication."

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“So!” the young man was watching him intently. “An anonymous letter! How interesting! And what did it say?”

“I sha’n’t tell you,” was the blunt response.

“Lecomte — you idiot!” retorted Cole, surprised by the unexpected rebuff; “it may be the very means — the one thing needed — to put the case into my hands. Heavens and earth, man! how can you justify yourself in withholding a possible key to the riddle!”

Gibbs commenced tugging at his moustache. Said he, —

“Look here; that damnable letter could not be of the least assistance to you. Besides, I destroyed it as soon as ever I gathered its import. I should like to get my fingers inside the collar of the scoundrelly blackguard that was responsible for it.”

“So it was damnable, eh? — and written by a scoundrelly blackguard. What else about it?”

“Nothing,” shortly.

“I beg your pardon, but it is something. It is easy, for example, to infer that the letter reflected — ”

Gibbs broke in with sudden heat.

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“It did! It reflected on Dorothy’s character in the vilest manner imaginable. For pity’s sake, drop the subject.”

“In a moment,” returned the young man, imperturbably. “When did you receive it?”

“Monday morning through the mail. It was typewritten, without date, and unsigned.”

“Was there a circle?—anything of that kind?”

“None whatever. There was nothing but a single brief, typed sheet.”

“Thanks,” remarked Cole, squinting at the bronze lamp. “But you are remarkably short-sighted, old chap, for not telling me all about it.”

Gibbs responded to this in a very quiet manner, but the words caused Cole to lift his brows and to whistle. Said Gibbs,—

“It were better that Dorothy remain forever lost than that I should use such a scurrilous missive as a means of recovering her.”

After the astonished whistle—

“You did n’t speak to Dorothy about it?” Cole asked.

“Certainly not. I merely treated it with the contempt it deserved.”

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Cole stared—and thought. After a while, “Very well, Sir Galahad,” said he, “I am wasting my time with you. It is deuced funny, though, that you should be more contumacious than the first individual upon whom I lay my hands, who has every reason for remaining still. Perhaps, now, if I used the same methods on you —”

“Foster,” said Gibbs, with abrupt earnestness, “do not fancy that I am ungrateful or unappreciative, for you know the contrary to be true—more than I can ever express.”

“Oh, I do not think that,” the young man said, opening the door; “what I do think had better not be expressed. I sha’n’t be so reticent, however; I will give you an object lesson in candidness: Lecomte, I think you are a chivalrous old ass. Good-bye.”

Cole arrived at his club in time for a late dinner. He ate alone and with more zest than had marked last night’s meal, notwithstanding the fact that his thoughts clung with annoying pertinacity to the anonymous letter.

Nine o’clock found him at McFerren’s, curious to learn whether anything had come of his

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and Flint's plan to trap the unknown intermediary. The detective was seated at one of the round-topped tables in the bar, a mug of beer in front of him, diligently perusing the pages of an illustrated weekly publication, whose antecedents and principles were appropriately proclaimed by the gaudy pink hue of its pages.

When Cole addressed him, however, Flint looked up with the blank, vacant stare of one contemplating an utter stranger who has unexpectedly intruded within the sacred narrow circle of one's individual privacy. At least, Cole was made to feel that he was such a trespasser. And as he was by no means dense, the young man quickly realized that such an elaborate denial of acquaintance was not without purpose; therefore he immediately assumed the role of a mistaken stranger, apologized, and retreated to another table.

Flint resumed the pink pages (in which he seemed to be prodigiously interested), and did not once glance in Cole's direction. Occasionally he would take a reflective sip from the mug, with the air of a man whose leisure is in no way circumscribed.

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For some minutes the young man was at a loss to account for such conduct; but presently his attention was arrested by another familiar figure among the constantly shifting, moving throng. The place was hazy with tobacco smoke; there was much loud talking and noisy laughter, and rattling and thumping of glasses on bar and tables; in one corner a mechanical piano discoursed weird rag-time melodies; hence the few individuals who chose a quiet glass, or a cigar or pipe, away at one of the more secluded tables, were, as a rule, undisturbed, even unobserved.

Again Cole glimpsed the familiar figure, and this time recognized it. It was the detective, Vawter.

He looked quickly back to Flint. That gentleman had laid aside his paper and was busily writing something on what Cole took to be a page torn from a memorandum-book. To the observer it appeared as if the detective, from certain uncanny, facial contortions on his part and an occasional glassy stare into vacancy, was engaged in an extraordinary mathematical calculation, and was experiencing considerable diffi-

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culty in obtaining a desired result. Presently he left off writing, carelessly crumpled up the paper in one hand, and after a moment or so, rose in a leisurely way and moved toward the door. As he passed Cole's table he contrived to drop thereon the crumpled sheet of paper, which Cole at once covered with his hand.

The young man waited. Flint paused at the cigar-lighter to light a cheroot; he exchanged a word or two with the bartender, and then the swinging-doors flopped to behind him. Cole observed, in the hasty look he cast around before smoothing out the paper, that Vawter was occupying the chair vacated by Flint. Then he flattened the sheet upon the table.

"You are being closely watched," — he read that far, then instinctively ran an eye over the crowd: if he was, he could detect nobody in the act. He turned to the note again. — "V. and I are unknown to the parties, so it is better that you should not recognize us. Nothing has happened yet, and I think it is because of you being here so much" — ("A polite *congé* he's handing me," grinned the reader.) — "but whatever you do, *be careful*," — the two words heavily underscored, —

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“especially after night. For the present, anyhow, I would advise you to stay close to your rooms; or if you have to go abroad after night, employ a cab with a trustworthy driver. If they mean to move against you at all, it will be soon, for it is certain you are regarded as dangerous.”

“No mysterious allusion about that,” was his mental comment, as he carefully tore the missive into tiny bits; “the old chap goes right into particulars.”

Well, he had a cab waiting for him, and if affairs had reached such a stage that his mere presence was sufficient to prevent a denouement, why, he was glad of the opportunity afforded to go back to his club and lounge till bed-time behind the big plate-glass windows overlooking the avenue. No, he would play Dupont that long-deferred game of billiards; it would be a wretched bore, to be sure, for he would have to give Dupont twenty-five points, but the game would be final.

He was distributing the fragments of Flint's note in the various cuspidors that he passed as he moved about the room, and the last few bits of paper were fluttering from his fingers when

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the attention of everybody was suddenly arrested by a crash in the street, which was instantly followed by a tumult of clattering hoofs, loud shouts, and vociferous profanity.

Cole was swept through the doors by the outward rush. A crowd was already rapidly gathering, and an energetic policeman was trying vainly to keep an open passage on the walk.

The centre of interest was Cole's own motor cab, lurched drunkenly against a telephone-pole, its rear axle bent almost to a right angle, the driver nursing a cut forehead and heaping bitter maledictions upon the head of some individual only hazily specified. To expurgate the driver's account of what had happened would leave it unintelligible; therefore this is the gist of what Cole gathered.

He (the driver) was waiting with his cab close to the curb, as his fare had directed him to do. He had been half asleep, when all at once he was aroused by the clatter of an obstreperous team just beside him drawing a heavy truck, and the shouts of the truckman to quiet them. But, it would seem, the horses were un-

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manageable. At the very instant cabby awoke they swerved toward the sidewalk; one wheel of the truck struck the cab violently, which was jammed against a telephone-post, and cabby himself was hurled unceremoniously to the walk. It all happened in the twinkling of an eye; and then the ————— (a string of unprintable nouns and qualifying adjectives designating the truck-man) had hurried away without pausing even to ascertain the extent of the damage he had created. The cab would have to be hauled to the garage, and what was cabby to do?

His fare did not know; but as for himself, he would have to secure another cab, which was a confounded bore, or walk. It has already been mentioned that Mr. Cole was averse to this form of exercise.

And then — what luck! — the vehicle was right at hand. True, it was a dingy concern, — a one-horse four-wheeler, the numbers on the exceedingly dim, smoky side-lamps so worn as to be illegible; but the animal appeared to be a likely one, and, best of all, the conveyance was immediately available.

Cole scrutinized the driver; but the man,

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opening the door at the moment, had his back turned. Cole entered, mentioned his club, and again squinted at the driver; this time the fellow's face was in his own shadow, and besides, he was stooping to make fast the door.

For one instant Cole was moved to alight; Flint's message flashed through his mind; but at once he dismissed the idea as absurd. The vehicle had already started and was going at a good gait, so what in the world was there to apprehend? What could happen to him, driving at midnight through Williamsburg's quiet streets?

But he had not been carried many blocks until his misgivings were once more awakened. Without warning the horse slowed to a walk, and Cole could hear the driver's voice in muffled ob-jurgation and complaint. Both windows were down, and the young man thrust his head out the one to his right.

"What's the matter?" he curtly demanded.

"Dad blamed horse had to go lame, sir," was the reply — "nigh hind leg."

His attention directed to the motive power, Cole now dimly perceived that the animal was

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indeed painfully limping. Well, the poor brute was not to blame for that.

“Vile lights you have,” commented he; to which cabby cheerfully assented, vouchsafing the information that he would not lay out any money on the old piano-box, as he was saving to buy an electric.

“Private owner?”

“Yes, sir. I ’ave a ’ansom besides this.”

“H’m — cockney,” reflected Cole. There was something strangely familiar about the fellow’s voice, but the young man could not place him.

“Ever drive me before?” he next inquired.

“Not that I know of, sir.”

After another vain attempt to see the man’s face, Cole withdrew his head inside the cab, and the conversation lapsed until it became manifest that the horse could proceed no farther without some attention. Cabby was profuse with his apologies, but the unfortuitous circumstance could not be helped; to all appearances Cole was confronted with an occasion when even money could not make the mare go.

The spot where they had halted was in the shadows of numerous tall buildings — patently,

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warehouses and wholesale establishments; the locality was dark and deserted, an ideal place for an attack, Cole thought, if any were intended.

The driver, whose features still remained adroitly hidden, was busy with the injured hoof. Presently he stood upright.

“Not a stone,” said he; “nails all seem in place; don’t know what can be the matter. The old mare never done me this way before.”

Cole changed his mind about the fellow being a cockney.

“See here,” said he, sharply, “I don’t propose to stay here all night. If the nag can move at all, I want you to get me home.”

“Sure, sir; we’ll try.”

The attempt was a failure, however; after one or two lurching forward steps the beast halted, holding her left hind leg suggestively up from the ground.

All his faculties alert, Cole opened the door on that side. But the night was silent, save for the creaking of harness- and carriage-parts in rhythm with the horse’s respiration; not a soul was stirring on the walks, not a vehicle of any kind on the street.

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“Sorry,” lamented the driver, “but I don’t know what we’ll do.” His tone was almost lacrymose. “Le’s see: it’s not over two squares to the Penn Club; if you don’t mind the walk, sir,” he suggested, “I would n’t think of making a charge for bringing you this far — no, siree.”

Cole was now determined not to start off through the night on foot.

“Charge or no charge,” said he, with a tone of finality, “I do not intend to walk. If we can do nothing better, we shall sit here until somebody comes along.”

Now, if he had only paused right there and abided by that determination! But, no; he must be after hurrying things, must this young man, and —

“Let me see that damaged hoof,” said he, briskly.

He reached down to take the suspended member, and that was the last thing he knew for a long time.

The instant he bent forward the driver struck him a cruel blow behind one ear with a short, heavy instrument. He dropped to the street without a sound.

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Then the driver's movements became expeditious. He picked up the limp figure, thrust it inside the cab and closed the door. Next he returned to the lame leg, snipped with a pair of wire-cutters a fine wire which was bound tightly around the pastern, whereupon the beast instantly recovered the use of the erstwhile disabled member as if by a miracle. In another second he had the reins in his hands. He was about to whip up, when of a sudden the helmet and gilt buttons of a policeman loomed up in the dim light beside him.

"What's the matter here?" the officer asked brusquely.

The man on the box was not in the least disconcerted.

"Horse lame," returned he, promptly. "Stone. All right now."

The policeman was suspicious. He peered into the cab, but was unable to discern anything for the darkness. Cabby, however, volunteered more laconic information.

"Gent's jagged. Lives at Penn Club. Taking him home."

"What's your number?" now came sharply

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from the officer, after he had spent some seconds vainly striving to decipher the detached blots of paint on the glass of one of the side-lamps.

“Six-eighty-four. Needs touchin’ up, don’t it? But I never find time to do it, somehow.”

After some further scrutiny of the vague markings, the officer apparently concluded to give cabby the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps they did suggest to his mind the number mentioned; at any rate, he gruffly directed the cabman to proceed, adding, as the latter obeyed,

“And don’t forget to use a bit of paint on them figgers, if you don’t want to lose your license. If I see you again without ’em, I’ll report you.”

“All right,” called back cabby through the night; “touch ’em up first thing in the morning. Good-night.”

The officer did not respond. He stood looking after the retreating cab a bit dubiously.

“I did n’t smell liquor when I stuck my head in the window,” muttered he.

And the Penn Club did not see Cole that night.

CHAPTER XIX

'A RESPONSE TO KELSEY'S SIGNAL

PHINEAS FLINT entered police headquarters Friday morning in no amiable frame of mind. He was a veteran officer, seasoned in the service, and it involved a considerable effort to admit that he had been guilty of a mistake; yet, what else was he to do? Since his talk at McFerren's with Cole, on the occasion of that gentleman's notable combat with Kelsey, and after a subsequent heart-to-heart conversation with the Inspector, he had arrived at the conclusion that matters had gone decidedly wrong. Fortunately, Mr. Flint was a conscientious man; he mistrusted, therefore — and, too, without seeking to justify himself — that he was in a large measure to blame for matters not having gone right. His mind teemed with doubts and misgivings; his habitually equable spirits were prey to a very unpleasant dejection.

Miss Day had not eloped; he was now sure

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of that. But the revelation that such diverse occurrences as her flight and Higdon's murder were traceable to a common origin, had astounded and bewildered him. Why, it was nothing in the world but close application to the operations of this same Yellow Circle that, in the beginning, had led him to dismiss the Day affair with the instantly formed elopement theory; the case was unworthy of his skill and talents; it would require time which he could ill afford to spare; while for months the Circle had challenged the best endeavors of the police of the country — had kept them constantly in hot water, if they would only admit it.

