

According to
Gibson



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ACCORDING TO GIBSON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

WHAT NEXT ?
ROMANCE TO THE RESCUE
BILL THE BACHELOR

ACCORDING TO
GIBSON

BY

DENIS MACKAIL
" "

BOSTON & NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

1923

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317 055
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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN.

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I

THE INVENTION OF PROFESSOR SALT

IF I had been writing of these affairs even ten years ago, I suppose I should have had to begin with a more or less successful attempt at off-handedness in referring to my membership of the Caviare Club. Good taste and gentlemanly feeling might even have demanded that I alluded to it under an alias. But the war has changed all that. No club can exist without members, and the nomination book at the Caviare, with its recurrent entries of "Killed in Action" or "Withdrawn," tells its own story. In the old days a candidate might expect to wait anything up to twenty years before reaching the test of election; but although things are not quite as bad as they were, many of the younger members have found themselves faced with a request for the entrance fee within as many months. The war has, of course, brought about worse things than this; but what would the

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originals of some of those portraits in the coffee-room think, if the news were to reach them that the committee have recently set aside an apartment in which one may, by giving notice in advance, entertain ladies at tea? From such imaginings one turns hastily away.

Nevertheless the old traditions still linger. Weighed down by the architecture and decoration of the place, even the newest arrivals address each other in hushed tones. If a servant fails to catch one's eye, one does not call to him; one waits for him to return. The loudest noise which has ever disturbed the peace of these rooms is still produced by Admiral Bonchurch clearing his throat, or by Sir Wolfram Muskett blowing his nose. And, above all, the old British negation of club life, which has made these institutions what they are, survives unchanged. One would as soon think of speaking to a stranger in a doctor's waiting-room as of addressing a fellow member of the Caviare without an introduction.

In such circumstances it will be understood that in the course of months or years one becomes faintly familiar with the outward forms of quite a number of people, without ever exactly reaching the point of wondering who they are. Every now and then one meets one of them in some other surroundings,

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and it is almost as much of a shock to find that they are possessed of voices and even opinions as it would be in the case of the elks and elands, whose moth-eaten heads decorate the upper strata of the smoking-room. I shall never forget my surprise on going to visit a well-known publisher once, at discovering that we had dozed on contiguous sofas for many years without a suspicion of each other's identity. I saw at once that he also recognized me, but of course we didn't refer to it. One never does.

Looking back now, it is impossible to say for how long I had let the tired angularity and the always faintly surprised countenance of Henry Gibson sink gradually into my mind, before the occasion when he first spoke to me. But it is quite certain that I should have been content to let the slight curiosity which I admit that I felt about him gnaw gently at my vitals until the end of his or my existence, if he had not at last taken this unexpected step. Yet even now there is very little concerning him which I can feel sure that I know. Of one side of his life I did, it is true, later on obtain details from a source whose accuracy is above suspicion. But even this informant confesses to a complete ignorance as to what his original circumstances may have been.

Gibson's own evidence is, as I can hardly fail to

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convince you, untrustworthy to the very highest degree. Even if there were any grain of truth to be found in the experiences which he confided to me during the six months of our more intimate acquaintanceship, I have absolutely no means of sifting such grain from the chaff in which it was concealed. His easy assumption of the different rôles in which at one time and another he depicted himself, and his apparent familiarity with a number of foreign countries, may have been, and probably were, nothing more than a remnant of his stock-in-trade in the one profession which I have real proof that he ever followed. Even his age is involved in impenetrable mystery. For if at one time he spoke of himself as if for many years he had been little more than a doddering spectator at the comedy of life, then as like as not he would startle me at our next meeting by professing himself unable to remember even the most recent and outstanding events in the history of our own times.

I never discovered that he had any friends. And though he once mentioned a brother, I have the gravest doubts whether any such person ever really existed. In short, so far as I am concerned, my knowledge of his past is—with the exception which I have just mentioned, and shall hope to describe to you later—confined to the totally irre-

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concilable and often patently untruthful statements which I obtained from the creature himself. Here and there I have sometimes thought that I detected a shadowy basis of fact. It is possible that you may come to feel the same impression yourself. But this is, quite frankly, a matter of absolute speculation; and since once one begins speculating about Gibson there is very little reason why one should ever stop, I would prefer—if I may—to tell you what happened on the occasion when it first entered his head to address me.

It began suddenly, as I have said, by his crossing the smoking-room and dropping—collapsing would perhaps be a better word—into the seat next my own.

“ This is very sad news,” he remarked, “ about poor old Professor Salt.”

“ I—I’m afraid I haven’t heard about it,” I answered, considerably puzzled by this unexpected opening.

“ Dear, dear,” said Gibson; “ I should have thought you would have been bound to see it. It was in the *Times*, I know. He’s dead. Died quite suddenly. Pneumonia. But perhaps you didn’t know him ? ”

“ No,” I replied. “ I’m afraid I didn’t.” And the name was, indeed, completely strange to me.

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“ Ah,” said Gibson. He seemed lost in a profound gloom, and I was just wondering whether it would be thought rude if I left him to his mournful thoughts when he added, suddenly: “ I had a very odd experience at his house once. Very strange indeed.”

“ Oh,” I said, politely.

“ Yes,” he continued. “ It was in the days when I was doing newspaper work. I was, in fact, in that uncomfortable position where one is on the staff, but off the salary list. You know what I mean ? No print, no pay.”

He allowed himself one more reminiscent pause, and then started off on what I took to be the body of the story.

* * * * *

It must (said Gibson) have been quite twenty years ago. Some foreigner had just been lecturing here in London on his discoveries in connection with colour measurement. Old Salt wrote a letter to the paper I was with at the time, pointing out that he had announced exactly the same thing at a meeting of the Royal Society in '93. We wanted to print his letter, because it looked like a good thing for the old country; but it would have run to nearly three columns, and as it was all in one

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paragraph and plastered with technicalities from start to finish, nobody knew how to cut it.

In those days I had an idea that if I made myself useful enough to the sub-editors, I might get taken on to the permanent staff. I can't think where I got this notion from, but there it was, and when this difficulty arose, I suggested that I should go down and interview old Salt, and try and find out, if I could, what exactly he was getting at. Nobody said "Don't," and he only lived a little way out of London, so I went off there straight away.

I found the house easily enough, and I rang the bell. The door was opened by the most awfully pretty girl, in a most awfully odd sort of dress. A kind of yellow overall. I shall never know whether she was Salt's laboratory assistant or Mrs. Salt's lady help, but anyhow I handed her my card with the name of the newspaper printed on it, and asked if I could see the Professor.

She took me down a long corridor and knocked on a door at the end. I heard somebody growling inside, and then she opened the door and I walked in.

The room was full of smells and apparatus and card indexes and bottles and all that sort of junk. And in the middle of it all was old Salt himself.

He must have been over fifty at this time, but

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you wouldn't have guessed it by looking at him. For one thing he, also, was dressed in a kind of wrapper or overall that hid his shape pretty completely, and for another thing he had the most extraordinarily young-looking eyes. The rest of his face might have been any age, but his eyes—well, I've seen that look in a schoolboy; often.

I told him at once that I'd been asked by my paper to come and see him about his discovery, but he hardly waited for me to finish. And his three-column letter was absolute, plain, one-syllable English compared with the explanation which he gave me now. I had my notebook, and I tried to catch hold of even one intelligible sentence to take away with me; but it was hopeless. I just had to stand there and let those unspeakable technical terms and symbols and fragments of what sounded like algebra pour over me in floods.

After what felt like hours, he suddenly stopped.

“That's the whole story,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied. I felt that I'd wasted a considerable amount of his time and still more of my own, and that I hadn't done either myself or my newspaper the very slightest bit of good. I was pretty sick; but having come all that way, I thought I'd just have one more try, and see if I

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couldn't get away with something that could be turned into print.

“ And are you at work on any further inventions, Professor Salt ? ” I asked, looking round the room at the extraordinary mess with which it was filled.

“ Hundreds,” he said.

“ Is there anything here,” I went on, “ about which you could tell me, that would be of general interest to the readers of my paper ? ”

It was a pretty rash thing to risk starting him off again like this, but I was glad I'd done it—afterwards.

“ Why, yes,” he said. “ I think you might very well do a series of articles on my work. Only perhaps it would be better if I wrote them myself. Something in the nature of the letter we were discussing, perhaps ? ”

“ Heaven forbid ! ” I said to myself; and to get him off this idea, I pointed to a contraption on wheels which was standing in a bow window. It had masses of piping and screws and handles for adjusting it, and little bits of glass twinkling in it here and there, and a kind of large trumpet arrangement at each end.

“ Now what do you use that for ? ” I asked.

“ Ah,” said Professor Salt. “ That certainly is an invention of my own; but I don't know that it

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serves any special end in itself, or has any practical value in the ordinary sense. I use it in connection with my other work for measuring rays of light."

He crossed over to the window, and began twiddling with the wheels and screws.

"You see, the ray enters here," he went on, pointing to one of the trumpets, "and it is broken up and kept waiting, as one might say, by means of this special apparatus; and as it passes through, it is registered on graded sensitized paper which is kept on a reel in the middle here."

I tried to look as if I understood, and to help with this illusion I repeated two of the simpler words which he had used.

"Kept waiting," I said. "Ah, yes."

"Yes," said Professor Salt; "and that's just the drawback of the thing. I have had to adapt it to slow the light rays down, because that's an essential principle of the process; but you see the result?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I answered.

He was patience itself in his explanation.

"Why," he said, "the necessary result is that the machine has to be carefully set, each time, nearly two days before one wants to use it. A ray of light entering at this aperture takes forty-six hours before it emerges at the other end."

I was catching on.

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“ Do you mean to tell me,” I asked, “ that light is in that box now, which started going through it on Wednesday ? ”

“ Of course,” he said, politely.

“ And that if I look in at one of those holes, I shall see the day before yesterday ? ”

“ Certainly,” he said. “ That is, if I remove the recording apparatus first.”

“ And you mean to say,” I went on, “ that that invention has no practical value. Why, good heavens, just think of the uses it could be put to! And why stop at forty-six hours ? Why not make it forty-six days, or months, or years ? Just imagine looking into that box and seeing the Great Exhibition, or the Battle of Waterloo, or your own great-grandparents’ wedding! It’s the most extraordinary invention there’s ever been. What’s the value of a film record compared with this ? Why, you’d be seeing the actual thing ! ”

I must admit that the Professor didn’t seem particularly excited.

“ I think you rather overestimate its potentialities,” he said. “ It is true that one sees what you describe as the actual thing ; but the field of vision is necessarily extremely limited, and there would be almost insuperable practical difficulties in extending either this or the time occupied in passing

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through the apparatus. In fact, I think I may say that I have already gone as far as it is possible to go, without distorting and altering the whole character of the rays."

"But even so," I went on, determined to find my news-story if I could, "there must be an enormous area of practical utility to which you could put an invention of this sort, without confining yourself to the mere measurement of light, or whatever its primary purpose is. For example, say a murder is committed. There is no trace of the criminal, but the doctors can swear that the man has not been dead more than so many hours. Along comes the detective, with one of your machines, adjusts it to the right length of time, looks through it, and sees the murderer. Or better still, attaches a cinematograph camera to it and actually takes a pictorial record of the crime, which can be reeled off afterwards in court. What do you say to that?"

Professor Salt shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "That wouldn't do. You see, when the detective looked into the machine, he would only see what the machine had seen first. So that unless your murder had been committed actually exactly in front of it, it wouldn't be any help at all. Look here," he added, "I'll show you."

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He unfastened a kind of door in the side of the affair, and lifted out what I took to be the recording part of the works—a sort of black box, with a clock ticking away on the top of it.

“Now then,” he went on. “You look in this end.”

I stooped down and peered into the hole at which he pointed.

“Why, it’s all green,” I said. “It looks like a bit of a garden.”

“Exactly,” said the Professor. “That’s a corner of my orchard. I was using the apparatus out of doors two days ago because the light is so much purer there.”

The field of vision was, as he had said, extremely limited, and the scale of everything was considerably reduced. It was rather like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. But for all that, I could see unmistakable trees and a bit of garden wall, and the leaves on the nearest tree were moving as though there were a light breeze.

“By Jove!” I said. “That’s pretty wonderful.” And as I said this, two things happened. The first thing was that I was conscious that someone had come into the room behind me, and I heard Professor Salt say, “This is a gentleman from a newspaper, dear.” The second thing was

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the simultaneous appearance in the light-measuring apparatus of a human figure. I recognized it instantly, for surely no two people could have worn and succeeded in carrying off in just that way that brilliant yellow overall. It was the pretty girl who had opened the door to me. She crossed the background of the picture and disappeared behind a tree.

“By Jove!” I said again. “That’s the most extraordinary thing that I’ve ever seen.” And I took my head out of the mouth of the trumpet and straightened my back.

Professor Salt was beaming with a kind of nervous pleasure at my enthusiasm, and I now saw that there was standing by his side one of the most forbidding-looking women that it has ever been my lot to behold. Tall and sinister, the word “bully” seemed to be written in every feature of her face.

“Are you being kind enough to look at Charlie’s nonsense?” she asked me, in a voice that made my blood run cold.

“This is my wife, Mr.—er—Gibson,” interposed the Professor.

I held out my hand, but Mrs. Salt took no notice of it. Though I was naturally put out by this piece of purposeless rudeness, I tried not to show it.

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“ It seems anything but nonsense to me, Mrs. Salt,” I said. “ I can imagine an absolute fortune being made out of this thing if it were properly developed.”

Mrs. Salt didn't actually call me a fool and a liar in so many words, but the sniff with which she favoured me did quite as well.

“ But just look at it,” I protested. “ The picture is small, I admit, but the detail and colour are perfect.”

And to encourage her, I put my head back in the opening and took another look myself.

If I had had any doubts before as to Professor Salt's utter incapacity for dealing with the practical side of his invention, they were instantly confirmed. The whole circle of light was filled with a close-up of Salt himself and the young woman in yellow. They had completely carried out the requirements of my hypothetical murderer; but with this important difference. They were embracing. Further, they were embracing in the quiet, earnest, but apparently indissoluble manner which you may observe, if you care to, on park benches after sunset.

I was aghast at the possibilities of this situation, but one thing I made up my mind to at once. Only physical force should remove my head from

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that aperture until either the Professor's pictured embrace should come to an end, or Mrs. Salt should leave the laboratory.

But physical force was exactly what did it. Mistrusting my ability to make suitable comments on the sight which I beheld, I preserved an intense and absorbed silence; and, as I ought to have guessed, it was precisely this silence that Mrs. Salt could not tolerate. I was having the identical effect on her that you have on me, when you sit here reading a new number of *Punch* that I haven't seen.

"What are you looking at, Mr. Gibson?" I heard her ask.

I mumbled out some muffled reply, and all the time the close-up remained unaltered and practically immovable.

The next thing that I knew was that I had been plucked backwards by the tail of my coat and dashed against the edge of the bow window. In less time than it takes to tell, and in considerably less time than I would have needed to find a solution for the crisis which was threatening the domestic life of the Salts, Mrs. Salt had assumed my position in front of the apparatus, and her head had disappeared into the hole.

The Professor was still beaming in gentle self-

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satisfaction at nothing in particular, and if ever I pitied a man, I pitied him at that moment. True, there seemed to be just one chance in a million that the apparently interminable embrace had in fact ceased at the moment that I had taken leave of it; but the odds were incalculably weighted in the other direction.

The next instant I knew the worst.

Mrs. Salt emerged from the opening, pale with fury. She said nothing for a moment, but she caught hold of her husband by the back of the neck, and with irresistible strength forced his head into the aperture where hers and mine had just been.

Then she spoke.

“ Charles,” she said, in a terrible voice, “ what is the meaning of this ? ”

My heart went out to the unfortunate scientist. Criminal or foolish as his action may appear to you—and mind you, you have no idea how pretty that girl in the overall was—you could not but have felt sorry for him if you had seen Mrs. Salt at this moment.

From the inside of the apparatus, where Professor Salt's head was, there came a kind of strangled bleating, and his wife released her grip. Immediately he emerged.

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“ I don't understand you, my dear,” he said, avoiding, as it seemed to me, my eye. “ The meaning of what ? ”

“ Of that picture,” said Mrs. Salt; and once again she took her turn at the opening. But she had swung round again in an instant.

“ You've done something to it,” she said. “ It's gone.”

“ What's gone ? ” asked the Professor.

His hair was ruffled, and the back of his neck still bore the marks of his wife's fingers, but from the tone of his voice I knew what had happened. Whether temporarily or permanently, the guilty couple had, two days before, shifted out of the machine's line of sight, and their disappearance had been accurately registered and recorded.

“ Don't speak to me like that, Charles,” said Mrs. Salt. “ You know perfectly well what I mean. There's a terrible, vulgar photograph somewhere in this box, and I intend to see it.”

“ But, my dear—— ”

“ Take it out at once and show it to me,” said Mrs. Salt. “ After that, we will discuss what is to be done.”

“ But there isn't any photograph,” persisted the Professor.

“ Nonsense, Charles, I have seen it.” (Gibson's

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rendering of the wife was terrific.) “ This gentleman will help you to take the thing to pieces, if necessary; but understand, I shall not leave this room until I have that photograph in my hands.”

The Professor shrugged his shoulders and looked at me.

“ I am quite ready to help in any way you wish,” I said.

So old Salt got out his tool-box and to it we went. It must have taken the best part of an hour's work before the apparatus had been reduced to its component parts, and the whole of that time Mrs. Salt sat with her eyes fixed on us. By the time we had finished, the entire floor was covered with pipes and tubes and screws and lenses, but of the vulgar photograph there was, naturally, not a sign.

Professor Salt bowed courteously to his wife.

“ There you are, my dear,” he said. “ You've seen the whole thing taken to bits. You can search me and you can search the floor and you can search Mr. Gibson. And when you've done that, I hope you'll be satisfied.”

She gave a contemptuous snort.

“ There's no need for me to do that,” she said. “ I know how to believe my own eyes. Tell me, now, Mr. Gibson, what did you see when you looked into that machine ? ”

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Well, I hadn't gone down into the country that day to make trouble between man and wife, so I said: "Nothing that I could describe, Mrs. Salt. Only some very beautiful colours."

"Bah!" said Mrs. Salt, and kicking aside the débris on the floor, she went straight out of the room.

"Now then, Professor," I said, as the door closed behind her. "I think you owe me something for this."

"Certainly, Mr. Gibson," he replied. "I can hardly express my obligation to you."

"Well," I answered, "I'm not interested in your private affairs. I'm a newspaper man first and last. I want an exclusive description of this invention from you, and your undertaking that you won't breathe a word about it to a soul until we've prepared the ground for the story we're going to make out of it."

Professor Salt looked at me in a puzzled kind of way.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," he said. "What invention are you talking about?"

"Come, come, Professor," I said. "Don't try to beat about the bush. I'm talking about the machine which you and I have just taken to pieces."

"Oh, are you?" he answered. "Well, I'll take

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my chance of your finding out how to put it together again, but I'll tell you one thing; and that is that no power on earth will ever make me do so. Is that perfectly clear ? ”

“ But, Professor,” I said. “ You can't mean it. You can't realize its value. You don't know what you're doing ! ”

“ My dear Mr. Gibson,” he replied, “ you don't know my wife. And now there's just time for you to catch the next train back to London.”

* * * * *

At this point Gibson paused thoughtfully.

“ Is that all ? ” I asked.

“ That,” he said, “ is all that I ever heard of the matter. I never learnt whether Salt ran away with that girl, or whether he let Mrs. Salt sack her; but I've never heard another syllable about the discovery from that day to this. In fact,” he added, rising to his feet, “ I'd absolutely forgotten about the whole thing, until I was reminded of it by reading of his death to-day.

“ Well, you must excuse me,” he concluded. “ I've promised to go and play billiards. I hope I haven't bored you.”

His tall, lumbering figure passed across the smoking-room and out through the swing doors.

For a few minutes I remained in my armchair,

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gazing at the smoke from my pipe and turning over in my mind the story which I had just heard. Presently I managed to attract the attention of one of the smoking-room waiters.

“Partridge,” I said—for thus was the waiter known. “Can you tell me the name of the gentleman who was speaking to me just now?”

“Yes, sir,” said Partridge. “That was Mr. Gibson, sir. Mr. Henry Gibson. He lives here, sir,” he added.

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks very much. And would you mind getting me to-day’s *Times*?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Obituaries in the *Times* are, as you know, of two descriptions. The inferior dead hire a small space on the front page, while the superior dead are given anything from a paragraph to a column in the body of the paper. But neither of these places contained any mention of a Professor Salt. Nor, as I next discovered, did *Who’s Who*. Nor did any reference book in the whole of the Caviare’s well-equipped library.

In a mixed mood of annoyance and bewilderment I went upstairs to the billiard room, and both these emotions were increased by my finding it empty. Then came yet another sensation. The desire for revenge.

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I sat down at the nearest writing-table and unscrewed my fountain pen. Drawing a line through the embossed address at the head of the paper, I substituted the words "Elysian Fields." Then I went on:

"Professor Charles Salt presents his compliments to Mr. Henry Gibson, and hastens to inform him that having just met the late Freiherr von Munchausen he can assure Mr. Gibson that there is no occasion for jealousy."

No, I agree with you. It ought to have been better. But I still think that it was good enough for Gibson.

II

GIBSON AND THE GHOST

I DO not use the Caviare Club at all regularly. When I have finished my day's work, I like to take my dog out for a walk, and Rule 72 is terribly definite on the subject of dogs. "No member," it says, "shall introduce a dog into the Clubhouse." I suppose the Committee are afraid that we should all become too friendly, if we did; and so I only introduce Rufus to other dogs in the Park, and the Caviare is the poorer by the absence of a very attractive personality. Rufus's, I mean, not mine.

I should imagine, therefore, that it would have been quite a fortnight after Gibson had told me about Professor Salt before I found myself in the smoking-room again. He was lying back in his usual seat, with his eyes apparently closed; but there must have been some illusion about this, for I had barely ordered my tea and muffin when he came across the room and again sank into the chair by my side.

"Dreadful fog," he remarked. "I don't

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remember a worse one since the black winter of '77."

This opening surprised me. For not only was it completely incredible that Gibson's memory should have carried him anywhere near the date in question, not only had I the gravest doubts as to whether the winter of 1877 had ever previously been described as "black," but as a matter of fact the fog was so slight that to a Londoner like myself it was barely noticeable.

"It didn't strike me as so very bad," I suggested.

"Didn't it?" said Gibson, carelessly. "I dare say it's only that the windows need cleaning. I very seldom go out now, you know," he added.

I hadn't known it, and I wasn't at all sure that I believed him, but with my recollection of our last interview I wasn't going to ask him why. Instead I said: "Have you heard anything more about Professor Salt?"

No shadow of embarrassment disturbed his countenance.

"Why, yes," he answered. "As a matter of fact I received a very remarkable communication from him the very same day that we last met. I've been seriously wondering whether I oughtn't to send it to the Society for Psychical Research."

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He spoke so solemnly that I hardly knew how to answer, and while I was still hesitating, he went on again.

“What is your candid opinion on the subject of ghosts?” he asked.

“Ghosts?” I repeated. One didn’t, I felt, come to one’s Club to be asked one’s candid opinion on anything, least of all on such a highly controversial matter as this. I hedged.

“I’ve never met one,” I said.

“No?” said Gibson. “Then you’re still open to conviction. Perhaps I might tell you of a very strange experience that I had once. . . .”

Without further encouragement he proceeded.

* * * * *

I was quite a young man at the time (said Gibson), and I was on a walking tour in North Wales. I hadn’t meant to be alone, but the fellow I was to have gone with had just got engaged, or else he’d been stung by a hornet—I can’t quite remember which. Anyhow, he couldn’t start; but I’d made all my plans, so I went off without him. I enjoyed myself enormously. The weather wasn’t as good as it might have been, but the air and the scenery were perfect, and in those days one didn’t mind an occasional wetting. I had a little rucksack, and I used to put up for the night anywhere

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that they'd take me in. Like George Borrow, you know; except that I didn't try to talk Welsh.

But one evening it came on to rain in an absolute deluge. Even the things in my bag were drenched, and to make it worse I seemed to have got off the main road on to a cart track which looked as though any minute it might stop altogether. Once I thought I'd found a house, but it was only a chapel, and though I'd have gone in anywhere to get out of the rain, the door was padlocked and I had to give it up. By this time it was so dark that I'd lost all sense of direction, and I was really beginning to think that I was out there for the night, when suddenly in the distance I saw a light twinkling.

I made for it at once, though this meant scrambling over more than a dozen stone fences, and at last I came up to what looked like a fair-sized private house, with a lamp shining faintly through one of the windows. By now I must have been a pretty disreputable sight, but I couldn't afford to worry about that; so I made my way round to the front door and, as there wasn't a bell, knocked on it with my stick.

Presently I heard the bolts being withdrawn and then the door was opened on the chain, and I saw a middle-aged lady standing there holding a guttering candle. I took off my hat.

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“ I’m very sorry to disturb you,” I said, trying to instill a kind of exaggerated refinement into my voice, in the hope that this would make her overlook my clothes, “ but I’m afraid I’ve managed to lose my way. Could you very kindly direct me to the nearest inn ? ”

Somehow I felt it was no good trying to quarter myself on her, for I realized how like a murderer I must look.

“ The nearest inn is five miles from here,” she answered. “ You could never find it on a night like this. But my sister and I will be very glad if you will stop here till the morning. Wait a moment, and I will unchain the door.”

I began some kind of apology and clumsy thanks but she cut me short.

“ You can thank us in the morning,” she said.

I wondered what she meant by this, but I gave it up and followed her into the dining-room, where a still more middle-aged lady was sitting at table by herself. The two of them spoke to each other in low voices for a minute, and then the one who had let me in said: “ If you would like to change your wet things before joining us at supper, I can lend you some clothes of my father’s.” And seeing me hesitate, she added: “ He’s dead.”

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“ Oh,” I said, awkwardly. “ Of course, I *am* rather wet, but are you quite sure—— ”

“ Come with me,” she interrupted, and, taking up the candlestick, she led me upstairs into a bare-looking bedroom with a four-post bed and a couple of dark oaken presses in it. She went to one of these and opened the doors.

“ You’ll find what you need there, I think,” she said.

“ It’s most awfully good of you—— ” I began, but again she cut me short.

“ We can’t let you die of pneumonia,” she said. And with these words she went out of the room, closing the door behind her.

It didn’t take me long to exchange my wet things for a set from the big wardrobe. They weren’t a bad fit, except for the waistcoat, which sagged a bit in front; and when everything else was on, I looked round to see if I could find a pair of slippers. But I couldn’t, and as my own boots were much too wet to put on again, I decided to go downstairs in my stocking feet.

It was because of this, I suppose, that I overheard a fragment of conversation between my two hostesses as I returned to the dining-room.

“ If you don’t tell him,” said the sister whom I took to be the elder, “ then I shall.”

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I don't know what answer the other one might have made, for at this moment I thought it best to cough. They both started from their chairs as if they had been shot, but the next second the same look of relief came into each of their faces.

"I'm afraid I startled you," I apologized. "I thought you must have heard me coming in. I'm awfully sorry if I did."

"Oh, no," they both said together. "It was nothing. Won't you come and sit down, Mr. _____?"

"Gibson," I said.

"Our name is Ellis," said the elder sister, and we all bowed at each other.

Nothing could have been more hospitable than the way that they pressed me to eat, and I'm afraid I took full advantage of it, for I was pretty hungry. There was some jolly good cider, too. But during the whole of the meal the shadow of their interrupted argument seemed to stand over us, and our attempts at conversation were no very great success. More than once I seemed to catch them signalling to each other with their eyes.

Then, when I had at last finished eating, the elder Miss Ellis turned to me, and said: "We keep very early hours here, Mr. Gibson. If you

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would care to sit up a little longer, please do; but—— ”

“ Oh, no,” I said. “ I’ve been walking all day, and I shall be only too pleased to get to sleep. If the room is ready for me, I’ll go at once.”

Again they glanced at each other, and then the elder one said: “ Before you do go, there’s something I feel I ought to tell you. My sister would rather that I had kept it from you, but it’s better that you should know.”

I looked a bit puzzled, as you can imagine, but she went on at once.

“ Our father died nearly two years ago,” she said, “ and it was his wish that we should sell this house and go to live in some town. We would have been very glad to do so, Mr. Gibson, for you can imagine that it is lonely enough out here; but unless we sell it, we could hardly afford to move. And there’s something about it which has so far prevented even the people who have come to see it from wishing to live here. Perhaps you can guess what it is ? ”

“ You mean that it is so difficult to get at ? ” I suggested.

“ Oh, no,” she said. “ It would be perfectly easy for anyone with a car, and we’ve some of the best fishing and rough shooting in the whole of this

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part of the country. Many people would be only too glad to take it at the price that we have asked. No, it's something about the house itself."

"Do you mean the drains?" I asked.

"No, no," she said; and then speaking quickly, as if to prevent her sister from stopping her, she came out with it.

"One of the rooms is haunted," she said.

"Haunted?" I repeated, and I'm afraid I smiled.

"Yes," she said. "The room in which we are putting you to-night. My father's old room."

Somehow the idea no longer seemed quite so amusing. It struck me that even an unexpected and unknown guest might have been put somewhere else. But I had the explanation at once.

"I'm telling you," she went on, "because unfortunately the other rooms are all shut up. They aren't even furnished. So if you would prefer to spend the night here on the settle, we should quite understand. But I can promise you one thing. There is no danger."

I looked at the shining oak of the settle, and wondered what kind of an ass I should feel and what kind of cramp I should have if I tried to sleep on it. My fatigue more than my courage brought me to a decision.

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“ I think I’ll risk the bed,” I said.

Besides, of course, there weren’t such things as haunted rooms.

I seemed to see a look of relief come into Miss Ellis’s face.

“ I’m glad of it,” she said. “ I always hope that someone may come here who will break the spell, whatever it is. Who knows that it may not be you ? ”

I began to feel rather noble.

“ Who knows ? ” I repeated.

“ The room will be ready in about half an hour,” she added. “ I will leave you a candle here. And breakfast will be at half-past eight.”

We all said good-night to each other, and the two sisters went off upstairs to their own rooms.

And then, of course, as soon as they’d gone, I realized that I ought to have asked in what particular way the ghost, if it were a ghost, showed itself. Did it begin its work as soon as one was in bed, or did it prefer to wake one up at two or three in the morning ? Did it confine itself to noises and the rattling of furniture, or did it put in a visible appearance and cut its throat or hang itself in a phosphorescent glow ? It was too late to ask now, but I spent the next half hour in recalling to myself a number of grisly incidents which I had

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read or which had been related to me at different periods in my life. And the more I tried to think of other things, the more these stories came crowding into my brain.

Presently a log in the fireplace fell in with a crash, and the start that I gave made me realize that my thoughts were going the wrong way for a man who had to sleep in a haunted room. I picked up my candle and marched up the stairs.

I whistled a good bit while I was undressing to try and steady my nerves, but I'll say at once there was nothing oppressive or creepy about the feeling of the bedroom. I suppose that to many people the thought of ghosts still occurs whenever they are spending their first night in a strange house; but if my hostess hadn't taken the trouble to warn me, this was the last kind of room that would have put such ideas into my mind. It had no hidden corners, or curtained alcoves, to assist the imagination. It wasn't even hung with tapestries. On the contrary, the walls were a plain white distemper, and the light from my candle penetrated with the utmost ease into every angle. I began to feel considerably reassured. Why should I let the elder Miss Ellis's hallucinations—for this was clearly the explanation of the whole thing—disturb my night's rest? In another twelve hours I should

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have left the house for good and all, and meanwhile it was childish to pretend that anything supernatural was going to waste its time in a little white-washed bedroom like this. I stopped my whistling, hurried into the night-shirt which had been put out for me, jumped into bed, and blew out the candle. In ten minutes I was fast asleep.

It was still dark when I suddenly woke, and for a moment I wondered where I was. Then I remembered, and I put out my hand to feel for the matches, so as to see what time it was. But I never reached the matchbox. While I was still fumbling in the blackness, I was startled to hear—almost by my side, it seemed—a low, agonized groan. I shot round quickly, and at the same instant there was a crash as my hand caught the candlestick and it went rolling away over the floor.

I don't suppose that I have ever been more genuinely terrified in my life. My heart was beating wildly and the sweat was pouring off my face, but I could no more have got out of bed and hunted for those matches than have flown to the moon. I remained as I was, half sitting and half lying, with every muscle rigid, while I strained my ears to catch the echo of that sound. For perhaps as much as three minutes there was dead silence. And then,

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just as I was on the point of moving, it came again.

“U-u-agh!” said somebody from out of the darkness.

My tongue was dry and my throat seemed paralysed, but, calling on all my will-power, I forced myself to speak.

“What’s that?” I said, hoarsely. “What do you want?”

Dead silence, except for the pounding of my heart. And then, nearer than ever, I heard an indescribable kind of rumbling noise and a faint sigh.

Suddenly I made up my mind. Whether it were a ghost, an injured burglar, or a practical joker who was playing these tricks on me, the time for inactivity was over. With a quick movement I lunged out at the blackness with one fist after the other.

I could have sworn that both my arms must have passed right through the source of the sounds, but so little resistance did they meet that I almost fell out of the bed on the further side. And as I struggled to recover myself, there came—actually from the very spot where I was lying—an absolutely unmistakable hiccough.

That settled it. A ghost might groan; a ghost might even rumble; a ghost might howl, gibber,

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wail, clank, scream, or caterwaul. But surely to goodness no ghost had ever so far forgotten itself as to hiccough. I jumped out on to the floor, felt my way round the bottom of the four-poster, and the next minute I had found the matches and struck a light.

With every wish in the world to hurry, I suppose it was a good half-minute before the flame of the candle was properly alight, and then, as it slowly grew to its full height, I turned round.

The next moment I all but dropped the candlestick back on the carpet. Lying in the very middle of the bed—across the whole breadth of which I had just made my way without encountering an obstacle of any kind—was a huge, bearded man, dressed as far as the visible portions of him were concerned in a nightshirt which was the exact twin to the one I was wearing myself. As I stood there, stupefied and dumbfounded, he tossed his head wearily, gave a hideous scowl, and uttered another heartrending groan.

I took a step forward.

“Excuse me, sir,” I began. And then I stopped. As I spoke, he had opened his eyes and turned them in my direction, and the candlelight was quite enough to show me that he was looking, not at me, but right through me.

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I can hardly tell to what ridiculous thoughts this action of his for the moment gave rise. In the small hours of the night one is apt to reason by strange and abnormal short cuts. And for a second, so solid did he appear and so completely unconscious of my presence or existence, that it occurred to me as a very reasonable explanation of the whole affair that I myself had died in my sleep, and was now doing my best to haunt somebody else. I think it was his second hiccough that brought me back to my senses.

“ I beg your pardon,” I began again, “ but would you mind telling me—— ”

And again I broke off. At these last words he had suddenly hunched himself up in a knot, straightened himself out again, and with the motion of a ponderous porpoise had flung himself over on his side, with his back turned in my direction.

I began to feel annoyed. It was no good anyone who was throwing himself about like this trying to make me believe that he was asleep. And to whatever mistake on my part my presence in his bedroom was due, I was at least entitled to a civil answer when I addressed him. I set the candle down on the dressing-table, stepped to the side of the bed, and tapped him on the shoulder.

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My hand went right through his back and was brought up short by the sheet!

I staggered backwards against the wall.

“ Good God! ” I said to myself. “ It is a ghost. What on earth am I to do ? ”

I looked wildly round for a bell, but there was no sign of one. I tried to shout for help, but my voice was strangled in my throat, as it is in a nightmare. I looked at the door in the far corner of the room, but even if I had the strength or courage to reach it, what could I expect in the way of assistance from a house full of women ? What would they think of me if I tried to rouse them with the news that there was a ghost in my bed ?

I suddenly wondered if the elder Miss Ellis had known what she was talking about when she had said there was no danger.

And then, while I was still trembling against the wall, there was a sudden flutter of sheets and blankets, a short explosion of hiccoughs, and the occupant of the bed had got out on to the floor.

He was an immense creature. Quite as tall as I am myself, and considerably heavier in every way, and as he stood there, muttering to himself in his night-shirt, he looked like a representation of Moses or someone of that sort, on a heroic scale.

Once again he stared right through me, and

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then he began walking noiselessly round the room.

First of all he went to the washstand, which was opposite the foot of the big bed, and seemed to be searching all over it for something, moaning occasionally as he did so. Then he poured himself out a glass of water, and was on the point of drinking it when something apparently made him change his mind. He set it down untasted and crossed to one of the oak wardrobes. He flung the doors open and began pitching the things out on the floor, bending down to peer into the backs of the shelves, but occasionally breaking off as if racked with a sudden spasm of pain. Once even tottering as far as the bed and clutching at the nearest post, while a torrent of low-pitched oaths fell from his lips.

In this way he gradually went through the whole of both the presses, but still, obviously, without coming on the object of his search. He took a moment's rest on the edge of the bed, and then began again; climbing on a chair to look on the tops of the wardrobes, bending down to look under the washstand, pulling out the dressing-table drawers, and flinging them with a baffled snarl on the floor. Once he made as if to open the door, and I thought he was going to leave me, but at the last

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moment he shook his head, and came back to start turning over the heaps of clothes on the carpet. And all the time his powerful and clumsy movements were punctuated by these indescribable sighs and groans, while his face was periodically twisted into a mask of agony.

“ Why the hell can't people leave things where they find them ? ” I heard him mutter once, as he passed uncomfortably near me. “ Much they care what sort of a night I have ! ”

I drew back in my corner and he passed by without touching me. And then a fresh thought seemed to strike him. Going back to one of the big wardrobes, he took out the sliding shelves and piled them in a heap on the floor. Then he set his shoulder against the side of the empty frame and gave it a great push. To my horrified eyes he seemed to sink more than half-way through it before it moved, but at last it did move, and heaving and straining, he succeeded in getting it as much as a yard out into the room. And then I saw, or thought I saw, what his object had been. For behind where the wardrobe had stood, there was the door of a cupboard, flush with the surface of the wall.

With a cry of delight he flew to the handle and tugged. But the door was locked, and it didn't

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even rattle. For another minute or two he had to give up his attempts while he sank on to a chair and coughed and groaned in a paroxysm of discomfort. And then he pulled himself together and began looking apparently for something with which to force the lock.

First of all he tried the poker from the fireplace, but the door fitted so closely that he could get no purchase to lever it open, and the wood was too thick to yield to the battering with which he next assaulted it. Then he took my comb from the dressing-table, and wedged it in close to the lock. What exactly he was trying to do I could no longer see, for though pervious, he was not transparent; but the worst oath that he had uttered yet came as I heard the comb snap in his hands.

Then he came back to my side of the bed and gazed thoughtfully at the candle and matches, as if pondering the possibility of burning his way into the cupboard, but this thought, I am glad to say, he abandoned. Instead, he got down on the floor and began turning up the edges of the carpet, searching now, I imagined, for the missing key.

“Clumsy idiots!” I heard him grunt, as he made his way round the room, puffing, and—I am sorry to have to repeat it—hiccoughing. I drew myself back into the smallest possible space as he

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neared my corner, but before he could reach me, he gave a sudden gasp of satisfaction and staggered to his feet. In his hand he held a key.

I must say that I was partly prepared for what followed, for even at the distance at which I was it was quite clear that the key which he had just found was far too small for the cupboard lock. But the ghost was either unnoticing of details or deficient in reasoning power, for it wasn't until he had made four or five attempts to turn the wards with this inadequate instrument that he seemed to realize what was wrong. When at last he did, he seemed suddenly to go mad.

With a fearful yell he hurled the useless key against the wall, and the next moment, dancing with rage, he was picking up the shirts and underclothes with which the floor was strewn and tearing them to ribbons. He aimed a particularly vicious kick at a pair of trousers and sent them flying through the air, and followed this up by sweeping all the glass and china off the washstand with a backhander from a knitted waistcoat. Then he launched another terrific kick at a woollen dressing-gown, missed it, took a second shot, and brought his toe against the end of the bed with a muzzle velocity of about five thousand feet to the second.

“Ow!” he shrieked, hopping wildly about on

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one bare foot. He put out his hand to steady himself by one of the bedposts, failed to catch it, tottered on to his injured toe, and with another ear-splitting cry, came stumbling across the carpet towards my corner. Again I shrank back, putting out a palsied hand to keep him off, but he had too much way on him for me to hope to escape. With a slithering crash he fell right against me. I felt his beard touching my neck, I felt—I saw it going right through me; I made a last, desperate effort to avoid him, and then, with a stifled shriek and a feeling of unutterable horror, I collapsed on top of him in a dead faint.

When I came to myself again (added Gibson, after a brief pause), it was daylight. I remembered at once what had happened during the night, but for the moment I was so cramped by the way in which I had fallen that I found it impossible to move. I could only sit there shivering and rubbing my legs. And then at last I managed to scramble on to my feet.

It was a radiant morning after the night's rain, and the sun shone full in at the window on one of the wildest scenes of confusion and destruction that a country-house bedroom can ever have seen. Broken china and torn garments were sprinkled all

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over the floor; a splintered drawer lay bottom upwards with a single fishing boot perilously balanced on one corner; and the wall all round the locked cupboard was scarred and dented from the blows of the poker. Of my bearded visitor himself there was, thank heaven, no sign.

It was impossible to wash, as it was impossible to shave, but I hustled into the first clothes that I could find, and went quickly to the door. There I suddenly paused. Would I, I wondered, a complete stranger, be believed if I laid the responsibility for the condition of the room which I had been lent for the night on the ghost of an unknown man with a beard? Would I for one second have believed any guest of mine who came to me with such a story in the morning? For a moment I thought of going back and trying to repair some of the damage, but to tell the truth I funked it. To have stayed in that room for another instant was more than I could face.

I closed the latch firmly behind me and ran down the stairs. The front door was open, and I hurried out into the fresh air. As I did so, the elder Miss Ellis came round the corner of the house with a garden basket on her arm.

I suppose I must have looked a pretty ghastly sight, for she stopped dead at once.

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“ Tell me,” she said quietly. “ Did you see it ? ”

I tried to answer, but I could only nod.

“ And you stayed there ? ” she asked.

I nodded again.

“ I fainted,” I said.

She showed no surprise.

“ What did he do ? ” she went on.

“ He was looking for something,” I said. “ He tried to break into that cupboard in the wall, and when he couldn’t—— ” I stopped short, shuddering at the recollection.

“ But do you mean the cupboard behind the big wardrobe ? ” she asked. “ How did he manage to reach it ? ”

“ He shifted the wardrobe,” I said.

She set down her basket on the dining-room window-sill.

“ Why did we never think of that ? ” she exclaimed, clasping her hands. And then, “ But what could he want ? What could he have left there ? ”

She didn’t seem to expect any answer, and I remained silent.

“ Mr. Gibson,” she went on suddenly, “ I suppose I ought to apologize to you for what you have been through, but you must listen to me first. My sister and I have both tried to sleep in that

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room—so have several other people who have come about our advertisement of the house. But every one of us has seen him, and every one of us has run out on to the landing the moment he has appeared. What has happened in there after that we have never known. But we have heard the most terrible noises, and always the place has been turned upside down as though he had been searching for something, and every time the search has been more thorough and the confusion more complete. I thought perhaps that if someone came who had the courage to wait there with him, we might get to the bottom of it at last; but——” She broke off, and clutched at the side of the porch.

“But why did you say there was no danger?” I asked.

Her face puckered into an expression of almost childish grief.

“He was our father,” she said. “He would never have hurt a hair of anyone’s head. The kindest man that ever lived—and the best.”

I remembered some of the late Mr. Ellis’s oaths, and I held my tongue.

“Come and have breakfast,” she said presently, “and afterwards we will open that cupboard.”

It was an endless, silent meal that followed, and as soon as it was over we all three went upstairs.

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The two Miss Ellises gave gasps of horror as they saw the chaos to which the room had been reduced, but they said nothing; only clasped each other's hands.

“Do you think you could help us if we got you a chisel?” said the elder one. “The key has been lost for over a year, and I don't want the servants—I mean. . . .”

“Certainly,” I said. “But if you could let me have a little salad oil and a hairpin—a fairly strong one—I dare say I could pick the lock. I'm afraid otherwise it would mean a good deal of damage.”

Why I should have been so thoughtful for the property which the late owner of the house had just done his best to wreck, I don't know. But the sisters nodded agreement, and in a few minutes I was at work.

Picking locks in this way is, of course, chiefly a question of knack. But I have always had rather sensitive fingers, and to tell the truth I had practised the art more than once in my schoolboy days. At the third attempt I felt the wards moving, and with gentle but steady pressure I shot back the bolt.

“There she comes,” I said, and I flung the door open.

I don't know what they had been expecting, and I hardly know what I was expecting myself.

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Buried treasure, perhaps; or a secret stairway. But all I saw was this. A shallow cupboard, not more than nine inches deep, and lined with shelves. And every shelf from top to bottom was crammed with the gaily-coloured wrappers of patent medicine bottles. The advertisements at the beginning of any high-class magazine will show you the kind of thing that I mean. Every single package had been opened, and every single package was guaranteed to cure the same identical complaint. Indigestion.

I suddenly remembered the noises that I had heard during the night, and a horrible light seemed to break over me. Modern spiritualism has prepared us for much; but to think that even beyond the grave . . .!

I turned to the sisters and saw the same thought staring from their eyes.

“Poor, poor father,” said the younger one slowly.

And then I thought it best to leave them.

* * * * *

Again Gibson paused.

“And is that the end?” I asked.

“Not quite,” he said. “So far I have only told you what I saw myself; but in a way the most remarkable and the most inexplicable part of the story happened after I had left. It was three or

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four months later, and I was in Monte Carlo. As I was coming out of the *Paris* after lunch one day, a victoria drew up at the door and out of it stepped the two Miss Ellises.

“ I could hardly believe my eyes, for a more unexpected meeting-place it would be difficult to imagine. I drew back, staring at them, and as I did so they saw me. Quickly the elder one came up to me and wrung my hand.

“ ‘ Mr. Gibson!’ she cried. ‘ At last we’ve found you. Why did you never leave us your address? How could you let us go all these weeks and months without thanking you?’

“ ‘ Thanking me?’ I said. ‘ I’m afraid I don’t understand.’

“ ‘ We’ve sold the house,’ she answered. ‘ We’re free at last, and we’re here on a holiday. And but for you we should have been cooped up there for life. How can we help thanking you?’

“ ‘ But the room?’ I stammered. ‘ I mean, your father? What happened?’

“ ‘ The night you left us,’ she said, ‘ he came again. The cupboard door was unlocked, and the next morning every shelf was stripped bare. Every single bottle and box had gone. The room is as it was when we first knew it. The man who has taken the house says he never knew what a

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good night's rest meant until he slept in that bed.'

"Ah," said Gibson, wagging his head sagely. "You may say what you like, but there are more things in heaven and earth than——"

"Yes," I interrupted, getting up suddenly. "There certainly are."

Perhaps I was rude to leave him. But nothing like so rude as I should have been if I had stayed.

III

GIBSON AND THE RIVALS

ANYWHERE else but at the Caviare Club one might, after two such experiences of leg-pulling as I had suffered at Henry Gibson's hands, have taken some kind of steps to find out who this remarkable creature was, and why he amused himself by fabricating these incredible stories for the bamboozlement of an innocent fellow member. But at the Caviare one either starts by knowing all about the men one speaks to, or else one never speaks to them at all. There is no master of the ceremonies to whom one can apply for particulars of other members' lives, and if anyone chooses, as Gibson had chosen, to disregard the Club traditions and begin talking to a stranger, the stranger is simply left to discover what he can. And in my case this was very little. The printed list on the smoking-room mantelpiece told me that he had belonged to the Club for over fifteen years, but here its information ceased. I knew also from Partridge, the waiter, that he occupied one of the

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permanent bedrooms on the fourth floor. But from Gibson himself I couldn't truthfully say that I had learnt anything, except that he was more or less in control of a very powerful imagination.

Naturally I was curious about him, and I suppose it was because of this curiosity that even after his second successful attempt to take me in I still couldn't bring myself to feel any grudge against him. Besides, he had looked so puzzled and distressed when my momentary exasperation had made me break away from him at the end of his ghost story, that it would have taken a far harder heart than mine to bear him any continued ill-will. If you never knew Gibson, you might find it difficult to believe, but the fact remains that I had all but returned with an apology for doubting his word. It just shows, I suppose, what the artificial atmosphere of a place like the Caviare can do. Some day I shall write an essay on the effect of architecture on human tolerance, with special reference to clubs and churches.

Meanwhile, let us get back to Henry Gibson.

It was again a matter of weeks rather than days before I found myself once more in my favourite corner of the smoking-room. I had been kept busy at home, finishing off a novel against time; and on this first free afternoon I had taken a long walk

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round the Park, and was now disposed to spend an hour or so, smoking a pipe, looking at the illustrated papers and, generally speaking, enjoying the mental vacancy to which my hard work had entitled me. For making one's mind a complete blank there is no place that I know like a club.

But my tea had hardly arrived when I laid down the *Sphere* and found myself gazing into Gibson's nervous-looking and myopic eyes.

"Hullo," he said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

I really scarcely knew whether I did or not, but as he was already sitting in the next chair, my answer seemed predetermined.

"Of course not," I said.

He smiled apologetically.

"I thought this might interest you," he went on, and he held out a newspaper as if to show me something printed in it; but at the last moment he withdrew it again.

"Perhaps it would be better to tell you the beginning first," he said.

"Is it a long story?" I asked, lifting the lid from the muffin dish.

"Oh, no," he said hastily. "Only about four thousand words."

I stared at the astounding creature. Was he

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poking fun at me because I was a novelist, or—or what did he think he was doing? And as I stared, he suddenly blushed.

“I mean,” he corrected himself quickly, “that it’s—that it’s quite short. Oh, very short indeed. I wouldn’t think of troubling you with it if it weren’t. It’s—I mean . . .”

He broke off uncomfortably, and I heard myself coming to his assistance.

“Well, let’s have it, then,” I said.

He gave a gulp of apparent relief, another fleeting smile, and began at once.

* * * * *

When I was reading for the bar (said Gibson), I used to be in chambers in King’s Bench Walk. It’s a long time ago now, and though I was called, I never practised, so that my memory of much that I did at that period is very vague indeed. But as it happens there was one piece of real life that I came across during those days which I have never wholly forgotten. Perhaps because it had nothing directly to do with the law.

The clerk in our chambers was called Albert Slaughter, and following the general custom in the Inns of Court, he was addressed by the pupils as Albert. He was a little man, with a ragged moustache—most barristers’ clerks, of course,

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imitate their employers and are clean-shaven—and a bald head. He used to come up every day from Beckenham, carrying his lunch in a brown paper parcel, and he must have been the first man that I ever came across who wore rubber protectors on the heels of his boots. When he wrapped his legs round his high stool, one couldn't help noticing them.

There was a touch of pomposity about the man which had always tempted the fellows in these chambers to make fun of him in one way or another. But he stood it very well, I must say; perhaps because he took himself so seriously that he never knew it. And he was certainly a very competent clerk.

I never used to share in these jokes myself. Somehow this kind of humour never appealed to me very much, and in a way this gradually established a sort of understanding between us as two men who realized that life was earnest. I believe he would have been glad to show his appreciation of my sobriety if the chance had arisen. But it never did. It's twenty-five years since I last saw Albert Slaughter, and during the closing months of our acquaintanceship I think I really did more for him than he did for me.

But I must begin by telling you how it was that I

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first came to learn that behind that ragged moustache and beneath that shining skull there dwelt both ambition and romance. Neither, perhaps, in their most beautiful forms, but sturdy enough growths for all that.

I had gradually come to notice that when I returned from my lunch, someone had contracted the intermittent and untidy habit of leaving an open newspaper on the table at which I worked. It wasn't always the same organ, but it was invariably folded back so as to display one of the inner sheets; and as by half-past two I had seen all that I wanted to see of the morning's news, I used to sweep it into the waste-paper basket and forget about it. That is to say that I made no particular effort to remember such a detail, but the cumulative effect of making this discovery and going through this action five or six times a month had insensibly impressed itself on my mind; and the day at length arrived when I said to myself, "Why should I be troubled with this plague of newspapers? Why can't this desultory reader get rid of his property for himself? Why should I spare even a second from my study of the law to act as a public scavenger?"

I picked up the latest crumpled addition to the papers on my table, and addressed my fellow pupils.

"Look here," I said. "Does this belong to

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any of you fellows? If so, I wish you'd chuck it away somewhere else, and not on my things like this."

But the three young gentlemen who shared the room with me were unanimous in disclaiming responsibility. They adopted various methods of making this point clear, and in the course of their explanations the newspaper itself became a good deal torn. I was left with a small fragment in my hand, and sitting down again in dignified silence, my eye lit suddenly on a familiar name.

You know the correspondence columns of the ordinary morning paper. They are regarded by the editors as a variable feature, to be expanded when there is a shortage of news, and contracted, moved on to an inferior page, or omitted altogether, when there is any kind of pressure from more important matter. Well, what I held in my hand was a portion of one of these columns, and what I now found myself reading was, as near as I can remember, this:

" Sir,

The present interest in the forthcoming celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee recalls the fact, which may be unknown to your readers, that the Koh-i-noor Diamond

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weighed, before it was re-cut, exactly 186 carats; and that it is exactly 681 years since the accession of Henry III, who enjoyed (if we omit the period of the Regency from the life of the third George) the second longest reign of any British sovereign.

Yours etc.,

A. HOWARD SLAUGHTER."

I laid this remarkable communication down on my table, and said no more about it. But after the other pupils had gone that evening, I picked it up again and went into the clerk's room.

"Albert," I said. "Is it you who have been leaving newspapers on my table all this time?"

He looked up from the copying press.

"Yes, sir," he said, apologetically. "I thought perhaps you might be interested in some of the letters of mine which they've printed."

I didn't like to tell him that until to-day they had all gone into the waste-paper basket unread. So I said: "But why didn't you tell me you'd put them there? I'd have given them back to you. As it is, I'm afraid they've all gone—that is, except the one I've just found."

"Oh, that's all right, sir," he said. "They were only duplicates that I put out for you. I've kept a

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set for myself in my press-cutting book. Perhaps you'd like to see it?" he added, hopefully.

"Well, some other time," I answered, not, I fear, very encouragingly. But Albert needed no encouragement.

"I'll bring it up here to-morrow, sir," he said, eagerly. And he did. I found the thing waiting for me when I arrived next day, and, as the reviewers say, once I'd taken it up, it was impossible to lay it down again. If I had come on the letters separately and in their original context, I should either have skipped them or have been enraged by their impertinent imbecility. But seeing them all together like this, I became, as it were, fascinated. It was such an extraordinary revelation of other people's lives, to realize that this creature, Albert Slaughter, had secretly and for many years been contributing this unsolicited information to the Press of the country; and that he was perfectly contented, apparently, if he got his name into print, no matter what kind of balderdash served as the excuse for his object. I let my Roman law slide, and spent the whole day poring over this *Encyclopædia Lunatica*.

The letters fell, as I soon discovered, into two main classes. First, the Historical Parallel or Coincidence, of which I have already given you an

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example. And secondly, the Topographical Curiosity or Anecdote, which generally referred to some little-known fact about the site of a public building. Both classes were invariably introduced by some more or less—generally less—apposite reference to a topic of the day, so that the reader was always being entrapped into the belief that the letter was going to deal with Home Rule, or Captain Dreyfus, or the Armenian atrocities. Sometimes both varieties were ingeniously combined. I remember, for instance, a letter which ran somewhat as follows:

“ Sir,

Your recent article on the progress which is being made with the new Tower Bridge may serve to remind us that it was in the neighbouring fortress that Sir Walter Raleigh formulated those theories which have borne fruit in the steam-engine as we know it to-day. Curiously enough, the engineers responsible for the work are relying for its operation on hydraulic power, but is it too late to suggest that the three hundredth anniversary of this great Englishman's first imprisonment should be marked by giving to this new means of communication between the banks of our

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national river the name of the ' Raleigh Bridge ? '

I am, etc.,

A. HOWARD SLAUGHTER."

And there were unclassifiable letters giving sporting records, suggesting improbable origins for slang phrases, quoting comic gravestones and names of public-houses, or asking plaintively why the maypole had gone out of fashion. Pages and pages, and yet again more pages of the press-cutting book had been filled with this torrent of nonsense, and the whole time there seemed to shine out from between the lines, shameless and unmistakable, the real motive which had prompted their construction. I mean the determination that by hook or crook the linotype should rattle and the presses roar for the perpetual advertisement of Mr. A. Howard Slaughter.

That afternoon I gave his book back to Albert, and I asked him: " Doesn't this work take up a great deal of your time ? "

" I do it in the evenings, sir," he said. " Of course it does keep me pretty busy, but then, it's what you might call my hobby. I hope you found them interesting, sir ? "

" Very," I said.

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“ Of course, they don't print everything that I write,” he went on. “ I suppose I could hardly expect that. But I ought to be having my five hundredth letter in some time this year. That's not a bad total, is it ? ”

“ Bad ? ” I said. “ I should say not. It's perfectly wonderful.”

He smiled modestly.

“ Yes,” he confessed. “ It *is* rather good. But,” he went on, “ I dare say you've noticed that there's another correspondent who runs me pretty close. I wouldn't like it if he was to reach the five hundred before I did.”

I was startled to hear that there were two of these monomaniacs at work, but after all, why not ?

“ What's the other fellow's record ? ” I asked.

“ Well, sir,” said Albert, “ I don't exactly know, because I may have missed some of his early ones. But ever since he took it up seriously, I've had his letters sent on to me by Romeike's, and I've got over four hundred and fifty already.”

“ By Jove! ” I said. “ It's getting a close thing. We can't have him beating you at the post.”

I swear that all I had meant was a kind of general encouragement, such as a spectator is entitled to offer at any sporting event. But the simple-minded Albert interpreted my words otherwise.

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“It’s really very good of you, sir,” he said, bashfully. “I can’t tell you what a help it would be if an educated gentleman like yourself was to give me a hand now and then. Really, sir, it’s very kind of you indeed.”

I gasped at him for a moment, but I hadn’t the heart to let him down when I saw the gratitude in his eyes.

“Right you are, Albert,” I said. “We’ll get to work at once.”

And thus it was that I came to take an active part in the great correspondence competition between A. Howard Slaughter and his unknown rival, G. Harley Tufnell.

In all great enterprises it is of course organization that really counts, and I saw at once that if we were to make certain of reaching the goal first, we must go into the thing thoroughly and work on lines which would leave as little as possible to chance.

First of all I began by trying to put myself in the average editor’s place. What would it be that, in the ordinary way, would make him give preference to one letter over another? A study of the correspondence columns of various newspapers seemed to show that intrinsic merit and even grammatical English counted for little or nothing. Brevity was

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clearly to be aimed at, and humour as far as possible avoided. I imagined that what really happened—and I have since discovered that this is roughly speaking true—was that all letters, except those from notorious publicists, were immediately flung into the nearest waste-paper basket, but that on those nights when news was scarce and space had to be filled, the ones which had fallen on top were taken out again, and, unless actionable or obscene, were passed over to the compositors at once.

This theorizing suggested two chief tactical schemes. First, we must increase our output so much that in any given waste-paper basket one of our letters must always be present; and secondly, we must write on as large and tough a paper as could possibly be obtained, so that a hand plunged carelessly into one of these receptacles must almost inevitably hit one of our communications somewhere. After some consideration I rejected the idea of having a coronet embossed on the flap of our envelopes, as I felt that in the long run this would probably do us more harm than good.

I paid a visit to a Regent Street stationer's and ordered a supply of large post, handmade note-paper, with deckled edges, and I had it stamped with Albert's Beckenham address. As an after-

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thought I also bought a bottle of violet ink. And with these raw materials we got to work.

I used to make the original drafts for most of the letters, but they were all written out by Albert himself when he got home at night; and every morning he used to post them at the post office in Fleet Street. They were too large to go into any of his suburban pillar-boxes. In the main I modelled my style on the press-cutting album, for it wouldn't have done if there had been too sudden a change; but I will admit that I introduced one or two pretty useful improvements.

For one thing, since at any rate as far as I was concerned we were simply out to beat Mr. Tufnell, I wasn't going to let myself be hampered by the difficulty of stringing my anecdote or coincidence on to the news of the day, or to trouble myself by following up a subject on which previous correspondence had already been printed. I was a forerunner of the new journalism, which starts from nowhere with a bang, and knows that if it doesn't catch your eye in the first two lines, then it will never be read at all.

This is the kind of thing that I used to turn out:

“ Sir,

It is interesting to reflect that the custom

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of placing small wooden acorns on the ends of blind cords has its origin in the druidical belief that the oak enjoyed a special immunity from the effects of lightning.”

or,

“ Sir,

How many of your readers, I wonder, are aware that if Cleopatra’s Needle were placed on the top of the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral their total height would still fall short by more than sixteen feet of that of the Great Pyramid of Cheops ? ”

My idea, you see, was to keep the letters as short and snappy as I could; partly so that they should make as little demand as possible on anyone’s intelligence, and partly because this meant that they were more suitable for filling in the odd spaces with which sub-editors are always having to cope. I got most of my facts—if they were facts—from Albert, and where he had picked them up I really don’t know. But he had been jotting them down in notebooks for years. And if any letter hadn’t appeared within a fortnight of being sent in, we posted a copy to the next newspaper on our list.

In a very short time the effects of this intensified

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campaign began to show themselves. We had many disappointments, it is true. But I had allowed for that, and I calculated that if only five per cent. of our letters got into print, we should still be able to count on an average of from three to four successes every week. It seemed as if the palm of victory were already in our—or perhaps I should say, in Albert's grasp.

But our unknown adversary was not, apparently, going to take things lying down. Within a month of the opening of my barrage, Tufnell's score had crept up level with our own, and the following week he actually beat us.

“He can't keep it up,” I told Albert. “We mustn't let ourselves get rattled. Remember we're two to one.”

“How do we know that, sir?” he answered. “What's to prevent this Tufnell from doing what I've done. What's to prevent him getting two, or even half a dozen, people to help him?”

“You're losing your nerve, Albert,” I said. “Nobody could send out more letters than we do over the one signature. They'd be giving the whole show away at once.”

Albert shook his head doubtfully.

“What worries me, sir,” he said, “is that I still don't know how many of Tufnell's letters I missed

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at the beginning. What's the use of going on if he's reached the five hundred already ? ”

This was true enough, even if it was hardly the fighting spirit that I had expected.

“ I hadn't thought of that,” I said. “ But how can we find out now ? ”

“ We might write and ask him,” Albert suggested. “ I suppose he'll have kept his own score.”

“ No,” I said, firmly. “ No communication with the enemy. He'll think we're afraid of being beaten if we do that. What we've got to do is to crowd on all the steam we've got, and whack him at his own game. What if he does reach the five hundred mark first ? By the time we've got to the thousand he'll wish he'd never learnt to read or write.”

You see, by now my blood was thoroughly up. I hardly noticed the strain that the competition was having on poor Albert. All I knew was that I'd backed him to win, and I was jolly well going to see that he did it.

But the very next day we got the information that we needed to bring the thing to a quick finish, and from the very last source that I had expected. In the *Morning Leader* there was a letter from Tufnell himself, which read as follows:

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“ Sir,

It would be interesting to ascertain what living writer holds the record for the number of unsolicited communications which he has had printed in the correspondence columns of the daily Press. I myself have now obtained publicity for no less than 473 such letters, all of them on subjects of general interest, and all entirely of my own unassisted construction. How many of your readers can beat this ?

Yours, etc.,

G. HARLEY TUFNELL.”

Albert brought me this letter as soon as I got down to the Temple that day. He was trembling with excitement.

“ We’re dead level, sir,” he said. “ We’re dead level! They printed my four hundred and seventy-third in the *St. James’s Gazette* last night. You know, sir, the one on the origin of spats.”

“ Did they ? ” I replied. “ Then I’m afraid he’s one ahead.”

“ What do you mean, sir ? ”

I tapped the *Morning Leader*.

“ If he’d scored four hundred and seventy-three when he wrote this,” I said, “ now that they’ve

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printed it, he's one up on you. Don't you see that?"

Albert gave a groan, and tottered against his desk.

"I shall never do it," he said. "And even if I did, how can I say that my letters are my 'own unassisted construction?' Why, you know they're not, sir. I should think quite fifteen of the ones that they've taken were put together by you."

"Brace up now, Albert," I said. "Be a man. Why should Tufnell have any more right to fix the rules of this competition than you have yourself? Whoever expects a horse to win the Derby without a trainer? All I've done is to give you a little advice, and show you how to spread your facts as thin as they'll go. You can bet your life that Tufnell hasn't written four hundred and seventy-three letters without getting hints from someone. It couldn't be done."

But Albert declined to be comforted.

"I've lost my amateur status," he kept on saying. "You can't get away from that, Mr. Gibson. Don't think me ungrateful, but I ought never to have let you help me. If I couldn't beat Tufnell off my own bat, then I never deserved to win."

I left him at that, for I must admit that my feelings were a little hurt after all that I had done

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for him. I went back to my neglected Roman law, and that night for the first time for a month I left the chambers without handing over a single draft letter. I wasn't going to force my assistance on anyone who didn't want it.

But the next morning Albert met me wreathed in smiles. By some extraordinary stroke of luck, due partly, no doubt, to the approach of the silly season, no less than five of his letters had found places in five different morning papers. And as chance would have it, although they were all modelled on my improved style, every one of them had been his own unaided work. My sporting instincts overcame my sense of his ingratitude.

"Keep it up, Albert," I said. "If you can do as well as this without my help, I'm certainly not going to force you into professionalism. At this rate you'll win even without counting my contributions."

I wrung his hand warmly, and our reconciliation was complete. For the rest of the match I would become a spectator, and nothing more.

We waited anxiously for Romeike's next bundle of clippings; but the days passed and still they didn't come. Had Tufnell been taken ill, I wondered, or had he thrown up the sponge? It was impossible to tell; but meanwhile Albert's score

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was mounting slowly but surely. He had a bad week after that miraculous five, but by the end of another fortnight he had passed four hundred and eighty, and still there came no sign or sound from his rival. It looked as if, after all, the thing were going to end in a walk-over.

And then the very last day of the Trinity term, when I was working alone in the chambers—for the other pupils had already left—he came into my room with an open letter and placed it before me.

“What am I to do about this, sir?” he asked in an uncomfortable voice.

I took the letter and flattened it out on my table. Then I gave a start.

“Good heavens!” I said. “Tufnell himself!”

Albert nodded grimly, and I began to read.

I can't quote the whole of the letter, for it covered an entire sheet of foolscap. But quite briefly it was nothing more nor less than an appeal for mercy. Tufnell explained that he had set his heart on holding the record for amateur correspondence, that he had worked for years with this sole end in view, and that success had come to be the whole object of his life. For the last six weeks, he said, he had never on a single day addressed less than fifteen letters to the London and provincial Press, but either overwork must have injured his style or

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his last communication to the *Morning Leader* must have set the editors against him, for not a single one of them had been printed. He realized that his present pre-eminence must mean very much to so distinguished a correspondent as Mr. Slaughter, but it was impossible that he could wish to triumph if he knew the bitter disappointment which this would give his opponent. He appealed to Mr. Slaughter's generosity either to refrain from writing letters to the Press until the editors had forgiven his (Tufnell's) indiscretion, or else to make use of another signature. Finally, he begged and besought Mr. Slaughter not to come to an unfavourable decision without at least affording the opportunity for an interview.

“What do you think, sir?” said Albert, when he saw that I had finished.