Now, however, underneath his vexation and mortification, there stirred a determination to rectify his error, a zeal to achieve success where he had initially failed.

He also was worried about Cole. While he had acquired a high opinion of the young man's courage, yet he was extremely doubtful respecting his caution, and the threat and warning of the Circle were not to be ignored. He trusted, therefore, that he had not been additionally negligent in merely charging Cole to remain watch-

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ful and keep himself as much as possible out of the danger zone.

Detective Vawter's report of the disabling mishap to Cole's motor-cab increased Flint's anxiety, and within a very short time a number of things transpired which seemed to warrant his worst fears.

First of all, a diligent use of the telephone failed to elicit the slightest trace of the young man. But while the detective failed in his main object, when the Gervaise number responded he was given another nut to crack.

Sparks, the Gervaise factotum, told him that earlier in the morning a messenger had come for Miss Gervaise. Whatever the nature of his message, it had greatly disturbed her. Failure to obtain responses to several calls on the telephone had measurably increased her agitation.

In an excited manner she had ordered her automobile sent from the garage with all haste; she had seemed hardly able to contain herself until its arrival; her face was drawn and white, her hands shook, and her voice trembled. Then she and the messenger had dashed away at top speed, she herself driving. So great had been

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her perturbation that she neglected to leave word respecting her destination or when she might be expected to return.

At this very instant the report of the policeman who had reprimanded the unidentified cabman the preceding night was brought to Flint's attention. He and Inspector Swift exchanged a pregnant look, and the Inspector's lips closed ominously beneath his moustache.

"Well, it looks as though they had him, all right," Swift quietly remarked. It was the sole comment offered by either, for both were very much at sea.

Had Miss Gervaise been inveigled into a trap, too?

The most that could be done, however, was to spur to activity the entire department machinery; while something might be learned concerning the destination of Miss Gervaise and her automobile, only the slenderest of clues was in their possession to guide the search to Cole.

Flint was too old and wise an officer to remain long dismayed by the apparent hopelessness of the task confronting him. The idea had

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become fixed in his mind that an avenue leading to the heart of the mystery would be opened up in one of two ways. The one most immediately promising was hope that Kelsey's appeal would bring forward the "intermediary"; should this fail, he was convinced — and was supported in his opinion by the Inspector — that a raid on the fortune-teller's establishment would not be without results. If Leporello and Cantarini were not the same, the former at least represented the highest order of intelligence that the police had as yet been able to connect with the Yellow Circle.

Since Foster Cole's illuminating conversation with the Inspector, the seer's so-called "studio" had been kept under a close surveillance. From ten till four o'clock each week-day, with perhaps a lull during luncheon time, a constant procession of smart carriages and automobiles were arriving and departing before the house. They discharged or took up stylishly gowned women — some singly and furtively, others in chattering, excited groups — accompanied occasionally by a sheepish-looking man. Otherwise the espionage had been fruitless. If Le-

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porello himself ever emerged from the house, the watchers did not know it.

Flint's assurance, though, was not without one or two disturbing factors: Did the criminals question the good faith of Kelsey's appeal? And hence, had they grown suspicious of the saloon and gambling-den? After careful deliberation he could not see how or why they should.

The creases at the corners of his eyes were more pronounced than usual, the eyes themselves bright and restless, as he proceeded on his way to McFerren's. It was not quite nine o'clock when he paused before the ornate plate- and stained-glass front — an unseasonable hour for the neighborhood, which wore a deserted appearance.

As he lingered on the walk, reluctant to leave the fresh morning air for the sour overnight reek of the bar-room, his wandering glance took in a window baseboard on one side of the doorway. There, in plain view, appeared a small yellow circle containing Kelsey's designating number and the additional letter "c," which meant that he desired to communicate with his superiors.

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But as Flint's eyes fell upon the signal he started, and they kindled with a sudden eager light. Over it had been chalked a cross — an assurance that the signal had been observed and that Kelsey might soon expect a response.

Instantly Flint's air of deliberation fell away from him; he became abruptly alert and keen-eyed. He started briskly to enter the saloon; but just then the swinging-doors flew open, and his look was riveted upon a man who came forth.

Instantaneously the glances of the two men clashed and swung apart, and Flint was sensible of a strange thrill. Never before had he seen just such a long, swarthy countenance, one so evil or sardonic. The man's regard, brief as it had been, seemed to pierce him through and through; to question his motives for being there, and immediately to read the answer and mock at it.

But for the moment Flint noted only one circumstance: while one eye was like jet, the other was, oddly enough, gray. Both, however, were curtains hiding whatever might lie behind.

It could scarcely be said that the man paused,

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for in the next second he hastened away. Flint, as he stared after the retreating figure, began to take note of the various impressions produced by details of his *bizarre* appearance. The glistening teeth, revealed in a swift, derisive curl of the upper lip, lingered menacingly; the performance had been decidedly and unpleasantly wolf-like. He all at once realized that the sombre, malignant countenance reflected a sort of ferocious strength; it was stamped with a refinement of cruelty which, even in retrospect, sent an involuntary shudder through him. There was nothing coarse or gross in the features; on the contrary, they indicated a high order of intellect, the unmistakable cast of a trained mind. The face might have been that of a student and scholar, but one without a heart; one to whom the attribute of mercy was utterly incomprehensible.

As for the rest, the man's clothes were shabby. He wore a sweater and corduroy cap; but a personality so extraordinary must necessarily overshadow and render inconsequential any condition of attire.

Fairly tingling with expectation, Flint hur-

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ried into the bar. But at once he halted, perplexed, wondering, inquiring. There was nothing in the customary early morning quiet of the place to warrant the feeling that some portentous event was imminent. Besides Dan Fogarty, busy as usual at this hour polishing glasses behind the bar, there were only two other persons visible, — the negro porter, engaged in a desultory cleaning-up process, and a plain-clothes man, Spencer, who was waiting to be relieved from his vigil over Kelsey. Kelsey! Yes — Flint's eyes were adjusting themselves to the dim interior — he was here, too. He was sprawled over a table in a far corner, his head pillowed in the hollow of one arm, asleep apparently. A shadow obscured the corner, and the sleeper's outlines were blurred.

Masking his presaging eagerness, Flint addressed Dan, while Spencer, yawning and relaxing his cramped limbs, approached.

“Know the man who just went out, Dan?”

“Nix,” Dan returned, not pausing an instant in his dexterous manipulation of cloth and glasses. “He's a new one.” Then abruptly his brisk movements abated; thoughtfully he

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added a glistening glass to one of the inverted rows on the bar. "Come to think of it, though," he added, "I *have* seen him in here once or twice."

"A guinea," now chimed in Spencer, speaking technically — "a smooth dip, I'd say, if he was n't dago. Jollied Kelsey some, bought two rounds of drinks, then blew."

The two detectives exchanged glances; Flint's contained an inquiry; Spencer's was purely negative.

"Dip," echoed Flint in a moment; "why?"

"Great Scott!" returned Spencer. "But you did n't see the man's hands, did you? Fingers twice as long as mine — slim — moving, moving, moving all the time. Never still a second. Say, Dan, did you notice how slick he fished up the mon to pay for the drinks? Could n't see where it came from."

But Dan would not enthuse; he was once more polishing glasses with the rapid precision of a machine.

"Lots of guys blows in here what's as smooth as that," said he, with lofty indifference.

Flint's gaze wandered back to Kelsey; noting

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which Dan remarked, with an expressive nod toward the sleeper:

“Pretty well lit up last night; the dago what just went out put him on the blink, for sure.” He then perceived that the empty glasses had not yet been removed from Kelsey’s table.

“Fetch me them empties, Smoke,” he directed the porter.

Flint continued to contemplate Kelsey; something in the man’s attitude did not appear quite natural. His mind was still full of the individual he had encountered in the doorway. He was both surprised and perplexed at the contrast between his impression of the stranger and the impression made by him upon such discerning observers as Spencer and Fogarty. Spencer was known — and feared — in the underworld as a “wise gum-shoe,” while not the least of Dan’s accomplishments as a first-rate bartender was the correct facility with which he could — as he himself might have expressed it — “get wise to what lay behind a duck’s front.”

“You say the guinea jollied him?” said Flint, incredulously, his eyes still on Kelsey. The porter was now slouching over toward the table.

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Spencer nodded. "Good-natured cuss; soused a bit himself."

The mental image of the evil face framed in the doorway, of the cruel, glistening teeth, grew still more vivid in Flint's mind, and, puzzled, he stared harder than ever toward the shadowy corner. Next instant he was electrified. The negro porter squealed like a frightened rabbit and at the same time leaped backward away from the table. Dan shouted a strident alarm:

"What's biting you, Smoke?"

But no one heeded. Flint, with Spencer at his elbow, was already bending over Kelsey, rolling the limp figure around until its staring eyes were turned up to the light. In a flash the distended pupils reminded him of the wild glare in Higdon's eyes when he had first looked upon his dead face.

There was a queer gulping sound from Spencer.

"Dead!" he breathed, horrified.

There could be no doubt about it. Spencer's awe-struck pronouncement was punctuated by a musical tinkle, as a glass slipped from Dan

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Fogarty's fingers and splintered upon the floor. The negro stood shivering with terror, his back pressed frantically against the wall.

Flint laid a hand over the three empty glasses on the table and turned an inscrutable eye upon his *confrère*.

"And under your very nose, Spencer," he marvelled. "Good-natured — jolly —? Lord, have mercy!"

Of a sudden Spencer paled and dropped heavily upon a chair. With a trembling hand he produced his handkerchief and aimlessly dabbed at the drops of sweat which all at once appeared on his brow.

"I — I took a — a drink with them," he said unsteadily, with a meaningless laugh.

However, Flint was no longer heeding his colleague. His thin face stern, he bent over the glasses, examining them, fingering them gingerly, sniffing at the lees, until Spencer overcame his nausea sufficiently to comprehend what the other was about. With a shaking finger he indicated one of the glasses.

"That's Kelsey's," he said.

"Sure?"

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“Sure. I noticed at the time; it's larger than the rest.”

The glass, with its few remaining drops of liquor, was carefully segregated from the others.

Meantime Dan was trying to stir the porter, who still stood staring in a fascination of horror at the figure collapsed across the table. By means of much whispered profanity — an involuntary index to the bartender's own excitement — the negro was at last moved to close and bolt the side and rear doors, while Dan himself hastened around an end of the bar to perform a like service at the front.

But before he could reach the entrance the swinging-doors opened and a man entered. Vexed at the intrusion, Flint wheeled around to get rid of the stranger summarily, when he was surprised at hearing his own name uttered. The newcomer's inquiring glance had not yet travelled past Dan, of whom he was asking where Mr. Phineas Flint might be found.

Curious now, the detective advanced, and Dan proceeded to make the doors fast. The act startled the stranger, who, for the first time, sent an apprehensive look coasting around the

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room. The lifeless figure at the distant table, it would seem, bore no especial significance to him, and he turned to await Flint's approach.

The latter's survey of the man told him but little. There was a certain imposing dignity about him suggesting the Church; but he was not a clergyman. Behind the august exterior the keen gray eyes discerned an obsequiousness in readiness to manifest itself if dignity failed to produce the desired impression.

"I am Phineas Flint," the owner of that name quietly remarked.

Without a word the man bowed and extended a sealed envelope. Flint ripped it open, and it is probable that no experience of his entire career had ever so bewildered him as what he now read on the single sheet which the envelope contained.

CHAPTER XX

CULLIMORE'S DEFECTION

COLE awoke to a consciousness of chill. Then, simultaneously, there swam into his mind a sense of extreme discomfort, and into his vision a handful of stars winking lazily through a small barred window. Occasionally something, black and shapeless against the outer night, fluttered before the window, obscuring the stars.

Somewhere outside, a mighty volume of rushing sound was all at once identified as the night intimacy of wind and trees, as if he were surrounded by a tempest-tossed forest. A groan smote his ears. In the next instant he was startled by realization that the groan had burst from his own lips. Simple discomfort expanded suddenly into a torment of pain that racked him from head to foot.

He lay on a couch of some sort, but was bound so securely that he could do no more than breathe

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and elevate his head an inch or two; which latter experiment he tried a single time, regretting the attempt for many stabbing minutes.

Time was of small account; but after an ordeal of waiting, approaching footsteps sounded lightly upon a bare floor. They quickly grew more pronounced — scarcely louder — and presently a light began flickering, with increasing brightness, through a grill which was on a line with his eyes.

The grill swung away as a door opened. Cole felt that his probation of pain was to merge into a lethe of delirium; for the figure who appeared in the doorway, bearing a small hand-lamp, was Cullimore. Staid and imposing as ever, his dignity was merely accentuated by the setting of tiny, cell-like room, which leaped forth from the nearer darkness with the lamp's advent.

He entered, closing and locking the door, then turned, with the lamp elevated, to survey Cole. Each action was stamped with the same quiet efficiency that characterized all the man's movements.

Seeing that Cole was blinking up at him, he set the lamp on the floor and acknowledged the wordless inspection with a nod of deference.

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Delirium was a certainty now: as the light descended, Cullimore surged to gigantic proportions and blended with his shadow, producing a grotesque pattern on walls and ceiling.

"Glad to see you awake, Mr. Cole," he remarked in silky tones. He was suave and polite, as always. "I hope I may do something for you, sir."

Cole laughed. His thoughts had been clinging to Edith's shining image, and to think that, in their madness, they should have shoved upon the screen — Cullimore!

The man looked gravely down at him. But now Cole wanted to turn his head away, and sleep. Then, up from the black depths into which he was sinking, understanding came rushing like a wave, and he started broad awake. He stared in wonder at the deferentially lowered head.

"Er — yes, Cullimore; did n't mean to keep you waiting. Brandy and soda, with one good lump of ice. Make it pretty stiff."

Cullimore bowed. "Very well, sir."