“Think!” I exclaimed. “It's the most pitiable, the most un-English, and the most unsporting suggestion that I've ever heard. The man has ruined his chances of winning, by boasting before he was out of the wood; and now he expects you to help him. I never heard of such impertinence.”

Albert looked at me nervously.

“I can't help feeling sorry for him, sir,” he said.

“Why?” I asked. “Why can't he take his beating like a gentleman? No, Albert, you'll

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forgive my saying so, but pity for a man like Tufnell is nothing less than weakness. To answer a letter like that would be unworthy of you as a citizen of the British Empire.”

“Perhaps you’re right, sir,” said Albert; and he picked the letter up and took himself off.

When I said good-bye to him that afternoon I was so certain that he would follow my advice that I asked him to send me a telegram as soon as his five hundredth letter was printed, and I gave him, as far as I could, my addresses for August and September.

“Don’t forget, Albert,” I said. “And mind, no trifling with Tufnell.”

“That’s all right, sir,” he answered, and we shook hands and parted.

* * * * *

Gibson closed his eyes thoughtfully and leant back in his chair.

“And did he win?” I asked.

“Who?” said Gibson. “Albert? No, he did not win. And neither did Tufnell. The competition was never finished.”

“Why not?” I asked again.

“The old, old story,” murmured Gibson, dreamily. “The chink in the armour. *Cherchez la femme.*”

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“ *La femme ?* ” I repeated. “ But where on earth did she come in ? ”

“ She’d been there all the time,” said Gibson. “ I might have guessed it from that letter, for they’re an unscrupulous sex.”

“ But you don’t mean to say that Tufnell—— ”

“ Exactly.” He nodded. “ G stood for Gertrude. As soon as my back was turned, Albert went off to her address. With such a bond between them as this craze for coincidences, the thing was inevitable. They were married before the long vacation was over. When I next saw Albert he told me that they’d agreed to retire from public life. So far as I know neither of them has ever written to the Press from that day to this.”

“ You must have been sorry you’d taken so much trouble,” I suggested, without committing myself further.

“ Oh, I don’t know,” said Gibson, off-handedly. “ Albert was a good fellow in a way.” He looked down hastily at the newspaper which he had been nursing all this time on his lap. “ He was always grateful for what I’d tried to do,” he added. “ He even called his eldest son Henry; after me.”

“ Did he ? ” I said. “ That was nice of him. And now, how does that newspaper come into it all ? ”

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“ Oh,” he answered, perhaps just a shade too airily. “ That’s the curious thing. That’s what reminded me of the whole story.” He handed the paper across to me. “ Just read that letter on the middle of page five,” he said. “ My namesake seems to be winning his spurs. Heredity’s a strange business.”

“ Is this a letter from Albert’s son, then ? ” I asked.

“ It must be,” said Gibson, rising to his feet and taking out his watch. “ Well, *au revoir*,” he added. “ I’m afraid I’ve some work to finish. I hope I haven’t kept you from anything.”

I watched him pass out through the swing doors of the smoking-room, and then I turned back to the newspaper.

With my previous experience of my unusual fellow member I still more than half expected to find no letter there at all. But I was wrong. Gibson’s evidence was, at first sight, complete.

“ Sir,” I read,

“ How many of your readers can claim, I wonder, that their weddings have taken place on the same day of the year and at the same time as those of both their parents and grandparents ? This has been so in my case,

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and *on each occasion* the bride's name began with the letter 'G.' It would be interesting to learn whether this coincidence constitutes a record.

Yours, etc.,

F. TUFNELL SLAUGHTER."

For a moment, as I let this imbecile communication sink into my brain, I almost believed that, subject perhaps to permissible exaggeration, Gibson had been telling me the truth. The story was improbable certainly, but it wasn't incredible, as his previous efforts had been.

And then I looked again, and I remembered something. His last, quick, short-sighted glance at the newspaper just before he had passed it to me, and the words which had followed that look. I realized suddenly that in that instant he had risked temptation and been betrayed. For however ingeniously the rest of his story might fit this evidence on page five, and whatever feminine names might or might not be represented by the initial "G," by no conceivable means could the letter "F" be taken as an abbreviation for "Henry."

Inspired by that ridiculous paragraph he must have made the whole thing up from start to finish!

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For a brief second this discovery held me suspended between indignation and laughter, and while I was still uncertain which of these would conquer, a third feeling stepped in and possessed me utterly. And the name of that feeling was Envy.

How *dared* anybody think out their plots as easily as Gibson!

IV

THE STORY OF COLONEL TURPENTINE

I INTRODUCE the word “ story ” into my title deliberately and advisedly. You who have shared my adventures with Henry Gibson up to this point will possibly wonder why I have not done so before. But what I am getting at is that it was after the narrative of the Tufnell-Slaughter contest that I first definitely decided that the question of Gibson’s veracity should no longer be allowed to trouble me. For if he chose to amuse himself—for some eccentric reason of his own—by pretending that his reminiscences were true, wasn’t he also amusing me ? And to be amused by anything that took place in the Caviare smoking-room was too rare and pleasant an experience to risk losing by any hair-splitting insistence on the separation of fact from fiction.

And so my tea-time visits to my Club began to increase in number; for now that I had achieved this new and broad-minded point of view, the hope of further entertainment from this irresponsible

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source made it impossible for me to keep away. Yet for the time being it almost looked as though my change of attitude had come too late. Long as I lingered over my tea and muffin during my next three visits, not once did Gibson raise his bird-like head from where he sat at the corner writing-table, scratching away interminably with his fountain-pen, and scowling ferociously at its point. What work he was engaged on I had no idea, but to interrupt such tremendous concentration of mind was beyond me; and when, at my fourth visit, I found him still hard at it, I began to fear that the three stories which he had already told me were to be all that I should ever hear.

But even as I endeavoured to reconcile myself to this thought I suddenly saw him lean back in his chair, thrust his pen into his pocket, shrug his shoulders, and, gathering up the loose sheets of his manuscript, cross quickly to the fireplace. He glanced once round the room to see if he were observed, and then, to my astonishment, with a swift movement he tore the sheaf of paper across and dropped the pieces among the burning coals. Having done this, he jerked down the points of his waistcoat, frowned, grinned, and immediately made a bee-line in my direction.

“Ashes to ashes,” he murmured, with an air of

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profound gloom. And then, as if to prevent my asking him what on earth he meant, he sank into the chair by my side, and went on.

“ Did I,” he asked, “ ever tell you the strange incident of my old friend Colonel Turpentine ? ”

He shot a quick look at me, as if to see how I would stand this name. But in my new mood I didn't turn a hair.

“ No,” I said. “ Never.”

“ I will tell it you now, then,” he answered, and crossing his legs, he began at once.

* * * * *

A good many years ago (said Gibson), when I was in the tobacco business, I once had occasion to pay a visit to a town in the State of Kentucky, which I should prefer, if I may, to designate by the imaginary name of Binksburg. My business was to keep me there for several weeks, and although I hadn't provided myself with any special letters of introduction, it wasn't long before I had made enough friends in the bar of my hotel to have been given cards for both the principal clubs. American hospitality is, of course, proverbial, and Binksburg was no exception to the general rule. When my work was over for the day, I was glad enough to be able to drop into one or other of these places, and either join in a game of cards or listen to the

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members exchanging stories. It was a pleasant change from my hotel, in the hall of which, according to the usual custom, I transacted most of my business.

There was, I must admit, a certain similarity about the men whom I met in this way, which might have made a longer visit seem less attractive. They all wore the same clothes, ordered the same drinks, told the same anecdotes, boasted of the same reckless pasts, and expressed the same polite surprise at hearing that I was an Englishman. But the one who carried all these qualities to the most accentuated degree, the one who served if not as the highest common factor then certainly as the lowest common denominator of Binksburg society was the hero of this adventure, Colonel Hexagon Turpentine.

Though I have no definite knowledge as to his age, I should imagine that he was between sixty and seventy, and I gathered that he enjoyed a small pension, supplemented by pretty extensive sponging among his friends. He had a husky, confidential voice, a wicked and experienced-looking eye, and he wore a goatee; which last is less common in the United States than you may have been led to suppose. If I had been making a permanent stop in this particular town there would

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have been no one whom I should have taken more trouble to keep at a safe distance. But as I was only there for three weeks, and my return was extremely doubtful, there was no need to take any special precautions. And, frankly, he amused me.

Late at night, when he had filled himself up with highballs and mint julep so full that you would have thought he'd have burst, he used to call for a concoction known as *Chili con carne*—a kind of soup, or tea, which took all the skin off the inside of one's mouth in about five seconds—and while he sipped this, he would become tearfully sentimental about his past life.

“ My poor old mother,” he used to say. “ There, if you like, was one of nature's gentlewomen. It's forty years since I saw her, for my father had the custody of the children when my old home broke up. I respected my father, sir. I never went against his wishes. I never saw my mother after they parted. But for all that, she was a woman in a million.” He rolled his brimming eyes towards the ceiling. “ One of the best families in Kentucky she came from. Proud as you make 'em. Passionate and headstrong, if you insist; but a true woman. My father was a great man in his way, a fine man, a distinguished man; but it's my mother that I've always taken after.”

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And here he would bury his face in his steaming cup and gulp down his horrible brew, while his shoulders heaved with emotion.

“My wife, too,” he would resume, emerging again. “A splendid woman, if ever there was one. A noble creature. An amazon. One of the oldest families in Kentucky. I broke her heart. I admit it. She loved me, sir. I tell you that woman loved the very soles of my shoes. But I was wild. I never could resist a pretty face; and it wore her down. Poor girl, she couldn’t stand the strain. She left me. Though she worshipped the very air that I breathed, the very ground that I trod on, she left me. But if I could meet her now, I know she would tell me that she was happier with old Hex Turpentine than ever she was with her other husbands. I know it; I know it.”

And then he would set down his empty cup, accept one of my cigars, and begin telling endless stories of the old days in Binksburg, when, for example, he and Major Mackintosh—the late editor of the *Times-Courier-Democrat*—were both boys together. How Mackintosh had once spent all night hanging by one hand to Mrs. General Wengler’s balcony, because the General had returned unexpectedly from West Point; and how in the morning, when he had been found there and

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challenged to mortal combat, he—old Hex Turpentine—had taken his friend's place on the field of battle; for Mac's hand was so swollen he couldn't get even his little finger inside a trigger-guard. No, sir, he certainly could not.

The actual upshot of this duel was never disclosed, for imperceptibly Colonel Turpentine had slipped off into the story of the night when, for a bet, he had drunk five bottles of rye whisky, and then climbed the Veterans' Monument on Union Square, and tied little somebody-or-other-whose name-I've-forgotten's stockings to the statue on the top. And while I was still wondering how on earth he had got down again, I found we were in the middle of yet another anecdote of how he had ridden sixty miles, in the middle of winter, and in three hours and twelve minutes exactly, in order to keep his promise to dance with the beautiful Miss Cumberland. "You know, the one there was all that talk about afterwards."

I didn't know, of course, though I could imagine where much of the talk must have come from. But it was atmosphere, and not accuracy, that I was out for, and this I was certainly getting, in its richest and its fruitiest form. Never can there have been such an abominable old boy. And equally abominable whether his unspeakable exploits were true

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or false. For mind you, I have only quoted him at his more presentable stage. With his second bumper of *Chili con carne* he was well over the edge of anything that could possibly be repeated by me.

But still, perhaps it is only fair to say that he was led on. Not by myself, I swear. But his fellow members used to gather round us, perching themselves on the arms of chairs and the tops of tables, and whenever this impure fountain showed the slightest sign of drying up, a word of doubt from one of them would set him off again, determined at all costs to beat his own record. It was a pretty brutal kind of sport, I dare say, but old Turpentine never saw the smiles which passed among them, and entertainment in Binksburg wasn't so easily met with that one could blame these men for seeking it here. And again, though they laughed at him behind his back, they had very strict ideas as to how far one might go before his face. For in a way they were proud of him, even if this pride hardly went further than the admission which was made to me one evening, "Yes, sir, we certainly reckon that the Colonel's a pretty interesting kind of a survival."

My three weeks in the dirty little town slipped quickly past, and a couple of nights before I was

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due to move on again, two or three of the men with whom I had done most of my business announced that on my final evening they would entertain me to dinner at the Blue Grass Club, and that to follow this up they had taken a box for the burlesque show at Schultz's Opera House.

"Of course," they said, with unnecessary candour, "it won't be quite the same as Macauley's Theatre in Louisville or any of them swell places, but old Schultz books some pretty live pieces every now and again; and anyway, with the kind of dinner we've fixed for you, we calculate the show can take care of itself."

I had the utmost belief in everything that they said, for I already knew something about the drinks at the Blue Grass Club; and I was just beginning to express my gratitude in suitable language when I was interrupted by a hasty frown from one side and a nudge from the other.

"Cut it out," said my principal host hurriedly. "Schultz's boxes ain't any too big."

For the moment I was at a loss to understand this mysterious warning, and then suddenly, as I realized why it had come, I knew also that it had come too late.

"What's this, boys?" I heard a third voice breaking in. "A little entertainment for Mr.

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Gibson here? Well, say, I should rather guess I'm in on this."

Did I mention that American hospitality is proverbial? It well may be. My three hosts turned to the newcomer as one man.

"Of course, Colonel," they said. "We shall be only too glad to have you join us."

Colonel Turpentine chuckled wheezily.

"That's right, boys," he said. "You sure couldn't give a farewell party to my friend here without asking old Hex. Why, 'twouldn't be no farewell without the oldest member. I'll take great pleasure, Mr. Gibson," he added, fixing me with his cloudy eyes, "in drinking your health tomorrow night, and accompanying you and the boys here to Schultz's. But you'll pardon me if I don't wear my tuxedo. Fact being," he concluded, "that I ain't got none."

I wasn't sure that I had quite apprehended this last remark, but as my host seemed, if not satisfied, at least reconciled to this addition to our party, I bowed politely, and we all adjourned to the nearest bar.

My last day was a pretty full one, for I had left a good deal to be crowded into it, and by seven o'clock—the time of my invitation to the Blue Grass Club—I was ready enough for the boasted dinner. I won't tell you everything that I ate, for

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it would give both of us indigestion to hear of it, and I'm certainly not going to tell you what I drank. But I had an unusually strong head in those days, and though I was exhilarated, no one could possibly have charged me with anything worse. We were a party of four, for one of my hosts had been called suddenly out of town, and between us we must have had a fairly serious effect on the Club cellars. But not one of us got going so quickly or kept at it so hard as the gentleman who had described himself as the oldest member. The amount of liquor that man put away was simply incredible. And yet, although his glass seemed continually and perpetually propped against his straggling goatee, he never once ceased regaling us with excerpts from his repertoire. By the time that we were ready to move he had got well into what one might call his *Chili con carne* stage. He ogled and leered at us as he poured forth his adventures with what he described as "the Sex," completely regardless of whether he were being listened to or not. He chuckled and coughed and dug a shaky finger into my ribs to emphasize the grosser parts of his stories. He was Silenus and Falstaff rolled into one, and with the addition of the richest Kentucky accent. He was horrible and inconceivable. He almost made me believe in Hell.

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At the end of dinner a stogie was forced into his mouth and lighted, and we all staggered to our feet.

“Now then, Colonel,” said one of my hosts. “Are you sure you feel up to coming on to Schultz’s?”

“What, miss all those lovely girls?” said Colonel Turpentine loudly. “What do you take me for? Mr. Gibson, sir,” he added, lurching in my direction, “do you think I don’t know how to do honour to a distinguished visitor? Old Hex is with you to the end.”

We all bowed before the inevitable, helped him into his hat, and set forth into the street. Colonel Turpentine took the arm of one of my friends, while I followed behind with the other.

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll break his neck?” I asked, pointing to the tortuous course which the couple in front were taking.

“Neck?” said my companion derisively. “I might be, if he had one.”

I laughed.

“Well, I hope he won’t have a fit,” I substituted.

“And I hope he won’t get us turned out of the Opera House,” said my friend. “Old Schultz don’t like it when the audience joins in the songs.”

A brief vision of my train pulling out of Binksburg on the following morning, while Colonel

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Turpentine and I languished together in the town gaol, seemed to flutter before me. But I was the guest of the evening, and I realized that I should have to see things through. An encouraging suggestion came from my companion.

“He’ll probably sleep most of the time,” he said. And in another minute we had reached our destination.

The Binksburg Opera House must, I should say, unquestionably have been the dirtiest thing in the whole of that superlatively dirty town. One trembled to think what might not lurk in the darkness on the floor of our box, and before it was possible to get a view of the stage, it was necessary to draw back a pair of the greasiest lace curtains that I have ever met. We took our seats to the accompaniment of the overture, and I was relieved to find that Colonel Turpentine did indeed seem to have sunk into a temporary stupor. By a kind of tacit agreement the rest of us drew our chairs away from him, and conversed in whispers.

“Does anyone know what this show’s called?” I asked.

One of my hosts consulted his programme.

“‘The Girls of Gay Paree,’” he answered.

In spite of the excellence of my dinner, I felt a vague kind of depression; but I struggled against it.

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“ That sounds fine,” I said.

But whatever it sounded, I knew as soon as the curtain rose that I was in for the most appalling entertainment of my life. If the prisons had been full, one might have been sorry for the performers, condemned to bawl such nauseating banality and flounder through such meaningless horrors; but as long as there was a cell untenanted, it was impossible to see why they should persist in avoiding a life of straightforward crime. Of burlesque, in the English sense of the word, there was none, except in so far as the thing burlesqued itself. And of reference to Gay Paree in any shape or form there was, perhaps fortunately, still less.

There was a comedian who talked like a stage German, and a comedian who talked like a stage negro; but even if one could have overlooked the fact that they were trying to be funny, they would have driven one mad. For the negro sang a song about his delicatessen store, and the German sang one about the cotton fields and the Mason-Dixon line. You'd have thought they would just have had the sense not to do that.

There was a young lady with gold teeth who sang about the moon in June, and whenever she did this, ten terrible harridans came sidling in from the wings and yelled the chorus almost entirely on

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one note. And there was a woman who must have weighed about fifteen stone—or, in American, two hundred and ten pounds—who wore tights and carried a wand like the fairy queen's, and I never discovered from first to last whether, for the purposes of the drama, she was supposed to be male or female. All the points in the comic scenes were led up to by the characters explaining exactly what they were going to do, so that by the time they did it you wished they were dead; and every joke that might have stood a dog's chance if it had been left to itself, was repeated six times whether the audience laughed or not. To do them justice, they generally didn't.

And there was a Child; at least she was dressed as a child. . . .

About two-thirds of the way through the first part, Mr. Ed Willcox, the elder of my two friends, leant forward and tapped me on the arm.

“ Say,” he whispered, “ I guess I didn't drink enough, or else I'm not as young as I was. If this gets you the way it gets me, what about going back to the Club ? ”

At the same moment Mr. Bud Seltzer, my other host, bent over me and murmured in my other ear: “ Say, this is a pretty bum outfit. Shall we beat it ? ”

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I was glad to be thus informed that even in Binksburg people knew a thoroughly bad thing when they saw it.

“ I’m all for leaving,” I replied. “ But what about the Colonel ? ”

We all three turned to look at him, and even as we did so he tilted over in my direction and tapped me on the knee. I understood him to make some remark about a peach.

“ What’s that ? ” I asked.

Colonel Turpentine didn’t repeat his observation, whatever it had been. Instead, he first laid his finger against the side of his nose, then closed one eye, and concluded by blowing a kiss in the direction of the stage.

I turned enquiringly to Mr. Willcox.

“ Do you understand what he means ? ” I whispered.

Mr. Willcox gave a muffled groan.

“ We won’t get him out of here without some trouble,” he confided to me. “ We’d better wait for the interval now. If we tell him it’s the end, I guess he won’t know any better.”

I nodded agreement, and for another fifteen minutes or so we stuck to our posts, while the Negro and the German went through the comic shoe-shining scene which preceded the first finale.

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But something went wrong about that interval. For directly the curtain had fallen, a man stepped in front of the advertisements with which it was covered and announced that at enormous expense he had engaged La Exquisita to present what he described as her "Specialty Olio Act"; and before we had a chance to move, the thing had started.

The management must have had a touching belief in theatrical illusion, for although La Exquisita was attired in Turkish trousers, it was quite obvious that she was no other than that unspeakable Child. She went through a very violent dance of the type which is, I am informed, known professionally as "Hootchi-Kootchi," and the instant she had finished the curtain rose on the second part of the burlesque.

Messrs. Willcox and Seltzer gave utterance to subdued oaths, and I'm not sure that I didn't join them. But American hospitality being, as I think I have remarked, proverbial, it was clear that they daren't suggest a move as long as Colonel Turpentine wanted to stay. And that Colonel Turpentine had fallen a complete victim to the charms of that Child could no longer possibly be doubted.

A perfect fusillade of winks was proceeding from his codfish eyes, he beat his hands together and

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stamped on the floor of the box whenever she appeared, and a running comment on her attractions, in which the words "lallapalooza" and "peacherino" occurred with great frequency, poured unceasingly from his lips. And then something still worse happened. The Child suddenly caught his eye, and from this moment until the end of the performance her acting—if one could use such a term—was directed entirely at our box. Never have I witnessed such a base parody of romance as the behaviour of this fuddled old satyr and that terrible infant. Even American hospitality wilted under the strain.

But in vain did Messrs. Seltzer and Willcox tempt the Colonel to come out and have another drink; even the promise of unlimited *Chili con carne* left him adamant.

"No, no, boys," he said. "We'll sit right here. This is certainly a bully show, and I'm not going to let my little friend over there see me go out before the finish. She and I kind of understand each other, we do."

My two hosts had to give it up, but for the rest of the performance we drew back out of sight of the stage and talked among ourselves, leaving Colonel Turpentine to carry on his public flirtation alone. Whenever we glanced at him we saw him

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goggling over the edge of the box, but somehow we didn't look at him more than we could help.

At last there came a concerted howl from the Girls of Gay Paree, a tempestuous skirling from the orchestra, a faint sound of applause from the audience, and the burlesque was over. My hosts and I leapt to our feet and propelled Colonel Turpentine out into the corridor, and so into the street. There he suddenly stopped.

“ Well, boys,” he said. “ We've certainly had a great evening. But you're young men still, and I'm getting on. I guess, if it's all the same to you, I'll leave you here.”

“ What ? ” said Mr. Willcox, in astonishment. “ Aren't you coming back to the Club ? ”

“ No, boys,” answered the Colonel. “ I'm not so young as I was. I'll just shake my old friend Mr. Gibson's hand here and now, and then I'll quit.” And suiting his action to these words, he gave an unsteady bow and rolled heavily away.

“ What's come to the poor fish ? ” enquired Mr. Seltzer, staring after him. “ I never knew him to act so queer.”

“ Search me,” said Mr. Willcox. “ I guess the drama's turned him sick.”

For another minute we all three stood gazing at the corner round which Colonel Turpentine had

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vanished, and then, unexpectedly, he suddenly reappeared.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Mr. Willcox stopped me with a nudge.

“Not so young as he was, ain’t he?” he said. “I’m on to his game now. Keep still here, and we’ll watch him.”

We all drew back into a doorway, and the Colonel went past the front of the Opera House without seeing us. And as he reached the other corner, he turned, and dived down an alley-way.

“Gee!” said Mr. Seltzer. “He’s going to call on Little Lord Fauntleroy. Now we’re going to see something.”

“Old Schultz won’t never let him in,” said Mr. Willcox. “He won’t want the Vigilance Committee closing up his theater.”

We crossed silently to the entrance to the alley and peered down it. At the further end Colonel Turpentine seemed to be engaged in heated argument with the guardian of the Stage Door.

“I’m only asking you to give her my card, young feller,” we heard him shout; and then came the doorkeeper’s answer: “I dassn’t do it, Colonel; the Boss’s orders is mighty strict.”

I saw the Colonel feel in his pockets, as if searching for the money that wasn’t there; and at

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his failure the doorkeeper became more insistent than ever.

“Now then, Colonel,” he said. “Don’t you go for to get me into trouble. I tell you, it can’t be done.”

“You’re a very insolent feller,” said Colonel Turpentine, and he turned haughtily away.

We hurriedly crossed the street again, but, as we had expected, as soon as he reached the front of the Opera House, the Colonel stopped again.

“He’s going to watch for her to come out,” whispered Mr. Seltzer. “I guess we’ll wait for the fun.”

I admit that I felt certain scruples about spying even on an old reprobate like this, but I reminded myself of the old proverb, “When in Binksburg, do as the Binksburgians do.” I huddled back still further into the doorway and waited.

It wasn’t long before the company began to come straggling up the alley. First of all the stage hands and the members of the orchestra; then a little group of harridans; then—easily recognizable—the heavy-weight fairy queen; then a knot of men, which may have contained the two comedians; and at last, her corkscrew curls still nodding beneath her veil, that incredible Child.

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As she turned the corner, Colonel Turpentine raised his hat.

“ Pardon me, madam,” I heard him begin, but she cut him short at once.

“ Now then, you big stiff,” she said warmly, yet, as it seemed to me, not altogether in displeasure.

“ J’want me to call a cop ? ”

“ If you would allow me—— ” began the Colonel again, and again he was interrupted.

“ Fresh enough, aincher ? ” said the Child skittishly. “ Who *are* you, anyway ? ”

“ A worshipper at your altar,” answered the Colonel gallantly. “ An admirer of your genius. My name is Turpentine.”

The effect of this disclosure was astounding.

“ Hex ! ” shrieked the Child, tottering against the nearest street lamp. “ Hex ! Don’t you know me ? ” She tore at her veil as she spoke, and I saw the Colonel stagger backward. He well might.

“ There’s some mistake,” he said hoarsely, and he looked round as if meditating instant flight. But the Child was too quick for him. With a leap she had flung her arms about him.

“ At last, at last,” she cried. “ After all these years. Oh, Hex, to think that we should meet like this ! ”

I saw the would-be Lothario battling feebly

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within her embrace; I heard Mr. Seltzer whisper in my ear, "Golly! It's one of his wives"; I felt Mr. Willcox forcing his way past me; and the next moment I saw Colonel Turpentine shake himself free and run like an antiquated lamp-lighter.

And as he ran, the creature with the ringlets called piercingly after him: "Hex! Hex! Listen to me! Don't you know me? *I am your mother!*"

* * * * *

Gibson stopped suddenly and grinned at me.

"You didn't expect that, did you?" he asked.

"Not altogether," I had to admit, amazed again, in spite of myself, at his impudence.

"I did the American talk well, don't you think?" he went on complacently.

"Oh, splendidly," I heard myself saying.

"Of course," said Gibson, leaning back and closing his eyes, "one misses the epilogue. One ought, in a way, to have a final scene. It would have been a good touch to have explained how Turpentine never told any more stories from that day to his death. But it was better to stop at the real climax. And besides," he added, yawning, "I told you that I left Binksburg the next morning, so unless I'd made somebody write me a letter, it would have been difficult to work it in."

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In spite of all that I had told myself, my brain felt suddenly a little unsteady.

“Excuse me,” I said slowly; “but let’s try and get this clear. Are you—I mean to say, is it—I mean, hang it all, why do you always try and make out these stories are true? What I mean is, what’s the idea?”

I waited a moment, and then repeated: “What’s the idea?”

But my only answer was the sound of peaceful breathing. The inexplicable Gibson was fast asleep.

V

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“PERHAPS you have wondered,” said Gibson the next time that I saw him, and before I could reopen the question which his sudden lapse into slumber had left unanswered; “perhaps you have wondered why it is that, although still in the prime of life, I am to be found so continuously wasting my time and substance within the confines of this by no means stimulating Club. You ask yourself, doubtless, how in these strenuous days any man can be content to retire thus early from the battleground of his profession; or how he can reconcile it with his conscience to become, when still so far from the age of the psalmist, a mere passenger, as it were, on the vessel of sublunary existence.” He gave a fleeting smile, as of satisfaction at the beauty of his own language, and looked at me enquiringly.

“I won’t pretend,” I answered, “that something of the sort hasn’t crossed my mind. But, after all, most people retire when they can afford to retire;

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and there are plenty of men here who've never even had anything to retire from. Please don't take my interest in the stories that you have told me as implying curiosity about your private affairs."

I thought I had put it rather neatly. Yet in Gibson's face there appeared a look of momentary disappointment.

"My dear sir," he said, "I have no secrets from anyone. My past is an open book. And," he added, with determination, "I insist on telling you why it was that I gave up one of the most lucrative solicitor's practices in the whole of the City of London."

Now, as you who have read thus far are well aware, Gibson had already represented himself to me as a journalist, a barrister, a tobacco merchant, and as the kind of man—if there be such a kind of man—who alternated walking tours in North Wales with visits to Monte Carlo. I opened my mouth to protest at the introduction of this fresh calling; but as I did so, some hint of what I can only describe as trustful anxiety in the creature's eyes, made me stop. One simply couldn't question a man who looked at one like that. It would have been like laughing at one's dog.

"Just wait a moment while I order my tea," I

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said, "and then I shall be delighted to hear about it."

He gave a sigh of relief.

"It's very good of you," he murmured. "I..."

He broke off and sat there drumming with his fingers on the arm of his chair, while the smoking-room waiter attended to my simple requests. And then, as soon as we were alone again, he began.

* * * * *

I was still a comparatively young man (said Gibson) when I succeeded to a partnership in the old-established firm of Montgomery and McGillicuddy who had, and still have, a large commercial and general practice in the City, and occupy offices in Basinghall Street. I was a bachelor—as I still am—and I shared a flat in the neighbourhood of Victoria Street with my brother Cecil.

My life was very much one of routine. Regular hours at the office were followed by quiet evenings at the flat, and on Saturday afternoons and Sundays my brother and I—he was an architect, by the way—used to go off together and play golf. I had good health and a good income, with prospects of doing better every year, and if ever I thought about the matter, it seemed to me that I had settled down into as comfortable and harmless a rut as anybody

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could hope to find. As far as I could possibly tell, I should remain in it for the rest of my life, and I certainly had no particular wish to do anything else. But this was not to be.

About five o'clock one spring evening, after I had been carrying on this existence for four or five years, I had returned to the clubhouse at Sandy Heath after playing a couple of rounds with my brother, and was sitting on the bench in the locker-room, pleasantly exhausted after my exercise, and meditating, perhaps, on the advisability of giving my cleeck a rest. Cecil was splashing about in a wash-basin in the next room, and occasionally we would shout remarks to each other through the open door.

I bent down to begin untying my shoelaces, when somehow or other my elbow knocked against the edge of my bag of clubs, which had been propped against the bench on which I was sitting; and in the hope of catching it before it fell, I shot my right arm quickly under my left leg and made a snatch at the strap of the bag. As I did so, I felt a sudden stab of pain—just here.

(At this point Gibson laid his finger on the lowest button of his waistcoat.)

The bag fell with a bang on the wooden floor, and I sat up again suddenly.

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“ By Jove! ” I said to myself. “ I wonder what I did.”

And then, slowly and carefully, I repeated the movement. I leant forward, I passed my right hand gingerly under my left knee, and made a cautious grab at the air. Nothing happened.

But I wasn't quite satisfied. I did it once again, more rapidly this time, and as I closed my fist the little dart of pain returned. I sat up quickly.

“ Cecil! ” I shouted.

My brother appeared in the doorway.

“ I say,” I said, “ I wish you'd come here a minute.”

He came, wiping his hands on a towel and staring at me.

“ What's the matter ? ” he asked. “ Has somebody been at your locker ? ”

“ No, no,” I said. “ But look here. When I lean forward like this, and put my arm just here, and then close my fist like that, I—hullo, there it is again. Whew! ”

“ There's what again ? ” he asked, still staring at me.

“ A most extraordinary pain,” I said; “ in my inside.”

Cecil flung his towel through the doorway of the inner room.

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“Just a minute,” he said. “What exactly do you have to do?”

“This,” I explained. And I did it again. This time the pain was so sharp that I couldn’t repress a cry.

“What do you think it is?” I asked, nervously. Cecil put on his spectacles thoughtfully.

“Just a second,” he said. “Let me have a try.” He sat down beside me on the bench, and tried to imitate my attitude.

“Like this?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s the other arm. And you have to make a kind of grab with your fingers.”

“Just show me,” said Cecil.

“Like this,” I said once more. And then I fairly yelped. It was exactly like having a red-hot corkscrew run into one’s middle.

Cecil got up again slowly.

“I didn’t feel anything,” he said. “If I were you I wouldn’t get in that attitude again. I mean to say, it’s one you could very well do without.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” I asked coldly. “Is it nothing to you that I am probably in for a very dangerous attack of appendicitis, if not something worse? Good Lord! I didn’t expect very much sympathy from you, I admit; but to make a suggestion like that—Why, how’d you like it if

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it hurt you like the devil to sit down, and all I said was that you'd better stand up? Eh?"

"If you feel like that about it," said Cecil, turning down the cuffs of his shirt, "I should think you'd better see a doctor."

This suggestion seemed suddenly to shift the thing on to a fresh plane; to carry my position as an invalid a stage—and an uncomfortable stage—further.

"Perhaps it's nothing, really," I said. "Just a slight strain or something."

Cecil had turned his back and was rummaging in his locker.

"Oh, very likely," I thought I heard him say.

I decided to drop the subject. After all, though it was tactless of my brother to have pointed it out, there was no real necessity to assume that particular attitude again. I would wait a week, and if at the end of that time a further test produced the same symptoms, then the question of a doctor might be reconsidered. Meanwhile, I would be careful to keep my right arm as far as possible from my left leg.

But mark what happened. Three days later Cecil, while performing his morning toilet in the bathroom, tripped over the cord of his dressing-gown, put out his hand to save himself, crashed

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through the window, and sliced his forearm with a deep cut about nine inches long. He shouted out to me, and when I came in and found him looking slightly green and bleeding like a pig, I decided that, arteries being the kind of things that they were, it would be a good thing to get hold of assistance. I tore downstairs to the flat below ours, where, as I knew, a doctor resided, and in less than half an hour Cecil's arm was safely stitched and bandaged and, I may add, in less than three weeks he was playing golf again.

But I wasn't. For what must my idiot of a brother go and do but—as soon as the last stitch had been put into his arm—begin winking and making signs at me? And then, as I continued to disregard these gesticulations—which, if the truth must be told, I believed to be connected with a desire on his part that I should offer the doctor his fee—what must he do next but remark aloud: “I say, Henry, now that Dr. Brindleworth is here, why don't you ask him to have a look at your inside?”

I scowled at Cecil, but I was too late. The doctor had already pricked up his ears.

“Why, what's the trouble, Mr. Gibson?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said sulkily.

“Don't you believe him,” said Cecil, obviously

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under the impression that he was being witty. "When he stands on his head, he gets a pain in his toe-nails. Don't you, Henry?"

I saw the doctor looking at me curiously. In dealing with his patients' alleged symptoms the last thing that a general practitioner can afford to have is a sense of humour, but Dr. Brindleworth, I should judge, can never have been tempted to indulge in such an extravagance.

"Is that really so?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "My brother's pulling your leg, I'm afraid."

"No, I'm not," said Cecil, whose recent escape from death seemed to have gone slightly to his head. "Just you show him, old chap, what you showed me at the clubhouse on Sunday."

I suppose I might have refused even then, in which case the rest of my life would have been a very different story. But Cecil's mockery had put me on my mettle. After all, the pain had been a very real pain at the time.

"It's like this, doctor," I said. "When I sit down and do this—like that, you see—I get a pain just there."

I only gave him a rough outline of the position, for to tell the truth I saw no point in taking unnecessary risks.

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Dr. Brindleworth looked at me seriously, and rubbed his chin with his hand.

“That’s very interesting,” he said. “What kind of a pain is it?”

I described it to the best of my ability.

“And just there, you said?” he went on, poking his finger into me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Perhaps you would let me make an examination?” he suggested.

Again I hesitated, but I saw that I had gone too far to go back.

“All right,” I said.

We went along into my bedroom, and I lay flat on my back on the bed. Dr. Brindleworth tapped me and kneaded me and listened to me and breathed at me. I felt rather congested about the head, for he had insisted on removing my pillow; but beyond this I was able truthfully to inform him that I felt no pain at all.

“Now raise your legs,” he said.

I did so.

“Now turn on your face,” he commanded.

I obeyed.

“H’m,” said Dr. Brindleworth, when he had finished hitting me on the back. “May I ask if

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you have had anything to worry you lately? Any business troubles, for instance?"

"No," I said, with my mouth full of blanket. "Nothing at all."

"H'm," he repeated, and he began walking up and down the bedroom, frowning to himself. Presently he said: "As far as I can tell, there's nothing here that need seriously worry you. But I'd be very glad if you'd let me take you to see Sir Theodore Backgammon. If he agrees with me, and if you have no recurrence of the pain, then I think we may definitely say that with moderate care there is absolutely no cause for alarm."

"Oh," I said. "But what do you think I've got?"

He didn't seem to hear this question.

"I'll make an appointment for you one day next week," he said, "and I'll come with you, of course, and let Sir Theodore know what I've found."

"But what *have* you found?" I asked.

Dr. Brindleworth shook his head and smiled faintly.

"I mustn't anticipate Sir Theodore's diagnosis," he said, and with this our interview terminated. I found myself irrevocably pledged to accompany a strange doctor to a strange specialist's, and all, as

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far as I could see, to satisfy my brother Cecil's peculiar and immoderate sense of humour.

But if you have ever had any dealings with the medical profession, you will realize that by now it was no longer possible for me to treat the thing from a detached or sensible point of view. Dr. Brindleworth's mysterious examination, his obvious unwillingness to commit himself to a definite opinion, and, above all, his deadly, unblinking seriousness, had hypnotized me. I took to looking in the glass to see if I were unnaturally pale or flushed; I woke up in the night and prodded myself for imaginary pains; I tried, but failed, to find my own pulse.

But one thing I did not do. Though often tempted, at the last minute my courage always failed me. I never put my right arm under my left leg and snatched at the air. The thing simply could not be faced.

I played no golf that week-end, but Cecil's arm gave me all the ostensible excuse that I wanted. Besides, it was raining hard all the time, and I sat in front of the fire, reading Hooper's Medical Dictionary, in the edition of 1839.

At last the day of my appointment with Sir Theodore came. I left the office early, picked up Dr. Brindleworth at his flat, and we drove together to Harley Street. It was a silent drive. Dr.

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Brindleworth had put on his best clothes and stared straight in front of him, and I kept on glancing at myself in the mirror at the side of the hansom. To my disordered imagination there seemed something unearthly about my pallor.

First of all Dr. Brindleworth and I waited together in the specialist's dining-room, and then I waited alone, while the two æsculapians retired to the consulting-room and discussed my case—or possibly my income. Presently a butler was sent to fetch me in.

By this time my nervous terror had reached such a pitch that I could scarcely control my limbs. I am not positive, but I believe that I entered the consulting-room on the butler's arm. Sir Theodore Backgammon was sitting at an enormous writing-desk, almost entirely covered with examples of the silversmith's art. He had a very large face, a high forehead, and wore a white piqué slip in the opening of his waistcoat. As I came tottering in he rose and grasped my hand.

“Take a seat, Mr. Gibson,” he said, and he switched on a small reading lamp, so that the light went straight into my eyes.

“Now just tell me, in your own words,” he went on, “exactly how you first became aware of these symptoms. Don't overlook any detail, just because

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you think it seems unimportant. I want to have everything.”

He smiled ferociously, and I began. I told him how on Sunday week I had been playing golf with my brother. I described the way that we had played and the time that we had taken. I explained how I was sitting down, after the second round, just preparing to change my shoes. And thus at last I led up to the famous attitude and the sudden pain.

All the time that I was speaking, Sir Theodore nodded his head and stabbed at his blotting-pad with a silver pencil-case. And when I had quite finished he said: “Just take off your shirt.”

“I beg your pardon?” I asked.

“Sir Theodore wishes to make a further examination,” explained Dr. Brindleworth, darting forward.

“Oh,” I said. “All right.” And I disrobed.

“Just lie down on that sofa, Mr. Gibson,” said Sir Theodore; and when he had got me there, with my shirt off, he went into the corner of the room and began washing his hands. A faint smell of scented soap drifted across to me.

“Have you any idea what is the matter with me?” I enquired.

Dr. Brindleworth looked at me reprovingly.

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Sir Theodore made no answer. Presently he finished drying his hands, and then at last he came over to the sofa. He slipped his arm behind me, seemed to release some kind of catch, and the part of the sofa which had been supporting my head suddenly gave way.

“ Ah,” he said, “ that’s better.”

And then he set to work. First he pinched, prodded, and poked the whole of one side, and then he stepped round the foot of the sofa and began on the other. Once I tried to ask him a question, but he wouldn’t hear of this.

“ Quiet, please,” he said, threateningly.

Unlike Dr. Brindleworth, he never asked me whether I felt any pain. But as a matter of fact he gave me agony, for he had the sharpest finger-nails of any man I’ve ever met, and I bore the marks of his examination for many days.

Presently he said: “ Get up. Place your feet together. Shut your eyes. Extend the right arm so. Now touch your nose. Now with the left arm. Now on one leg. Now on the other. Now again. Now put on your shirt.”

“ May I open my eyes ? ” I asked.

But he didn’t answer. So I risked it. I found that he had placed an armchair immediately facing his consulting-room window.

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“ Sit down there,” he said.

I did so.

“ Keep your eyes fixed on that chimney-pot,” he went on, “ and now watch what I do.”

He began moving things about, just where I couldn't see them. It was like the bit at the dentist's where he ties you down with a gag, and then starts fiddling with his instruments at the back of your head,

“ What's this ? ” asked Sir Theodore, pointing to something.

I knew what it was quite well, though I should have thought that in my position only a bird could have seen it; but for the life of me I couldn't recall its right name. Afterwards, when it was too late, I remembered that it was a vinaigrette.

“ It's—it's . . . ” I began.

“ Never mind,” said Sir Theodore, cutting me short. “ Now tell me what this is.”

Again, although my eyes were glued on the chimney-pot outside, I saw what he was holding quite clearly. It was one of those little silver things, like paper-knives, that doctors flatten your tongue with when they want to look far down your throat. I knew it had some special name. But to save my soul I couldn't remember whether it was *spatula* or *scapula*. So, as I didn't want him to laugh at me

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if I said the wrong thing, I answered: "I can't remember."

"H'm," said Sir Theodore. "That will do, now. Just turn your chair round. That's right. Now sit down again. Now cross your legs. Now _____"

And at this moment he hit me a violent blow on the right knee-cap.

"Hi!" I shouted, jumping up. "Don't do that!"

Sir Theodore turned triumphantly to Dr. Brindleworth, and Dr. Brindleworth looked admiringly at Sir Theodore. It was clear that only a three-guinea specialist could have delivered that blow with such startling accuracy.

Sir Theodore then went back to his writing-table.

"You can put your coat on again, Mr. Gibson," he said.

I put it on.

"Tell me, now," he continued. "Have you been overworking at all, lately?"

"No," I said, truthfully.

"What is your profession?" he asked.

"I am a solicitor," I said.

"No money troubles?" he went on.

"No," I said. "None."

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He made a note of this on a piece of paper.

“ Well, Mr. Gibson,” he continued, when he had done this, “ I don’t wish to say anything to alarm you. But I am very glad that you came to me when you did. Very glad indeed.”

I bowed.

“ Not at all,” I said. “ I—— ”

“ How long would it take you to get your affairs in order ? ” he interrupted me.

“ They are in order,” I protested. “ I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you.”

“ Good,” said Sir Theodore. “ Now I will give you a letter of introduction to a colleague of mine in Cape Town. I want you to drop everything here, absolutely, and catch the next mail-boat from Southampton. If you will place yourself entirely in my friend’s hands when you reach the Cape, I still have every hope that it may not be too late. Have you got anyone who could travel with you ? ”

“ No,” I said. “ But—— ”

Sir Theodore stopped me with a frown.

“ I will find a male nurse to accompany you, then,” he said. “ You had better be prepared to be away for at least eighteen months. This is a shock to you, no doubt, Mr. Gibson, but I assure you that you can count yourself lucky that things have gone no further than they have. In four or

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five years from now, I have no hesitation in saying that you will be a different man. That is, if you follow my advice in every way."

"But," I exclaimed, "I can't possibly leave my business for as long as that."

"No?" said Sir Theodore. "Then I think you had better dispose of your interest in it. I suppose there will be no difficulty about that."

"But I don't want——" I began again, and again I was silenced with a frown.

"Understand me clearly," said Sir Theodore. "Unless you follow my advice to the very letter, I must retire from your case at once. With my standing and reputation I couldn't possibly take it on any other terms."

He got up as he spoke, and began edging me towards the door. I had been holding his cheque in my hand ever since I had resumed my coat, and as he ushered me out, he extracted it from my limp fingers. The whole world seemed to be going round. The butler helped me into my overcoat and pushed me down the steps into the street. I can't remember seeing Dr. Brindleworth again, so I suppose that he had stayed behind. In a horrible kind of dream I crawled into a cab and went straight back to my flat.

The next day I arranged for my share in Messrs.

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Montgomery and McGillicuddy's business to be sold, and on the following Saturday my brother came down to Southampton and saw me off. Targett, the male nurse, travelled in the next compartment.

Cecil had lunch with me on board before the *Kenilworth Castle* sailed. Oddly enough we found ourselves next to some people that he knew—a mother and daughter on their way out to stay for two or three weeks at Madeira. I was introduced to them, but I was too much depressed to say more than a few words, and as soon as Cecil had left I went to my berth and lay down. Shortly afterwards I felt the engines moving and I realized with an aching heart that I had left my native country, possibly for ever.

We had a rough passage through the Bay, and it was another forty-eight hours before I came on deck. Almost the first person I saw was Miss Westerham, Cecil's friend. I raised my cap.

“Feeling better?” she asked, sympathetically. I had to admit that I was.

“Mother's still in bed,” she said. “Shall we go for a walk?”

For a moment I wondered whether I ought to ask Targett's permission, but she was a very attractive girl. I decided to risk it.

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“ I shall be delighted,” I said.

And thus began our first acquaintanceship, which lasted exactly two days. I knew that I was in love with her in less than ten minutes, and it was torture to realize, as I did, that whereas a fortnight ago I should have been free to offer her my hand the first moment that I dared, now, as a condemned man, I must be pledged to perpetual silence. Nevertheless, until the ship should arrive at Funchal I made up my mind to enjoy our friendship while it lasted. Poor girl, I only hoped that she, too, would not also become too fond of me.

All that day we paced the deck together, played quoits and shuffleboard with each other, and in the evening we sat up until the lights were extinguished. She told me the name of her favourite authoress, and I told her how to register a limited company at Somerset House. It was, I thought, a communion of souls.

The next day was just the same. Mrs. Westerham was still in bed. Targett had raised no objection to my behaviour. And I—well, I almost began to forget the hideous disease which had driven me from England. In the afternoon the ship's sports were held, and Miss Westerham and I competed as partners in the arithmetic race, the

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egg-and-spoon race, the cracknel race, and the deck-croquet mixed doubles. The thought of our parting at Madeira became unbearable. And yet how could I ask any woman to share the life which I saw stretching before me? No, no. I must and I would carry my burden alone.

But late that night, as we sat together on a box full of lifebelts, listening to the throb of the propeller and the sound of the water rushing from the ship's prow, she suddenly asked me: "Why can't you wait at Madeira and catch the next boat on? Would it really interfere with your plans?"

"I cannot do it," I replied.

"But I'm sure the purser could arrange it," she said. "Now, do."

"Miss Westerham," I answered. "Enid—if I may call you that—I will tell you the truth. I have been sent out to South Africa by Sir Theodore Backgammon, in the care of a male nurse. His name is Targett; he is travelling second-class. Much as I would wish to stay at Madeira for as long as you remain there yourself, I dare not do it. My life may seem of little value to you. I dare say it does. But has any man the right to throw away his only chance of living, when so much that is good still remains to be done in this world? I ask you, has he?"

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“ Gracious! ” said Miss Westerham. “ Why, surely you can’t be as bad as all that! ”

“ I am, ” I said sadly.

“ But what is wrong with you? ” she asked. “ How could a man as ill as you say you are beat the ship’s record for the high jump? You are making fun of me. ”

“ I wish that I were, ” I said.

“ But what is it? ” she repeated. “ Is it your lungs? ”

“ I don’t think so, ” I said.

“ But surely you must know, ” she insisted. “ Unless, that is—I mean to say . . . ” And she blushed.

“ No, no, ” I said hastily. “ Whatever it is, it is nothing that I would hide from you. The answer to your question is in my state-room, in a sealed letter addressed to Dr. Underwood of Cape Town. He is to take over my case when I arrive. ”

“ But do you mean to tell me that you have let them send you off, half round the world, without ever asking what was wrong with you? ” she asked, gasping.

“ You don’t understand, ” I said. “ There are some cases in which it is kinder for the patient not to be told. All I know is that when I was changing my shoes after a game of golf a few weeks ago, I

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leant forward and put my right arm under my left leg, and immediately I felt the most agonizing pain."

"You did what?" said Miss Westerham.

"I put my right leg—no, I mean my left hand was—no, look here," I said, breaking off. "I'll show you."

I sat on the edge of a deck chair, and for the first time since the day that I had had that warning twinge, I reconstructed the attitude.

"Well?" asked Miss Westerham. For some reason she had her handkerchief pressed against her mouth.

"It's a most remarkable thing," I said, looking up at her from where I was crouching. "It's a most extraordinary and inexplicable affair, but—good heavens, it's gone!"

"What's gone?" she asked, coughing a little, as it seemed.

"The pain!" I cried. "A miracle has happened! Miss Westerham—Enid, if I may call you that—I am cured! I am free! At last I can speak to you. At last the hideous cloud has lifted. Enid—dearest—this afternoon we tied for the second place in the egg-and-spoon race. Will you not let me carry the egg of your beauty in the spoon of my love for the rest of our two lives?"

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Miss Westerham turned her back quickly. I could see her shoulders shaking with emotion.

“There, there,” I said. “I know I was impulsive. I know I have startled you, but——” I put out my hand and touched her gently.

“No, no,” she said, shuddering. “Leave me. Leave me at once.” And to my horror, she burst into a peal of hysterical laughter.

“Enid!” I cried. “Speak to me! Answer me!”

“I can’t,” she gasped out. “You’re—you’re so frightfully funny!”

And with these terrible words she slipped past me and fled down the nearest companion.

In that moment (said Gibson impressively) I knew that my love for her was dead. Since she subsequently married my brother, this was probably just as well. But for the time being I was like a man distraught. To have escaped like this from the very jaws of death, to have laid one’s hand and fortune at the feet of a chit of a girl, and then to be told that one was funny. Nay, that one was frightfully funny. It was too much.

How I reached my cabin again I do not know. Targett was waiting up for me, but I dismissed him at once. Then I took Sir Theodore’s letter from my dispatch-case, broke the seal, and opened it.

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The next moment I had suffered another overwhelming shock.

“Dear Underwood,” Sir Theodore had written,

“I am sending you herewith one rich solicitor. I don't want to see him again for eighteen months. Meanwhile, I am counting on fifty per cent. of whatever you can get from him. If there's anything the matter with him except too much money, I'll eat my stethoscope.

Yours ever,

Theodore Backgammon.”

For a minute and a half I stared at this unspeakable missive. Then, with an oath, I ran to the purser's room. He was in bed—on the top of a chest of drawers, as is the habit of sailors—but he received me with the utmost courtesy.

“When's the next boat back to Southampton?” I asked.

“To-morrow afternoon, from Funchal,” he said.

“Can you book me a berth on it?”

“Yes,” he said. “Unless it's full. Will you want accommodation for your man?”

“No,” I answered. “My man is going on. He's not been at all well, and I think the voyage

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will do him good. Here are fifty pounds to cover his expenses. May I ask you to be good enough to hand him the balance when he reaches Cape Town and to see that he delivers this letter to Dr. Underwood in person ? ”

“ Certainly,” said the purser.

I took an envelope from his desk, put Sir Theodore’s letter in it, fastened it up, and handed it over.

“ Thank you,” I said. “ Good night.”

The next morning I packed a handbag and slipped over the side while Targett was having his breakfast. In a few more hours I was safely on board the *Saxon*, and by the Monday morning I was back in London. I took a cab and drove straight to Sir Theodore’s house in Harley Street. The same butler opened the door.

“ I wish to see Sir Theodore Backgammon at once,” I said.

To my surprise, the butler shook his head.

“ Haven’t you heard, sir ? ” he asked.

“ No,” I said. “ What is it ? ”

“ Sir Theodore has had a serious breakdown, sir,” said the butler. “ He was removed last Tuesday to E——.” He gave the name of a well-known private home for mental cases.

“ But,” I shouted, “ do you realize that he made me sell my practice, and start off half round the

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world only ten days ago? It's monstrous! It's intolerable! Why didn't you warn me? How dared you admit me to the house of a certified lunatic? If there's a law in England I'll get damages from him."

But the butler shook his head again.

"I'm afraid it's not my fault, sir," he said. "But if you wish to consult a very respectable firm of lawyers, I can tell you where several of his best patients have gone."

"Oh, you can, can you?" I snorted. "Where's that?"

"Montgomery and McGillycuddy, sir," said the butler. "In Basinghall Street."

* * * * *

Gibson stopped, and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"Do you see now," he asked, "why I never went back to my office again?"

"Not quite," I said.

"How could I?" he appealed to me. "My partners knew why I was selling my interest. I should have been the laughing-stock of every clerk in the place for the rest of my life. I couldn't face it. I invested the whole of my capital in Standard Oil, and I have lived at the Caviare ever since."

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“And you never felt that pain again?” I enquired.

“Ah,” said Gibson, “I thought you might ask that. It brings up the most unpleasant part of the whole story. About a fortnight after I got back to my flat, my brother Cecil came into my room with an angry look on his face.

“‘I wish,’ he said, ‘the next time you borrow my tie to keep your breeches up, you’d take care not to go off with my best gold safety-pin.’

“‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

“‘Look here,’ he said. ‘Here have I been hunting high and low for the thing for over a month, and all the time it was stuck in the end of that tie I lent you, and hanging there in your locker at Sandy Heath. I value that pin. It was given me by that Miss Westerham that you met on the boat. What could I have said, if she’d asked me where it was?’

“‘My dear Cecil,’ I replied, ‘I don’t know and I don’t care. But, leaving Miss Westerham out of it for the moment, I should like to know why the blazes you dignify that infernal pin with the unmerited description of “Safety.” It’s the most dangerous pin I ever met in my life!’

“And the next day,” added Gibson, rising to his feet, “I moved out of the flat. After all, it’s

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almost always a mistake for brothers to live together.”

He threw me a final, brief smile, and disappeared through the swing-doors into the hall.

VI

THE MYSTERY OF THE MANAGING DIRECTOR

I HAVE an idea that about this time Gibson must have told me a number of stories the details of which have, for one reason or another, slipped from my memory. It is difficult otherwise to explain how I am left with the vague impression of an account of a diamond necklace, stolen from a countess at the Royal Academy *soirée*, and subsequently brought to light in a ham sandwich at the British Museum refreshment room; of the inexplicable disappearance of a landowner who had driven certain gipsies from a field where their caravans had pitched for centuries, and of the strange discovery, many years later, of his mummified head in a cocoanut-shy at Mitcham Fair; of the poisoned pyjamas used to dope the favourite in the Open Championship; and of the remarkable narrative of a Kensington policeman who witnessed the committee of a well-known political club offering up a human sacrifice on the steps of the Albert Memorial.

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I feel that it must have been from Gibson that I learnt of such impossible affairs, for they are certainly not the kind of thing that I should ever be likely to invent myself. But though these fragmentary outlines have remained stored away in the recesses of my mind, the actual particulars in each case seem somehow to have become dislodged. And to reconstruct the originals from such scant material would, I feel, be hardly fair either to the memory of Gibson or to the readers of these Tales.

And so, regretfully yet sternly, I pass at once to the next occasion where I feel that I can safely supply the details that are needed, and reproduce in this chapter the account which Gibson gave me of the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Mr. Abraham Dix. As before, I shall quote the actual words of the narrator.

* * * * *

London (said Gibson) has changed so much and so fast during the last fifteen or twenty years, the housebreaker and the building contractor have wrought their work so well, that photographic records of many familiar streets taken at the beginning of this period now seem to us like the pictures of some foreign town. You have only to look at the old cover of the *Strand Magazine* to see what I mean. Yet the change has been so continuous, the spectacle

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of gigantic cranes and of the steel skeletons of new buildings has become so constant a feature of the Londoner's horizon, that it is only when some sudden thought causes him to peer into his memory that the extent of this metamorphosis is brought home to him. The St. James's Hall, Walsingham House, Hengler's Circus, Newgate Prison, the Aquarium, the Big Wheel, Howell and James, where are they now? *Où*, as has been well asked, *sont les neiges d'antan*?

It is more than likely, therefore, that unless you have some special reason to remember it, you have already forgotten even so recent and so hideous an edifice as Dix's Omniferous Stores, which ceased to exist as a separate entity in the retail microcosm barely twelve years ago.

It was in Knightsbridge that Mr. Abraham Dix, the founder of this business, entered, as a draper's errand-boy, on his commercial career. And it was in Knightsbridge that he gradually, during the sixty-five years of his life, turned his dreams into bricks and mortar, into plate-glass windows and mahogany counters, into Manchester goods and Paris models, into groceries, drugs, carpets, books, footwear, hardware, and sundries—in short, into the kind of establishment which could fully justify his slogan, “From Layette to Lay-Out.” And

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finally it was in Knightsbridge again that, in his private office on the fourth floor of the Omniferous Stores, he was found dead in the peculiar circumstances which I shall now relate.

The month was December, and the Christmas Bazaar in the sub-basement was already swarming with customers, while in every department throughout the big building money was pouring into the cashiers' boxes. Mr. Dix had arrived as usual at half-past nine in the morning, had dictated his letters and instructions to his secretary and had, again as usual, dismissed her while he went through the schedule of returns for the previous day's trading. In the ordinary course of events he would not emerge again until shortly after noon, when it was his habit to make a general tour, incognito so far as the customers were concerned, of the whole establishment, winding up in the restaurant on the fifth floor, where he would examine and pass the menu and the musical director's programme for the selections to be played during lunch.

But at twenty-five minutes past eleven on this particular day, Mr. Emms, the head of the silk department, observed a lady of rather ample figure enter his domain with what he at first sight took

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to be a large red handkerchief protruding from one end of her muff.

He was on the point of stepping forward to warn her of the risk which she was incurring of losing her property, when to his surprise he realized that the handkerchief was, in fact, no handkerchief, but the head of a fully-developed and recently-deceased turkey. With a whispered word to his second-in-command he fell in behind her and followed her at a distance of some yards through into the silver department. Here the lady seemed suddenly to become aware of the unusual appearance of her muff and, with a quick glance round, she stuffed the head back into its interior. And then, satisfied apparently that she had not been seen, she laid a careless hand on the nearest counter, swept a large cigar-case off the edge, and caught it neatly in her unfolded umbrella.

In Mr. Emms's opinion the time had come for action. He stepped forward and touched the lady on the arm.

"Pardon me, madam," he said, "but may I trouble you to come with me to the Managing Director's office?"

The lady stared at him in surprise.

"Certainly not," she said. "What is the meaning of this impertinence?"

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“ I have no wish,” answered Mr. Emms, “ to cause any unnecessary unpleasantness, but I must ask you to do as I say.”

The lady’s assurance seemed suddenly to leave her.

“ I am a clergyman’s wife,” she said. “ If my husband were to hear of this, he would never lift up his head again. Let me pay you for what I have taken, and I will pray for you every night as long as I live.”

“ That is impossible, madam,” said Mr. Emms sternly. “ You have no right to make such a suggestion.”

The lady’s eyes filled with tears.

“ But you have such a kind face,” she said pathetically. “ Surely you cannot wish me to suffer such terrible disgrace. See here,” she added, fumbling in the front of her dress; “ here is a gold watch which I have just bought for my husband. Take it. It is yours, if only you will let me pay and go.”

But Mr. Emms’s horrified eyes had already detected the price label on the back of the proffered watch.

“ Silence,” he said. “ You will come with me at once to Mr. Dix’s office. I am not to be bribed with stolen goods.”

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The lady hung her head, and allowed herself to be led to the nearest lift. In a couple of minutes they had reached the private secretary's room.

“ Please tell Mr. Dix,” said Mr. Emms, “ that I have observed this lady in the act of purloining the firm's property. And,” he added ferociously, “ you had better send down for a policeman.”

“ Certainly, Mr. Emms,” said the secretary, and lifting the receiver of the telephone, she gave the necessary order. Then she moved to the door of Mr. Dix's room. The clergyman's wife sank into a chair, moaning, and wiping her eyes with three and a half yards of Honiton lace which she took from the pocket of her sealskin jacket.

“ Let me beseech you,” she wept, “ to overlook this—this lapse. I cannot think what made me do it. But I have been overworking so terribly at the Girls' Friendly Society. Surely Mr. Dix will understand if I tell him that ? ”

Mr. Emms was just drawing himself up to administer a chilling reproof in the character of Blind Justice; he had even cleared his throat for the opening phrase; when a piercing shriek rang suddenly out from the inner room. He paused with his Adam's apple half raised.

The shriek was repeated.

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“ My God ! ” said Mr. Emms. “ What was that ? ”

He darted one look at his fair prisoner, but she seemed in a state of complete collapse. The next moment he had flung himself at the inner door, and burst it open.

The sight which met his eyes was fully described at the inquest which, as an acquaintance of the Town Clerk, I had the privilege of attending in company with a friend of mine. I will now summarize it shortly.

Immediately inside the doorway, Miss Billingfield, the lady secretary, was lying senseless on the ground, and by the corner of his big desk, his arms outstretched over the carpet and his toupée gripped closely in one of his hands, was the body of Mr. Abraham Dix.

“ Did you, ” asked the coroner, when this point had been reached, “ notice anything else about the deceased ? ”

“ Yes, sir, ” said Mr. Emms.

“ Please describe it to us. ”

“ Well, sir, ” said Mr. Emms, “ I went over at once to see if there was anything as I could do, and I noticed immediately that the ends of Mr. Dix’s trousers were stuffed inside his socks. ”

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The coroner looked up sharply.

“ Was that in accordance with the ordinary custom of the deceased ? ” he asked.

“ No, sir,” said Mr. Emms.

“ And did you remark anything else ? ” continued the coroner.

“ I also saw,” replied Mr. Emms, “ that Mr. Dix had what we call a traveller’s sample of ribbon—a short length taken from a bundle which was lying on his desk—pinned diagonally, as one might say, across his waistcoat.”

This, as you can imagine, was the point at which the reporters sharpened their pencils and began to scent a mystery. But there was more to follow. When Mr. Emms had concluded his evidence, and had explained how it was that he was in the Managing Director’s office; how, on turning from his first examination of the deceased, he had found the policeman for whom Miss Billingfield had telephoned just entering the room; and how the discovery was then made that the alleged shop-lifter had taken advantage of the confusion to make her escape; and when the policeman had confirmed this part of the story, then Miss Billingfield herself was called.

“ When,” asked the coroner, “ did you last see your employer alive ? ”

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“ About half-past ten,” said Miss Billingfield, “ when I finished taking his dictation.”

“ And between half-past ten and the time that you next entered the inner room,” enquired the coroner, “ what were you doing ? ”

“ I was typing in my own room.”

“ The whole time ? ”

“ The whole time.”

“ Did anyone else enter the deceased’s office during this period ? ”

Miss Billingfield seemed to hesitate.

“ I cannot say,” she replied at last. “ I heard Mr. Dix’s voice speaking once, but he had a private telephone on his desk, and he may have been using that. He had had the bell muffled, so that even if it had rung, I shouldn’t have heard it. Mr. Dix had a very loud voice, and he has often carried on conversations in the next room in which, from where I was, I could not hear the other party speaking.”

“ And on this particular morning,” continued the coroner, “ what was it that you heard the deceased say ? ”

Again Miss Billingfield hesitated, and then she answered: “ First of all I heard him say, ‘ What ? ’ He said it very loudly, and as if he was very much surprised. Then he said, ‘ But who are you ? ’ or something like that. Then I heard him say, ‘ Are

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you sure there's no mistake? I only sent you ten thousand.' And then, 'All right. Mum's the word. I quite understand.' And after that he dropped his voice, and I couldn't catch anything more. I thought at the time that he might be speaking to himself."

At this moment I looked round at Tom Headley, the man who had come with me to the inquest—he was a Member of Parliament, by the way, and I had known him for years—and to my astonishment I saw him half rise from his seat, with his jaw dropping and his eyes bursting right out of his head.

"What on earth's the matter?" I whispered.

"Nothing," he said hastily. "Nothing." And he sank back in his place.

I thought perhaps he was feeling faint.

"Would you like to go out?" I asked.

But the coroner tapped on his table with his pen.

"Silence!" he shouted, glaring at us, and we both subsided at once.

Then came the medical evidence.

Dr. Woppingham, giving an address in Sloane Street, stated that he had been called by telephone to the Omniferous Stores on the morning in question. He had found the deceased lying as described, and examination had revealed that life had

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been extinct for over half an hour. He had attended Mr. Dix for many years, and though of course he was no longer a young man, there was, in his opinion, no reason why, with ordinary care, he should not have lived another fifteen or even twenty years. Any sudden shock might, however, have been very dangerous.

“Do you mean a physical shock?” asked the coroner.

“Physical or mental,” said the doctor.

“And in your opinion,” the coroner continued, “what was the actual cause which brought about the deceased’s end?”

“Heart failure,” said the doctor, “following such shock. I found at the base of the *os occipitis* a severe, suffused contusion; but I am unable to state whether this resulted from the manner in which the deceased fell, or whether it was produced by some blunt instrument before the fall took place.”

“In the latter event,” asked the coroner, “could this injury, in your opinion, have been self-inflicted?”

“In my opinion,” said Dr. Woppingham, “that would have been impossible.”

“And did you discover in the room any such instrument as you describe?”

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“ No,” said the doctor. And then he added: “ I didn’t look.”

The coroner made a careful note of this answer, and then he went on.

“ One more question, Dr. Woppingham. Have you any theory which will explain, from a medical standpoint, the unusual condition of the deceased’s clothing ? ”

“ No,” said the doctor again.

“ Thank you,” said the coroner. “ I will not detain you any longer.” And Dr. Woppingham bowed and left the court.

But the mysterious part of the affair wasn’t over yet.

The next witness was Mr. Hilary Bennett, a director of the Omniferous Stores. He stated that he had arrived on the scene a few minutes after the discovery had been made, to keep an appointment with Mr. Dix. Seeing that the doctor was in charge in the private office, and hearing from Mr. Emms of the shoplifter’s escape, he had first gone back to the doorway which communicated with the main store; but the commissionaire, who had been on duty there since ten o’clock, was positive that no one had left Mr. Dix’s suite by that route during the whole of the previous hour. Then he had run down the private stairway which led direct to the

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street, and had discovered that the door at the bottom of it was open. At the time, this had only struck him as explaining how the shoplifter had got away; but he had since been informed that it was Mr. Dix's invariable custom to lock this door from the inside after he arrived each morning, with a key which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. Miss Billingfield could doubtless confirm this.

“ In other words,” said the coroner, cutting him short, “ the door leading to the street must have been open ever since half-past nine ? ”

“ Not necessarily open,” said Mr. Bennett carefully. “ But it would have been possible for anyone to open it from the inside by turning the handle of the latch. If the door were shut, it could not be opened from outside without the key.”

There was a rustle in the court-room as those present tried to see where this answer was leading them.

“ And did you inform the constable of your discovery ? ” the coroner pursued.

“ Yes,” said Mr. Bennett. “ And acting on my suggestion he searched Mr. Dix's pockets for the key.”