Blackness again, and Cullimore was forgotten. Again Cole's eyes opened with a start, to see the

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man close beside him. There was no table in the room, and he prepared the drink with the tray on the floor. Stooping, he held a large lump of ice in his left hand and struck it smartly with the heavy brass door-key clutched in his right. The action came to Cole's vision only obliquely; but as key crushed upon ice, light flashed in a darkened recess of memory. He uttered a little cry.

"You — you," he whispered tensely; "you were the cabby!"

The stooping man lifted a surprised visage.

"I, sir? What cabby do you mean?"

But even as he spoke Cole knew that his inspiration had been misleading; the strange cabman's voice, the tall, familiar figure, the face kept so carefully averted or always in shadow, could never have been Cullimore's. He sighed and accepted the cooling drink, which the other administered with all the gentle deftness of a professional nurse.

"But you killed Higdon," he said, as soon as his head had been eased back to the pillow. "You killed Higdon."

The glass nearly slipped from Cullimore's

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fingers. For one strained second he remained rigid; then he placed the glass on the tray and stood upright. He addressed the man on the cot, without an accent of discomposure.

“Begging your pardon, sir, it was not I killed him.”

“But the day he was murdered, I saw you leaving the old house — the house whose gatepost bore ‘The Master’s’ sign manual.”

For a long moment Cullimore contemplated Cole, then, without speaking, he stooped once more and took up the tray from the floor. Moving methodically to a corner of the room, he placed the tray upon a low, locker-like box that stood there, then returned to his former position beside the cot.

“Whatever you know, Mr. Cole, be it much or little, your knowledge does me an injustice. Hindeed it does, sir. I can tell you this much, and it’s just how much I had to do with ‘Igdon’s death.” Cullimore’s earnestness could be pretty accurately gauged by his carelessness with the letter “h.” “I put that mark on the post, and I ’urried away. I never saw the ’ouse before, and I ’ve never seen it since. I was simply act-

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ing under orders that I dared not disobey. I'm acting under orders now, sir; but I 'opes to disobey *them* orders."

A simple, quiet directness behind the man's polite address was not without its effect upon Cole. But he was left harassed by perplexity.

"Why speak of 'Igdon, sir," the other was pursuing, "just at this time? Would n't you rather discuss your — begging your pardon, sir, — your liberation?"

The young fellow continued to stare up at the mild countenance, which, except for its smugness, might have been that of a bishop. The fire of the brandy was beginning to creep into his veins, but he was still weak, his head still buzzed, and all at once his impatience sought relief in a querulous complaint.

"Why the devil is it a subject for discussion? Why don't you cut these ropes, or whatever they are?"

"I want to, sir — believe me, I do — but we must have an understanding first, sir."

This was too much for Cole's tired brain, which could understand nothing.

"You're one of that gang of cut-throats, Cul-

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limore," he said; "you can't make me believe otherwise — you 're one of them."

The full, mobile face became melancholy, almost meek.

"Mr. Cole, I must dispute what you say, sir. I'll admit that I might have been misguided; but what I was and what I am now are two different things. I 'ave put all that be'ind me, sir. I 'ave taken my life in my 'ands by breaking loose from them. It's a dangerous thing to attempt, Mr. Cole; but I 'ave resolved to try. You see, sir, I am being perfectly fränk with you?"

"You have some terms to offer, then?"

"I have, sir, with your permission."

Cole could do naught else but listen; and presently it all began to form itself quite clearly in his mind — only he could not keep it there; the grotesque imps of fact were so elusive! Under normal conditions, he might have marvelled at the man's disclosures, his utter moral blindness to the enormity of deeds wherein, one way or another, he had participated, and of which he spoke with undisturbed equanimity. But all his emotions were lulled to a sort of torpor by pain; the man's matter-of-fact way of speaking left the

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grim things whereof he spoke without color or flavor.

It early became manifest that Cullimore was bound by an oath, and that his fear of it was worse than the fear of death. Yet, an acute ear would have discriminated between dread of the oath and dread of the punishment following its breach. So, after all, the man was frank only when he could ignore the oath's spirit, clinging tenaciously to its strict letter by silence, evasion, or downright falsehood.

He started from the premise that, having been delegated to murder Cole, through failure to do so he had saved the young man's life. This sophistry, presented through an infinite variety of ways, wrung no expression of gratitude from Cole. Higdon's fate was paraded — not without point, Cole admitted, — as an example of what Cullimore might himself expect as a penalty for shirking the obligation.

“ Believe me, sir, when I say it: I don't know 'ow you got 'ere; I was sent — begging your pardon, sir, — to bash you over the 'ead. Strike me dead if what I say is n't true. I could n't appear unwilling to do what I'm bound by sol-

CULLIMORE'S DEFECTION

emn oath to do, sir; I 'ad to make a show of obeying; and 'ere I am. I sha'n't do murder if I can 'elp it. You meet me 'arf way, Mr. Cole, and you shall go free — so 'elp me, you shall!”

Abruptly Higdon appeared in the picture. It seemed that he was to have been Miss Day's custodian. He had spirited her away — Cole's vagrant attention paused to hearken — to some secure place, which he had refused to divulge.

Up to this point the young man had listened with less interest for the speaker's troubles than for his own; but had he not been restrained by his bonds, at Cullimore's last declaration, no doubt, he would have started violently.

What was this about Higdon? — and Dorothy? Of a sudden Cole's interest was aflame.

“Say that again, Cullimore,” he sharply commanded.

“'Igdon never told where he took her; he died with the secret locked in his bosom.”

When the full import of this statement struck home to Cole's comprehension, for a moment he was merely dumfounded; then his head rolled in a stupor of sickening horror.

Dorothy imprisoned in some unknown hiding-

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place, and the lips of the only person cognizant of its location forever sealed!

“It’s the solemn truth, sir,” Cullimore was insisting, his grave earnestness now quite extinguishing all aspirates. “Thirty minutes after the young lady left the church we lost all track of ’er. We ’unted ’igh and we ’unted low, too. ’Igdon ’e took ’er and ’id ’er away — as soon as we ’anded ’er over to ’im, sir. ’E would n’t tell.”

Cole was panting.

“You — you’re lying.”

The man’s regard was a mute but effective refutation of the charge. Cole tortured himself in a fruitless effort to free his hands, while conviction crept home to an understanding dull with amazement and unspeakable dread and loathing.

“Good God, Cullimore! You — you unprincipled brute! — do you mean to say that nobody has been aware of her whereabouts since Tuesday night?”

“It seems so, sir. None of us ’as.” Sighing, he lowered his eyes in silent sympathy.

“Who waited in the automobile behind the church?”

CULLIMORE'S DEFECTION

The answer was a quick, sidewise glance — Cullimore was anything but prepossessing when he looked that way — and a nervous fidgeting of the fingers.

“Come, Cullimore, you know.”

“If you please, sir, if anybody was waiting there in an automobile, *I* don't know who it was.”

Rank falsehood or evasion, Cole was unable to seize upon the means of determining which; the curtained passage off the church corridor did not recur to his confused mind as the possible lurking-place, nor did he consider that the automobile might have been temporarily empty. He groaned in an agony of spirit at his utter helplessness.

The matter of freedom was now become paramount; desire for it burned him with a fierce, mad yearning, and he was ready to lend ear to anything Cullimore might say. He would grovel at the man's feet — kneel to him — abase himself in any way, if only —

“Cullimore, you're not utterly heartless,” he said; then, with quick eagerness, — “are you? For God's sake, let me out of here — cut these

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bonds — and any sacrifice I can make for you, I'll bind myself to do it!"

The other rubbed his hands with placid satisfaction.

"I was getting to that, Mr. Cole, — pray don't distress yourself, sir, — I was approaching that very point."

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN THIEVES FALL OUT

RESOLVED to its final elements, Cullimore's proposal was, after all, quite simple. He wanted to save his own skin. The caution of wisdom had borne in upon him a fearsome conviction that the days of the Yellow Circle were few, its doom imminently sure. He wanted to put as many miles between himself and Williamsburg as he could accomplish with \$10,000 — only, he had n't the \$10,000.

There was a share in a much richer prize, dependent upon delaying Miss Day's marriage — Cole could not follow the speaker very closely — which was being forfeited by failure to fulfil the Circle's commands. But what was gold to the wrath of "The Master" ? — or, escaping him, the police?

Cullimore strove to make plain that he stood between two fires, and he cringed at the scorching flames of both. Moreover, he unconsciously re-

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vealed the fact that he was very much of a coward. Once let him disregard a mandate of the Circle, and punishment would follow certainly; death overtook delinquents in mysterious ways and when least expected. His pallor, his anxious starts and listening pauses, the shaking hand that mopped his glistening face as he spoke in hushed whispers of that unseen terror, "The Master," left no doubt whatever on this score.

The prisoner's brain was too like a seething caldron for its owner to think of uncovering the riddle of the first disappearance; anyhow, the riddle was only of secondary importance now: what did it matter why they had taken Dorothy? She might be dead; if not, he must be free to find her before it was too late. Or, at least, he must carry to Lecomte such intelligence of her fate as he might glean — sometime, when his head quit aching — from this fantastic recital, heard now with wits so dull. . . . Suppose it had been Edith? He shuddered and cursed inwardly.

Of a sudden he steadied; his mind resumed its normal functions with luminous precision. The

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germ of an idea had fallen there; it clung, it took root and grew; and Cullimore's monotonous monologue flowed on.

Many things came back to Cole with extraordinary vividness: the first yellow circle, discovered on Gibbs's doorstep the night Dorothy disappeared; the circle on the message in the reliquary; both had been addressed to Cullimore, the second one, doubtless, being his own private symbol.

Was he the intermediary?

If he spoke truth, no. But his guarded words — so framed that no one but himself was inculpated — left Cole anxiously in doubt. In view of what he proposed doing, as a last resort, he dared ask no questions touching upon Kelsey, or in any way betray his cognizance of Kelsey ever having communicated with Cantarini through a go-between.

However, with what information the police already possessed of the Circle, Cullimore's admissions to-night established a certainty that he stood close to the Circle's inner workings. If he was not the intermediary, then Cole's idea might prove feasible — heaven knew it was des-

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perate enough at best. If he was, then Cole's plight indeed must remain hopeless.

Whether or not Cullimore was the intermediary, could he be persuaded into Flint's or Inspector Swift's presence, and one or the other be apprised of the significance of his identity? Truly the task seemed precarious; still, not so unassured as Cole's present predicament.

Gradually, as he weighed the chances, the germ developed, bending this way and that in the swirling current of his thoughts; and then it burst suddenly into blossom. Cole became as cool and steady as a rock.

For his brilliant scheme involved nothing less chimerical than to take advantage of Cullimore's demand for \$10,000, and under cover of an apparent acquiescence, try to send him to Flint with an order so worded that the detective, by reading between the lines, would appreciate the importance of the messenger.

"You know, of course," said he, "that no man carries any such sum about with him? It would be impossible, in any event, to obtain it to-night."

Until now, if one might judge by his kindling countenance, Cullimore must have been on tenter-

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hooks concerning the outcome of his proposal. Yet his eagerness was admirably suppressed.

“Why, sir, my plan was this. Give me a cheque for the amount; give me your word as a gentleman that you will not offer me any violence if I release you, and that you will make no attempt to escape from this room till after three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. I shall mail a letter to any one you name, who will release you.

“It would n't be easy getting out of here, anyhow; the room was designed for just such emergencies, sir, —”

“For Miss Day, I suppose,” with sarcasm that left the other unmoved.

“Well — yes, sir, — among others. The place is isolated, surrounded by trees, and it is not likely that you could attract anybody's attention. But as I said, I am willing to trust to your gentlemanly word.”

All at once Cole saw the folly of attempting to send this man to Flint at McFerren's, with any sort of message. He laughed bitterly at the extravagant notion. Sore indeed must be the straits into which he had fallen, that his imagination could devise no better scheme than this!

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He had never been confronted by a crisis where the outcome promised less. If he dismissed his poor, makeshift plan as utterly impracticable, only one alternative course remained open to him: he must give Cullimore his word of honor, and then immediately break it! The instant his bonds were released he must overpower his jailor.

In his estimation, the doubts, the innumerable aspects of the situation which influenced his decision first one way and then another, were as nothing to the deliberate outrage to his deep-seated principles of honor which lay in the alternative course. To one who knew him, the inward struggle would have appeared in its true light. No moral obligation, in his opinion, was more solemn or sacred than a pledged word; and the willingness with which this rascal was ready to pin his faith to it made the dilemma no less poignant. No amount of casuistry, such as the end justifying the means, relieved the situation in the least. A man's word once passed, it should be upheld though the heavens fall.

Still, a woman's dire distress was calling for succor. Even now she might be starving. Taking the most favorable view of her plight, she

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must be frantic with terror, suffering the pangs of hunger and thirst. A groan burst from his lips; great drops of sweat stood on his brow.

“Cullimore, I give you my word of honor.”

This was sufficient; instantly the bonds were severed.

But Cole did not yet stand free. He was required to bear a new agony while the blood returned to his benumbed limbs. And then he stood swaying unsteadily, sinking beneath a deadly nausea, his head throbbing madly.

Lord! To think of attacking a man now! He was as helpless as a babe. He must put the scoundrel off until his strength returned, and then —

The walls reeled and the floor rose dizzily, as he lurched forward like a drunken man. Cullimore caught him before he fell and supported him to the cot.

“Better lie quiet, sir, until your strength returns. I can wait a bit.”

“’M all right, Cull — Cullimore; be fit as a fiddle in a minute.”

“Perhaps, sir, a bite of something — ?”

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The butler made the suggestion temptingly, but Cole's stomach rebelled at the very idea of food. He shook his head.

"The box in the corner," the other went on, "is well stocked — tinned meats, biscuits, beer, mineral water —"

Another groan from the figure sitting dejectedly on the cot checked him. This time it was realization of his utter unfitness to carry out his determination that overwhelmed Cole. Why, not under a week would he be in condition to pit his strength against a schoolboy's. After all, he must catch at the other straw — make it his *dernier ressort* — try to send Cullimore to Flint.