“ And he found it ? ”

“ No,” said Mr. Bennett, impressively. “ The key was not there.”

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There was another quickly subdued rustle in the court.

“ Now tell me, Mr. Bennett,” the coroner continued, “ have you, with the close knowledge of the deceased’s business affairs which you must possess, any information which will explain the statement made by a previous witness that she heard the deceased remark, ‘ But I only sent you ten thousand ’ ? ”

Mr. Bennett shook his head.

“ No, sir,” he said.

The coroner looked up, and smiled the smile which indicates prior knowledge of the answer which is to be made to a question.

“ Will you tell the jury,” he said, “ what you found on the deceased’s desk ? ”

“ On Mr. Dix’s desk,” said Mr. Bennett, “ I found a sheet of his private notepaper, and written on it in his own handwriting were the words, ‘ Lord Knightsbridge.’ ”

“ Nothing else ? ”

“ Nothing else.”

“ Just let the jury see that exhibit,” said the coroner, turning to a police-officer; and the sheet of notepaper was handed round for the twelve jurors to inspect. When it came back to the coroner again, he turned once more to Mr. Bennett

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and asked: "Have you any knowledge of any dealings which the deceased had with any person known as Lord Knightsbridge?"

"No, sir," said Mr. Bennett.

"Thank you," said the coroner. "Now just one more question. Has there come to your notice during the past months any indication of a feeling on the part of any of the deceased's employees which might have led any of them to wish to do the deceased any kind of injury?"

Before Mr. Bennett could answer, a man at the back of the court rose suddenly to his feet.

"As General Secretary to the Amalgamated Society of Retailers' Assistants and Auxiliaries," he shouted, "I protest against that question being put."

"Silence, sir!" barked the coroner. "What is your name?"

The man bobbed up again.

"Holzapfel," he answered.

"Kindly leave the court at once," said the coroner.

The interrupter folded his arms.

"I have made my protest," he said with great dignity, and then, rather to my surprise, he actually did leave. Perhaps he mistrusted the look in the

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eye of the policeman who had begun edging towards him.

“ Now, sir,” resumed the coroner, turning again to Mr. Bennett. “ Let me repeat my last question.” And he repeated it.

“ Must I answer that ? ” asked Mr. Bennett, looking nervously towards the spectators at the back of the room.

“ It is a very important point,” said the coroner.

“ Then, if you insist,” said Mr. Bennett, “ I must inform you that about a fortnight ago Mr. Dix posted a notice on the employees’ notice-board forbidding the further use inside the building of openwork stockings.”

As the coroner glared angrily round the court, the murmur of indignation which had arisen died suddenly away.

“ Thank you, Mr. Bennett,” he concluded. And Mr. Bennett withdrew.

The coroner consulted a slip of paper.

“ Call Mr. Purdy,” he said.

A lean man, with an incredibly high collar, stepped forward and took the oath.

“ Now then, Mr. Purdy,” said the coroner, “ you are, I believe, a cashier at the Brompton Road branch of the Great Southern and Metropolitan Bank ? ”

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“ That is so,” agreed the witness.

“ You knew the deceased by sight ? ”

“ I did.”

“ And are acquainted with the details of his account ? ”

“ I am.”

“ So that if the deceased had recently received or paid out any large sum of money—let us say, ten thousand pounds—you would have knowledge of this ? ”

“ I would,” said Mr. Purdy.

“ Can you tell us, then, whether, in fact, the deceased did in the course of the last few weeks pass any such large sum through his account ? ”

“ On the seventh instant,” replied Mr. Purdy, in a sing-song voice, “ Mr. Dix called at the bank at 9.20 a.m. in the forenoon, and presented an open cheque, payable to self and endorsed on the reverse, for ten thousand pounds sterling. The whole sum was immediately paid over to him in bank-notes. The numbers of those notes were _____ ”

Here the coroner raised his hand.

“ Thank you, Mr. Purdy,” he interrupted. “ The police have asked that the numbers of the notes should not for the present be disclosed.”

Mr. Purdy bowed, and another thrill ran round

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the court. Surely, I felt, we must be getting somewhere at last.

But with the next witness the coroner started off on a still further tack.

“ You are, I believe,” he said, addressing the surly-looking man who had just been called and sworn, “ a Deputy-Divisional Traffic Superintendent in the employ of the London Telephone Service ? ”

The surly-looking man nodded.

“ Speak up, please,” said the coroner.

“ That’s right,” said the witness.

“ Have you a record of any calls originating from or being received by ‘ Western 9606 ’—the number of the deceased’s private line—on the morning that the deceased met with his death ? ”

“ No,” said the witness.

“ Such records are, I suppose, kept ? ” enquired the coroner, with one eye on the reporters’ table.

“ Not of incoming calls, they aren’t,” said the witness.

“ But of outgoing calls ? ”

“ That’s right.”

“ So that if Mr. Dix had originated a call that morning your department would have a record of it ? ”

“ No,” said the witness.

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“ Why not ? ” asked the coroner sharply.

“ Because the line was out of order and being tested for repairs,” said the surly-looking man.

“ Oh,” said the coroner, scowling at the back of the court. “ You may stand down, sir.”

The witness withdrew, and the coroner held a brief, whispered conversation with a man who looked as if he might once have been a police inspector. Then he rose to his feet again.

“ Gentlemen,” he said, “ I had hoped to be able to conclude our enquiry in one sitting, but the evidence which has been given to-day makes this, I am afraid, impossible. It is clearly essential, before we are able to reach a proper decision, that two—at least—of the points which have been referred to should be cleared up. First of all, an effort must be made to trace the ten thousand pounds in bank-notes which were known to be in the deceased’s possession twenty-four hours before his death. And secondly, it is of the utmost importance that Lord Knightsbridge should attend, so that he may be asked if he can explain why it was that the deceased should have occupied his last moments in writing his lordship’s name on this sheet of note-paper. The inquest will therefore be adjourned until—— ”

But here the most extraordinary interruption

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took place. Tom Headley, for whom, at his own request, I had secured admission to the court, and who might therefore, you would have thought, have taken care to do nothing that would bring discredit on his introducer, suddenly raised his voice and called out: "But there isn't any such title! How can you summon a man who doesn't exist?"

In an instant we seemed the centre of a hundred pairs of curious or angry eyes. But already the coroner's last words had caused people to begin rising and moving towards the doors. With one hand I dealt Tom Headley a violent blow in the wind, and with the other I pointed indignantly at an old man sitting just in front of us. As I hurried my friend away, I had the satisfaction of seeing a specially large policeman clambering over the seats towards the innocent victim of my ruse.

But as soon as we were clear of the court-room I turned impatiently to Tom.

"What the dickens do you mean," I asked, "by shouting out like that? And besides, anyway, how do you know there isn't a Lord Knightsbridge? Can't you credit that coroner with any kind of sense at all?"

"I'm awfully sorry, old man," said Tom, still rubbing his waistcoat. "I apologize like anything.

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But do you really suppose that I've spent two years in the Whips' Office without knowing something about the peerage? Of course there's no Lord Knightsbridge. There never has been."

"Well," I protested, "even so, what has it got to do with you?"

"Look here," said Tom, disregarding this question, "if I give you my solemn word not to utter a sound, will you try and get me into the inquest again next time? I've got a very special reason. I can't tell you what it is now; but if ever I can, I promise I will."

"Does that mean that you're the murderer?" I asked, smiling at his earnestness.

He jumped as if he had been shot.

"No, no," he said quickly. And then he added enigmatically, "At least, if I am, I'll tell you as soon as I'm sure."

And with this I had to be content.

The newspapers the next day were full of the coroner's mistake. But in the general excitement that the inquest had aroused I doubt if the public as a whole paid much attention to it. They were too busy discussing the numerous remarkable features of the affair itself. Some people thought that Mr. Dix had been murdered by the shoplifter earlier in the morning, others suspected Miss

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Billingfield, others plumped for Mr. Holzapfel or one of his minions. Every hour a fresh rumour of the impending bankruptcy of the Omniferous Stores was started, but this was at length knocked on the head by an official pronouncement from the surviving directors. The strange condition of the deceased's trousers and waistcoat suggested to many ingenious minds that the crime was the work of some secret society, whose mercy Mr. Dix had sought in vain to purchase with the ten thousand pounds in bank-notes. I can hardly describe the fantastic theories which were showered on one wherever one went. Every morning the newspaper headlines said that important developments were expected in the next twenty-four hours, and every evening they asked contemptuously what the police thought they were doing.

On the day that the inquest was resumed, the streets round the coroner's court were packed with a seething mob. But once again I had succeeded in obtaining two cards of admission from my friend the Town Clerk, and Tom Headley and I fought our way triumphantly into the room. There was a hushed silence when the coroner rose to address the jury.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “since this enquiry was opened, there have been two developments to

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which I think it necessary to draw your immediate attention. In the first place, a search by the police at the deceased's residence has resulted in the discovery of the keys of his private entrance to the Stores. They were, in short, lying on the top of his dressing-table. It seems clear, therefore, that on this particular morning the deceased must have reached his office through one of the main entrances, and that no one could subsequently have gained admission to his suite by means of the private stairway unless they possessed a duplicate key.

“In the second place, a statement has been made to me by Mr. McQuantock, the manager of the deceased's bank, that the ten thousand pounds in bank-notes have been returned to him intact, and in circumstances which he considers, and, I may add, that I myself consider, entirely satisfactory. There are very important reasons why these circumstances should not be made public, and unless the jury insist, I should very much prefer that the incident should be considered as closed.”

He paused for a moment, and though the jury looked as bewildered and inquisitive as the rest of us, none of them had the courage to ask what he meant. So he went on again: “Having thus disposed of the question of both the opportunity and the motive by which the deceased might have

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met his end at the hands of a fellow creature, I feel justified in asking the jury to return a verdict of 'Death from heart failure, the result of an accidental fall,' in accordance with the medical evidence."

There was a gasp of surprise from the crowded room. Inexperienced as most of those present must have been in the ways of the law, common sense was enough to tell them that the coroner had rushed at his decision in total disregard of quite half the facts of the case, not to mention their own very natural wish to be provided with the sensational disclosures which the Press had been promising them for a week. But the coroner had his jury well in hand. After a mere pretence of consultation, the foreman rose and returned the verdict which had been put into his mouth, he and his colleagues were discharged, and the police began clearing the court.

I turned to Tom Headley, and found him wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Thank heaven," he murmured, "that a British jury still does what it's told. Come back to my flat, and I'll tell you a secret."

In another ten minutes we were sitting over his fire, and this is the story that he confided to me:

"On the morning of the eighth—the day that

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Dix died—a registered parcel was brought to me at the Whips' Office. It contained ten thousand pounds in bank-notes and a letter from Mr. Dix. He said that he understood that a payment of this sum to the party funds would secure for him a knighthood, and he would be obliged for our formal receipt and an assurance that the thing would be put through at once. I may say that as far as I was concerned I was all for letting him have it. But the Chief said, No. He didn't know the man, and he wouldn't trust him not to give the show away. Ten thousand pounds would be useful enough, but with all the talk there had been of the purity of the fountain of honour, we couldn't afford to run risks with a stranger. He asked me to take the money back to Mr. Dix, and explain that he was labouring under a misapprehension.

“ Very well, then. By the same post I had a line from Dick Porphyry—you know, the Under-Secretary to the Duchy of Lancaster. He'd been promised a peerage some time ago, but we'd put it off because his seat wasn't any too safe. Now he said that he must have it at once, because his doctor had ordered him abroad for a year, and he would have to resign in any case. I spoke to the Chief, and he said 'Yes, that's all right. Ring him up and tell him we'll put it through at once.'

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“ I asked my secretary to get him on the telephone, but I suppose now that I must have handed him the wrong letter by mistake. Anyhow, when my bell rang, I said, ‘ Is that you, Dick ? ’

“ ‘ Yes,’ said the voice at the other end.

“ I said, ‘ I say, it’s all right about your peerage.’

“ He said, ‘ What ? ’ It sounded as though he were surprised.

“ I said, ‘ It’s all right about your peerage. It’ll be in the New Year’s List.’

“ He said, ‘ But who are you ? ’

“ ‘ Headley, of the Whips’ Office,’ I said.

“ ‘ Are you sure there’s no mistake ? ’ I heard him ask. ‘ I only sent you ten thousand.’

“ I couldn’t make out what he was getting at.

“ ‘ Ten thousand what ? ’ I said. ‘ I don’t follow you.’

“ ‘ All right,’ he answered. ‘ Mum’s the word. I quite understand.’ And he rang off.

“ It sounds stupid, I know, but it wasn’t until he was gone that I realized what had happened. Through giving my secretary the wrong number, I had been speaking to what the coroner calls ‘ the deceased.’ I ran and told the Chief at once. He said I must go round and explain to Dix what I’d done. I didn’t relish this particularly, but I

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hustled into a cab straight off. When I got to the Stores, I found that he was dead.

“ I was in the devil of a stew, but there was only one thing to be done. I went back and told the Chief, and he said, ‘ Go to the inquest and see what happens. We’ll return the money to Dix’s bank, and if necessary I must try and square the coroner. Fortunately, he’s a member of the local association.’

“ Well, that’s what we did. You see now why the doctor was so certain that poor old Dix had died from shock. Anyone would, who got a peerage as cheap as that. As for ‘ Lord Knightsbridge,’ of course, the explanation is that he was practising writing his new title. And as for his clothes, isn’t it obvious that he wanted to see what he would look like in Court Dress ? ”

I stared at Tom in amazement. And then a thought struck me.

“ Yes,” I said. “ But why did the telephone witness say that the line was out of order ? ”

Tom laughed.

“ Stop and think,” he said. “ Does the London Telephone Service *ever* know which of its lines are out of order ? Of course it doesn’t. Besides, the Postmaster-General is going to get a peerage too.”

VII

GIBSON AND THE WAGER

“ I WONDER if you have ever paused to consider,” said Gibson, sinking back into the armchair next to mine, and crossing his legs, “ what a debt you writers owe to the Savoy Hotel.

“ No, no,” he added, as I was about to reply to this observation, “ I’m not speaking in terms of money. So far as that goes, I agree with you that very few writers ever enter the Savoy at all—except as other people’s guests. But I was thinking of the indispensable part which that particular hotel has come to play in the opening scenes of what are generally known as ‘ Shockers.’ However successful rival establishments may be in other respects, the position of the Savoy as the one suitable setting for the beginning of this kind of story remains unassailable. I fancy that its closeness to the river may have something to do with this; for there seems a very general belief among authors of fiction that once you have got your characters on to the Thames Embankment, all ordinary laws of proba-

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bility are suspended. Curiously enough, I have noticed the same feeling in New York in connection with Riverside Drive. What is it, I wonder, about these waterside boulevards . . .”

He paused meditatively for a moment, and then continued.

“ And yet, after all, there may be more in it than one would at first sight believe. There is no smoke without fire, you know. And oddly enough, one of the strangest experiences in my own life had its origin in a dinner at the *Café Parisien* at the Savoy.”

I saw now where he had been leading me.

“ Perhaps you will tell me about it ? ” I suggested.

“ Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” he replied; and he began his story at once.

* * * * *

Although he has played many minor parts in his time (said Gibson), it is quite likely that you have never heard of my friend John Freemantle, the actor. I certainly doubt whether I should ever have heard of him myself, but for the fact that in the distant past we were schoolfellows together. And even so, if we had not always kept up a fluctuating kind of acquaintanceship, his name would have meant nothing to me on a theatre programme; for until he left school and was given his first part

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—as one of twenty-five guests at a bigamous wedding—he had been known to the world more simply and less euphoniously as J. F. Snell.

Perhaps it was his experience of the temptation which he had thus afforded to the shafts of school-boy wit, which made him abandon his original surname and expand his initials; possibly there were family reasons of which he never told me; but in any case it was as John Freemantle that he assumed, with great satisfaction to himself, a series of more or less insignificant rôles on the London and provincial boards. Fortunately for him, he was possessed of quite adequate private means, and so long as he could pass through a stage door about half-past seven for six nights in a week, change his clothes, smear his face, exhibit the result to the public, and leave again about half-past eleven, he was perfectly happy and perfectly harmless. It was only in the intervals between his engagements that he would develop signs of a certain sensitiveness about his career and his profession which made him a little exhausting to the people whom he met. And as he was incapable in any circumstances of discussing any subject unconnected with the stage, I, at any rate, had come to take special pains only to see him when I was certain that he was in what he used to call a “shop.”

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But when, one day, I found a telephone message waiting for me which contained an invitation to dine with Mr. Freemantle at the Savoy Hotel—where he was then staying—at seven o'clock sharp, I had very little hesitation in accepting it. For not only did it seem incredible to me that anyone could wish to dine at such an hour unless they had some immediate and pressing reason, but I also remembered, as it happened, that I had read a notice of a new play, well within the last three weeks, in which John Freemantle's name had actually been mentioned. Of course it was a bit awkward that I had neither seen this entertainment nor, for the moment, could recall its title, but still, with less than an hour for our dinner, there seemed to be considerable hope that a little tactful lying would enable me to conceal these facts.

I found him waiting for me when I arrived, and he seized my forearm affectionately with a sort of Shakespearean grip.

“ Good lad,” he said, throwing the words well off his chest. “ Shall we to the banquet ? ”

“ Oh, rather,” I answered, shaking myself free. I got rid of my hat and coat, and we went through into the *Café Parisien*.

John Freemantle seemed to be well known to the waiters, and a group of them conducted us to a

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table by the wall. For some minutes all conversation was directed to the subject of food, but I knew that as soon as this had been settled I would be expected to talk about the stage; and as, after all, I was getting a very good dinner for nothing, I couched my preliminary observation in the form which I felt would make it easiest for my host to include also in his answer some reference to himself.

“ Well, John,” I said—I called him “ John ” more because he called me “ Henry ” than because we were really intimate—“ Well, John, how’s the show going ? ”

This seemed to me the very essence of tact. But to my surprise his face darkened, his brows descended, his lip curled, and his voice shook with passion.

“ The show ! ” he snorted. “ It came off on Saturday. Killed dead by the critics—curse their souls ! ”

I’m afraid my next remark escaped me before I could stop it.

“ Then why on earth are we dining so early ? ” I asked.

Yet, as a matter of fact, I could hardly have said anything which would more quickly have restored John Freemantle’s conceit. He looked round,

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gathered in the eyes of the nearest half dozen diners, settled his tie with a flourish, and answered in a very loud voice: "The fact is, old man, that I'm so used to dining early before the theatre, that I quite forgot to make it later."

Again he looked at the neighbouring tables, collected his meed of imaginary applause, and attacked his *consommé*. I was left wondering, for the thousandth time, why it was that actors should, simply by virtue of their calling and quite irrespective of their merits or success in it, suffer under such an inexplicable delusion as to their importance in the eyes of the general public. From the expression on John Freemantle's face one might have thought that he had just said, "I always dine early because it is my practice to qualify for the Royal Humane Society's medal immediately afterwards," or, "because it is my custom to spend the evening discovering the North Pole."

But, poor fellow, his complacency didn't last long. He entertained me during the fish and entrée with details of the alleged conspiracy which had resulted in his last engagement terminating so suddenly, and from then on he delivered a series of slashing attacks on all the most celebrated professionals of the day. This one was known to owe his success to Court influence, that one had never

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been sober for twenty-five years, and yet another had only escaped prosecution for the most unmentionable crimes by leaving hastily on a world tour. As for acting, of course they could none of them ever hope to act. They couldn't play gentlemen because they had all been brought up at reformatories, and they couldn't play character parts because they hadn't even troubled to master the elements of make-up; or if they had, then they were too conceited to risk spoiling their own beauty.

“But wait a minute,” I said at this point. “Surely you'll admit that Dash”—I named a well-known tragedian who had recently become his own manager—“surely you'll admit that Dash knows how to make up? I shall never forget seeing him as the hump-backed negro in—in whatever the thing was called.”

“Dash?” sneered John Freemantle, snapping his fingers; and then, a little inconsequentially as it seemed to me, he added: “Did you ever see me as the old grandfather in *Mrs. Murgatroyd's Mistake*?”

Strangely enough, I had. In the play in question John Freemantle had appeared on the stage for rather under two minutes, but on me at any rate he had made a deep and lasting impression. Never in my life had I seen anyone so incredibly ancient,

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so completely gone at the knees, so amazingly quavering about the voice, or so incomparably unlike anything in heaven or earth. A very conservative estimate would have set this grandfather's age at two hundred and fifty years—and even at that no one could say that he had worn well.

“Do you know,” pursued John, fixing me with his eyes, “that it used to take me two hours to make up for that part every night, and another hour and a half to get it all off again?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “Did it really?”

“It did, though,” he answered. “Why, at the dress rehearsal they nearly had me turned out of the theatre. No one had the least idea who I was. That was something like a make-up!”

“It was indeed,” I said fervently.

“But it isn't only old men that I can manage so well,” he went on, smiling happily. “Why, I'd bet you five pounds that I could come up to you in any character that you like to mention, and until I told you, you'd never guess who it was.”

This, I thought, was going a bit far. Even such a masterpiece as the old grandfather must have aroused my suspicions anywhere but at a theatre.

“I'll bet you ten pounds you couldn't,” I retorted. “Why, of course I should know you.”

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John Freemantle slapped the tablecloth with his hand.

“Done!” he exclaimed. “Now, look here. Ten pounds in even money that I come up and speak to you, and that you don’t know who I am until I tell you. Is it a go?”

“Of course it is,” I said. “That tenner will suit me very well. But wait a second; we must have a time limit. I’m not going to go on looking out for you in one disguise after another for the rest of my life.”

“I’m only going to try it once,” said John, “because that will be quite enough. But to make it easier for you, I’ll give myself a time limit of three days. Now, then, we’ll start from when you leave the Savoy to-night. Is that all right?”

“Quite,” I said. “So I’ll begin spending the money at once.” And I called to the waiter to bring us some still bigger cigars.

“Help yourself,” I said to John. “No one can say that I’m not generous with my winnings.”

He took his gift at once, but so moody and abstracted had he suddenly become, that it was fully five minutes before he remembered to light it; and from then onwards until I left him, I could see that his whole mind was given up to considering exactly what form of disguise he should assume for

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my benefit. Such answers as he made to my observations showed clearly that his thoughts were anywhere but in the *Café Parisien*, and at last, shortly before ten, worn out by his silence and preoccupation, I got up and said I must be going. If I had stayed any longer, I should have begun to yawn in his face.

“ Look here,” he said, frowning ponderously; “ about this bet. You’ll promise not to say afterwards that you knew it was me all the time ? ”

“ My dear John,” I answered with dignity, “ I am an Englishman and a sportsman. Of course, I shall be scrupulously honest over this business. If I don’t answer you inside two minutes by saying ‘ Hullo, John ! ’ then the money is yours. Is that good enough for you ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t want to make it as difficult for you as all that,” he protested.

“ You are at liberty to make it as difficult as ever you can,” I said. And having thanked him again for my evening’s entertainment, I saw him into the lift and turned to leave the hotel.

But at this moment, as chance would have it, I suddenly felt a slap on the back, and looking round saw a second cousin of mine, named Aubrey Wotherspoon, and his wife.

“ Hullo,” said Aubrey, heartily. “ The very

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man we want. Marjorie's dead keen on dancing, and I've twisted my hock." (He was a hunting man, as you may have gathered.) "Come along to the ballroom and give her a turn."

Of course I said I should be delighted; I couldn't very well say anything else; and for more than another hour Marjorie and I capered together over the parquet, while Aubrey sat beaming at us by the wall. I have never been a very good dancer, but my partner made it as easy for me as she could; and I was just getting properly into my stride, as it were, when some other friends of theirs came drifting in from a theatre, and I found myself released. For another ten minutes or so I hung about, waiting to see if I should be wanted again. But Marjorie was now hard at work with a young man who dipped and plunged like a pro., and I realized that I had served my turn. I said good-night to Aubrey, collected my hat and coat, and went out into the Strand.

The rain which had been falling when I arrived had now stopped, and after my evening in the well-heated hotel, I thought it would be pleasant to walk at any rate some of the way home towards Down Street, where I then lived. I set off at once at a steady pace.

I had reached the neighbourhood of Leicester

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Square without meeting with any adventures, but at this point my wandering thoughts were suddenly recalled to this world. A figure in a raincoat and a battered felt hat had come darting out of an archway, and before I could slip to one side or ward him off, he and I became involved in a kind of staggering embrace.

“Look out where you’re going, sir,” I said, shoving him away from me. And as I did so, the figure looked up at me cringingly. In the light from the nearest street lamp I saw a villainous, wrinkled, yellow face; the face, in fact, of an unmistakable Chinaman.

He stood there, showing his discoloured teeth in a grin of cowardly defiance, and at the same moment a sudden light burst upon me. I stepped forward again.

“Hullo, John,” I said cheerily. “Where’s my ten pounds?”

I just had time to see the look of horror and surprise which flashed into his countenance, when a heavy hand descended on my shoulder from behind.

“Now then, now then,” said a gruff voice. “What about it?”

I looked round quickly, and found myself in the grip of an enormous police-constable. With his

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other hand he had already caught hold of the supposed Chinaman by the sleeve of his raincoat.

“Vine Street,” said the policeman, laconically. “Now come along like good boys.”

I peered under his helmet. For the moment the thought had darted into my mind that it might be he, and not the Chinaman, who was really John Freemantle. But he was a good six inches too tall. I turned back again.

“Come on, John,” I said. “Tell him what you’re doing.”

“None of that,” the policeman broke in. “I seed what you was doing all right; and I ’eard what you said. You come along quiet.”

“You don’t understand, sergeant,” I said. “This gentleman is a friend of mine. We’re doing this for a bet.”

“You tell that to the Superintendent,” replied the policeman. “If you say anything else, I shall ’ave to report it. ’Ere,” he added, raising his voice to a passing taxi-driver. The cab slowed down and stopped by the curb.

“In you get,” said the policeman.

There seemed nothing for it but to obey. If John chose to carry his joke as far as the police station, the only alternative was a free fight on the pavement.

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“Vine Street,” shouted the policeman out of the window, and off we went.

The next thing of which I became aware was that my fellow-prisoner was leaning heavily against me on the back seat; and as I tried to edge away from him, he seized my hand and, with a whispered word which I failed to catch, forced something into it that felt like an envelope. I supposed that this was the ten pounds; that John meant—for some reason which only an actor could understand—to carry his imposture through to the finish; and that this was his way of getting me to back him up. I slipped it quietly into my pocket, wondering what the deuce he was going to do when we reached the police station.

But at this moment we swung into the brilliant lights of Piccadilly Circus. I turned my head to inspect, with the help of this illumination, the details of my friend's unexpectedly successful make-up; and I saw at once what you have probably already guessed. The man wasn't John Freemantle at all. No disguise on earth could have transformed my old schoolfellow's well-marked features into that flattened mask. I felt a brief sensation of indescribable nausea. And then, as the cab moved forward out of the block in which it had been waiting, I took a desperate resolution.

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“ Look here, inspector,” I said, addressing the policeman. “ I give you my word that this thing’s a mistake. I’ve never seen this man before in my life. Now, if five pounds—— ”

“ That’ll do,” snapped the incorruptible official. “ You’ll be sorry you said that, my man.”

“ No, I won’t,” I said; and at the same moment I flung myself at the door of the cab, wrenched the handle back, fell heavily into the street, bounded up again, and was off as fast as I could possibly tear. From behind me I could hear a roar of baffled rage, but I never looked round for a second. I dodged in front of a motor-omnibus, scattered a group of pedestrians on the pavement, dived down the alley by the side of St. James’s Church, swung across Jermyn Street and down York Street, and never stopped until I had reached the Wanderers’ Club in St. James’s Square. I hurtled through the glass doors.

“ Is Mr. Smithson in the Club ? ” I asked breathlessly of the porter.

I had chosen the first name that had entered my head, for there was no time to stop and think, but to my surprise I seemed to have hit on a real one. I saw the porter hastily setting my dress clothes against my muddy and exhausted appearance, and deciding that they could be held to excuse

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the manner of my intrusion, and then he answered:

“ I don't think so, sir. But if you'll wait in here, I'll go and make sure.”

I found myself conducted into a little sort of waiting-room leading out of the hall, and there I did my best to regain my breath while the porter went on his search. In a couple of minutes he was back again.

“ No, sir,” he informed me. “ Mr. Smithson left half an hour ago.”

“ Too bad,” I said. “ Well, I must try and get him at home.” I crossed to the window and pulled back the curtain, as if to see whether it were still raining. There was no one in sight outside. My captor must, I thought, have decided to stick to his bird in the hand and to let me go. It seemed to me a very sensible decision.

“ Well, good night,” I said. “ I'm sorry to have troubled you. By the way, could you lend me a clothes-brush for a moment? I've been rather badly splashed by a taxi.”

“ Certainly, sir,” said the porter, and he most obligingly detailed an underling to assist in removing the signs of my recent adventure. Again I expressed my thanks, and then, with a rapid glance from the porch which still revealed a deserted

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pavement, I turned up the collar of my coat and moved quickly away.

I had reached St. James's Street without further molestation, and had just decided to treat myself to a cigarette when, in feeling in my pocket for my case, my hand lighted unexpectedly on something else.

"By Jove," I muttered, pulling out the envelope which was now my only souvenir of that brief but unpleasant cab ride. "I wonder what's in it."

I moved nearer to a lamp-post and examined the outside. The flap was gummed firmly down along its whole length, and apart from certain dirty smudges both sides were completely blank. As I pinched it thoughtfully between my finger and thumb, its contents seemed to yield and shift beneath the pressure. "Well, why not?" I asked myself, and with a quick movement I tore off one of the corners.

It was half full of what looked, at first sight, like tooth powder. And yet was it likely that anyone with teeth like the ones I remembered in that Chinaman's mouth could have any real use for such stuff? I thought of tasting it, but no, it might be some kind of poison. I thought of throwing it away, but this seemed rather unadventurous. Finally, I inserted a cautious finger, brought it out again with

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a little of the powder on the end, and—very gingerly—bent over it to discover how it smelt.

It was exactly at this moment that I heard a hoarse voice addressing me.

“Cheese it,” said this voice, in urgent tones. “Do you want the bulls after you?”

I spun round quickly. There was an outlandish-looking man standing by my side, with a black beard and a broad-brimmed hat—rather like a stage conspirator.

“Bulls?” I repeated. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You’ll see what I mean all right,” he said huskily, “if you start sniffing snow on the middle of the sidewalk.”

“Snow?” I echoed. “But this can’t be snow.”

“Coke, then,” he substituted.

“And still less is it coke,” I added.

“Say,” said the bearded man; “you’re pretty fresh, ain’t you?”

Again his meaning seemed to have escaped me. I peered questioningly into his face, and at the same instant something unnatural about the way that his beard joined his cheek connected itself suddenly with a thought which in the excitement of my escape had almost gone out of my head. How on earth John Freemantle had managed to shadow

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me all the evening without my noticing him, I had no idea; but if I were quick, my ten pounds would still be safe.

“Hullo, John!” I said loudly. “You nearly had me then.”

He looked at me in a kind of puzzled fury, but I wasn't going to stand for any more bluff.

“Come on,” I said encouragingly. “Off with the jolly old beard.”

At once a venomous look came into his dark eyes. He made a quick feint with his left hand, and as I started back, he snatched the envelope from me, dealt me a savage kick on the leg, and the next moment was tearing away down the hill.

“Dash it all,” I thought. “I must have made another mistake.” And then, as a second wave of agony swept over my injured limb, I lifted up my voice.

“Hi!” I shouted. “Hi! Come here at once!”

He turned his head for an instant—I can only imagine to yell some parting defiance—and as he did so, I saw a vast, tenebrous figure step out from the darkness of a shop entrance and lift him clean off his feet with one hand.

“Now then,” said this apparition, warningly, and then he too saw the envelope. “Ah, would

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you ? ” he growled, closing a gigantic fist over it. “ Got you with the goods this time, Jack. Eh ? ”

Although I had, as you know, very special reasons just at the moment for avoiding all unnecessary dealings with the Metropolitan Police, and although there could be no shadow of doubt that this mammoth figure was a plain-clothes officer, my curiosity overcame me. I drew nearer to the little tableau.

“ Are you coming quiet, now ? ” I heard the detective enquire, and even the unwelcome familiarity of his words hadn't the power to drive me away.

“ None of your frame-ups, ” snarled the captive, wriggling impotently. “ I was given that envelope by that guy over there. I ain't got no more notion what's in it than nobody at all. And take your fist out of my windpipe, ” he added feebly.

The plain-clothes officer looked at me suspiciously, but it was too late to retire. I opened my overcoat, so that my dress shirt should show to the best effect.

“ What's that he says ? ” I asked haughtily.

The officer saluted with his free hand.

“ Says you gave him this 'ere packet of dope, ” he announced. “ I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you for your name and address, sir. ”

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Once more I saw Vine Street looming before me. But there was no time for hedging.

“That’s all right, officer,” I said. “Smithson’s my name. The Wanderers’ Club. I’m sorry I haven’t got a card on me.”

“And ’ave you ever seen this man before?” he asked, dangling his prisoner at me by the scruff of the neck.

“Yes,” I said, remembering that our whole interview must have been witnessed. “He came up and spoke to me just now, and for a second I mistook him for a friend. But I discovered at once that I was wrong.”

“And you didn’t give him nothing?”

“On the contrary,” I said. “He gave me a very vicious kick. But I think he’s in safe hands now, eh?”

Strangled noises were coming from the prisoner’s throat, but the detective paid no attention to them.

“Quite safe, sir,” he chuckled gruffly. “I don’t suppose we’ll have to trouble you about this again.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” I said truthfully.

“I’ve got all the evidence I want in this little envelope,” explained the plain-clothes man. “We’ve been after him the best part of a week, but we’ve got him properly now. Smithson, did you

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say, sir? Thank you, sir. Good night to you, sir.”