"I can write," he grimly announced.

"I have blank cheques on all the banks, Mr. Cole," — he respectfully tendered them, — "and a fountain-pen."

With an effort, Cole raised his head and met the other's eager look.

"Not a cheque — I have n't half the amount you demand. I must give you an order on a friend."

Cullimore betrayed a sudden disquiet.

"Not Mr. Gibbs, if you please, sir."

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“No, not Mr. Gibbs,” drily. “I daresay you would n’t care to face him with any such document.”

“I have severed my connection with Mr. Gibbs, sir.”

But Cole was wholly incurious respecting irrelevant details. Fumbling in his coat pocket, he produced presently a forgotten dinner invitation.

“If you please, sir, is there any doubt — will there be any — do you think —” Cullimore floundered helplessly; it went terribly against the grain to so question even the implication that lay in a gentleman’s actions, particularly when those actions were so straightforwardly convincing as Mr. Cole’s were at present. But the young man relieved the other’s embarrassment.

“I assure you, Cullimore,” with a level look, “you shall receive just what I send you after.”

Cullimore’s fears were assuaged.

And now came the crisis. In the next minute, beyond peradventure, Cole was convinced that he would again be lying helpless on the cot — perhaps dead — alone in the cell-like room. What a desperate chance! But his aching head could devise no better one. It was an effort to speak

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evenly, with no other break in his voice than might naturally be ascribed to his present weakness; but he did.

“Do you know Phineas Flint?”

Apprehension held every nerve tense, every muscle taut. The ex-butler's eyes rolled to a contemplation of the ceiling; after a moment's intense reflection, he was obliged to admit that he had never heard of the gentleman.

Cole permitted himself a breath of relief; one treacherous bit of ground was got safely over; now for the next. The reason for sending him to McFerren's must be made plausible, whatever the sacrifice of truth.

“Between you and me, Cullimore,” — the voice grew confidential — “Flint and I are Pat McFerren's backers — on the Q. T., you understand; nobody besides we three even suspects it, and I would n't have it get noised abroad for ten times ten thousand dollars. I can give you a note to Flint —” And here Cullimore interrupted, suspicion reflected from every lineament. Or did the fellow's countenance mirror only a deep amazement?

“McFerren's!” he exclaimed.

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Cole felt that his heart had stopped.

“Pat McFerren’s,” he listlessly repeated. “I shall give you the street and number. Not a nice neighborhood, but you will have no trouble find —”

“But — McFerren’s!” Cullimore’s habitual deference was for once put to rout; his bewildered mind seemed unable to digest this extraordinary confidence. “You — the owner of —”

“No-no-no,” Cole testily interrupted. “Don’t get a wrong conception of my connection with the place; I simply have — er — invested a good bit of my money there — Flint and I.”

For a long time Cullimore remained silent; and that period of doubtful, anxious waiting — when Cole’s very life, maybe, was balancing on a hair — so harrowed the young man’s soul that he was almost persuaded to rise up and smite the smug face; to do anything, in fact, that would break the unendurable strain. At last Cullimore spoke.

“But — Mr. Cole — it’s hard to believe such a thing.”

How could that gentleman surmise, at a time

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when so many vital considerations weighed heavily down on him, that the very absurdity of the assertion was enough to excite incredulity in the most simple of minds? His shoulders rose in an indifferent shrug; no ripple of his emotion rose to the surface.

“Very well, then,” he said, “all negotiations are off. I can think of no other expedient.”

The other was eyeing him most intently, striving to pierce behind the inscrutable mask of the refined features.

Mr. Cole was a gentleman; Cullimore’s calling had brought him often enough into contact with gentlemen for him to recognize the stamp when he encountered it, and he knew Mr. Cole pretty well. His uncertainties were not very complex. He had a deep-rooted conviction that a gentleman would not lie to save himself; but he did *not* know that Cole was lying to save a woman.

At last Cullimore drooped once more to a mien of deference.

“Write the order, sir, if you please,” he said; “I can judge better then.”

The blank half of the dinner-party invitation

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supplied the necessary paper, the inverted tray, a desk, Cullimore furnished the pen. And now Cole considered.

The message must be brief; it must appear precisely what it pretended to be. Yet it must impart to Flint — if it ever came to his hands — the consequence of the bearer as a lieutenant of Cantarini. Furthermore, the reader's attention must be at once arrested and held until the under meaning came to the top.

It was no easy task to accomplish on the spur of the moment. And such a moment!

In the end Cole wrote coolly, unhurriedly, albeit a trifle unsteadily:

MY DEAR FLINT, — I must have \$10,000 at once. You must get it for me. Circumstances are such that you can't come to me, nor I go to you. It is absolutely necessary that a third party act for us; so you must trust the bearer; he is the intermediary.

FOSTER COLE.

Whether or not the assertion embodied in the missive's concluding phrase was true — in a quite different application, of course — Flint's readiness of wit in interpreting its hidden purport, to-

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gether with the likelihood of Cullimore carrying the message to him in the first place, constituted the slender thread whereby the captive hoped to win his freedom. Forgetting his scruples of a few minutes before, he chafed like a caged leopard, hot with anger that his customary fire and strength should have deserted him in this, the hour of his greatest need.

Cullimore was reading the note, pondering its contents with puckered brow, and in a minute he would turn derisively upon its writer. Then all would soon be over; the hypocritical rogue would doubtless "bash" him over the head, which cheerful occupation he had declared to be the ostensible purpose of his call to-night.

Cullimore, however, did no such thing. Cole's pretence had been taken in good faith, or else Cullimore was craftier than the young man bargained for. In truth, Cole's fears were augmented by the man's immediate conduct.

After fully a minute's scrutiny of the written sheet, he carefully folded it, sealed it in an envelope, placed the envelope in his pocket, and announced that he was satisfied.

Cole smiled. Such childlike simplicity in a

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rogue so unprincipled was beyond belief. Tottering to his feet, Cole gained the nearest wall, against which he leaned with the best assumption of nonchalance he could command. He crossed his arms over his chest, and said, with a spark of his old whimsical manner,

“Cullimore, when thieves fall out, honest men get their dues — sometimes And I have had to oil the joints of that old saw pretty liberally to make it work smoothly.”

Cole almost fancied a napkin over the crooked arm — that the ex-butler was waiting to serve him instead of leaving him to heaven alone knew what fate — so respectful and attentive was his air. His well-fed face fairly radiated good-feeling.

“You always did enjoy your joke, sir,” he returned, his good humor admirably tempered by his sense of a servant’s obligations.

“And I hope I ’ll enjoy — ” He bit the words off; he was about to add “this one”; but it were foolish to toss the fellow even a veiled warning. But Cullimore’s flexible brows were raised expectantly.

“Yes, sir?” he politely urged.

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But Cole, with an impatient gesture, motioned him away.

“Go — hurry. The time to laugh has not arrived — not yet.”

The other turned to unbolt the door; and the instant the broad back and rounded shoulders were presented to the room, Cole's arms dropped to his sides, his eyes narrowed, and he grew suddenly rigid.

“Don't forget your promise, sir,” the man flung across a shoulder.

Cole's lips twitched spasmodically, his hands clutched convulsively; but he was gathered for a leap, and at the first sign that bolt and door-latch were free, he essayed it.

It was a foolish thing to do, no doubt; but he could not stand idle and watch this crafty rogue depart unhindered. He was possessed by a profound conviction that in thus leaving him, the fellow was merely departing to perpetrate acts of deeper guile and villany. His unhesitating willingness to carry the note to Flint was simply a blind. Unquestionably he would take it to Cantarini instead; perhaps they would even use it to lure Flint to his undoing — Cole had not thought

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of that before — and he was still helpless in their power, no further advanced toward liberty than before Cullimore's visit.

But that individual was alert. In a panic of terror, he wheeled to meet the impetuous charge. The instinct of self-preservation was alone responsible for what immediately followed. Something flashed in the light, and Cole fell with no other sound than the thud of his contact with the floor.

Cullimore darted through the doorway, the door closed, and the bolt shot home. Then he peered through the iron grill.

“I 'ated to strike you, sir,” he said, his voice trembling, the full face pasty, “but I 'ad to. For shame, Mr. Cole! You 've made me lose all faith in a gentleman's given word, so you 'ave.” And with a fine burst of feeling, — “I shall keep mine, though, never fear.”

But Cole uttered no word. He lay face downward on the floor, one arm extended its length before him, the other crooked under his forehead.

Outside, the bird choir was in full chorus where last night the wind had sung. For it was broad

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day, and the interior of the tiny, cell-like room was dim and unreal in the wan, sickly light from the still burning lamp.

Minutes dragged along, and the man on the floor never moved.

CHAPTER XXII

A MUTE APPEAL

CULLIMORE arrived before McFerren's gaudy front only a few minutes after Flint's advent, and prior to entering he paused irresolute on the walk — just as Flint had done, but from quite different motives. He was still filled with wonderment that Cole should have sent him here.

All at once he espied the yellow circle on the window baseboard — Kelsey's token, cast like a baited hook in a stream — and his wandering look was immediately arrested. He stared at it with considerable amazement. Likewise he was more than a little disturbed by its presence here. Darting an anxious glance up and down the deserted street, he drew nearer and inspected it more closely, and in a moment succeeded in identifying it.

On the wedding-eve he had been awaiting a message from "The Master"; this same symbol

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on the doorstep, earlier in the day, had afforded him a means of identifying the messenger. Then, at nightfall, he had answered a summons of the bell. He recalled that a couple of ladies and a little girl were passing at the moment, chatting gayly and laughing, and it was not until they had gone by that a rough, shabby man hastened up to him and whispered in his ear the password. He had thereupon thrust into Cullimore's hands a small brass box, dissolving, like a ghost, into the shadows. He remembered clearly the man's unshaven face and repulsive features as they had abruptly appeared in the square of light from the open door. He had never seen him before or since.

However, this signal might be weeks — even months — old; the cross indicated that it had been responded to, anyway. It did not once enter Cullimore's head to connect it with any one on the interior of McFerren's, and his final conclusion was that the spot had been chosen simply because it was a favorable one whereon to catch the attention of the person to whom the signal was directed.

Thus disposing of the circle, Cullimore pro-



“Edith moved her clasped hands to the arm of his chair. How girlish and lovely she was !”

A MUTE APPEAL

ceeded into the bar-room. A minute later he handed Phineas Flint the envelope.

From frank bewilderment Flint's keen insight cut straight through the whole gamut of succeeding emotions to an appreciation of the fact that the note hid a message intended for his eyes alone. Only for a moment did he consider that Cole really intended to demand \$10,000, or that he had written under coercion. Still the characters revealed an unsteadiness, as of stress or weakness, and a second thought suggested that the message might have been wrung from him by threats directed against some one else. This was a very grave possibility in the light of Miss Gervaise's unexplained flight in her automobile that morning.

But, then, if so, why had it been directed to him? No, Cole intended to convey some message to him; it had to be veiled, and it was up to him uncover it.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, the concluding phrase stood out from the rest of the missive, as if inscribed in letters of fire: ". . . *he is the intermediary!*" The word had come to be common enough between them for

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it to assume an important significance in any circumstances.

Yet, powerful as was his feeling at that moment, his visage remained composed and his regard rested abstractedly on Cullimore's left arm, midway between shoulder and elbow. Purposeless as that regard appeared to be, it disturbed the man, for he gave the arm an involuntary twist, as if the look were a ponderable something that could be shaken off. The movement apparently succeeded, too; at once the faraway expression vanished, and Flint, seeming to awake to the matter in hand, transferred his attention to a survey of the messenger.

In a natural, friendly manner he suddenly slipped a hand beneath the arm he had been regarding so absently, as if to draw its owner to one of the tables, and in the next instant Cullimore had disengaged it. He was plainly uneasy.

Flint, however, appeared not to notice the shift; he began speaking pleasantly, his manner affable; but beneath his clasp, brief as it had been, he had satisfied himself of the presence of something harder than garments and human

A MUTE APPEAL

flesh. Cullimore's arm was encircled by a metal band.

Immediately Flint conducted him to the table where Kelsey still lay face downward.

"Before we get down to our errand," he was saying, "I would like for you to tell me whether you know this man."

Puzzled at such a request, Cullimore nevertheless followed his agreeable guide to the table in the shaded corner. At a private signal Spencer moved up nearer the twain, halting just as Flint once more turned the dead man's face up to the light.

The effect upon Cullimore was instantaneous and extraordinary. With a choking cry he staggered backward and would have collapsed upon the floor had not Spencer guided his errant movement to a chair, upon which he dropped weak and limp. His face went as pale as ashes, its well-fed rotundity becoming suddenly mere flabbiness; his jaw sank upon his breast; he contemplated the dead man with staring eyes, under a spell of horror and terror which for a time deprived him of the power of speech.

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Instantly he had recognized the coarse features; in the expanded pupils he had read the manner of death, as had Flint; and in view of his own contemplated desertion and flight the terrible significance of the tragedy struck him with overwhelming force. At last a trembling, muttered exclamation struggled from his twitching lips:

“God! I fancied I might run away from *him!*”

“From Cantarini?” asked Flint, drily. But he spoke to deaf ears; nodding to Spencer, he tapped the frightened man upon the shoulder.

“I guess you had better come with me,” he said. Still Cullimore did not heed, and after a little pause he tapped the shoulder more insistently.

“Buck up; this is a pinch. You had better come along quietly — understand?”

All at once Cullimore fell to trembling violently. Something like a sob burst from his throat, and he voiced, in the dull accents of despair, a conviction which Flint was destined to hear many times repeated before the morning passed, “There’s no ’ope for me now; I’m as

A MUTE APPEAL

good as dead. All I arsk is: don't let 'im get at me."

Without warning he slid from the chair and sank in a flaccid heap upon the floor.

Shortly after the noon hour an automobile dashed in among a group of unoccupied buildings, some half-dozen or so miles distant from Williamsburg, which stood as a monument to past activities of an abandoned stone-quarry. One of these, a small cottage in the midst of a pine grove and somewhat detached from the others, had been the superintendent's home during the period of the quarry's operations. The city made no provision for its secret police to go riding about the country in automobiles; but Flint's errand was to release Cole, and as Culimore had declared Cole to be here, he shrewdly conjectured that he would not have to foot the bill himself.

The region about the quarry was stony and sterile, and in consequence sparsely inhabited. Nevertheless Flint was not entirely unfamiliar with the place. It had been the scene of more than one notable round-up of tramps, in at-

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tempts to catch some malefactor or other who, for reasons best known to himself, chose thus to masquerade.

As the motor chugged up a road overgrown with weeds his meditations were all at once bent into a new channel. All the buildings bore many signs of frequent occupancy by these nameless gentry of the road — all save one. The cottage in the pine grove, for all that Flint could discern, might never have been disturbed since, years ago, the superintendent and his family departed from its shelter for the last time. He puzzled over the circumstance until he drew near the front door, where the cause stood revealed. On its panels was emblazoned a yellow circle enclosing the capital letter "M" — the token of "The Master."

Could it be true that this symbol was more potent than locks and bars to stay the wanton depredations of every stray tramp and vagabond? It would seem so. The possibility was vividly significant of the extent of Cantarini's power and authority.

The potency of the yellow symbol, however, did not in the least deter Flint. With a word

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to the chauffeur to wait, he advanced to the door, tried it, found it fastened, and with one stout kick shattered the rusty lock. He entered, calling aloud Cole's name, and at once heard an answering shout and his own name uttered in an ejaculation of surprised recognition.

The cell door, though, was not so easily overcome as had been the first one encountered. Its heavy oak timbers were nail-studded, the lock was a ponderous affair, and the hinges might have served the door of a bank vault. Manifestly one of the rooms had been recently transformed into this prison-like cell. After some minutes of expert manipulation by Flint, however, the bolt was finally shot back, and Foster Cole was at last really free.

When, after Cullimore's departure, Cole came to himself, it was with a feeling that he had been immured for months instead of less than twenty-four hours. The blow from the big brass key had not been severe; it had simply been the last straw beneath which his endurance, already strained to the utmost, had given way.

Furthermore, he awoke to a realization of the

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importance of recuperating his strength as quickly as possible; there were provisions in the locker, and after a forced meal he turned his attention to effecting his escape. He was thus engaged when startled by the front door crashing in.

Flint's embracing glance noted with approval the quiet air of determination which seemed now to possess the young man. Indeed, there was a marked change in Cole's manner. Since consciousness had returned his every movement, every thought, had been actuated by a fierce, blind anger, but not an unreasoning anger. The very fervor of his resentment against the villains had steadied and sobered him, as he comprehended the necessity of a cool head and deliberate action. His face had settled into inflexibly stern lines; his eyes wore an unchanging hard expression that betokened how ruthlessly he would deal with the arch-criminal once they came face to face.

The automobile was whirring townwards. Flint was voicing his admiration for the way in which Cullimore had been hoodwinked, when Cole cut him short.

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“Tell me,” he directed curtly, “just what you got out of Cullimore.”

Flint proceeded to obey.

“In the first place, your deductions as to the manner in which Miss Day was kidnapped were correct.”

“*Why* did they do it?” The hard look regarded Flint steadily.

He shook his head. “Cullimore don’t know. At least, he does n’t know all the ins and outs of the matter; his ignorance of so many things explains the promptness with which he tumbled into your snare.

“By delaying the wedding till after the twelfth — that’s next Tuesday — Cantarini was putting himself in the way of securing a vast fortune. What do you think of it? The Englishman don’t know how. I think there’s a good deal we’ll have to learn from Miss Day herself.”

A sudden thrilling recollection left Cole outwardly unmoved.

“The twelfth,” he repeated; “that’s Miss Day’s birthday.”

“You don’t say.” For a second or two Flint remained in a brown study. “We have n’t all

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the facts," he continued at length; "we are handicapped. When we move again we must be sure it's in the right direction. Cullimore could n't throw any light upon Cantarini's influence over the young lady; I think the answer is very simple, though."

Cole calmly ignored the proffered explanation.

"You're not telling me what you learned from Cullimore," said he.

"Correct. But I'm so full of this thing now that I hardly know how to talk coherently about it.

"Well then, 'The Master' himself, it would seem, attended personally to all important matters. It seems to be his policy to keep his tools as much as possible in ignorance — doubtless one secret of his power. He administered the poison to Higdon; Cullimore designated the house where other members of the gang were to dispose of the body under cover of night. By the way, Kelsey is —"

"D—— Kelsey! Stick to Cullimore." The interruption was voiced without heat, and Flint, smiling whimsically, continued:

"It was Cullimore and 'The Master' — or

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let us call him Cantarini — who carried Miss Day in the automobile Spotwood saw, to the very room where I found you. They threw a lap-robe over her head as she ran down the corridor. Kelsey must have been going some himself, or she must surely have overtaken him.

“They were all in a hurry, when it comes to that; did n't want their absence noted in town, I suppose. The plan was carefully laid beforehand. After turning her over to Higdon, they did n't pause an instant at the quarry, and Cullimore was back at his post at Mr. Gibbs's before that gentleman would have returned home even under ordinary circumstances.

“But a cog slipped — a pretty tangle it makes, too. Why should Higdon want to kidnap the young lady over again on his own account? He did, though. And it is self-evident that his and Cantarini's interests were not by any means identical. But what he did with her —”

“Stick to Cullimore,” Cole again admonished. His teeth were clenched, and the gleam in his eyes grew more pitiless; it was maddening to

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allow his mind to dwell on Dorothy's probable plight.

"Well, he contends that all along he held out for Higdon's life and yours; but Cantarini was cold-bloodedly obdurate, and for his persistence he was delegated to put you out of the way. He did n't dare appear too stubborn, either; but all at once it occurred to him that here was a chance to touch you for funds to make his get-away. He had to be quick, too, if he did n't want Cantarini to get wise to his duplicity. Nice cheerful sort of person, that Cantarini."

"And if Cantarini had found me alive he would have performed the finishing process himself — 'bashed' me over the head, was Cullimore's graphic way of putting it."

"Very likely," Flint agreed. "You were mistaken, though, about Cullimore being the intermediary."

"You have captured him also?"

For a moment the other was silent, then —

"Not yet," he said quietly. "Of course, if Cullimore had been, your attempt to send him to me must have failed."

"Lord only knows how I hoped he was n't.

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I used the word because I knew it would mean as much to you as a specific direction — had I been permitted to write one.”

Flint nodded comprehendingly, and resumed his former business-like tone.

“It was Cantarini himself who hauled you away from McFerren’s last night. That plan was also carefully prearranged in every detail. Why he didn’t finish you at once — when he had the chance — I can’t —”

“I think I can tell you,” Cole interrupted. “Cullimore is not alone in seeing the Circle’s early finish. Cantarini is simply hanging on — despairingly, for all we know — until his schemes ripen; then he means to efface himself without the least consideration for his tools. He is taking no more chances than the rest of them.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Just the same, you are lucky. What sort of looking man is Cantarini?”

Cole described him: tall, loosely built, his features swarthy, lean, and prominent. “Nobody who has even seen him once could ever forget his face,” he supplemented, “for he car-

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ries one indelible mark. One eye is as black as jet, the other gray."

Again Flint nodded, but his features did not move a muscle. After a while it further transpired that Cantarini was a consummate mimic, having the talent of adapting himself to any character he might choose to assume.

"A cabman, for instance," suggested Flint.

"Yes, a cabby. I know now that it was he."

For a while Flint considered the advisability of telling his companion about Miss Gervaise's mysterious journey of the morning, but on second thought concluded to postpone the news until the young man had had more time to pull himself together. What he had to tell would only increase his hearer's anxiety; there was nothing to add to allay it.

The motor drew up at police headquarters, and without further parley Flint led the way to a private room. He asked, as soon as they were seated,

"What are your plans? — or have you any?"

"Find Cantarini," returned Cole, unrelentingly stern.

The gray head nodded appreciatively, the

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creases at the corners of the shrewd eyes deepened, the man's face seemed all at once to become a veritable network of wrinkles, as fine as threads.

"Excellent," he acquiesced, "but not specific." And in a queer, constrained manner he proceeded with an apology for the cavalier way with which he had disposed of the affair at the church, at a time when every person interested was in such deep distress of mind.

"I realize now," said he, earnestly, "that it was a tragic moment for you and your friends. I did the young lady a great injustice by —"

"I knew that."

"Yes, you saw a good deal that I was blind to," Flint ruefully admitted. Then, after frankly confessing his blunder and asserting a determination to compensate those who had suffered thereby, he unhesitatingly offered to devote all his time and attention to assisting Cole in his search for the missing girl and in bringing Cantarini to justice — "if," he concluded simply, "you are now willing to accept my aid."

This led Cole to inquiring whether the other had any plans himself, his eyes lighting with

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a sudden glow of eagerness while he awaited the reply.

It seemed that Flint had not only a plan, but a very simple and direct one. It involved nothing less than a raid upon Leporello's establishment. "Immediately," said Flint; "go after him when he's least expecting it."

After a thoughtful second or two — he was remembering to be deliberate — Cole gave the idea his approval.

"But what of Miss Day?" he asked. "Cantarini does n't know where she is."

"Stop thinking about it," was Flint's advice. "One thing at a time and take 'em as they come. It's Cantarini's turn now. Get him into a steel cage — we have some beauts here — and we can direct all our energies to finding the young lady. We should be able to take up the trail within the hour — and I'm not without an idea or two concerning that."

He argued that Higdon must have had some conveyance at hand — a horse and buggy, very likely — for his own use; that he would scarcely have returned to the city with Miss Day, and that the only other direction he could have gone

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from the stone-quarry was to the north. He confidently declared that if he and Cole should go over Higdon's only available route, a careful inquiry at every house along the road would yield some definite result. He pointed out that the man could not have gone far, since he returned to Williamsburg — and to his death — sometime during the same night.

Meanwhile Cole had produced from a pocket of his coat a strip of very fine white cloth — linen cambric, to be precise — a foot or more square. Its edges were frayed and rough, as if it had been hastily torn from the garment of which it had originally formed a part. It bore a number of dark-brown stains.

“Flint,” he now said, “I shall be very glad to have you for a coadjutor. But get one thing impressed upon your mind here and now: when I come face to face with that heartless scoundrel, I'm going — well, whatever happens, you're not to interfere. Get that?”

By a nod Flint signified that he understood, carefully refraining from committing himself, however, to any spoken pledge.

Cole then spread out the strip of cloth, con-

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templating it with lowering eyes, and it could now be seen that the brown stains formed a rudely printed word. Flint's eyes kindled as he scrutinized it.

“Blood?” he queried, bending over it.

“Yes” — Cole's voice shook — “blood. I found it fluttering outside the window of my cell, fastened to one of the bars.”

The strip of cloth bore the single word
“*Help!*”

CHAPTER XXIII

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BY a fortunate chance, when Cole and Flint strode rapidly up the walk to Leporello's wide double-entrance, there was no waiting conveyance before the place to indicate the presence of a visitor.

Their quick sally was the signal for the rear guard of plain-clothes men to emerge from their various places of concealment and, following closely after their leaders, surround the house. This was accomplished quietly and unobtrusively, by the time the two had arrived at the front steps.

The French maid presented the chief difficulty. How to get by her before she had time to warn Leporello — whom, it will be recalled, she had once protested to Cole she had never seen — was a cause of much concern. Indubitably, they had some secret method of communication between the first and the second stories. The idea of resorting to force was repugnant alike to both

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men; but it was mutually agreed that if she allied herself with the criminals, after the purpose of the raiding party was once made known to her, she must be dealt with accordingly.

The inner doors stood wide open, but a wire screen barred the way. Cole, in advance, jerked at the handle, and then fell back with a smothered exclamation of chagrin.

The screen was hooked on the inside. And each second's delay, the least unusual noise spelled danger not alone to their enterprise, but to themselves as well.

Flint was not an instant divining the cause of the check, which he proceeded to make only a temporary one by slitting the fine wire mesh with his pocket-knife, and, thrusting his hand through the aperture, releasing the hook.

Just as they stepped inside, the reception-room door — immediately on the right of the entrance — opened, and the petite French maid appeared on the threshold, surveying them with questioning eyes.

The next moment she was back in the reception room again, and Flint stood over her, shaking an impressive forefinger in her startled face.

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Cole stood hearkening for some sound that might indicate that their intrusion had been detected, his own countenance a mirror of apprehension and anxiety.

But for the moment Flint's headquarters manner was dominant.

"Not a sound from you, my girl," he whispered menacingly, "unless it's to whisper answers to my questions. One crooked move, and you go to jail on the double-quick — understand? Come, now — where is this Leporello? How can we get to him in about two seconds?"

Flint's purpose, of course, was to browbeat the girl, and for the moment he succeeded in doing so. The pretty face blanched at his truculent words and manner, the red lips fell apart, and she would have recoiled in alarm had not Flint roughly caught one of her wrists.

"No stalling goes!" he whispered sternly. "Answer up."

The girl turned wildly to Cole. Manifestly she was too terrified to shriek or utter a sound, even if she had been so minded. There was recognition and appeal in the look she bent upon the young man, and at once he interposed.

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“No use being rough, Flint. Let me talk to her.” Flint reluctantly released his grip on the girl’s wrist, and Cole continued, addressing her,

“My dear, this man is an officer of the law; the house is surrounded by police; your employer is a thief, a murderer, a kidnapper of defenceless women, and they have come to arrest him. Will you attempt to warn him, or will you help us?”

For a long moment the girl stared at him. Her expression of alarm gradually melted away before one of stupefaction and then of bewilderment; and at last the color returned to the pretty face with a rush. Then a strange, hard light glinted in the long-lashed brown eyes. It was now the turn of the two men to be amazed.

“*Mon dieu!*” she gasped. “Arrest Monsieur Leporello?” She searched Cole’s steady gray eyes earnestly. At last — “*Eh bien!* I shall certainly help you!” was her decision.