I watched them marching off together, their back view presenting a very deceitful picture of the friendliness of their relations, and then, once again, I turned up towards Piccadilly. It struck me that what with the Chinaman, the Conspirator, and Mr. Smithson of the Wanderers' Club, the detective force at Vine Street would find themselves presented with as pretty a problem as any that could have come their way for quite a considerable time. Yet it also occurred to me that it might be a good thing if I hurried on certain plans which I had at this time for paying a visit of some months to the continent.

Meanwhile I was becoming increasingly aware of a painful stiffness in the leg which had been subjected to the double strain of my leap from the moving taxicab and of the alleged dope-fiend's attack. By the time I reached the corner of my own street, I really could hardly walk; and between this corner and the door of my flat I should think that I must have stopped nearly a dozen times, while I clutched at the railings and relieved myself with a selection of groans and curses. But at length I dragged myself up my stairs and, taking out my latchkey, opened my own front door.

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As I did so, I had a strange impression of a brief flash of light through the door of my sitting-room. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared, but as mine was a service flat, into which no one with any business to do so could be expected to enter for another six or seven hours, I raised my voice and called out.

“Hullo,” I said. “Is anyone there?”

Dead silence greeted this enquiry. After all, I thought, perhaps I imagined it, or perhaps it was a light from some vehicle in the street shining for a moment through the window. I slipped off my overcoat, dropped my hat on to a chair, and crossing the hall, switched on the light in my bathroom.

At this point the telephone bell in the sitting-room suddenly began to peal.

“Oh, curse the thing!” I muttered, and once again I limped out into the hall. Who on earth, I wondered, could want to ring me up at nearly one in the morning? Another of those infernal wrong numbers, most likely.

I put my hand on the switch just inside the sitting-room door, and turned on the light. The next moment both my arms had shot up in the air, in obedience to an irresistibly worded command. Standing in the middle of the room was a seedy-looking man with an uncommonly dirty face, and

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in his right hand, which was directed unwaveringly towards my waistcoat, was a horrible little black automatic pistol.

“ And keep 'em up,” added this alarming vision, taking a step towards me.

“ This,” I thought, “ is quite unmistakably my unlucky evening. I wonder what happens next.” But I said nothing; I only reflected on the extreme annoyance which it would cause me should that automatic pistol accidentally go off.

“ Nah, then,” said the seedy-looking man. “ Wot are *you* doing 'ere ? ”

But for the presence of that pistol my retort would have been obvious. For the moment, however, the *tu quoque* struck me as a very much over-rated form of repartee.

“ Dash it all,” I protested. “ This is my flat.”

“ *Wot ?* ” said the seedy-looking man. “ But you're not the Honourable Wokingham ? ”

Nothing exasperates me more than the misuse by the lower orders of courtesy titles.

“ *Mr. Wokingham,*” I said with great emphasis, “ lives upstairs.”

“ Blimey,” exclaimed the seedy-looking man. “ I've been and cracked the wrong crib ! ”

All this time the telephone bell had continued to

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ring, but at this point it stopped abruptly, and with the cessation of sound a sudden idea came flashing into my mind. Did *bona-fide* burglars, I asked myself, ever really say "Blimey?" Wasn't there something a little stagey about that reference to cracking a crib? And what was more, didn't John Freemantle know perfectly well that I lived in the same block of flats as Fred Wokingham? I dropped my hands and opened my mouth.

"Hullo, John," I said. "You nearly——"

Bang went the automatic pistol; there was a shivering of glass just to the left of my head, where the 'Monarch of the Glen' hung; and my arms went up again like a jack-in-the-box.

"Look out, you fool——" I began, but my words were cut short at once.

"You blooming well do wot you're told," said the intruder. "And don't you start calling me names. I shan't miss you next time. See?"

I saw only too well that that unlucky wager had landed me for the third time that night in a hideous misunderstanding, and that on this occasion it had nearly cost me my life. But what could I do, except continue to stand there on my aching leg, with my arms becoming stiffer and more uncomfortable every second?

Meanwhile, in the burglar's countenance there

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appeared a convulsive spasm, which seemed to register the birth of a fresh thought.

“Look 'ere,” he said, again taking a step towards me. “'Oo told you as I was called ‘John,’ eh?”

I tried to laugh.

“Nobody,” I said. “At least, it’s no use trying to explain. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“No,” said the burglar, with the utmost vehemence. “I would *not*. And do you know why, mister blinking boiled shirt? Cos, if you arst me, you ain’t got no more business in this flat than wot I ’aven’t. Tried to kid me I’d come to the wrong address, did yer? D’yer think I don’t see your little game?”

I could only gape at these mysterious suggestions.

“Ho, yuss,” added the burglar, his eyes now rolling with fury and the muzzle of his automatic wobbling wildly all over my person. “D’yer think I’m such a mug I don’t see wot you’re after? Why, you ruddy swell, I ’eard that limp of yours the minute you come inside the door. Gentleman Jenkins of Portland Gaol, that’s your number. But I’ll learn yer to come ’ere, doing an honest cove out of a job. Them Wokingham sparklers is mine, d’yer see? And when I’ve got ’em, I’m going to

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leave you 'ere for the cops. Nah, then, wot abaht it ? ”

“ I assure you—— ” I began expostulating, and at these words the telephone bell started ringing again. Without thinking, I made a movement towards it, but I was stopped at once by a yell of rage.

“ None of that,” barked my visitor. “ You stay where you are. I'll attend to this for yer.” And still covering me with his pistol, he crossed to my writing-table and lifted the receiver from the instrument.

“ 'Ullo,” he said; and the next moment he had dropped the receiver like a hot coal, and clapped his hand over the mouthpiece.

“ 'Ere; wot's the game ? ” he asked, a look of terror spreading over his really uncommonly dirty face.

“ Game ? ” I repeated, completely mystified.

“ 'Ere's Vine Street on the line,” he croaked. “ Asking for a Mr. Gibson. Is this another of your little tricks, or wot is it ? ”

“ Vine Street ! ” I gasped. This was the last straw. By some appalling and inexplicable accident my identity must have been discovered by one of those two police-officers, and if ever I escaped from the present horrible situation, I saw that it would only be to find myself in the dock—charged

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with heaven alone knew what. Forgetting everything else, I dashed towards the telephone.

“ Let me speak to them,” I shouted.

“ It’s a plant! ” shrieked the burglar. “ Keep back, you fool, or by gum, I’ll—— ”

Crack! went the pistol again, but without waiting to see if I were dead or alive, I flung myself on to him. There was a brief but violent struggle, another explosion from the automatic, a reeking, stifling smell of gunpowder and whisky, and then with a sudden, sickening vision of a million brightly coloured stars, the whole world went roaring away from me into a black mist.

When I came to myself (Gibson proceeded, after pausing for a moment to let the effect of this brilliant piece of description sink in), I found that I was lying in my bed. I was aching all over in every portion of my body, but nowhere more violently than in my head, which, as I could tell without attempting the impossible feat of moving my hands, was heavily bandaged. Presently there was a sound of the door opening, and the service-valet came in.

“ Pull down the blind, for heaven’s sake,” I groaned. “ And tell me, how many bullet holes have I got in me ? ”

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“None, sir,” said the valet. “Only that crack on the head, sir. And the doctor says you’ll soon get over that. I’m afraid he got right away though, sir.”

“The doctor do you mean?” I asked wearily.

“No, sir. The burglar. But I can’t find as he’s taken anything. Only smashed up your sitting-room a bit. Would you like some breakfast, sir?”

“No,” I said, shuddering.

The vision of the valet faded away, and I passed off into an uncomfortable mixture of sleep and unconsciousness, with an intermittent nightmare of police and handcuffs. After what might have been minutes or months—I had no idea which—I heard the door opening again.

“Get out,” I said.

“I say,” answered a voice, “I’m awfully sorry about this, old chap, I——”

I opened my eyes. For a moment I thought I was seeing my own ghost. A figure with its arm in a sling and its face heavily decorated with sticking plaster was standing at the foot of the bed. Then I suddenly recognized it.

“Well,” I said, “I can’t say that in the circumstances I think your disguise is in very good taste. But you’ve lost your bet, old man. I know who you are perfectly well.”

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“Bet!” shouted John Freemantle, while a sharp stab of agony made me gasp for breath. “I’ve come to tell you that infernal bet is off. I wish to heaven I’d never been such a thundering ass as to take it on.”

“What?” I exclaimed, trying to sit up, and falling back with another groan. “Well, you don’t wish it any more than I do. But what’s made you change your mind?”

“I thought it would be a jolly good idea,” said John, “to dress up as a woman and come round here last night and see if you’d let me into the flat.”

“Did you?” I asked, shutting my eyes again.

“Yes,” said John Freemantle. “I borrowed some things from a girl I met at the Savoy, and I had a wig that I’d bought when I played Mercutio at Blackpool. Bobbed hair, you know. I dare say it would have been all right, if I’d come round in a cab; but like a silly idiot I thought it would be fun to walk. I only got half-way up the Haymarket when I saw that I was being followed by a policeman. I tried to dodge him, but it was no use. Then I got the wind up and started to run, but with those infernal skirts round my legs I hadn’t a dog’s chance. He caught me in a blind alley off Jermyn Street, and though I put up a bit of a fight, the brute got me down with some kind of jiu-jitsu.

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He dragged me off to Vine Street, with a crowd of beastly people jeering at me all the way and my face bleeding like a butcher's shop where I'd hit the pavement. I did my best to explain that it was only a joke, and that I was doing it for a bet; I even got the inspector to try and ring up your flat, because I thought you might back me up or bail me out; but he couldn't get any answer."

"No," I said. "That's quite right. He couldn't."

"Well," continued John, "I spent the night in the cells, and this morning I was had up before the beak and charged with masquerading in female costume and assaulting a police constable in the execution of his duty. I suppose I was dashed lucky to get off with a fine—the beak said I was, anyhow. And I had the sense to give them my real name, so it won't hurt me professionally if it gets in the papers. But look here, old chap," he added. "What I really came round for was to pay you that tenner. You win all right, because I'm not going on. I've had about enough of it. But if it hadn't been for that infernal policeman, I'd have shown you something."

"Keep your filthy lucre," I replied. "I'm not going to make my living out of blood-money. Moreover," I added impressively, "little as you

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may know it, you have already shown me all and more than I could ever possibly wish to see.”

And with these words I turned my face to the wall, and burst into a horrible peal of hideous laughter.

VIII

GIBSON AND THE BLUE EMERALD

ONCE every two years the Caviare Club is closed for cleaning and decorating, and for about three weeks members are permitted to accept the hospitality of some rival institution, where they slink about forlornly, exposed to the critical glances of its inhabitants, and feeling rather like new boys during their first term at school. It is a difficult period for all of us, but at its conclusion we are so glad to be back again in our old quarters that it never occurs to us to enquire—as we might otherwise do—why the Caviare looks just as dirty as it did before we went away. In the rapture of regaining our favourite chairs and our own wine list, this question remains unasked and unanswered. And like a colony of ants who have been disturbed and then replaced, we resume all our former habits exactly as though we had never been interrupted. It becomes, indeed, almost a point of honour to pretend that our banishment has never taken place.

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I was a little surprised, therefore, when a few days after our return from the St. John's Club—which, as of course you know, prides itself on its diplomatic and Foreign Office connection—Gibson appeared by my side in the smoking-room and enquired: “ Well, how did you get on among the proconsuls ? ”

“ At the St. John's, do you mean ? ” I asked. “ Oh, nothing to complain of. But I only went there once. They seemed rather—well, rather fond of talking.”

Gibson nodded agreement.

“ I didn't go at all,” he informed me. “ They let me stay here, because I've got one of the bedrooms. But I knew the St. John's set well in the old days. I might even have been a member by now if things had turned out differently.” He smiled faintly, and then added: “ But perhaps you didn't realize that I'd ever moved in that kind of circle ? ”

“ No,” I answered. I didn't particularly believe it either, but the time had long passed since I used to trouble myself about Gibson's veracity.

“ I did, though,” he went on. “ I was two years in the Foreign Office before I resigned. In fact, I might well have been there yet, but for the jealousy that I aroused by being given the Order of the

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Golden Cow when I was still only a Third Secretary.”

“The Golden Cow?” I repeated, interrogatively.

“Yes,” said Gibson. “Fourth Class, with the right to remain covered in the presence of everyone below the rank of archdeacon. That’s a bit of a rarity in these days, even at the St. John’s Club.”

I could well believe it, and I said as much.

“Perhaps it might interest you,” he suggested, “to hear how it was that I gained such an unusual distinction. What? Oh, no. Quite a short story. I’ll tell it you at once.”

And leaning back in his chair and pressing the tips of his long fingers together, he began immediately.

* * * * *

You must excuse me (said Gibson) if in the course of this narrative I find it necessary to suppress or alter the real names of some of the persons and places concerned. Quite apart from the provisions of the Official Secrets Act, there are good reasons why, in the present state of international politics, I should be very careful to avoid giving any clue as to the identity of the very high personages to whom I shall have to refer. But as regards my own share in the matter, I shall be as scrupulous in dis-

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pensing with any kind of exaggeration or misrepresentation as—well, as you have always known me to be. And it is, fortunately, with my own share that I shall have principally to deal.

I was, as I have already told you, a Third Secretary in the Foreign Office in London. For nearly two years I had gone to work in a black coat and a bow tie, had shared a room looking over the quadrangle with two of my colleagues, and for about six hours a day had occupied my time either in writing minutes to other members of the staff or in drafting communications which might eventually serve as the basis of official dispatches. It was, on the whole, both a dignified and a peaceful existence, and if about ninety-five per cent. of everything that I wrote found its final resting-place in one of His Majesty's waste-paper baskets, no taxpayer had in those days ever been heard to complain of it.

One morning in the late spring, when I had finished feeding the pigeons on my window-sill and was just beginning to turn my mind to the thought of work, a messenger came in with the intimation that Mr. Vere-Tiverton—the head of my branch—would be glad if I would step along the corridor and see him at once.

I found him sitting alone in his room, writing impressively with a quill pen on blue paper, and

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after I had stood watching him for about ten minutes he turned abruptly to me and said:

“ You speak Transylvanian, Mr. Gibson, I believe ? ”

“ No,” I replied. “ I’m afraid not.”

Mr. Vere-Tiverton picked up his quill and resumed his writing, and I was just on the point of returning to my room when he suddenly laid it down again and added: “ Wait.”

So I waited. Presently he stopped writing, read and re-read his composition with great care and a quantity of grimaces, and then, folding it over and over about sixteen times, he locked it away in a scarlet dispatch-box.

“ Now then,” he said, taking off his spectacles and putting on a pair of eyeglasses; “ would you be prepared to start for Spain to-night ? ”

This was the first time in my official experience that it had ever been suggested that I should leave England, but as Mr. Vere-Tiverton was now looking out of the window, my surprise passed unnoticed.

“ Certainly,” I answered after a moment. “ Only isn’t a King’s Messenger going off to—— ”

He interrupted me by tapping with his keys on the desk.

“ Yes, yes,” he said. “ But the King’s Mes-

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senger will be known. We must send someone who will not be suspected."

"Oh," I said, feeling rather bewildered.

"This is the position," continued Mr. Vere-Tiverton. "A certain Personage—in fact, I think I may safely say a certain Personage in a Very High Quarter—wishes to convey a gift—an extremely valuable gift—to a Scarcely Less Exalted Recipient, on the occasion of the Recipient's betrothal. The assistance of the Foreign Office has been requested, but we have been warned that the nature of the intended present has become known, and that attempts may consequently be made to intercept it *en route*. In these circumstances it seems to the Under-Secretary and myself that it would be better to entrust its transmission to someone who, while fully fit to assume such a serious responsibility, will be less liable to invite attention or suspicion than one of our ordinary messengers."

"Oh," I said again. And if I hadn't been in the service for nearly two years I might have added, "Then why not send it by registered post?" But experience had taught me that where my department was concerned, the longest way round was regarded not sometimes, but invariably, as representing the shortest way home. So I held my tongue.

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Mr. Vere-Tiverton picked up a paper-knife and rattled it against his knuckles.

“ By the way,” he said, “ I suppose you’ve got a uniform ? ”

“ A uniform ? ” I repeated, wondering what this had got to do with it. “ I’ve got my rig-out in the yeomanry, if that’s what you mean.”

“ That will do,” said Mr. Vere-Tiverton. “ His Serene Highness has always been very punctilious on questions of costume, and never more so than since his exile.”

“ Do you mean that I shall have to wear uniform all the time ? ” I asked.

“ Not while you’re travelling,” he explained. “ But you had better put it on as soon as you arrive. And now, if everything’s quite clear, you’d better take this chit to the Finance Branch and see about getting your ticket.”

I took the slip which he handed me and moved towards the door. But half-way there an idea struck me.

“ Wouldn’t it be as well,” I said, coming back to the big desk, “ if you told me where it is that I’ve got to go, and whom it is that I’ve got to see ? ”

Mr. Vere-Tiverton reflected for a moment on this suggestion, and then he rose, looked carefully

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round the room, and, coming close up to me, whispered something.

“ I beg your pardon ? ” I said, taking out my handkerchief and drying my ear.

“ His Serene Highness, Prince Stanislas of Sauerstadt,” he repeated. “ Just outside San Sebastian.”

“ Oh, yes,” I said. “ Quite.”

“ Here are your instructions,” he added, unlocking the red dispatch-box and taking out the document which he had been writing when I came in. “ I think you had better memorize them carefully, and then destroy them. It wouldn't do for them to be found on you.”

“ Certainly,” I said. “ Thank you very much.” And then, just as I was leaving, yet another thought came into my head.

“ By the way,” I asked, stopping by the doorway. “ What is it that I've got to take to His Serene Highness ? ”

“ Ah,” said Mr. Vere-Tiverton. “ Yes. Of course. Just as well you reminded me.” He opened a drawer in his writing-desk, and took out a little leather case. “ This,” he explained; and as he spoke, he pressed the catch and opened the lid.

Blinking on its white velvet bed, from where its myriad facets seemed to shine into every corner of

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the lofty room, I saw a large, oval, blue stone. Right into its clear heart I peered, where mysterious fires seemed to leap and sparkle, and as I gazed at it in admiration and astonishment, Mr. Vere-Tiverton closed the lid again with a snap.

“ It’s an emerald,” he said.

“ Don’t you mean a sapphire ? ” I suggested.

“ No,” he said shortly. “ It’s a blue emerald. So far as I am aware, it is the only blue emerald—at any rate of anything approaching this size—in the whole world. Take it,” he added, “ and understand that you are in no circumstances to let it out of your sight or keeping for a single instant until you place it in His Serene Highness’s hands. Your success on this mission is of the utmost importance, not only to your career and to the Department which you serve, but also to—well, to a Very High Personage whom it would perhaps be better that I should not name.”

I bowed deeply, and put the case in my pocket.

“ *Bon voyage,*” said Mr. Vere-Tiverton. “ It is a pity that you don’t speak Transylvanian, but I understand that His Serene Highness converses fluently in French; and in any event all you will have to do is to give him the case and come straight back. I shall see you next week then. *A rivederci.*”

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“*Auf wiedersehen,*” I replied, and this time I really did leave him.

I returned to my room and, disregarding my colleagues' request for details of my recent interview, set myself to mastering my written instructions.

They seemed simple enough. All I had to do was to proceed to Biarritz by the ordinary route, which would take me about a day and a half, drive over the frontier to His Serene Highness's headquarters at the Villa Frangipanni, present my visiting card to the Chamberlain, Count Zybska, hand over the jewel in its case to Prince Stanislas himself, and come home again. I repeated these particulars to myself until I was satisfied that I was word perfect, and then tore the paper two or three times across.

But my room had no fireplace in which I could burn these pieces, and as I didn't like to take the risk of throwing them where someone else might afterwards pick them up, I stuffed them in my pocket, meaning to put them on my own fire when I went home to pack. And so it was that, while crossing the Horse Guards' Parade, I pulled out my handkerchief to blow my nose, and instantly became aware that I was the centre of a kind of miniature blue snowstorm.

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“Dash!” I said, stooping down to gather up the scattered fragments of minute paper.

A bulky but good-natured stranger came to my assistance, and between us we had soon retrieved all but a negligible quantity. I'm not sure that I shouldn't have managed it more quickly if I had been by myself, for the stranger was severely handicapped by his size, but I felt it would only look odd if I declined his help. So I thanked him warmly, and in a few more minutes I was back in my rooms. Once more I emptied my pocket of the scraps of paper, threw them on to the fire, and watched them twist and shrivel into ash. Once more I took out the little leather case, opened it, gazed wonderingly at the blue emerald, and then, just as I was going to put it back again, I changed my mind. The jewel itself should return to my pocket, but the case, which had added appreciably and therefore suspiciously to my contour, should travel separately in my dressing-bag. I smiled knowingly to myself as I made this decision, and, having carried it out, went through into my bedroom to begin packing my yeomanry uniform.

I caught the boat train at Victoria with plenty of time to spare, had a reasonably good crossing, with no signs that I was attracting any unusual kind of attention, and as soon as I reached Calais, made my

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way to the *wagon-lit* which was to run right through to Biarritz. In accordance with Mr. Vere-Tiverton's directions I had booked a whole compartment to myself, but in spite of the fact that I had paid for and held two tickets, there was a little trouble with the conductor before we started. The whole coach, it appeared, was full, and a monsieur who had seen from the corridor that I was by myself would be very grateful if I could let him share my section. He was, of course, prepared to pay, and I gathered that he had already shown his ability to tip. But my instructions were definite. I was very sorry, I explained, but I had recently been very ill, and in the circumstances must insist on my right to remain undisturbed.

The conductor tried persuasion. The other monsieur, it seemed, had also been ill. Then he tried being rude. But I stuck to my point, and at last, shrugging his shoulders and spitting unpleasantly through the window of the corridor, he took himself off. I bolted the door after him, and prepared to undress.

But first of all, as soon as I had opened the folding wash-basin which was fixed opposite the end of my berth, I took the blue emerald out of my waistcoat pocket and laid it down where I could keep my

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eye on it until such time as I should be ready to transfer it to the pocket of my pyjamas.

I unlocked my dressing-bag, took out my sponge and toothbrush, and was perhaps half-way through my preparations for bed when my attention was attracted by a sound as of someone trying the door of my compartment.

“Who’s there?” I said sharply. And then, as an afterthought, I added: “*Qui est là?*”

There was no answer.

“What do you want?” I called out. “*Qu’est que c’est que vous voulez?*”

Again there was no answer. The rattling had ceased, but even as I decided that my question had shown the would-be intruder his mistake, I suddenly saw that the bolt was moving slowly back. The next second, and before I could reach it, the door had opened. On the threshold was standing the same bulky-looking man who had helped me to pick up those pieces of paper on the Horse Guards’ Parade.

My mind leapt to the explanation like a flash of lightning. He must, while offering me his uninvited assistance, have caught sight of some scrap of writing which had given him a clue to my mission, and from that moment, I supposed, he had never really let me out of his sight. I saw at once

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that there was no time to snatch up the blue emerald and attempt to conceal it. To do so would only be to indicate its position immediately.

For what felt like many minutes, but must in reality have been a matter of seconds only, we stood watching each other beneath the glare of the electric light. And then, with a sudden movement of his hand from behind his back, he flung himself at me. I raised my left arm to protect myself, made an ill-directed grab at the blue emerald, missed it, barked my knuckles on the edge of the basin, and saw it from the tail of my eye swinging back into its vertical position, and the next instant my wrist had gone down before a violent blow, and I was struggling powerlessly against the overwhelming, choking sweetness of a pad of chloroform.

When I regained consciousness (Gibson continued, after a short but effective pause) I found myself lying across the lower berth. My head was throbbing intolerably, the noise and vibration of the train were insupportable, and I felt that at any moment I might be devastatingly sick. But the thought of the blue emerald gave strength to my stricken limbs. I tottered to the window and flung it up. We seemed to be running steadily through thick wreaths of early-morning mist, and as I drew

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the fresh air into my lungs, the first feeling of nausea left me. I turned back to examine the inside of my section.

Never in my life have I seen such an appalling vision of disorder and chaos. The contents of my dressing-bag and of the pockets of my clothes—including even my bundle of bank-notes—had been flung broadcast all over the little compartment. The carpet had been dragged from the floor, the blankets from the berths, and a series of gashes had been made in the two mattresses. Even the green shade had been torn from the light in the ceiling.

I set painfully to work to repair some of this confusion before summoning such doubtfully sympathetic assistance as might be rendered by the conductor and, as I did so, a sudden thought struck me.

If my assailant had indeed been in search of the blue emerald, as his contempt for my money would suggest, why should he have caused all this destruction when all the time it was lying ready to his hand by the side of the wash-basin? Could this, by any miraculous chance, mean that he had overlooked it? I crossed again to the little folding cabinet and pulled it open. The next second a terrifying memory had flashed into my mind. I saw a vision of that last, protective movement

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before unconsciousness had overcome me, and I realized that in missing my real object and knocking up the basin I must have sent the blue emerald slithering down the waste-pipe, and that it was now lying on the permanent way at some unknown point on the two or three hundred miles which separated me from Calais.

I sank back on my berth with a groan. What was the use of having accidentally saved my precious charge from that obese ruffian if my only clue to its present whereabouts was represented by an indeterminate length of railroad track situated in some unknown portion of Picardy? If only I had even the faintest idea of the time at which the attack had taken place, it might have been some help; but although I knew when the train had been due to leave Calais, I had taken no steps to check its punctuality. I couldn't even recall having looked at a clock since I had left Victoria.

Automatically I raised my aching arm to glance at my wrist-watch, and the next instant my heart seemed to stop beating as a wild, desperate hope darted into my mind. The glass had been shivered to atoms by the force of that sudden blow; even the case was dented and flattened against my bruised flesh; but the little hands, arrested in their eternal progress, still pointed faithfully to seven minutes

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past one. Resolutely I disregarded the possibility of failure, while even such a faint chance of success yet remained. I bolted the door again, brushed my hair, resumed my discarded clothes, packed my bag, and sat down to await the train's next stop. I had a bad moment when I found that the little leather jewel-case was no longer anywhere to be seen, but even on this ominous sign I would turn a blind eye as long as it could possibly be done.

And so, about a quarter of an hour later, you must imagine the long train pulling slowly into a sleepy-looking station. The very second that it stopped, I dropped my bag through the window, and in another moment I had dodged past the conductor and, seizing the bag from where it had fallen, was tearing up towards the front of the train.

Raising my hat politely, and at the same time ostentatiously fingering a twenty-franc note, I addressed the engine-driver in my best French.

“Pardon me, monsieur,” I said, “but would you have the goodness to inform me, as precisely as is possible, where this train was at seven minutes past one this morning?”

“*Hein?*” said the engine-driver, spitting unsympathetically on the floor of his cab.

I repeated my question.

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“*Cinquante francs,*” said the engine-driver this time.

There was no time for argument, and besides, the taxpayer would have to foot the bill. I handed him up his fifty francs.

“*C'est ça,*” said the engine-driver. “*Et le train était sur la voie.*” And he laughed heartily at his own wit.

“You dashed idiot,” I thought. “I hope you get your head knocked off in the next tunnel.” But aloud I said: “Your pleasantry is very amusing. But am I to report you to my brother-in-law, the general manager?”

“By no means,” said the engine-driver. “But for myself, I have only directed this machine since Amiens.” And with these words he pulled a handle somewhere in his cab so that all further conversation was made impossible by an agonizing noise of escaping steam.

I remained hidden until the train had left, and then set about discovering the quickest means of returning to Amiens. By three o'clock in the afternoon I had found my way to the office of the *chef de gare* at that station.

“Pardon me, monsieur,” I said, “but I had the misfortune to drop from one of your excellent carriages on the Biarritz express last night a photo-

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graph of my late wife, which is of inexpressible value to me for reasons of sentiment the most pure. Might I beg you to inform me at what point on your superb line the express found itself at seven minutes past one, the hour of my loss so sad ? ”

“ Monsieur should address himself to the bureau of lost propriety at Paris,” replied the station-master.

“ Without doubt,” I said. “ Nevertheless, I would desire particularly to assure myself of the exact neighbourhood of my misfortune in order that I may light a candle, or possibly several candles, in the nearest church, and thereby receive the assistance of the blessed saints in my search.”

“ For myself,” replied the station-master coldly, “ I am an atheist.”

“ A freemason perhaps ? ” I suggested.

“ And what of it ? ” he enquired.

“ Simply this,” I said. “ I am myself a Past Grand Master of the Ancient and Honourable Jupiter Lodge, number seven hundred and fifty-six, of Great Britain.” And seizing his hand as I spoke, I dug my finger-nails forcibly into the fleshy part of the palm.

“ It is enough,” said the station-master, wincing. “ At seven minutes past one this morning the express for Biarritz was between Rue and Noyelles. I have the time-sheet here in my bureau.”

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“A thousand thanks,” I replied. “Monsieur is of an amiability prodigious.” And giving his hand a final grip I hurried from his office.

At half-past four I had reached Noyelles in yet another train, and leaving my bag in the cloakroom, I set out quickly along the road to the north. In a few minutes I had left the houses behind me, and at once I clambered over the nearest fence, hurried across a couple of fields, and so reached the permanent way.

Keeping my ears wide open for the sound of any approaching train—for the workings of French railway signals have always been an insoluble mystery to me—I began slowly making my way between the rails of the up line in the direction of the coast. The sun beat down pitilessly on the metals, but never for a second did I interrupt my crouching progress from sleeper to sleeper. Every inch of the ground was closely examined, and if I had time I could tell you of many unexpected things that I found, but though my hopes were raised again and again by a piece of broken bottle gleaming in the sunlight, of the blue emerald there was still no trace. At the end of an hour I straightened my back and refreshed myself with a cigarette, and then, just as I was preparing to start again, I suddenly saw, lying in the middle of the six-foot

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way, an object that made my heart leap into my mouth. For though its lining had been wrenched out and its hinges broken, there could be no mistaking that little leather jewel-case.

In the excitement of this discovery I was as nearly as possible run over by a goods train on the down line. But in another minute its last wagon had rattled out of sight round a curve, and placing the damaged case in my pocket, I resumed my weary walk.

My hopes were now running high. It seemed clear that the thief, enraged by the discovery of the empty casket, had first wreaked his vengeance on the thing itself, and then flung it through the window. Surely, then, unless I had been forestalled, somewhere between this point and the station at Rue I should come on the blue emerald itself, lying lodged in a crevice of the road-bed.

And the astonishing thing is that I did. As a matter of fact it hadn't even fallen into a crack. It was perched temptingly on the very middle of a sleeper, and I first saw it winking at me when I was quite fifty yards away. The very next platelayer to come that way must inevitably have gone off with it, for it was simply asking to be taken. My luck seemed incredible; for a moment I thought I

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should actually faint with excitement before I could reach it.

But I didn't; and by eight o'clock I had resumed possession of my bag; by ten o'clock I was back at Amiens; and by two o'clock I was sitting up in a crowded second-class compartment, jolting towards Paris. So far as my present trip was concerned, I had finished with such dangerous luxuries as sleeping-cars.

I won't describe the next stage in my exhausting journey. But at last, about noon the following day, after travelling almost unceasingly for over sixty-five hours, I found my seventh train steaming into Biarritz. I waited until everyone else had left the compartment, even until the platform had begun to empty, and then, hot, stiff and dirty, I climbed down the steps and went in search of my registered luggage which had preceded me by twenty-four hours.

And here, as I approached the *douane*, my luck turned again, and I found that a second misfortune had befallen me. Why I hadn't discovered it before, I don't know. But I was certain enough now. My bundle of bank-notes, my visiting-cards, and my booklet of travelling-coupons were all there safe enough; but of the baggage-check for the box which contained my uniform there was no shadow or sign.

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Could I have overlooked it when I was gathering up my other property, or had—— I rushed to the custodian of the *douane* and raised my hat.

“ Pardon me, monsieur,” I said, “ but I have had the misfortune to lose the ticket for a box of mine which arrived last night on the *train de luxe* from Calais. Might I beg to be informed where one should address oneself in such circumstances ? ”

The *douanier* spat skilfully over his counter.

“ A box ? ” he repeated. “ What description of box ? ”

“ A brown box,” I explained. “ With many labels on it. Also on each end it was marked with my initials. ‘ H. G. ’ ”

“ And of what size ? ” asked the *douanier*.

“ Like this and like that,” I said, demonstrating with my hands.

The *douanier* seemed to be weighing his answer carefully, and again I took a bank-note from my pocket and twisted it negligently between my fingers.

“ *Ça c'est pour moi,*” said the *douanier*, leaning over and seizing it. “ As for the box, monsieur should perhaps address himself to the police. A box of such a nature was claimed by a gross gentleman, it is now yesterday.”

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“ You mean he gave up the ticket for it ? ” I asked.

“ Naturally, ” said the official, and at this he cleared his throat so terrifyingly that I shut my eyes. When I looked again he had gone.

The explanation was obvious, even if unsatisfactory. Foiled in his attempt to discover the emerald in my compartment or on my person, my assailant must have leapt to the conclusion that I had concealed it in my registered luggage. Barring the uniform, which would be expensive to replace and was, moreover, essential to my mission, the whole loss could well have been covered by ten pounds. And even this my Department would, in all probability, be quite content to pay. But was I to risk international complications by appearing at the distinguished exile's court in a much-soiled travelling suit, or ought I to telegraph to London for another uniform, and so remain in uneasy possession of the blue emerald for a further indefinite period ?

In the end, after much uncomfortable cogitation, I decided to proceed to the Villa Frangipanni and lay the case, in confidence, before Count Zybska. And accordingly, after a bath and a shave at the Carlton, I chartered an automobile in which to complete the last stage of my journey. You may

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be sure that I scrutinized the chauffeur pretty closely before I started, and that I kept a keen look-out on the road as we bowled along. But nowhere on the ten-mile ride did I detect any indication that I was being watched or followed. I had a nervous moment, it is true, at the frontier, but I was only detained for a couple of minutes, asked a few perfunctory questions, and immediately released.

And so at last, about a quarter to three, my car drew up at the outer gate of His Serene Highness's temporary court. I handed my card to the porter on duty, and explained my desire for an interview with Count Zybska. The porter seemed to be expecting me.

"The automobile," he said, "must rest here. But if the señor will proceed to the Villa by the path which I shall show him, and present his card to the doorkeeper, he will then be conducted to His Excellency's apartments."

"Ten million thanks," I replied. The porter scrawled some illegible symbol on the back of my card, returned it to me, pointed out the route with a wealth of southern gesture, saluted, and withdrew again into his lodge. I started at once up the steep and winding path.

I must have walked for quite ten minutes

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through a forest of palms and cactuses, sweltering in the heat and beating the flies off with my handkerchief, before I first caught sight of the white walls of the house itself. And as I had no wish to increase the embarrassment of my visit by arriving in too sodden and exhausted a condition, I paused for a moment to recover my breath and to dust my boots on the grass at the side of the path. For the thousandth time since I had started I made use of the opportunity to feel the little lump in my waistcoat pocket; and then, to make assurance doubly sure, I glanced quickly round and, inserting my finger and thumb, extracted the blue emerald for a final inspection.

Yes, there it was; as dazzling, as fairy-like and—to me—as odious as ever. I gave it one more polish against the sleeve of my coat, and then, just as I was on the point of putting it back, it seemed suddenly to leap from my hand and, before I could catch it again, it had gone.

I bent down at once to recover it from the grass at my feet, but while my hand was still less than half-way there I heard a hoarse command from the direction of the nearest bush, a scurrying sound behind me, and instantly my two elbows were seized in a vice-like grip, while something that felt like a knee was thrust forcibly into my back. And

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at the same moment there stepped out from the protection of an *araucaria imbricata* an unwelcome but familiar figure. For although he had now chosen to decorate his bulbous countenance with a small crêpe mask, there could be no mistaking my old friend of the Horse Guards' Parade.

He wasted no time in words, for I was completely at his mercy. His pudgy fingers darted at my pockets, turning out the contents with a machine-like rapidity. I heard a startled gasp as he came on the damaged jewel-case, but the next second he had flung it away and was hard at work again. He snatched at my hat, ran his hands rapidly over it, and tossed it aside; he seized my nose so that I yelped with pain, and took the opportunity to gaze into my mouth. And at each failure his methods became rougher and more objectionable. For days afterwards I was black and blue all over.

And yet, for all the annoyance and even agony of the mauling to which I was being subjected I was hard put to it to conceal my triumph. Five seconds earlier and nothing could have saved the emerald from being his. I kept my eyes resolutely from the ground, determined to make no sign which could give him the slightest clue to my knowledge of its whereabouts.

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It was the brute behind me who put the idea into his head. I heard him muttering something in an unknown tongue, and at once my bulky enemy had hurled himself on all-fours and was tearing over the ground like an ill-conditioned retriever. But, miraculously as it seemed to me, the blue emerald still eluded him. Again and again he passed over the exact spot where I was certain that it had fallen, plucking feverishly at every inch of the ground, but with absolutely no result. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

Suddenly he stopped short, and sitting back on his feet, pulled out a long-barrelled revolver, tastefully mounted in mother-of-pearl.

“The emerald,” he panted, directing his weapon at my stomach. “Where is she?”

I looked at him stupidly.

“What emerald?” I asked.

“Assassin!” he shouted, taking deliberate aim at me; and at the same moment the desperate chance on which I had counted came off. The villain behind me had no desire to be spitted on the same bullet which deprived me of my life, and he did exactly what I should have done myself. He let go.

At once I slipped hastily to one side, leapt into the air, and fell heavily on the kneeling gunman. The pistol jerked out of his hand, and as my thumbs

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sank deep into the rolls of his throat, I really thought I had got him. But the odds were too heavily against me. As he choked and gurgled beneath my grip, I saw from the corner of my eye my other assailant creeping nearer and nearer. With a quick movement he had seized the mother-of-pearl pistol, and as he brought the butt end down on the back of my skull, I relapsed, for the second time in the last thirty-six hours, into utter unconsciousness.

I don't think (Gibson went on) that I can have been knocked out this time for very long, but when I came round again there was no sign of either of the thieves. My head was aching fit to burst, but I set to at once to begin hunting for the blue emerald. My own explanation of the fat blackguard's failure was that I must have been standing on it the whole time, but after twenty minutes of rapidly increasing anxiety, the appalling fact had to be faced; the emerald simply wasn't there. After all the horrors that I had been through, after travelling unceasingly for nearly three days, after being chloroformed, sandbagged, and reft of my luggage, I had reached the very threshold of success only to lose that infernal stone within half a mile of the Prince's villa. Of course, the two thieves must

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have seen it the second they had laid me out. They would have bolted at once, have left the grounds by climbing one of the walls, and already they were over the frontier or on the sea. I sank against a cactus, groaning aloud, and as I did so, a gorgeously attired flunkey made his unexpected appearance.

“It is the visitor for Count Zybska?” he enquired in Spanish.

“Yes,” I said feebly.

“His Excellency is waiting,” said the flunkey. “But perhaps the señor is unwell?”

“No,” I said rudely. “I’ve only been making a daisy-chain. Take me to His Excellency at once.”

He bowed impassively, and struggling to my feet I followed him across the rest of the grounds and through a French window into a large and handsomely appointed room. The Count rose from a desk at which he was writing, and wrung my hand warmly.

“Your Excellency,” I said, “you must pardon my abruptness, but there is no time to be lost. I have just been assaulted within five hundred yards of this very house, and though I did all that I could to protect it, the blue emerald has gone. Two men, one extremely stout and the other smelling strongly of garlic, have escaped with it. Apologies and

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explanations must wait, but let me beg of you to telephone instantly to the mayor, or whoever controls the local police, so that an attempt may be made to arrest them before it is too late."

"Yais," replied Count Zybska, smiling at me amiably. "It ees vairy fine days."

I saw at once that he had failed to apprehend my meaning, so I repeated myself in French.

"*Barfaitment*," said the Count when I had quite finished; and pointing towards a door in the corner, he went through an imbecile pantomime of washing his hands.

"No, no," I shouted. "Listen to this." And I was just starting off again, this time in German, when the portière at the end of the room rattled on its rings, and there entered a short, stocky figure in a green knickerbocker suit, with a bald head and, as far as I could judge at a hasty glance, an impediment in one of his eyes.

"Zut!" said Count Zybska, with an appearance of some alarm. "It ees 'Is Serene 'Ighness." And turning to the new arrival he embarked at once on what I took to be an explanation of my presence.

Prince Stanislas listened stonily, occasionally looking towards me with his less imperfect eye, and when the Count at length ceased he said in French:

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“ It is enough. But where, then, Mr. Gibson, is your uniform ? Do you think to insult us ? ”

“ No, no, your Highness,” I exclaimed. “ Never would I have appeared in your presence without my uniform. But in the course of my voyage, alas, one has stolen it from me.”

“ Stolen ! ” repeated the Prince. “ And the emerald, then. Is that also stolen ? ”

“ Your Highness,” I said quaveringly, “ I will tell you everything.” And I did. In the faint hope of mitigating his severity by explaining all that I had suffered for his sake I began at the beginning. If I exaggerated a little here and there, then I think it was no more than anyone else would have done. And, to tell the truth, the more I piled it on, the better the story seemed to be going. I described how twelve armed men had burst into my sleeping compartment in the train, and took all the credit for the ingenious idea of dropping the jewel down the waste-pipe and simultaneously breaking my own watch.

“ *C'est magnifique,*” said the Prince, slapping his knickerbockers. “ *C'est épouvantable. Ah, si vous étiez de notre service ! Continuez, monsieur. Continuez toujours.*”

Encouraged by this success, I went on to describe how twenty-four armed men had flung them-

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selves on to me at Biarritz station, and how, though I had wounded most of them, they had succeeded in seizing my baggage. I told of the running fight over the frontier, in which I had been chased by forty-eight armed men in motor-cars. And I was just reaching the point where ninety-six men, all armed to the teeth, had ambushed me in the very grounds of the villa when His Highness stopped me.

“It is terrible,” he said. “It is superb. And you escaped them all?”

I had gone too far to go back.

“All,” I replied.

“Monsieur,” said His Serene Highness, “you are a hero from a land of heroes. With ten men such as you, do you think we should be content to remain exiled in this desolate and abominable hovel? Never. But we can and we will reward you. The Order of the Golden Cow (fourth class) shall be yours. Kneel, Monsieur Gibson, and receive it from the hands of a Prince who, whatever his misfortunes, can still recognize devotion when he sees it.”

The whole situation seemed to have passed out of my control. I prostrated myself with a jerk on the polished parquet, His Serene Highness raised his walking-stick to administer the royal accolade, and—there was a little tinkle on the floor,

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as from the turned-up end of my despised civilian trouser leg the blue emerald rolled out between my knees.

“Your Highness,” I said brokenly, as I snatched it up and held it out to him, “this is the most fortunate moment in my whole life!”

IX

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF HENRY GIBSON

HOWEVER the forces of reaction may have fared in the outer world during the last hundred years—and this is certainly not the place to try and answer such a dangerous question—there can be no doubt that in clubland, taking the matter of the election of members as a test, they have done pretty well. Slowly but surely in club after club the committee have succeeded in usurping this right, until nowadays in the great majority of these places the old democratic tradition of universal suffrage has become simply a tradition, and nothing more.

But at the Caviare we have not yet, thank heaven, sunk as low as this. The form of election which was established by our rude forefathers still stands inviolate. All candidates are balloted for by the entire body of members—or at any rate, by as many of them as take the trouble to turn up—and if in practice the blackball is but rarely used, it

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remains, nevertheless, in existence as a protection and safeguard for the people's sovereign rights.

I mention these details of our constitution as a necessary introduction to the final phase of my acquaintanceship with Henry Gibson which, little as I knew it, was already, with relentless footstep, making its swift and implacable approach. For six months, counting from the day when he had first made himself known to me and outraged my sensibilities with the story of Professor Salt, scarcely a week had passed without our meeting in the smoking-room. And on every occasion, save for that brief period when he had driven his pen so furiously at the corner writing-table, he had treated me to examples from his fantastic répertoire of ingenious, improbable, and mutually contradictory anecdotes. If at first I had been tempted to resent the assaults which he thus conducted on a fellow member's credulity, if I had even let my mind toy with the thought of revenge, I had yet in a surprisingly short time come to find myself more and more dependent on the entertainment which he was undoubtedly affording me. The sombre smoking-room, which for so many years had represented for me at the best a species of temporary euthanasia, and at the worst the very home and headquarters of oppressive boredom, had suddenly developed in an

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astonishing way into the most amusing place in London.

Truly he was an extraordinary man, and this was a no less extraordinary situation.

And so we come to the day when, entering the hall of the Club through the double swing-doors, I saw Gibson's back silhouetted against the brightly lit notice board, to which the names of the candidates for the next election had been pinned. I hung up my hat in the cloakroom, washed my hands—for the lure of free soap and towels is one that it is hard to resist—and then strolled out into the hall again. Gibson was still standing immovable, absorbed apparently in the contents of the board.

“Hullo,” I said, coming up behind him. “Have you spotted a friend there?”

He turned round with a start, showing me a face drawn and grey with the stress of some emotion.

“A friend?” he repeated, in a voice which I shall never forget. And then he raised his hand and pointed to a name on the typewritten list.

“Look there,” he said, the tip of his long forefinger trembling against the paper. “And then tell me if you still think we won the war!”

I peered where I was directed, wondering as I did so what evidence of Great Britain's defeat I

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could expect to find in this strange quarter; but the name which I saw was most certainly not that of a German.

“Why,” I exclaimed, “what on earth is wrong with Mr. Leamington Dunn?”

Gibson let his arm fall to his side, and gazed at me in astonishment.

“You call yourself an author,” he said, “and yet you can ask me that!”

Perhaps it was stupid of me, but I was still searching for some clue connected with his previous statement.

“Is he a war correspondent, then?” I asked.

“Worse than that,” said Gibson. “Far worse. I tell you that man, who has the impertinence to submit his name for election to one of the oldest and least disreputable clubs in England, is nothing more nor less than a well-known, a notorious Literary Agent.”

He paused, as though awaiting the look of horror which must inevitably appear on my face at the receipt of this intelligence. But, unfortunately, he paused in vain.

“Of course,” I said. “I remember the name perfectly now you remind me. But I never heard anything against him before. Do you mean to say

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that there's any real reason why he shouldn't be elected?"

"Reason!" repeated Gibson, casting his eyes up to the ceiling. "I tell the man that a literary agent is putting up for his club, and he asks me if there's any reason why he shouldn't get in. Why," he added, dropping the third person and bringing his eyes down again, "in heaven's name, what other reason do you want?"

"Well, but hang it all," I said, "why *shouldn't* a literary agent be elected if he wants to? Of course I know that publishers don't like them, but if it comes to that, clergymen don't like free-thinkers, and cricketers don't like golfers. And yet we manage to find room for all of these here without any particular trouble that I've ever noticed. After all, people don't belong to a club so as to have rows with their professional enemies. They do it because . . ."

And here my closely reasoned argument broke off. For the fact is that if one is really driven to it, it is jolly hard to say why people do belong to clubs—except in satisfaction of the instinct which makes men (and sheep) imitate one another.

"Yes, yes," said Gibson, taking advantage of my pause. "I know all that. But you've got to draw the line somewhere. You can't say that a

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murderer, for instance, is a fit candidate for election, just because there's a rule that the Club isn't to be used for business purposes."

"But a literary agent isn't the same as a murderer," I protested.

"No," said Gibson forcibly. "He's a great deal worse."

"Oh, come, I say——" I began. But before I could develop my remonstrance any further he gripped my arm.

"Come into the smoking-room," he said, "and let me tell you something about this Mr. Leamington Dunn. And when I've put the facts before you, perhaps you'll let me know whether you still think he ought to be elected."

I suppose that I ought to have suspected the word "facts" when used by such an accomplished liar as Gibson, but the earnestness of his tone no less than the pressure of his hand made it impossible for me to decline. In another minute we were back once more in our old, familiar seats.

* * * * *

Now, then (said Gibson). Just oblige me by listening to this.

About fifteen or twenty years ago, when I had just come down from the University and was wondering what on earth I was to do next, the Muses

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who, no less than Satan, habitually lie in wait for those who haven't enough to do, egged me on to write a Novel. There is nothing unusual about my story so far, for there is no doubt that ninety-nine persons in this country out of every hundred have, at one time or another, whether secretly or publicly, practised this vice. But this is where I pass at once from the majority to the minority. I sent the manuscript to a publisher, and within a fortnight it was accepted. In consideration of a cash payment of twenty-five pounds, I disposed of all rights in the work in every country inside or outside the Berne Convention, including even the right to set any portion or portions of it to music.

It never occurred to me that I hadn't struck an entirely satisfactory bargain. All I saw at the moment was that if I wrote twelve such novels a year—and in the ardour of my youth I saw nothing impracticable in this—then I should be provided with a steady annual income of three hundred pounds; which would, in those days, enable me to lead a very comfortable bachelor existence. My future and my career seemed, in fact, assured.

But the Serpent was not long in entering my Eden. For some inexplicable reason, connected possibly with a certain brutality in my hero and a corresponding imbecility in my heroine, the novel

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was a success. In three months it had gone into no less than twice as many impressions. It was advertised to appear serially in a low-class Sunday newspaper. A well-known hack playwright rushed a dramatic version on to the boards. In short, I seemed to have blundered accidentally into the Halls of Fame.

Yet even so, incredible as it may appear to a writer like yourself, I still saw nothing wrong in the scale of remuneration that I had accepted. I was young, careless, and impractical. The name which I had made for myself seemed worth far more than mere paltry dross. I have no doubt that I should have gone on selling my books for twenty-five pounds to this very day but for the appearance on the scene of the serpent that I have mentioned.

He arrived not singly, but in battalions. Every morning my breakfast table was covered with letters from literary agents. They wrote from Bedford Street, from Henrietta Street, from Bristol and Newcastle-on-Tyne, and finally even from New York and Boston. And one and all expressed their passionate desire to make my fortune. I began to wonder whether, after all, there might not be something in it.

And in this new and speculative mood I at length decided to ask the opinion of a brother

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author—the only one that I knew. His name was Wilkinson, and he made his living by writing what are, I believe, known as “cloak and sword” stories. You know the kind of thing. Archaic dialogue and the surprising irruption in disguise of Queen Elizabeth or the Young Pretender.

“An agent?” said Wilkinson, when I put the point to him. “Of course you ought to have an agent. All publishers are thieves; they don’t mean to be, very often, but they can’t help it. Why, my man has doubled my royalty in the last five years. He’s paid for himself over and over again.”

This sounded attractive.

“Then whom would you advise me to go to?” I asked. “I’ve had letters from dozens of them, but how am I to tell which is the best?”

“There’s only one agent,” said Wilkinson, “that I can really swear you can trust. Leamington Dunn is his name. He’s acted for me from the very beginning, and he’s as straight as they’re made. If you like, I’ll ring him up and tell him you’re coming to see him.”

“That would be very good of you,” I replied gratefully. “Are you sure you don’t mind sharing him with me?”

Wilkinson laughed conceitedly.

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“ My dear Gibson,” he said, “ you’ll pardon my saying so, but you and I are scarcely competing in the same market. I should think that I had won my literary spurs when you were still in your cradle. I am only too glad to be of service to a beginner.”

I thanked him humbly, and there and then he rang Mr. Dunn up. An appointment was fixed for me for the following day, and I returned to my rooms to dream of the fortune which was perhaps now awaiting me.

The next day I found my way to Leamington Dunn’s office. I had prepared myself to be kept waiting, but to my pleasure and surprise I was shown straight in to him. He rose at once from his desk and wrung my hand.

“ My dear sir,” he said, “ this is indeed a pleasure. Any friend of Mr. Wilkinson’s comes, of course, with the strongest recommendation, but in your case I should have been proud to handle your work without any such formality. Sit down, won’t you, and let me offer you a cigar.”

“ It is very good of you,” I murmured. “ I had no idea that you knew anything about my work.”

“ You see in me,” said Mr. Dunn, “ one of your greatest admirers. Yes, I think I may say that I was almost the first, if not the first, man to appreciate your writings in this country.”

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This seemed to me to be going rather far. But flattery is always sweet, and as I lit my cigar I bowed and smirked.

“You’ll forgive my saying so,” pursued Mr. Dunn, “but it comes as rather a surprise to me to find that you are such a young man. I had always imagined—but there, there; genius knows no age.”

I felt a little uncomfortable in this shower-bath of praise, but I endeavoured to laugh it off.

“I certainly don’t lay claim to any genius, Mr. Dunn,” I said. “I have been very fortunate in satisfying the public; that is all.”

He cast his eyes up to heaven, overcome, apparently, with my modesty.

“And your English,” he exclaimed. “So fluent; so idiomatic. You must excuse me again if I say that I am astonished.”

I couldn’t for the life of me see what there was to be astonished at in my English. After all, I had had a quite reasonably good upbringing. So, with another smirk, I let this compliment pass.

“And now suppose we come to business,” I suggested.

“Certainly; certainly,” he said. “I take it that you wish me to watch your interests in connection with a new play, eh? Well, though I say it myself, you couldn’t have come to a better man.”

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“ A play ? ” I repeated, feeling rather puzzled. “ No, no. It’s a novel that I want to sell.”

“ A novel ? ” said Mr. Dunn. “ I never knew that you wrote novels. Well, well, never mind. Whatever it is, I’ve no doubt that we shall find a market for it. Does it deal with Norway ? ”

“ No,” I said, more mystified than ever. “ The scene is laid chiefly at Brighton.”

“ Well, there’s nothing like striking out a new line,” said Mr. Dunn. “ But you mustn’t be disappointed if you find some of the public complaining that it isn’t Norwegian.”

“ But dash it all,” I protested. “ Why on earth should it be ? I’ve never been in Norway in my life.”

“ *What ?* ” shouted Mr. Leamington Dunn, starting up. “ But aren’t you Mr. Ibsen ? ”

“ Certainly not,” I said. “ My name is Gibson. Henry Gibson. I am the author of *Ursula Wagstaff*, which is now in its sixth impression.”

“ ‘ Henry Gibson,’ ” repeated the agent, sinking back into his chair. “ I understood that Mr. Wilkinson had said ‘ Henrik Ibsen.’ I’m very sorry, sir, but I fear that I have been addressing you under a misapprehension. I shall complain to my secretary about this. Meanwhile, if you will leave your real name and address, I’ll—well, I’ll write to

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you. But I'm afraid that my hands are very full just at present, and, frankly, I very much doubt whether I could make anything of your work if it is on the lines of *Ursula Wagstaff*. After all, I have a certain reputation with publishers and editors to maintain; and besides, there are my other clients to be considered. Just touch the bell by the door as you go out, and my secretary will give you your hat."

There is no need to tell you with what words from me our interview then terminated. Suffice it to say that they were both pithy and pointed. Within three minutes I had left Mr. Leamington Dunn's office for good and all, and for nearly twenty years I have, out of pure good nature, kept silence on the subject of his incredible mistake. But I can keep silence no longer. If a man with such an incident in his past is to submit himself for election to a club like the Caviare, then the time has come for me to speak. And having told you what I have, I am confident that you, as a trustee for the traditions of European literature, will see that for Leamington Dunn nothing short of the blackest of blackballs is either thinkable or possible.

* * * * *

I had listened to this recital with growing amazement, for, in spite of everything, I had been con-

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vinced at the beginning of it that at last Gibson was about to confine himself to the truth. But what on earth was I to make of such a farrago of nonsense? Or even if I allowed for the grossest kind of exaggeration, and accepted the suggestion at the bottom of it all that Mr. Dunn was better acquainted with business than with literature, what real reason was this why I should take the very serious step of recording my vote against him?

“Look here, Gibson,” I said. “Before you ask me to blackball a man about whom I really know nothing except his name, I think I am entitled to put a question to you. Can you look me in the face and tell me that this story which I have just heard is true?”

“True?” said Gibson. “Of course it’s true. At least——” He checked himself, and before my scrutiny his eyes shifted and then dropped. “You mustn’t ask me that,” he broke out. “It isn’t fair. I swear I meant to tell you the truth when I began just now. I know I’m sometimes not as accurate as I ought to be, but you’ve always been so sympathetic before, and——I can’t explain,” he added sullenly. “But I’ll tell you this. If Leamington Dunn is elected to this Club, then I shall have to leave it. You can choose between us. Only heaven knows that if a friend of mine asked

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me to blackball a fellow, I shouldn't ask him if he were speaking the truth. I should do it."

Perhaps you can understand how uncomfortable this reference to friendship made me feel. But what could I say? What could I do? This sudden transference of Gibson's powers of invention from his imaginary past and his imaginary acquaintances to a real and actual man put me in the most impossible position. I wondered for the first time whether I had been doing wrong all this while to let him exercise his dangerous gift without any kind of protest. Oughtn't I to have foreseen that sooner or later his obviously unbalanced mind would move just a step too far, and let me in for some such hopeless situation as this?

"Listen to me," I said, at last breaking into the painful silence. "If you will give me your real reasons for keeping this Leamington Dunn out of the Club, and if I think they're good enough, then I'll come up from the country next week and vote against him with the greatest pleasure on earth. But if you won't do this, then I'll stay where I am, and if he's elected, then at least you'll know that I've done nothing to help him."

Twice, three times, Gibson opened his mouth as if he were on the point of making a clean breast of it. And then, with a violent twitch, he shook his head.

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“ I can't tell you,” he said in a low voice. “ I can't tell you.” And with these words he got straight up out of his chair, and without looking at me again he left the room.

For the best part of another hour I sat where I was, gazing thoughtfully at the doors through which he had vanished, recalling to myself one by one all the stages of our six months' acquaintance-ship, reminding myself in detail of the astounding series of adventures which he had confided to me, and asking myself again and again how else I could have dealt with this latest and most unmanageable development. And each time as I reached this final problem, Gibson's words, spoken earlier during the same afternoon, seemed to echo in my ears. “ *I swear,*” he had said, “ *I swear I meant to tell you the truth when I began.*”

If this were indeed the case, if what I had come to regard as mere harmless eccentricity were in fact some curious mental twist, which made him incapable of distinguishing truth from falsehood—what then? London, I knew, was full of professional gentlemen who, for three guineas or more, would resolve any such complex, or analyse and so charm away any such freak of the brain. Why, in these days they were even curing homicidal maniacs by means of inoculation. If I could induce

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Gibson to place himself in one of these persons' hands—— But no, as I tried to picture this I recognized at once the impossibility of it.

And besides, how, with my knowledge of Gibson's methods, could I be certain that even that heartbroken cry, which had seemed to come from his very soul, had not been his final and most successful attempt at pulling my leg ?

I knocked out my pipe, shrugged my shoulders, and, collecting my hat from the cloakroom, passed out into the street.

The next day, accompanied by my family and my dog, I went down to the country, and for nearly a month gave myself up to solid work in the mornings and solid golf in the afternoons, to solid vacuity in the evenings, and solid sleep at night. London—that strange place where one can never for a moment sit on the ground, and where one dare not go out for even five minutes without a pocketful of loose change—sank back into as remote a perspective as the planet Mars. The Caviare Club became simply a clumsy handwriting which redirected my letters. And as for Henry Gibson, he was, for the time being, scarcely more than a wraith—inexplicable and mysterious as ever, but in the present circumstances no longer to be taken

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with more than the very minimum of seriousness. Once or twice, indeed, the idea did pass through my mind of sending him, perhaps, a picture postcard, and asking him for news of himself, with implicit reference to Mr. Leamington Dunn. But each time I put it off. The weather was too good to waste any more time indoors than was absolutely necessary for the purpose of earning my daily bread.

And so the weeks slipped by, and at last one morning, that London from whose influence I thought I had escaped, became suddenly aware of my absence, and reaching out a careless, yet irresistible tentacle, swept me back into its maw. An American publisher had chosen the middle of my summer holiday to arrive in England; there would be much business (I hoped) to discuss with him; and as my house was shut up, the only thing to do was to telegraph for a room at the Caviare. I forced my reluctant neck once again into a stiff collar, packed a suitcase, and with many an ungenerous groan at the hardships of an author's life, took my departure for Waterloo.

At the Club all was peace and calm. The well-remembered commissionaire ran out and helped me in with my luggage; the old, indefinable smell of soap and cigarettes filled the hall; and—yes, the

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porter had received my telegram and a bedroom had been reserved.

“ I’ve given you Mr. Gibson’s old room, sir,” he said.

“ What ? ” I exclaimed. “ Has Mr. Gibson moved, then ? ”

“ Not moved, sir,” said the porter. “ He’s left.”

“ Left ? ” I repeated, my heart suddenly sinking.

“ Yes, sir. Quite a surprise it was to us after all this time. He went off just a fortnight ago, sir. The same day as the last election.”

It was true, then. Gibson had carried out his threat.

“ Did he leave his address ? ” I asked.

“ No, sir,” said the porter. “ He said he was probably going abroad, and he’d write and give it me later.”

“ Oh,” I said. “ Thanks.” And I hurried across to the green baize notice-board. Yes, there it was. Second on the list of newly elected members I read the sinister name of Mr. Leamington Dunn.

And then a horrid, cold thought came creeping into my mind. What if Gibson, dreading the nameless persecution from which I had declined to assist in saving him, had sought his own life ?

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What if my mistrustful insistence on his telling me the truth had left me to walk the rest of my days a murderer in the sight of heaven? With a sudden decision I dashed upstairs, three steps at a time, to the secretary's office.

“ Good afternoon, Mr. Bassett,” I said. “ I'm rather interested in one of the names on the new list of members. I wonder if there would be any objection to your telling me how the voting went for Mr. Leamington Dunn ? ”

“ Leamington Dunn ? ” said the secretary. “ Certainly. I'll tell you at once.” He turned to a leather book on his table. “ Yes,” he went on. “ I thought so. A hundred and thirty-eight white balls and—yes, one black ball.”

“ Thank you,” I murmured, taking out my handkerchief and wiping my brow. Whatever Gibson's fate might be, the shadow of guilt had passed away from me. By no possible means could my one vote have affected such an overwhelming result.

“ So you know Mr. Dunn, do you ? ” asked Mr. Bassett, as he put his book away again.

“ Well, no,” I stammered. “ At least, not exactly. That is . . . ” And at this moment, as I floundered and hesitated, a page-boy came into the room.

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“Excuse me, sir,” he said, addressing Mr. Bassett. “But could you speak to a gentleman for a minute?”

“Eh?” snapped the secretary, looking up. “What gentleman? Why can’t you tell me his name?”

“He’s a new gentleman,” said the boy sulkily. “It sounded like Dunn.”

“Dunn?” repeated Mr. Bassett, glancing at me. “Of course; of course. Ask him to come in at once.”

I moved hastily towards the door, but before I could reach it the new member had shot into the room. His excitement was obvious and contagious, and I noticed that in one hand he was flourishing a copy of the printed list of members.

“G’d-afternoon,” he panted. “My name’s Leamington Dunn. Look here, Mr. Bassett, you must forgive my impatience, but I’ve just found in this list here the name of a man that I’ve been looking for for nearly three years. Why he should have hidden himself away like this, heaven alone knows. But it’s of the utmost importance, for his sake as well as mine, that I should get into touch with him at once. I’ve just been speaking to the porter downstairs, and he tells me he’s gone off and left no address. If you can possibly suggest any

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means by which I can discover where he is, I shall be most deeply indebted to you.”

He broke off, still panting, and I saw Mr. Bassett eyeing him cautiously. Then he asked:

“And what is this member’s name, Mr. Dunn?”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Dunn. “His name’s Gibson. Henry Gibson.”

I remained rooted to the spot, while once again Mr. Bassett seemed to be considering his answer. At last he shook his head.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you, sir,” he said. “Mr. Gibson had lived here for a number of years. A fortnight or so ago he gave up his room, but if he didn’t tell the porter where he was going, then he certainly never told me.” He hesitated for a moment, and then added: “But perhaps Mr. Mackail here can help you. I believe he knew Mr. Gibson quite well.”

Mr. Dunn turned on me at once.

“Can you?” he entreated. “Did he ever tell you where he was off to?”

It was my turn to shake my head.

“No,” I said. “But perhaps—— Well, look here, would you mind coming downstairs for a minute? Gibson told me a great deal at one time and another, and it’s just possible that, if you don’t mind answering a few questions first, I might be

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able to give you some kind of clue. But, frankly, I rather doubt it.”

“ I’ll answer anything you like to ask,” said Mr. Dunn, with the utmost openness. “ Gibson has treated me in the most extraordinary way, but I’ve nothing to hide from him or anyone else. Shall we come, then ? ”

I followed him down the stairs, and in a couple of minutes I was ensconced once more in my favourite chair, while Leamington Dunn recovered his breath in the seat which had so long been associated in my mind with Gibson.

“ Now, then,” I began, “ I think I ought to tell you that about a month ago, when your name came up here for election, Gibson expressed the most extraordinary alarm at the prospect of meeting you. Before I say anything more, therefore, I must, in justice to my absent friend, ask if he had any real cause to fear anything from such an encounter. I have my own reasons for doubting whether his feelings were based on any substantial grounds, but I should appreciate frankness from you over this matter very much indeed.”

“ My dear sir,” replied Mr. Leamington Dunn, “ your caution does you credit, and in return I will tell you everything that I know. In the first place, have you any idea who Gibson really was ? ”

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“ Who he was ? ” I echoed. “ Do you mean what he did ? ”

“ No,” said the agent. “ Who he was.” He paused for a second, and then added: “ Have you ever heard of Minnie Baker Sanderson ? ” [This wasn't the real name, but there are, as you will see, reasons why I should alter it.]

“ Have I ever heard of Hall Caine ? ” I retorted. “ Why, of course I have. I should think I've avoided more short stories by that lady than by any other writer, dead or living. They seemed to have dropped off lately, but one usedn't to be able to open a magazine in the whole of England or America without tripping over an example of her work. Heard of her ? I should think I had.”

“ Well,” said Mr. Dunn. “ Minnie Baker Sanderson's real name was—Henry Gibson.”

“ *What ?* ” I exclaimed, starting back.

“ Yes,” said Mr. Dunn quietly. “ I was his agent, so I ought to know. And up to three years ago I had placed well over five thousand of his short stories. He was an odd sort of devil—always wrote more or less with his tongue in his cheek, but never so that more than one in a million would notice it. Frankly, the stuff was tripe. But what we agents call the ‘ stenographer and sales-girl class ’ simply ate it. And as far as the magazine editors were

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concerned it was impossible for him to get ahead of his output. He must have been making quite twenty thousand pounds a year.

“ I don't mind telling you that more than once I begged him not to work so fast. ‘ It isn't that your stuff is falling off,’ I said, and this was true enough; ‘ but no man can write as hard as you're doing without letting himself in for a breakdown. Believe me,’ I said, ‘ I've had some experience, and I ought to know.’ But Gibson simply wouldn't listen to me. He said he had no earthly kind of interest apart from his work, and if ever he tried to take a holiday he could hear his own brain buzzing round, and it drove him mad. I suppose I ought to have been warned by this, but the fact is that, in spite of everything, there was something about the man that made one feel that perhaps after all where he was concerned the ordinary rules didn't apply. I wonder if you follow what I mean ? ”

I nodded.

“ Yes,” I said. “ Go on.”

“ Well,” continued Mr. Dunn, “ things had gone on like this for years, and I was making a steady income out of managing Gibson's business for him, when suddenly one day I had a call from the editor of the *Pantological Magazine*.

“ ‘ Look here, Mr. Dunn,’ he said, handing me

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a manuscript. 'What does Miss Sanderson mean by sending us a story like this? Has she gone mad, or what is it?'

"I didn't care to confess that I had passed a manuscript on without reading it myself, though in Gibson's case I'm afraid I had been guilty of this more than once.

"'Why, what's wrong with it?' I asked.

"'Wrong?' shouted the editor. 'You take it home and read it, and if it doesn't drive you into fifteen thousand blue fits, I'll eat my hat.'