There was a certain mystifying intensity in her manner, as of flaming passions curbed; but the sincerity of this unexpected prompt readiness to aid them could not be doubted. Flint, too, was

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plainly surprised; nevertheless his alert watchfulness did not abate in the least.

“Wait!” the girl presently whispered, laying a warning finger upon her lips; “*taisez-vous!*” With an abrupt movement she turned away, and instantly Flint started forward to stay her. Cole laid a firm, restraining hand upon his arm.

“Do as she says!” he commanded. “Wait — and keep quiet. We can trust her.”

The officer was only too plainly sceptical, but he paused and contented himself with following, anxiously, the girl’s quick, yet cautious movements.

She released from her brown hair the lace cap she wore, and, advancing to the wall, thrust it into what appeared to be a detail of the panel carving. After this puzzling performance she turned again to Cole, addressing him in a voice low-pitched, but no longer whispering. Her first words and the accompanying gesture toward the lace cap explained her mysterious conduct.

“He cannot hear you now — not so easily; that is a spy-hole — a speaking-tube. I think Monsieur Leporello sleeps; but maybe not.” Then her voice suddenly trembled with passion.

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“Thief! — assassin!” she said bitterly. “*Ah! c’est vrai.* He has deceive’ me. His *secrétaire* — you remember, monsieur? — he was oh, so kind and good to me! He swear he love me, the beast! But he love me not at all; he make one fool of me. Monsieur, there is no *secrétaire* : he is Monsieur Leporello himself — *croyez-vous?* I find out this morning. I help you — *hang heem!*”

“What is your name?” now demanded Flint, his keen eyes steadily probing her.

“Marie Barbier,” she answered simply, and with a defiant flash, “I am not afraid of you!”

Even in the stress of the moment, Cole could not repress a smile. Flint’s uncompromising attitude manifestly no longer dismayed the girl. But in the next instant both were lending an attentive ear to her rapid utterance.

The entire house, she informed them, was literally honeycombed with secret passages and windings, and also there were artfully arranged mirrors and spy-holes and ways by which the fortune-teller, in his cabinet, could see and hear what transpired in other parts of the house.

“Hope you ’re right about him being asleep,” muttered Flint.

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“He always takes a nap after luncheon,” the maid reassured him. She then, swiftly and concisely, proceeded to map the interior of the house for them.

Behind the alcove in the cabinet, among other details, there was a secret chamber to which access was gained by means of a sliding panel in the wall. It was in this hidden chamber that Leporello usually enjoyed his mid-day *siesta*. This room, it seemed, was the converging point of most of the secret passages — just how many Marie did not know. Flint’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction, however, when she announced that she could guide them to the entrance of one stairway in the walls which led directly to the room in question.

“You follow the girl,” said Flint to Cole; “I’ll try to get close enough to him in his cabinet — if he’s there — to follow him through any hole he may uncover in the wall. Carry your gun in one hand, the flash-light in the other.”

At once the twain separated. Flint, after removing his shoes, went stealthily up the front stairs, while Marie Barbier conducted Cole toward the rear of the house, where presently she paused

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before a tall bevelled mirror that stood against the wall. Pressing a spot on the frame, both frame and mirror receded noiselessly from them, disclosing a narrow stairway which ascended precipitously at right angles. Here Cole disposed of his own shoes, while Marie whispered her final instructions.

“The stairs turn twice. At the top, run your hand along the wall — thees side” — indicating his right — “and you will feel a row of round-headed nails. Find the fourth one from the top and the bottom one. Press them at the same time.” With a sudden alteration of manner, she patted the hand which grasped the revolver, smiling into Cole’s intent eyes. “Courage, *mon ami!*” she whispered, and silently left him.

He began the steep ascent with no other light than that which wandered in from the shaded opening below, and when he rounded the first turn he was in Cimmerian darkness. With the utmost caution, he continued to go up, up, counting the steps of each stair-section so that he might judge when he arrived at the top of the last flight.

At last the stairs ended. He held his breath

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until the throbbing pulses in his ears muffled all other possible sounds. He heard nothing else. So after a minute of tense hearkening he pressed the button of his flash-light, shielding the bull's-eye with the hand that held the pistol. Very carefully, he permitted a thread of light to pierce the darkness. On either hand and apparently within six inches of his nose was a dead, smooth wall surface. Then the light flashed out, and in the next moment he had found the two nails controlling the hidden door-latch.

After he had pressed them he knew that the wall in front of him had moved away. No light was revealed, but there was a perceptible freshening of the air, which had been stifling in the restricted stairway.

The moment had now arrived for exercising the utmost circumspection. A sound as slight as his bated respiration might easily betray his presence to an occupant of the room beyond, and if Marie Barbier's surmise had been correct, Cantarini was now somewhere near at hand in the pitch darkness that enveloped him. But strain his hearing as he might, not the slightest sound rewarded the effort. He strove to make out the

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breathing of a sleeper; but if Cantarini was sleeping in the room, he slept silently.

After a while he advanced one stockinged foot, every sense alert, every nerve and muscle tense with the strain. Still nothing happened. The feeling of morbid expectancy was fast becoming unendurable. His imagination was beginning to people the Stygian darkness with every sort of horror and lurking, unseen danger. Yawning trap-doors waited to give way beneath him, needing only the touch of some hidden spring, which perhaps his foot was even now pressing; heavy weights were suspended above, which his next move would precipitate upon his head; Cantarini, a fiendish smile contorting his cruel lips, was off there in the dark gathering himself to spring when the intruder advanced one more step.

The invisible terrors were surely unnerving him, and it was a positive relief when a sudden draught signified the opening of a door or window. Immediately a snap, like a dry stick breaking, disturbed the silence, and an electrolier in the ceiling blossomed into light.

The tungsten filaments in the bulbs illuminated the scene with a ghastly simulation of daylight,

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and there, within a dozen feet, the bright light striking downward across the swart, maleficent visage, stood Leporello the Seer.

It was Leporello rather than Cantarini that faced Cole, for the man was garbed from head to foot in the habiliments of his unscrupulous calling — a long robe of black velvet tricked out with the zodiacal signs and various cabalistic symbols in silver thread. On his head he wore an enormous black silk turban. This funereal costume was relieved by one spot of color; the front of the turban was ornamented with a circlet of magnificent yellow Oriental topazes, which gleamed and coruscated like living flame.

Yet, too, it was Cantarini, beyond a doubt; he who was supposed to have been drowned in front of Santiago; no one could mistake those ill-matched eyes.

Obviously he had just entered the room, for immediately behind him a gaping aperture in the wall signified a concealed door, which he had not yet had time to close, and the fingers of his left hand still lingered on the electric-light button. Instantly Cole covered him with the revolver.

“Don't stir,” he said grimly.

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For the briefest instant, Cantarini showed that he was disconcerted. He would have been justified in giving way to mortal terror, because he had every reason for believing that the man confronting him was at that very instant lying dead some miles from Williamsburg. To have met him in any surroundings would have been startling enough; but to encounter him here, stalking through the very penetralia of his occult establishment, must have suggested powerfully that Cole's ghost had come to wreak vengeance for the outrages done the body.

The delusion could not last for long. As Cole's temper rose, gray hollows appeared in his lean, unshaven face; the thin lips might have been cut in granite; his gray eyes were merely two pin-points of wrathful fire.

"Cantarini, you scoundrel!" he said, with deadly deliberation, "if you have anything to say, say it quickly, for I am going to kill you."

Cantarini remained as motionless as a graven image, but a sudden pallor overspread the dark features. Looking along that steel tube, levelled so steadily at him, and into the sinister eyes behind it, he could not doubt the implacable intent

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of his enemy. His cruel lips twitched wordlessly once or twice, and then he spoke.

“Cole, this is monstrous! Would you shoot me down in cold blood? — without a chance?”

“I would,” was the calm response. “I am going to do that very thing. It will be no more than meting out to you the precise treatment you deserve. Be quick.”

“One can’t think — very well — in — in such circumstances,” the man faltered. Still it was manifest that his cunning brain was never so active as at that critical moment. Cantarini clearly recognized how desperate his predicament was, and for once his fertility of resource could offer no way out; his faculties seemed benumbed.

Doubtless, within the next ten seconds, Cole’s finger would have closed upon the trigger, — from the unconscious prompting of desire, if not premeditatedly; but instead he jerked his head up with a smothered imprecation, yet keeping the revolver pointed directly at Cantarini’s heart. Flint’s leatherlike visage and gray head had suddenly appeared in the aperture behind the seer.

“Out of the way, Flint!” Cole cried. “I don’t want to shoot you.”

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“Nor anybody else,” Flint quietly retorted, advancing into the room. “I think I have saved you from committing murder, Mr. Cole. Control yourself.”

An oath burst from the young man’s lips.

“Flint, if you don’t get out of the way, I’ll shoot anyhow.”

It is impossible to say what might have happened, but what did transpire was startling enough. Flint’s arrival afforded just the diversion that Cantarini needed; his hand had not been removed from the light button; and all at once the room was plunged in darkness. Whatever desperate hazard Cole might have taken while the room was flooded with light, it was a different matter shooting aimlessly in the dark, when he would be as likely to strike Flint as the other.

He heard a brief scuffling noise, a sound as of rending garments, and then Flint’s voice raised in a shout.

“The door behind you!—guard it! Don’t let him escape!”

Cole, however, on an automatic prompting, had leaped back to it the instant the lights went out. He was prepared to meet any shock—to die, if

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need be — but nothing happened until Flint found the light button and snapped on the lights again.

Cantarini was not in the room, though some yards of heavy black silk, which had composed the turban, and the long velvet robe were.

“The fellow ’s an eel,” said Flint, panting from the exertion of the brief struggle; “he wriggled right out of his clothes like a snake shedding its skin.”

The other was bitterly reproachful.

“Flint, Flint, Flint!” he groaned in accents that sounded the very nadir of his disappointment, “why did n’t you let me finish the wretch while I had the opportunity! What a rotten bungler you are! Now he ’s gone.”

The detective did not pause to argue the matter, nor to resent his companion’s biting denunciations. As he went, rather recklessly, down the narrow stairway which Cole had ascended, he merely reminded that angry and chagrined young man of the cordon around the house. But Cole was not to be placated.

In the hall below they found Marie Barbier, her eyes wide with excitement and fear.

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“He has escape’!” she whispered tragically; “I see it in your faces! Do not leave me aga—” Abruptly she raised her hands to her cheeks, and, cringing as if from a blow, stared down the length of the hall. Her appeal ended in a terrified cry: “*Voilà monsieur!*”

The exclamation was punctuated by a deafening crash from Cole’s revolver. A door at the extreme end of the hall had been jerked open, disclosing Cantarini in shirt and trousers, who, when he perceived the group, immediately banged it shut again. With a movement as quick as lightning, Cole had raised his weapon and fired.

The bullet splintered a panel, and then Cole and Flint, with Marie speeding frantically after them, were upon the door so quickly that the man on the other side barely had time to vanish through another doorway beyond.

Again, as the portal swung to, Cole’s revolver cracked with ear-splitting violence. Again a panel was shattered. The maid shrieked and covered her ears with her palms; while, with a muttered curse, Flint tried to strike the smoking pistol from the young man’s hand.

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“You fool!” — Flint’s politeness was forgotten — “save your cartridges! The first one warned the men outside. He can’t get away.”

But the white, set face and glittering eyes that turned scornfully to the officer disillusioned that individual respecting Cole’s intent.

“Try that again, Flint,” he said calmly, “and I’ll pot you.”

All this in the instant following the second shot. Then came an answering shot from the other side of the closed door; a pinch of splinters flew toward them from the panel an inch below the hole made by Cole’s bullet, and the maid uttered a hysterical shriek.

Instinctively Flint dragged her to one side. But with the fugitive’s shot, Cole’s nostrils suddenly expanded and his eyes lighted with the lust of battle. Utterly heedless of the danger, he dashed straight toward the closed door and, as the lock snapped, into the room beyond. Then he abruptly halted.

The room was empty.

The other two were close at his heels, Marie in such a frenzy of excitement that she was almost powerless to act. A gray mist of powder smoke

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hung undulating in the air, its pungent odor stinging their eyes and nostrils.

“It ees a trap-door!” Marie was screaming. “I know eet! To zee cellaire! . . . *Prends garde, monsieur!*”

The warning came too late to profit Cole. Amazed at the girl's conduct, as on hands and knees she groped wildly over the floor, he did not stir until, in her agitation, she pressed the hidden spring, regardless of the fact that he was standing on the trap.

He plunged downward into blackness, his precious revolver flying from his hand, as he grasped futilely at the floor to stay his fall. He landed upon his feet, but with a shock that carried him to his hands and knees, that brought his teeth together with a crack, wrenched his neck painfully, and left him for a time stunned and breathless.

He was dimly aware that the trap-door slammed shut behind him, but was vividly sensible of the fact that he was in a darkness absolutely opaque. Before he could stir, a sullen red flash and a scattering of sparks came simultaneously with a loud report, and the bullet that

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fanned his face sent the plaster behind him flying.

And he was now unarmed! Slowly — very slowly and carefully — he lowered himself to the cement floor again, where he lay face downward, silent and inert, and waited.

He heard a stir and bustle somewhere off in the darkness, but Cantarini did not fire again. He also heard Flint tugging and wrenching at the trap-door and stamping upon it, while the maid chattered unintelligible directions. It must have stuck fast after his fall, for some seconds elapsed before Flint finally got it open again. Then the daylight that broke the Stygian blackness revealed a cellar with cement floor and walls, which, save for a few small boxes and the indescribable odds and ends that accumulate in such places, was empty. There was nothing large enough to conceal the bulk of a man.

Flint gauged the drop the instant he had the door open; in the next he had grasped the edge and swung down beside Cole. Marie, with clasped hands, her pretty face colorless and her lips parted, knelt beside the opening and strove to follow with wild eyes the scene below.

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There was little enough to reward her excited curiosity. Cantarini had once more eluded them; there was not a sign of him; and Flint was already searching, with methodical rapidity, for the concealed door.

Meanwhile Marie Barbier grew more collected, and presently came down the ladder which the others had ignored. All three were well-nigh breathless, for since Cole's snap-shot in the hall not more than two minutes had elapsed, and the heat and flurry of the chase had been carried forward with a rush that had kept every muscle and nerve strained to the utmost. During the present temporary lull the overwrought girl all at once succumbed to the reaction from her recent powerful agitation.

A low, joyful exclamation from Flint announced the success of his search, and Cole had just warned him to be careful of another shot from the dark, when Marie rushed forward and grasped the detective's arm.

"*Messieurs! messieurs!*" she cried, sobbing, "you cannot catch heem! It is not to be! He has escape'; let heem go!"

"Tut, girl," retorted Flint, impatiently shak-

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ing her hold from his arm. He was looking too eagerly for the spring controlling the door-fastening to heed her interruption.

Marie Barbier drew lithely away and watched him with a curious catlike intentness. In a moment the door swung open, and she was on Flint like a flash.

“*Mon dieu!*” she cried through set teeth. “You shall not!”

Surprised at this unexpected attack, the man turned to release her determined grip.

“Why, you little idiot!” he exclaimed. “What do you mean!”

But the girl clung desperately to him until Cole interfered. He forced his fingers beneath hers, gently but firmly, and drew her around until she faced him.

“Marie,” he said, with understanding, “you don’t want such a monster to escape. Think, child! Think a moment of how he has deceived you. Not only is it true that he does n’t care for you, but you know he is unworthy of even one —”

“*Ça suffit.*” She did not let him finish. Drawing suddenly away, she slipped her hands

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from his and for a moment hid her face in them. They were very delicate hands. Presently one of them sought her throat, while the other indicated the aperture in the wall. Her head drooped, her eyes were downcast, the pretty face was drawn and white.

“I — I am a good girl, monsieur,” she said chokingly. “Go.”

Flint hastened into the opening, but the young man lingered and looked across his shoulder at Marie. She had not stirred. On a sudden impulse he came swiftly back to her, and, catching the outstretched hand in both of his, looked down at her with sympathetic discernment. The light in the cellar was dim, but the girl felt and responded to his interest; her melancholy eyes met his.

“Yes, Marie,” he spoke gravely, “I know — I understand. You are a good girl. *Au revoir.*”

Then he hurried after Flint.

The delay occasioned by the search for the concealed door had been fatal, however. The tunnel extended to a room in the stable, where a door opened directly upon an alley; and as the stable concealed the alley from the premises,

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the last stage of the fugitive's flight had met with no interruption.

"I have a premonition that you will never land him behind the bars," Cole gave as his opinion. But anger and disgust all at once mastered him. "Oh, you sleuth!" he cried bitterly.

But words could not help matters any. Cantarini was gone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DOWN!

IN the whirl of Friday morning's events Miss Gervaise must not be lost sight of. At an hour so early that she had not yet risen, her maid awoke her to impart the intelligence that her presence was urgently desired downstairs.

Miss Edith did not delay. What with Foster Cole's unaccountable silence and her anxiety concerning Dorothy, any summons would find her willing, if not actually ready, to obey it, in the hope of learning something respecting her friend's fate. Edith was a loyal little body; and so it was not long until she was confronting in the reception-hall a raw and awkward country youth, who stood nervously maltreating his hat under the severely disapproving eye of Sparks. That worthy was dismissed.

For some reason the sight of the youth unwontedly agitated the girl, and for a moment she

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was obliged to drop upon the hall settle until she recovered her equipoise.

“What is it?” she asked breathlessly.

“I want to see Edith Jarvice,” returned the lad.

“That is my name — Gervaise. Hurry, please; tell me what it is you want.”

The lad's name was Reece Jones. His father, Hiram, was a farmer residing near the village of Eastview, some twenty miles north of Williamsburg. Last Wednesday evening about dusk his father was loading a wagon with wood in the tract of timber on his farm, when he was astonished to see off among the trees a lady approaching him.

At first the elder Jones was inclined to believe that he beheld a wraith, so improbable was the circumstance; but fortunately he had courage enough to wait and satisfy his curiosity.

After watching the apparition for a while, he soon became assured that he was looking at no supernatural visitor, but one of real flesh and blood, and, moreover, just at present in dire need of assistance.

She appeared to be wandering aimlessly, and as she drew nearer, Jones observed that she

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seemed to be dazed and on the very verge of falling from exhaustion.

To add to his bewilderment, her dress, which had once been white, was of a rich and expensive fineness that was far beyond the pale of anything within his experience, but terribly torn and bedraggled and covered with burrs and mud. Her hair, of a wondrous golden hue, was half-broken from its fastenings and resting, sadly tangled, on her shoulders. She wore no other head-covering.

When Jones seized her hand she gave him one terrified look and fainted dead away. She was now at the Jones home, out of her mind, and calling constantly for Edith Jarvice.

There was no doubt in Edith's mind respecting the identity of "the strange lady"; beyond peradventure it was Dorothy Day.

But how —? why —? what —? A thousand questions rushed into her brain; she sat for a time fairly stunned by the boy's well-nigh incomprehensible revelation; for the related facts presented such an extraordinary state of affairs that her mind was utterly unable to grasp them in all their horrible significance.

DOWN!

Dorothy Day, gentle, refined, cultured, not inured to the least hardship, to be wandering aimlessly, half-crazed; what a shocking picture the words conjured up before this other gentle girl's mental vision!

What dreadful impulse had driven her blindly on to the point of both physical and mental collapse? Had she been going thus since Tuesday night? Wednesday evening it was that Farmer Jones had found her, miles from Williamsburg; had she traversed all that long weary distance in her wedding-gown and frail satin slippers? The possibility was too awful to contemplate.

And the poignancy of Dorothy's distressing condition came to Edith in a sudden overwhelming gush of feeling that left her wholly disregarding of the embarrassed messenger. She gave way unrestrainedly to a fit of weeping.

The friendship that responds without questioning is a fine thing. For when it became certain that Foster Cole could not be found, nor Mr. Gibbs for the moment, Edith resolved to hasten herself to Dorothy. True, she suffered one or two pangs of misgiving and trepi-

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dation, for Edith was neither bold nor adventuresome; but her resolution remained unshaken.

Dispensing with the services of her maid, she dressed for the long ride with nervous, eager haste, and soon she and the boy were tearing madly in the direction of Eastview.

“How far, Reece?” she ducked her head a moment to inquire, for the wind-shield was of small account.

“Twenty-two miles I’d call it, mam, to the house,” Reece shouted.

“Good road?”

“Pike road, mam; straight as a stretched balin’-wire an’ smooth as the inside of a wheat-chute.”

Twenty-two miles! Within the next ten minutes the huge car had accomplished one-half the distance; the journey ended just twenty-four minutes after the start.

The car, long, low, and rakish, with all the signs of its smart newness hid beneath a coat of dust and grime, was incontinently abandoned under the widespreading branches of a patriarch among apple-trees, almost at the Jones doorstep. Mrs. Jones herself conducted Edith

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at once to a small but neat upstairs bedroom. The good lady's manner betrayed a consuming curiosity which Edith, of course, was obliged to ignore.

"You — you've been very kind," the girl faltered, pausing at the door; "but pray leave us together — for the present."

Regretfully, but with unabated cheerfulness, Mrs. Jones went down the stairs.

All a-quiver with agitation — nervously expectant that hope was about to be realized, fearfully apprehensive that she was to be doomed to bitter disappointment — Edith was obliged to pause until she stilled the wild beating of her heart. But in a few moments she succeeded in mastering her emotion; then, advancing on tip-toe to the bed, she looked heartbrokenly down on the face of the sleeper. The features were wan and pinched — Edith choked back a sob — but they were Dorothy's.

"A light breeze at the windows was playing about,

And the white curtains floated, now in, and now out."

It bore gently all the fragrance of the fair flowering June, touching the pale cheeks with the gentleness of a dream-kiss.

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Still, notwithstanding her pallor and the look of weariness, the sleeping girl was strikingly beautiful; her blonde hair overflowed the pillows in an exuberant cascade of gold, the long lashes lay on her cheeks like soot on snow.

Edith was wildly curious to hear from Dorothy's lips the secret of her flight, yet not for worlds would she disturb her now.

However, there is a subtle, mysterious telegraphy between those who slumber and those who are awake, whereby messages are conveyed to that monitor mind which never sleeps. In a little while Dorothy felt the influence of her friend's sorrowful inspection; she stirred and sighed, and then opened her eyes to meet the loving, commiserating look bent upon her.

Instantly Edith was seated on the bed, straining the beautiful blonde head to her bosom.

Close to eight o'clock that evening a large touring-car, bearing every appearance of a recent cup competitor, drew up at the curb before Miss Day's residence. Apparently there was nobody near to observe that the machine bore only two passengers, — two ladies, — one of whom was

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driving, while the other reclined listlessly in the tonneau. They were Edith and Dorothy.

The former, without stopping the engine, turned brightly to her companion, saying,

“The ride has n't been too much for you, Dolly dear, has it? But here we are at last — and oh, it's so much better to be at home than to be among strangers, however kind they are. You just sit here, while I go fetch Sarah.”

Miss Day remained motionless and unresponsive.

Edith had gathered her skirts in one hand, preparatory to alighting, and had half risen from her seat, when a figure darted from the nearby shadows, rushed soundlessly to the automobile, and threw open the tonneau door.

Storm-clouds had gathered with the evening, and twilight had deepened quickly into night. The act was accomplished so rapidly that Edith was aware only of a vague shadow flitting in beside Dorothy, and afterwards closing the door again.

Next instant a rough hand thrust her unceremoniously back into the seat. At the same time

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she was sensible of a painful pressure between her shoulders.

“Do you feel that?” said a man’s subdued voice at her ear. “It is the muzzle of a revolver. An outcry from you, young lady, will mean instant death.”

There was no sound from Dorothy, and for some inexplicable reason Edith did not feel in the least alarmed — not even astonished. The hand continued to bear heavily upon her shoulder.

“You must be desperate,” said she composedly, without turning her head, “to attack two defenceless women. What do you want?”

“A very simple favor; one that you may easily grant, without other loss to yourself than an hour or so’s time. I want the use of your motor, and I want you to drive it at my direction.”

The curt, menacing earnestness of the low-pitched words left her unmoved.

“May my companion alight?” she asked.

“Well, I guess not,” was the insolent response. “It is her company that I particularly desire. Come, be quick, my dear young lady.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I’ll count ten — slowly. Then I’ll shoot.”

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The girl pondered one second, then expressed a conviction.

“I don't believe you will dare do it.”

“Don't you?” coolly. “Very well; try me. . . . *One!*”

Had she ever heard that voice before? She thought so, but could not be sure. Her thoughts flew with lightning rapidity during the next few seconds, but the only emotion that seemed to stir within her was a ridiculously irresistible desire to laugh. And all the while the voice was intoning at her ear, “*Two! — Three! — Four! —*” slowly, to be sure, but inexorably.

It all at once flashed into her mind to wonder where Foster Cole was; she was so accustomed to having him beside her, to smooth out all difficulties and lead her out of all predicaments, that his absence now was like a great aching void.

“*Five!*”

Come to think of it, she had not heard from him since he left her yesterday morning; that was strange — in the circumstances, unaccountable. Surely, nothing could have happened to *him!* For the first time she experienced a qualm of fear, a dizzy sinking sensation of the heart.

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“Foster! Foster! Foster!” a voice within her wildly cried. How much longer could she endure the muzzle of that frightful pistol boring into her back? Not long, because he would fire soon. What did this truculent highwayman mean? — was he merely insane? Foster could make short work —

“*Six!*”

She glanced anxiously along the street; but it was empty.

“*Seven!*”

Her ears strained to catch any sound behind her; but no one was approaching from the rear.

“*Eight!*”

Nothing whatever was to be heard, in fact, except the clang and roar of a trolley in a distant street, the man's bated breathing between counts, and the purring of the engine's six cylinders. But her excited senses all of a sudden caught a subtle change in the voice, still relentlessly marking off the deadly reckoning, as if the man were nerving himself for the final bloody act. . . . He must indeed be desperate. . . . Poor Dolly! She must have fain —

“*Nine!*”

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And then, just as the ultimate number trembled on the man's lips, the girl was suddenly filled with a blind, unreasoning anger.

"Very well," — her teeth were clenched, — "shoot."

Straightway she gathered herself to send forth a cry for help before the bullet could render her powerless. But instantly the long sinewy fingers of two hands closed around her throat, and proceeded to choke and shake her into insensibility.

"Curse you!" the voice hissed. "I'll be my own chauffeur, . . . Take that, you little devil!"

Now the girl was terrified in all conscience. Not until the fingers touched her throat did she realize the utter recklessness of the attack or the inconceivable audacity of her assailant. The boldness with which he disregarded the chances of possible interruption, of certain retribution, was astounding. She was helpless, however, in that awful grasp — suffocating, half wild with fright.

"Will you do as I say?" demanded the voice, the pressure on her throat relaxing somewhat. "Drive straight ahead at top speed; turn as I tell you to, stop at my command, and you shall come to no harm. At the first sign of trickery —

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if you try to let out another yell — why, I 'll finish the job. Speak up!"

She all but collapsed. Next she was so roughly thrust aside that she nearly fell to the street, but she dimly knew that the man was clambering across to the driver's seat. One leg was over the back-rest when, without the slightest warning, an interruption came from an unexpected quarter.

Now, as it happened, Dorothy had not fainted. The instant the man's face appeared at the side of the automobile she bent one wild look upon him, and at once turned deathly pale, cringing away from him as far as the confines of the tonneau would permit, where she sat speechless with terror.

And thus she remained, staring at the intruder with fixed, unseeing eyes, until he started to swarm over to the front. The movement seemed to break the spell that held her enchained. With startling abruptness, her frenzied, piercing screams burst forth and rang shuddering through the still night.

All along the street doors opened, and windows were thrown up with a crash. And now, somewhere off in the darkness, could be heard the

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flutter of an approaching automobile, coming at a pace that must soon bring it upon the scene.