"He added some more about people trying to trade on their reputations and so on, and finally he left. I didn't wait to go home before reading that story; I read it at once. And of all the amazing, astonishing, infernal bits of gibberish I've ever struck, this one just about took the bun. Time and again I thought I was going to catch the drift of it, but at one moment the scene was up in a balloon and at the next it was down in a submarine. On the first page the heroine was called Miranda, on the second she was called first Gwendolen and then Sally, and after this she never kept the same name for a single paragraph. And the men, too. You never knew what they were going to be or who was going to butt in next. The thing was indescribable. And yet any one sentence that you might care to

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pick out not only made perfect sense by itself, but had every mark of having been extracted from a genuine short story. It was the way everything was mixed up that drove me silly.

“First of all I thought that Gibson must have been trying to be funny, and then I wondered if it could be something to do with his typist. But at this moment my secretary came into the room with a bundle of manuscripts.

“ ‘These are all from Miss Sanderson,’ she said. (At Gibson’s request we kept the secret of his identity even inside the office.) ‘But I wish you’d have a look at them, Mr. Dunn. For either there’s something very odd about them or else I ought to see a doctor.’

“I snatched them up at once. A glance was enough to show me that compared with these extraordinary productions the story that I had just read was plain English. They were all made up of real words; they were even broken up into paragraphs; but not a single sentence from beginning to end possessed so much as a glimmering of sense. I realized at once that the breakdown which I had at first feared, and then come to laugh at, must have turned up at last, and that at that moment my unfortunate client was no better than a raving lunatic.”

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Mr. Dunn paused for an instant, and then resumed.

“Naturally,” he said, “I made every effort to get in touch with Gibson at once. I wrote off to his address there and then, and begged him to let me see him as soon as possible. For six days I waited for an answer, and on the seventh my note came back through the dead-letter office. I went to his rooms, but he had vanished without a trace. Luckily I had so much of his work in my office that I was able to fill almost all his contracts without any great difficulty. But from that moment to this I have never set eyes on him, and except for one extraordinary communication which I received about a year after his disappearance, he might as far as I was concerned have been dead. All this time I’ve had a very large account of his which I’ve been quite unable to pay; and now, it seems, I’ve stumbled on his track at last only to find that I’ve lost him once again. Unless you can help me, I really don’t see what on earth I can do.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, determined to probe this astonishing story to the bottom. “You said that he did write to you once after his breakdown. What did he say?”

“You’ll think I’m raving myself when I tell you,” said Mr. Dunn. “But he wrote as if he

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were going in the most mortal fear of me. He begged me to cease my persecution, which he said was driving him into the grave; and then he ended up by saying that if I would meet him in the Whispering Gallery at St. Paul's, wearing a green suit with yellow buttons and a false nose, he would consent to dictate some more stories to me in Hebrew. He mentioned no time and no date, but in any case I couldn't have dreamt of complying with such a suggestion. The man must have been as mad as a March hare. And now, if you have anything at all to tell me, I beg that you will do so at once."

"Mr. Dunn," I replied, "your frankness invites my confidence, and it shall have it. I am convinced by all you say that this unfortunate man has nothing to fear and much to gain by letting you know where he is. I will tell you at once everything that I know about him."

And I did. We sat there together until nearly dinner-time, while I pieced together my story of all that I had heard from Gibson during those six extraordinary months. Mr. Dunn listened in perfect silence and with the closest attention, and when at last I finished, he remained gazing reflectively out of the window for several minutes. Then he said: "It seems clear to me that although

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Gibson is still far from normal, he must be considerably better than he was. These stories which he told you, and your account of the time when he wrote all that stuff and then threw it into the fire, seem to show that the creative impulse is still there."

"Oh, yes," I replied. "I don't think there's very much doubt about that."

"It seems a pity that they should be wasted," said Mr. Dunn, still staring through the window.

Again I agreed.

"If you'd care to write some of them down," he added, fixing me suddenly with his eye, "I could probably get you a very good price for them."

"Oh, no," I said. "I couldn't possibly do that. It's a matter of opinion, I know, but if you'll forgive my saying so, I should hardly feel that I was playing the game."

"All right," said Mr. Dunn, rising to his feet. "Don't decide now. Think it over. And if by any chance you should hear from Gibson, you'll let me know where he is?"

"Certainly," I replied. "That is, unless he definitely asks me not to."

"Oh, quite," said Mr. Dunn. "That is, of course, understood."

He gave me a friendly smile, and made his way out of the smoking-room.

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And thus, for nearly three more months, the matter rested. I saw Mr. Dunn many times during my visits to the Caviare, and we generally spoke a word or two when we met. But beyond his regular question of "Any news?" he made no further reference to the subject which was still probably exercising his mind quite as much as my own. And if he were still hoping that one day my greed for gold would make me change my mind about publishing these Tales from Gibson, he made no mention of this either. Certainly, so far as this mild-mannered and agreeable gentleman was concerned, justification was completely lacking for Gibson's extravagant statement that a literary agent is a great deal worse than a murderer. In the calm atmosphere of the Club smoking-room our meetings blossomed gradually into a kind of easy-going friendship, yet I know that Leamington Dunn would be the first to admit that so far as entertainment and amusement went he could never hope to take the place of my vanished maniac. Not twice in a lifetime does one come across a Henry Gibson.

And so we pass on to the final incident in the Gibson Saga, which will also contain my vindication for laying these Tales before the public.

For this, there can be no doubt, a new chapter will be required.

X

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I ONLY stayed up at the Caviare for two more nights after that first meeting with Leamington Dunn, and then, having dealt with all the business which had called me to London, I went back again at once to my family and my dog. But the weather down in the country seemed to have become demoralized by my absence. Day after day it rained and it blew; the house which we had taken grew smaller and smaller; the view of the eighteenth green, which during the first fine weeks had furnished me with such endless inspiration for my work, was in its present water-logged condition producing a strain of morbidity in my hero and heroine; and finally we decided that we could stand it no longer. The boxes were pulled out from under the beds; the carrier was ordered to collect the bath, the cot, the perambulator, and the weighing machine with which, as a married man, I always travel; I waded over to the club-house and removed our golf-bags; largesse was distributed

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copiously in all directions; and the whole family, never omitting the dog Rufus, returned again to our house in Chelsea.

Back in our home we all began to pick up at once. Even my hero and heroine seemed to benefit from the change and to look on life with healthier and more courageous eyes. Once more the Caviare knew my familiar presence, and even my continued uncertainty as to Gibson's fate turned gradually into a thing of use and custom. I missed him still, I would have given much to know where he was and what he was doing, but the pang of our original parting no longer stood between me and my pleasure in life.

"Any news?" Mr. Leamington Dunn would still ask, whenever he saw me. "No," I would reply, shaking my head. "Not yet." And presently even this faint expression of hope disappeared. "No," I would say. "None."

And so September and October passed on their way. Earlier and earlier the heavy curtains in the Caviare smoking-room were drawn together, shutting out the raw and misty evenings. It would take something more than a mere muffin to attract me to my Club on afternoons like these, and for

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over a fortnight the claims of my own fireside had held undisputed sway.

Then one morning a dim, reddish object appeared through the gloom of the November sky. By midday it had grown so bright that it was actually casting faint shadows on the wall opposite my study window. By two o'clock it was impossible to look at it directly without injury to the eyes. "By Jove," I said, "I must go out for a walk at once before the beastly thing sets."

And at half-past four, exhausted but virtuous after my tramp, I mounted once more the steps of the Caviare Club.

I had just made my usual, awkward acknowledgment to the commissionaire's salute, when the porter came running out of his box.

"This only came in an hour ago, sir," he said, handing me a long envelope. "I was just going to forward it on to you."

"Thanks," I said, glancing at the typewritten superscription. And then—I really don't know why, unless the disturbing augury of the sun's reappearance had anything to do with it—an idea, which in an instant had grown to a most positive conviction, seized possession of my mind. With another quick look at the American stamp, cancelled by the waving lines of the Santa Barbara postmark,

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I tore the envelope open and snatched from it twenty or thirty sheets of flimsy paper. With trembling fingers I turned hastily to the final page. And there at last I saw the name which that sudden, intuitive flash had told me that I should find.

“*Yours sincerely,*” I read, “*Henry Gibson.*”

Without leaving the hall, without even unbuttoning my overcoat, I sat down on the leather seat opposite the tape-machine, and began at once at the beginning.

* * * * *

DEAR D. M. (Gibson had written),

We live in strange times. Who would have thought, after more than three years during which I never left our Club except for an hour's walk before breakfast or after dark, that I should suddenly find myself transported across five thousand miles of water and railroad to end my days on foreign soil? Nevertheless, this is what has happened. Destiny had so decided, long before the first palæozoic trilobite had shoved its nose above the primeval ooze; and who am I that I should quarrel with the workings of Destiny?

I bear you no grudge for your share in bringing about my exile. You were the creature of circumstance no less than myself; and even the arch-

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villain Dunn may be supposed, by those whose faith can rise to such heights, to fulfil some inscrutable and sordid purpose in the plans of the Architect of the Universe. Moreover, I have now passed beyond his power. I can afford to laugh at him; to snap my fingers at his puny malevolence; even, sometimes, to pity him.

When I first discovered that my hiding-place had been betrayed, I will admit that I went through a terrible and agonizing phase; a phase on which, even yet, I hesitate to look back. But no matter. I have passed through the fire and have emerged again, purified and unscathed, into a nobler and a wider existence; an existence whose beauties and capabilities I am still only on the very threshold of appreciating.

My original idea in uprooting myself from my old quarters and setting sail for the United States was, frankly, prompted by nothing more than a panic-stricken desire to put as large a portion of the world's surface as possible between myself and my enemy. But as I stood on the boat deck of the *Aquitania*, and the Atlantic breezes began sweeping the clouds and cobwebs from my brain, courage and confidence seemed to grow in their place, and I determined that, come what might, I would face the future like a man. I decided that I would

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follow the trail which has been blazed by Messrs. Walpole, Chesterton, and Drinkwater, also by Mesdames Asquith and Sheridan, and enter on arrangements for a prolonged lecture tour to every town and city where there was any prospect of my presence being tolerated.

The subject-matter of my discourses was, of course, of secondary importance. But it was only a question of minutes before I decided that the topic which would probably suit both me and my auditors best would be the well-worn and well-tried "People Whom I Have Met." And if by any mischance this should prove insufficient as an attraction, then I proposed to fall back on my imagination for a series to be entitled "My Six Months in Soviet Russia."

With this great decision safely off my mind, I came down from the boat deck, and for the next six days I think I may say, without undue conceit, that I was the life and soul of the ship's company. My conjuring tricks at the First Class concert were encored five times; I organized and led the cotillion at the dance on the following night; I was practically engaged to no less than three millionaire's daughters at once; and my work as supernumerary trap-drummer to the ship's band not only resulted in a record collection being made for

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the Seamen's Orphanages, but even secured for me an offer of a ten-year contract at a Brooklyn roof-garden. By the time that the bars were sealed and the Statue of Liberty had appeared over the horizon, I had the satisfaction of knowing that nothing less than the Carnegie Hall would contain the reputation which I had made for myself as a lecturer.

I put up at the Plaza, and the morning after my arrival I went down town to the office of Mr. Herman Sparks, the well-known agent, and sent in my card. After a short delay, I was admitted to the sanctum.

"Good morning, Mr. Sparks," I said. "I am an English author, and I am thinking of delivering a series of lectures on People Whom I Have Met and My Six Months in Soviet Russia. I suggest that you should pay me one hundred thousand dollars premium and twenty-five per cent. of the gross takings at all my readings. The newspaper, magazine, motion-picture, gramophone, broadcasting, and translation rights I propose to retain for myself. I am ready to begin as soon as you can get the three-sheets printed, and am prepared to go on until one or the other of us shrieks for mercy."

"What about the ice-cream and lemonade rights?" asked Mr. Sparks.

"I have no wish to be harsh or unreasonable,"

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I said. "We will split them in a proportion of ninety-five per cent. to me, and five per cent. to yourself."

"Good," said Mr. Sparks. "But perhaps you will pardon my asking, what well-known books have you written?"

"That," I replied, "is a matter which I am afraid I cannot discuss. But if I show you the receipt for my annual subscription to the London Society of Authors, I take it that that is as much as you, or any other agent, will require."

"Quite," said Mr. Sparks hastily. "And now, if you will step into the other room and dictate your life history and your views on prohibition, baseball, and disarmament to my stenographer, I will prepare the agreement at once."

"Mr. Sparks," I replied, "you are a man after my heart. I may be wrong, but I think you are going to make your fortune out of this tour."

"Mr. Gibson," said Mr. Sparks, "I am but serving the great cause of Anglo-Saxon Literature. We'll start you off at the Century Theatre on Sunday week."

In half an hour I had left the office with the signed agreement in my pocket, and the next ten days I spent in being photographed, in receiving representatives of the Press, in polishing up my

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English accent, and in ordering a large supply of dress shirts. The time seemed to fly, for every moment was fully occupied, and at last the very day of my lecture had come, and I still hadn't found the opportunity to prepare any notes. I realized that the job must be taken in hand at once, and was just moving to the telephone to ask that I should not be disturbed, when the bell rang and I heard Mr. Sparks's voice on the line.

"Hello," he said. "I just called up to tell you we're sold right out for to-night, and I've got the Mayor to promise to introduce you. Are you feeling fit?"

"Yes," I replied. "Fit as a fiddle."

"That's fine," said Mr. Sparks. "Now what you want to do is just to forget all about this evening, and get plenty of fresh air. I'm calling for you in an auto in half an hour, and you and I are going to have a day's golf out at Sound View."

I didn't like to tell him that I still hadn't written my lecture, so there was nothing for it but to accept. I ran into my bedroom to change my clothes, and as soon as I was ready, the telephone rang again to say that Mr. Sparks was waiting. I dashed into the elevator, and in two more minutes we were off. We played two rounds of golf—both of which I won, though the second only at the twentieth hole

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—and then, as the evening shadows were beginning to fall, Mr. Sparks made a suggestion.

“ Say,” he said, “ why don’t you ’phone the Plaza to send your clothes right around to the theater? We’ll dine out here, and I’ll run you back so you’re just in time for the show.”

Again I found myself faced with the awkwardness of admitting that my lecture was still unprepared, but again I hesitated about confessing this. Mr. Sparks seemed to take my silence for consent.

“ That’s the notion,” he said. “ And now I’ll just show what we can fix for you here in the way of a dinner.”

It was certainly a very good meal, though I must say that I missed my alcohol. At about a quarter past seven we took our seats again in Mr. Sparks’s automobile, and started off at a good pace for the city.

I was now for the first time wondering if I hadn’t taken on more than I could manage. The audience would probably expect me to speak for at least an hour and a half, and it seemed impossible that I could keep up an extempore speech for anything like as long as this. I looked at Mr. Sparks’s efficient profile as he crouched over the steering-wheel, but I saw no sign there which

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could encourage me to tell him how I was situated. I thought of pleading sudden illness, loss of memory, or loss of voice; but I literally hadn't the courage. And besides, to back out at this stage might mean the cancellation of my whole tour.

"Look here," I said at last, as we were crossing the East River, "do you think it would matter if I lectured to-night on My Six Months in Soviet Russia after all?"

"Why, what's the idea?" asked Mr. Sparks.

"Oh, nothing," I replied. "Only I just thought it might be better."

"Forget it, then," said Mr. Sparks, leaping on to his accelerator. "Do you want me to waste five hundred dollars' worth of special souvenirs? Not on your life!"

I sat back in silence, and in another ten minutes we drew up at the stage-door of the Century Theatre. In a kind of nightmare I left the car and entered the building. A valet from my hotel was waiting in my dressing-room with my evening clothes, and but for his assistance I doubt if I should ever have succeeded in changing.

"I say," I asked him, when at last he had forced me into my coat, "do you think you could possibly get me something to drink?"

"Sure," said the valet, taking a small flask from

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his hip pocket. "And seeing as it's Sunday, I'll only charge you ten dollars."

I slipped him a bill and took a deep draught. As the fiery liquid coursed down my throat, I felt my courage returning, and at this moment Mr. Sparks, accompanied by his stenographer, came back into the room.

"That's right," he said approvingly. "A little bracer's all you want, and you'll do fine. Now come and let me introduce you to our Mayor."

I followed him down into the wings at the side of the stage, where the introduction took place. But already the effects of my drink were beginning to wear off, and as the roar of thousands of voices reached me from the front of the house, I tottered and clutched at an iron ladder.

"Just come and have a look at them," said Mr. Sparks, taking my arm. "It's certainly a great sight."

And it was. I suppose more cases of agoraphobia have developed in the vast auditorium of the Century Theatre than in any other building in the world. As I squinted through the little spyhole at that ocean of faces, my knees knocked together and my teeth chattered uncontrollably, while my tongue cleaved (or clave) to the roof of my mouth.

"There's five thousand dollars there to-night,

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if there's a cent," whispered Mr. Sparks. And then, taking out his watch, he added: "Well, come on, Mr. Gibson. I guess we'd better make a start."

With a heroic effort I detached myself from my agent's support, and moved towards the stage. The whole place seemed to be whirling about my head, and as for calling to mind a single Person Whom I Had Met, I could no more have done so at the moment than have flown. I heard Mr. Sparks addressing his last words to me, but not a trace of their meaning entered my brain. Then the stenographer seemed to be saying something, but I only smiled weakly at her and shook my head.

But still she stood there, directly in my way.

"That's all right," I managed to utter, waving her aside.

She appeared to be trying to hand me something.

"No, no," I said. "I mustn't have anything more to drink now. Afterwards, if you like. But certainly not now." And I tried to dodge round her.

"I guess your English humour gets past me Mr. Gibson," she retorted, still blocking my path. "But say, don't you want your lecture?"

"My what?" I cried, staggering back.

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“Your lecture,” she repeated, and now I saw that what she had been pressing on me was a sheaf of typescript.

“Good heavens!” I shouted. “You don’t mean to say—— Here, give it me at once.” And snatching it from her hand I marched straight on to the stage, while the whole colossal audience rose to their feet and cheered.

If any of the New York papers for the following day ever came your way, there will be no need for me to describe the enthusiasm with which that first lecture on *People Whom I Have Met* was received. Mr. Sparks’s stenographer had gone far beyond anything that I should ever have dared to do myself. With the second page of her composition, where I found myself describing my breakfast with the Prime Minister in the Banqueting Hall at Buckingham Palace, I knew that I had that great-hearted audience with me. And though I was afraid at times that my surprise at some of the incidents which I was relating might find its way into my voice or expression, my fear proved groundless. For an hour and forty minutes, save for occasional ripples of appreciative laughter, the huge gathering remained tense and silent in their seats while, like Orpheus with his Lute, I fairly handed them out the goods.

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Often as it had been repeated in other cities since, I shall never forget the scene at the conclusion of this opening lecture. The audience rose at me as one man; Union Jacks were waved from the boxes; flowers were showered down on to the stage. Again and again I stepped forward to bow my thanks and gesticulate my desire to be allowed to go to bed; but it wasn't until a patrol-waggon had been sent for and a number of my more enthusiastic admirers cracked over the head with night-sticks that the theatre began to empty. And it was an hour after this before Mr. Sparks succeeded in getting me out of the building disguised in a fire-man's uniform.

“ Well, Mr. Gibson,” he said, when at last we were back in my sitting-room at the Plaza, “ you don't want to worry about Soviet Russia just yet awhile. I reckon we can keep you going with to-night's program for two years solid. Time enough to think about what happens next, after that. I hope you like the lecture, huh ? ”

I realized from his tone how unnecessary my panic earlier in the evening had been, and that in providing me with the material for my discourse he was only following his own and all other agents' customary procedure. But I adapted myself quickly to this new discovery.

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“ With a little polishing up,” I said, “ it will make as good a lecture as I’ve ever heard. And did your stenographer do it all herself ? ”

“ Yes, sir,” said Mr. Sparks. “ She’s a right smart girl at fixing a lecture.”

“ She certainly is,” I replied. “ And perhaps you’ll be good enough to order her a dollar’s worth of cut flowers and charge it to my account.”

“ Better make it fifty cents,” said Mr. Sparks. “ We don’t want that girl to start giving herself airs.”

Well, the next night I repeated my lecture in the Symphony Hall at Boston, and after that I worked across to Buffalo and so on all over the Middle West. Everywhere that I went I had the same success, and gradually, as I became more familiar with my material, I dropped my notes altogether and, while still relying on the stenographer’s introductory remarks to get myself started, fell back, after this, pretty much on my own inspiration. Mr. Klauser, the manager whom Mr. Sparks was sending round with me, quite approved this arrangement, for he knew that it would help to prevent me getting stale; and he was also good enough to give me one or two other hints which I have no doubt assisted to improve my delivery.

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“Pitch your voice right up to the top gallery, Mr. Gibson,” he said. “But don’t make the mistake of following it with your eyes. Keep ’em on the centre of the orchestra seats. That’s where the big money’s sitting, and that’s where they’ll expect to have you look. There’s many a good lecturer slipped up bad by getting too friendly with the cheap seats.”

I adopted this suggestion at once. At the Idiot Asylum at Columbus (O.), where I was lecturing the next night, I picked out a powerful-looking man in about the twelfth row below the platform, and, keeping my eyes always fixed either on or near him, I found that my general sense of ease and my command of the audience were very much increased. At the end of the evening, when, as usual, my admirers swarmed up to shake me by the hand, I had an idea from this man’s expression, and perhaps partly from the strength of his grip, that he had developed some more than special interest in me. But he confined himself to the conventional “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gibson,” and moved on again at once. In the rush of new faces he soon passed out of my mind.

But the next night, at the Oddfellows’ Temple at Cincinnati, I hadn’t been on the platform for more than three minutes when, raising my eyes, I saw

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the same powerful-looking fellow again occupying a seat on the aisle in about the twelfth row. "This is very gratifying," I said to myself. "I wonder who he can be." But although he again came up at the end and shook my hand—a little more firmly this time—and again expressed his pleasure at meeting me, he added nothing more; just slipped away in the crowd.

The next evening I was lecturing again at the Commercial College at Lexington (Ky.), and there he was again. And for the rest of the week, at the Indianapolis Propylæum, the Terre Haute Polytechnic, and the Evansville City Hall, the first thing that I saw as I faced my audience was this same mysterious and powerful-looking stranger. And each night he gripped my hand a shade more fiercely, murmured his delight at encountering me, and disappeared.

For another ten days I stood this extraordinary manifestation of devotion, and then I found that it was beginning to affect my confidence.

"Look here," I told Mr. Klauser. "There's a fellow with a high forehead and a big, blue jowl who sits in front every night, and comes up and shakes hands with me at the end. How long he's been doing it for I don't know; but I've noticed

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him every evening for over a fortnight. Have you any idea what he can mean by it ? ”

“ No,” said Mr. Klauser. “ I have not. But if he’s annoying you, just say the word, and I’ll have him slung out.”

The following evening the man was there again, and at the end I pointed him out to Mr. Klauser.

“ There he goes,” I said. “ That square-looking fellow over by the door.”

“ You leave him to me,” replied Mr. Klauser.

But whether the man had got wind of my manager’s intentions or not, the next night he was occupying his same seat, and this time he had on either side of him two equally powerful-looking companions who even accompanied him up to the platform at the end, and shook hands with me before and after my persecutor.

“ I’m very sorry, Mr. Gibson,” said Mr. Klauser, when I reproached him for allowing this nuisance to continue. “ But those two guys who were with him to-night were a couple of Pinkerton’s men. I know ’em well. I guess, if it’s all the same to you, we’d better leave things as they are. We don’t want anything getting in the papers.”

“ What on earth do you mean ? ” I asked. “ Are you suggesting that Pinkerton’s could possibly have anything against me ? ”

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Mr. Klauser shrugged his shoulders offensively.

“ I don't know, I'm sure,” he replied. “ I reckon you're the one that knows the answer to that.”

“ This is intolerable,” I said angrily. “ I shall telegraph to your chief at once.”

And I did. There should be no need to tell you that my conscience was absolutely clear, but the constant strain of my work was telling on my nerves. I sent a long and expensive message (“ collect ”) to Mr. Sparks, saying that unless he instantly supplied me with a new manager, cancelled the arrangements for the rest of my tour in the Middle West, and sent me out to the coast, I would not be answerable for the consequences to Anglo-Saxon Literature.

My threat had its immediate result. The next day Mr. Klauser was recalled to New York, two days later Mr. Mangelstetter arrived in his place, and the following morning we took our seats in my parlor-car, bound for Sacramento. Every time almost that the train stopped, I walked up and down the track looking for signs of my incubus and his myrmidons, but by the fourth day I was satisfied that we must have shaken them off. The inexplicable nightmare in which I had been living for nearly three weeks had passed into the unknown.

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I slept soundly again at nights, and began putting on weight.

And yet, if you will believe me, no sooner had I risen to my feet at the Episcopal Institute on the evening of my arrival at Sacramento, hardly had I cleared my throat to begin my exordium, than my eyes started out of my head as I saw my enemy, more powerful-looking than ever, sitting back with a faint sneer in the middle of the twelfth row.

For a moment I all but broke down, and then, setting my teeth, I pulled myself together. Resolutely disregarding his presence, I addressed my remarks to every other part of the hall, and at last the evening concluded with the customary triumphant ovation.

But during the mechanical delivery of my lecture my mind had been busy. And when, as usual, the man joined in the crowd of congratulatory handshakers, I waited until his turn had come and then, instead of offering him my palm, I seized him by the wrist.

“Wait,” I whispered hoarsely. “I must and will have an explanation from you.”

He nodded his head carelessly, and stood aside until the hall had emptied. I felt no fear of him now that the crisis had arrived—it would have been better perhaps if I had—and making some hasty

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excuse I let Mr. Mangelstetter go back to the hotel by himself.

Then I turned to the man who was waiting.

“Follow me,” I said.

Without a word he put on his hat and accompanied me into the street.

“Now, then, sir,” I said, as we came out into the wide tree-bordered boulevard; “perhaps you will furnish me with an explanation of your extraordinary behaviour in dogging my public appearances in this strange manner, in shaking my hand night after night, and in perpetually assuring me of your pleasure at getting to know me.”

The man gave a short, mirthless laugh.

“I don’t want to shake your hand,” he said. “Every time I try and get away without doing it. But it’s no use. I just get stuck in the crowd, and there’s no other way out.”

“Well, well,” I went on. “Leaving that on one side, why come to my lecture twenty-five times on end? Let me tell you, sir, that I am performing a very arduous public duty. It’s no joke, I can assure you, speaking to these vast congregations eight or nine times a week. Your constant presence is affecting both my nerves and my appetite. Why do you do it?”

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“ You may well ask that,” replied the man, with a repetition of his unpleasant laugh.

“ But I *do* ask it, sir,” I cried, disregarding his contemptible innuendo. “ I *do* ask it. And what is more, I ask why, on the occasion of my recent appearance at Nashville, you should choose to attend in the company of a couple of hired bravos from Pinkerton’s ? ”

“ I got wind you were planning to fire me out,” he replied.

“ And what if I was ? ” I retorted. “ Isn’t this a free country ? ”

“ I guess it is,” he said grimly. “ It’s free enough for you English lecturers, anyway.”

“ Explain yourself,” I demanded.

“ That is my intention,” he answered. “ See here, Mr. Gibson, I’m a member of the American Authors’ League, and—— ”

“ What ? ” I interrupted. “ American Authors ? But there aren’t such things. Surely I, as a literary man, should have heard of them if there were.”

“ I reckon you must take my word for it,” said my companion. “ Downtrodden and neglected as he is, eclipsed and overshadowed by the writers of your effete yet dangerous island, the American author still exists and, let me add, is still to be feared. Too long has the poor worm suffered this

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endless stream of foreign lecturers, too long has he watched the very cream of the literary market being skimmed off by alien hands. For three weeks have I listened to your impertinent and untruthful account of your intimacies with the crowned heads of Europe, hoping perhaps that at last I should come on a single utterance which would justify me in commuting the terrible sentence which my League have passed on you. I have been patient; I have been scrupulously fair; I have endured such torments from your wearisome and shameless lips as few men, however strong, could survive. But to-night I have made up my mind. The League's sentence must be carried through. And even if I go to the dreaded chair, it will be with the knowledge that I have lit such a candle as by the mercy of heaven shall never be put out."

"But stop! Wait!" I protested, edging away from him. "Why should I suffer where so many others have gone free? Even if you, with your boasted fairness, have failed to derive profit from my lectures, what of the thousands, the millions of your fellow countrymen who have swarmed nightly to hear me speak; into whose stunted and commercialized lives I have brought a breath of sweetness, a taste of culture and romance?"

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“ You are wasting your breath,” he answered inexorably. “ Your doom has been pronounced by a higher tribunal than that of any mere lecture fans.”

“ No, no,” I cried. “ Be just. Be reasonable. No one on earth was ever meant to listen to my lecture twenty-five times running.”

“ And no one on earth shall ever listen to it again,” he shouted. “ On your knees at once, you base-born boob, and ask, while there is still time, that your sins may be forgiven. For as sure as to-morrow's sun shall rise, in two minutes from now you will be among the immortals.”

“ Mercy! Mercy!” I wept, falling to the ground and clutching his legs.

“ Never!” he roared. “ Never until the last British literary man has been driven from my beloved country's soil. The Authors' League has spoken, and the Authors' League must be obeyed.”

I felt the cold muzzle of his pistol pressing against my forehead; I gave a last, despairing shriek; there was a burst of thunder in my ears; and in another second the body of Henry Gibson lay a lifeless corpse on the blood-stained sidewalk, while his soul winged its way upwards through the scented night.

Yes, my dear D. M., though I regret that I am

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unable to tell you what it is, I have solved the riddle of the universe. My earthly sufferings are over. I am at peace with the ages.

I am sorry that my abrupt and unexpected method of quitting this sphere prevents my forwarding you the personal memento which I should have wished you to receive; but if you have any use for the copyright of any of my unpublished works, it is yours. See that the arch-fiend, Leamington Dunn, delivers it into your hands intact.

Yours sincerely,

HENRY GIBSON.

* * * * *

And so this was the best that Gibson could find to say to me after all my weeks and months of anxiety on his behalf. A story which not only from the very outset transcended all limits of even Gibsonian improbability, but ended up with the impudent, if not actually blasphemous, statement that the writer himself was dead. "At peace with the ages," indeed! And then he'd sat down, banged the whole thing out on a typewriter, and posted it nearly three hundred miles from the scene of his alleged murder.

And all that stuff about his lectures, too. What did the creature take me for?

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Yet already I was growing calmer. I was even beginning to appreciate the undoubted humour of the thing. And as this mellower and kindlier mood descended on me, two main deductions seemed to suggest themselves as arising from this extraordinary missive. First and most undeniably, that Gibson was still as mad as a hatter. And secondly and perhaps less certainly, that he had chosen these peculiar means to let me know that he wasn't coming back to England.

Yes, though he still refused to admit it directly, that final reference to the disposition of his copyrights showed clearly, to my mind, that he had counted on the "arch-fiend Leamington Dunn" acquainting me with his alias; and in so far as one could gauge the mental processes of a lunatic, this would be ample ground for the perpetuation of his exile. Whether the unwitnessed and post-mortem signature of a madman would possess any value in the eyes of a Court of Law was another point. But then, I didn't want his copyrights. I had quite enough trouble with my own, and——

I heard footsteps behind me, and thrust the letter hurriedly into my pocket.

"Hullo," said a familiar voice. "Any news?"

For a moment I hesitated, but Gibson had made

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no stipulation of secrecy. I withdrew my hand again.

“ Yes,” I answered, passing the letter to Mr. Dunn.

He read it in silence, no trace of expression marking his discovery of the references to himself, and then he returned it to me.

“ Poor chap,” he said, and with his right forefinger he tapped gently but significantly on his forehead.

“ Yes,” I replied. “ But—— ”

“ But what ? ”

“ Well,” I tried to explain, “ he seems contented enough, doesn't he ? I mean, after all, no writer can be really unhappy as long as his imagination still stays with him.”

Mr. Dunn received this observation in thoughtful silence. But after a minute or so he said:

“ Anyhow, there's no longer any reason why you shouldn't let me have those stories. As far as I can make out, he's appointed you as his literary executor.”

“ Oh,” I gasped. “ No. I mean, yes. I suppose he has.”

And this is how these Tales from Gibson have come to be published. Not, it is true, exactly in the

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manner that Leamington Dunn desired, for I have insisted on crediting them with their true authorship. I couldn't, as a conscientious writer, take the praise (or blame) for work which was not really my own. But if I have succeeded in transferring to these pages one hundredth part of the indescribable charm which emanated from my eccentric, yet gifted, fellow member, then I shall feel myself well repaid. Moreover, in the matter of terms, Mr. Dunn has certainly been as good as his word.

I have never heard from Gibson again. I have never really expected that I should. But somewhere on the wide face of this globe I can picture him still, button-holing unsuspecting strangers and pouring his strange medley of satire and invention into their defenceless ears; while all the time the royalties from the myriad works of Minnie Baker Sanderson continue to pile up in Leamington Dunn's bank.

And sometimes another thought has come to me. I know that he was once at Santa Barbara, for the evidence of the U.S. Mail on that postmark is unimpeachable. And is it thinkable that a man of Gibson's nature could resist the temptation which would there be drawing him from less than a hundred miles away towards Pasadena and Hollywood? What if that nobler and wider existence

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of which he spoke were the freedom from the written word which is open to all men of creative imagination in the great studios of the land of celluloid? Yes, I am still waiting, and waiting hopefully, for the Gibson touch to make itself felt through the medium of the film. There can be no doubt that I shall recognize it when it does.

Meanwhile, I still often look towards that familiar chair in the Caviare smoking-room, half-hoping and half-dreaming that I shall see him there once again. But it is hard to preserve in one's memory all the details even of such a personality as Henry Gibson's, and there are days—rare at present, but they will become more frequent—when I am almost tempted to believe that he and his stories are both nothing more than the idle imaginings of my own fiction-haunted mind.

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