There was an oath and a muttered malediction from the man in the automobile. He tried to jump from his insecure position astride the back-rest to the walk; a reckless feat to attempt, for he landed on hands and knees with a force that wrung from him a cry of pain. One arm doubled under him with a sickening, crunching sound. After one vain effort to rise, he groaned and sank back to the walk.

CHAPTER XXV

AND OUT

AT nightfall, worn out in both mind and body, taciturn and dispirited, Cole and Flint returned from an ineffectual search for the missing bride. Cole had pressed into service Gibbs's touring-car, and it too seemed tired.

They had called at every house along the highway and had penetrated every by-way, but never a trace of Dorothy did they find; and at last even Flint's assurance became shaken. To have Cantarini slip so easily out of their very grasp had been bad enough, but complete failure of their subsequent efforts had beaten Cole down under a keen sense of defeat and a profound feeling of discouragement.

On the way home Flint finally told of Kelsey's tragic death and Miss Gervaise's mystifying flight, his hearer lethargic until Edith's name was mentioned; then the effect of this disclosure surprised the detective not a little. Cole jumped, as

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it were, back to life. Leaning forward, he gave the chauffeur the Gervaise number. "Go like the devil!" he tersely commanded.

The young fellow obeyed.

"What do you mean?" demanded Flint.

"It's an easy one," was the dry response. "Miss Gervaise has heard news of Miss Day."

Flint marvelled in silence: the possibility had not occurred to him.

Of course, they did not find Edith at home; but without a second's hesitation, Cole reëntered the tonneau, directing the driver to hasten to Miss Day's.

It was while the speeding motor was entering the block in which her residence was situated that the two men were startled and thrilled by Dorothy's prolonged scream. The chauffeur needed no other urging. He shot forward the sparker, and the big machine fairly leaped over the intervening distance.

Cole was out on the walk before the motor stopped just behind the other. He stooped over the prostrate figure, only to recoil immediately with a smothered ejaculation of sheer amazement.

"*Cantarini!*"

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At once, however, Flint shouldered him aside. His more comprehensive glance had descried the fact that the man was disabled, and he wanted to forestall any possible rash act on the part of Cole which the young man would surely repent of afterwards.

“He’s wounded,” Flint curtly announced; “I’ll take care of him; look after the ladies.”

Half an hour later, when Gibbs’s automobile returned to Miss Day’s bearing its overjoyed owner, he was greeted in the rear drawing-room not only by the mistress of the house herself, but there were present besides Cole, Phineas Flint, Miss Gervaise, Sarah Kemp, and a remarkable looking black-avised man whom Mr. Gibbs had never seen before.

If Dorothy had been apprehensive over the probable manner of her lover’s greeting, her doubts were soon set at rest. Utterly disregardful of his audience, Gibbs hastened to her.

“Dorothy!” he cried, a low, vibrating echo of the days and nights of wretched suspense; an assurance that his devotion remained unchanged, unquestioning. As their hands met in a trembling clasp, her eyes grew hazy.

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“My dear!” she whispered. “My dear!”

For a long moment each pair of eyes drank thirstily from the depths before them. The man's features were working with emotion; but, undemonstrative by nature, he contented himself with that pregnant handclasp and an avowal which reached no other ears than Dorothy's. It made her eyes shine like sapphire stars. They hung upon his fervid look as he turned to the others; her smaller hands, reluctant to leave the strong grasp that enveloped them, lingered in his.

The story was soon told. It harked back to Dorothy's school days, when she and Alessandro Cantarini — the son of a wealthy Italian merchant, residing in Nagasaki, who had married a native Japanese lady — had been classmates in an obscure college in California.

The traditions of the little college (a sectarian affair) would not tolerate fraternities, and, unsuspected by a trusting faculty, Cantarini organized a secret society known among the students as “The Golden Circle.” It was the depiction by Leporello of her initiation into this (then) innocent association that had so agitated

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Dorothy on the occasion of her visit with Edith to the seer.

The girl had always felt the influence of Cantarini's magnetic personality; yet even her unsophisticated mind had noted, without identifying, the sinister power that lay behind the man's attraction. When he proposed marriage, her dislike grew to loathing and fear.

Her father, however, had come under Cantarini's influence; he favored the marriage, and had been angered at her refusal to comply with his wishes.

Then for a time Cantarini disappeared. His father failed in business, and the young man was thrown upon his own resources, far from home and with no means of getting there. It was now that the unscrupulous elements of his nature asserted themselves. Meeting Miss Letitia Leonard, he worked upon her susceptible mind until he persuaded her to join the Circle. He exerted his authority as Master to wring from her a distorted account of the family secret. Armed with this, he reappeared before Dorothy and her father, and tried to force her into a marriage.

Meantime Chauncey Day had made his will.

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He had bestowed upon Cantarini the affection which would have been lavished upon the son which he lacked. Hence, if Dorothy was not married before her twenty-fourth birthday the Day fortune was to go absolutely to Cantarini.

But Cantarini's threat to expose the family secret put a new complexion upon his attitude. Day's eyes were opened to his true nature; he bitterly regretted the will, declaring his intention of destroying it as soon as he could reach his San Francisco office.

Next morning Day was discovered dead in his desk-chair and the safe door open. The manner of his death remained a mystery; it was never satisfactorily explained; and as Dorothy knew nothing of the will, no other reason existed for suspecting Cantarini than the fact that he too disappeared at this time — for ever, Dorothy sincerely and fervently hoped.

On her father's death, his estate passed to her, as the sole heir, by mere operation of law. But Cantarini's reflections upon her birth had raised bitter doubts in her mind, and she sought for other heirs who might have a stronger claim to

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the property than she herself had. None were found.

It was then that the girl resolved to sever old relations and to break off associations that were bitterly painful. Also she wanted to obviate any chance of Cantarini ever finding her again. So she selected the birth-place of her old nurse as a refuge, and together the two journeyed to Williamsburg.

Meantime, to Cantarini in Cuba occurred the possibilities of the Golden Circle as a means to further his own selfish and unprincipled ends. The innocuous college society afforded the nucleus of a great and potent criminal machine. He developed the idea, and with the aid of recruits gained among his fellow soldiers, the scheme to escape was successfully carried out.

Lieutenant Cole occasionally received a Williamsburg newspaper, and one of these containing Dorothy's name happened to fall into Cantarini's hands, and at once the scheme to secure her patrimony began to form in his fertile brain. It was an account of his death that had impelled Dorothy to risk the privations and perils of war

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time, and by journeying to Cuba, to satisfy herself that her evil genius was forever laid.

“It was through you, Lecomte, that he worked upon my feelings,” Miss Day bitterly declared. “He held that odious Circle over my head, demonstrated its evil power, and I was desperate — distracted — frantic. I feared for *your* life, not mine. When I understood into what a hideous machine of crime that harmless school society had grown, I knew not what frightful calamity I might precipitate upon you by one false move.”

For weeks she had been finding threatening notes in her very house — on her dressing table, on her pillow even — and all were of a nature to inspire her with terror; all were aimed at delaying her marriage.

Long ago she had freed herself of the Circle's odious badge, the gold band around her arm. She had thought it safely hidden in the reliquary, which Miss Letitia must doubtless have passed to Kelsey, and when it was thrust into her hand at the church and a whisper pronounced at her ear what she believed to be the death-sentence of the man she loved, her reason tottered and fell.

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She ran blindly to shriek a warning, but was intercepted at the curtained passage.

Higdon's interference appeared in its true light. No sooner had she been delivered into his care, than he assured her of his protection. Protesting that it was dangerous for her to return to the city until he could communicate with Gibbs, he promised to take her to a safe place where she could remain until he succeeded in notifying his employer. While he was gone after his horse and buggy, stabled in a nearby shed, she had torn from an undergarment the strip Cole had found fluttering from the cell window.

"A forefinger was the pen," she announced; "one of the rusty window bars, after I had moistened it, supplied the ink."

"Rust!" exclaimed Flint, with an embarrassed laugh. Foster Cole merely shrugged his shoulders.

"We must have ridden all night," Miss Day continued. "He left me at last in an empty, tumble-down hovel on the edge of a wood, promising to return as soon as he could do so with safety, with food and a change of clothing. I was earnestly charged not to stir from my hiding-place

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until he came back. I don't know whether he came — doubtless not — or how long I remained in that horrid hut; I recall only that it was night, and again that the sun beat down pitilessly. . . . And next I was lying on a bed, looking up into Edith's eyes."

However, the surprise of the evening came from Sarah Kemp. Dorothy was clasped tightly in her arms, and the gaunt old lady turned from one to another of the company with a gleam of defiant pride and affection sparkling in her deep-set eyes, which held the attention of everybody present. Even Cantarini watched her furtively.

"Gentlemen" — her voice was deep and harsh — "one of the worst things about this whole business is what has been said and hinted about Dorothy's birth. All those stories are as false as hell!"

Cole was impelled to glance at Gibbs, whose look supplied whatever information the younger man may have desired respecting the anonymous letter. Sarah did not pause:

"When I was a girl I nursed Kathie Leonard, before she ever heard of Chauncey Day or thought of being his wife. She felt — poor soul! — that

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her husband was drifting away from her because they were childless, and when Bill Kemp left me penniless in a little one-horse Sierra mining-camp, with nothing but a week-old baby, why, Kathie — God bless her! — took us into her home — took my baby as her own. It was an easy thing to do, for Chauncey Day was away on his prospecting trips for months at a time. Before she died Katharine Day whispered the secret to him. It made a hard and bitter man of him — for a while; but as the years passed he grew to love the child for her own sake — as if anybody could help it! — and raised her as his very own daughter.”

Of a sudden she levelled a grimly accusing finger at Cantarini, who uneasily shifted his position.

“That dog,” went on Sarah, with deep-stirring anger, “that white-livered cur there — look at him, everybody — got hold of some crooked story that there was something wrong with my Dorothy’s birth. Where he got it the devil, his master, only knows. When Chauncey Day died I had to tell my precious lamb the truth.

“Hear me,” — once more her look reflected

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defiance, — “my Dorothy is as honestly born as any of you. I know; I am her mother.”

For a moment her burning eyes swept the group, as if she half-expected her statement to be challenged. And then Gibbs performed the most graceful deed of his life; he advanced, and, taking one of the gnarled hands in one of his, bent low over it. But Sarah jerked hers away.

“No,” she checked the gallant act, sternly and yet not unkindly. “I am her mother only for to-night. Our lives have been lived different, and I won’t have them changed now. Where my own precious girl has failed, Mr. Gibbs, it is n’t likely that *you* can move me; so I’ll just keep my old place.”

Persuasion encountered an impregnable wall. All arguments based on duty and the wishes of others left the old lady inflexible.

Cantarini’s fractured arm impelled Gibbs to proffer the use of his automobile for the purpose of conveying the prisoner to jail — which he did with a certain satisfaction, as he reflected on its speed.

The man arose instantly at the summons. For a moment something of his old air of arrogant

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superiority manifested itself. He squared his shoulders, his lips twisted into a half-smile — enigmatic, mirthless as always — and the odd, ill-mated eyes swept the company.

In that instant, an instant of death-like silence, he knew that he was condemned. Each direction he turned, the regard that met his was hard, stern, and without pity; he knew that it meant a judgment from which there was no appeal.

With an assumed air of jauntiness he bowed to the detective.

“May I smoke?” he inquired.

Flint, anxious to leave, nodded a thoughtless acquiescence.

“Careful!” warned Cole, starting to his feet.

Too late! Flint’s hand darted out to intercept the cigar, but Cantarini already had it between his lips, and when Flint dashed it to the floor it had been bitten in two.

A laugh of bitter mockery rang out, and Mr. Gibbs hastily conducted the ladies from the room.

Aconitine acts swiftly as well as surely, but leaves the brain clear to the end. At last — just

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before the ultimate paralysis rendered the man helpless — his dilated pupils were turned upon Cole and the white teeth glistened in a final sardonic smile.

“You’ve won,” he breathed.

And thus it happened that Cole’s premonition was realized.

Sometime later, after all signs of the evening’s stress and turbulence had been removed, and before the company broke up, it was arranged that Lecomte Gibbs and Dorothy were to be married at once — as soon as Dr. Floyd could be communicated with — and then depart immediately for a long sojourn abroad. So, after all, Dorothy Day was married before her twenty-fourth birthday.

While the various individuals were moving from the room, Edith contrived to detain Foster Cole in the rear. The door closed and they were alone together. She turned to him with a light in her eyes that made his pulse leap.

“Foster,” she began brokenly, “you might never have escaped from that horrid place.”

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“ You must blame my friend, Phineas Flint, for that.”

“ Can't you ever be serious? ” she cried. There was a catch in her voice, and she pressed a hand to her throat. “ Foster, if you had n't — ”

But just then the door opened a few inches and Mr. Gibbs thrust his beaming countenance through the aperture.

“ Fix it up, you two,” said he, with provoking bluntness; “ I can then make a wise distribution of the reward. I'll stand for a year's honeymoon in Europe, and Dorothy and I will meet you in Venice.”

“ *Wretch!* ” Edith flashed at him as the door banged upon his delighted chuckle.

“ Well? ” said Cole, hiding his eagerness only indifferently; “ if I had n't —? ”

All at once, with a glad little cry, she was nestling in his arms.

“ Oh, Foster, if you had n't escaped it would have killed me! I know — now — that I love you; that I have loved you always.”

He stood speechless with sheer joy, clasping her tightly to him. His head drooped forward; his face was buried in her sunny tresses. She

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felt him trembling. And then her arms stole around his neck, and, with lowered lashes, her face turned up to his, she whispered, — tearfully, but she was laughing, too, —

“It would be hard — I don’t believe I could endure it — to go on living for ever and ever without your nonsense. . . .

“Silly boy! . . . not again; somebody’s coming. . . .

“Well — there! . . .”

THE END

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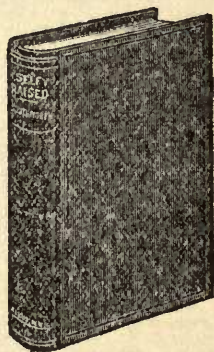
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