

“ My father—oh, God ! ”

“ Lie down for your life ! ”

He stood beside her, watching, ready to strike if one of the bees succeeded in entering the greenhouse. Only once did he remove his straining eyes from this task. The sight which then greeted them wrought a fresh cry of horror from his lips.

The terrible swarm hung like a dust-cloud in the air above the garden-gate, rising and falling in swift undulations, which caused the light to flash and scintillate on a myriad gilded bodies and shining wings. A faint, shrill piping came to his ears across the silence. The door in the wall was open, and the garden now quite empty.

Biles leaned forward.

“ Mrs. Bardwell’s maid has confessed that she rang up Dr. Cornwall immediately before luncheon this morning,” he said. “ She tried to communicate with him before, but he had gone to the country, to a case, overnight. He got her warning that the police suspected him of being responsible for her mistress’s death, just after he had carried his second victim, his uncle, in a dying condition, from the garden.”

The detective struck a match, and relit his cigar. Dr. Hailey sat watching him with sorrowful eyes.

“ Ten minutes later, as you know,” he went on, “ Cornwall blew his brains out. He had the wit to see that the game was up. He had been badly stung, of course, but his long experience of the bees made this a less serious matter than it would have been in the case of an ordinary outsider. In any case, moreover, he had to accept that risk if his plan was to succeed.”

Silence fell in the big consulting-room. Then the doctor remarked :

“ Miss Cornwall has recently become engaged to be married ? ”

“ Yes.” Biles drew a long whiff. “ That was the circumstance which made speed essential to her cousin’s murderous plan. He was hopelessly in debt, as a result of Mrs. Bardwell’s extravagance. Only his uncle’s money, which is considerable, would have saved him. If Miss Cornwall married he must have lost all hope of obtaining it, and so of marrying the girl on whom he had set his fickle heart. I have ascertained that he insisted on inoculating both father and daughter against spring catarrh a month ago, and that the injections he gave them hurt them terribly. No doubt

Mrs. Bardwell received a similar injection about the same time. Thus, for each of these three individuals, a single bee-sting, on your showing, meant instant death."

Dr. Hailey inclined his head.

"The moment I saw the swarm, the truth flashed across my mind," he declared. "These Cyprian bees, as I have been at pains to find out, and as your bee-keeping friend told you, are exceedingly ill-natured. But no bees, unless they have been previously roused to frenzy, ever attack at sight people who have not even approached their hives. It was all too clear, even in that first terrible moment, that the swarm was part of a carefully prepared plan."

The detective rose, and held out his hand.

"But for you, my dear friend," he said, "Miss Cornwall must inevitably have shared her father's fate, and the most devilish murder of which I have ever so much as heard would, almost certainly, have gone unsuspected and unpunished."

Raymund Allen

A HAPPY SOLUTION

from THE STRAND MAGAZINE, 1916

The portmanteau, which to Kenneth Dale's strong arm had been little more than a feather-weight on leaving the station, seemed to have grown heavier by magic in the course of the half-mile that brought him to Lord Churt's country house. He put the portmanteau down in the porch with a sense of relief to his cramped arm, and rang the bell.

He had to wait for a few minutes, and then Lord Churt opened the door in person. His round, rubicund face, that would hardly have required any make-up to present an excellent "Mr. Pickwick," beamed a welcome. "Come in, my dear boy, come in. I'm delighted to see you. I wish you a merry Christmas."

It was Christmas Eve, and his manner was bubbling over with the kindness appropriate to the season. He seized the portmanteau and carried it into the hall.

"I am my own footman and parlour-maid and everything else

for the moment. Packed all the servants off to a Christmas entertainment at the village school and locked the doors after 'em. My wife's gone, too, and Aunt Blaxter."

"And Norah?" Kenneth inquired.

"Ah! Norah!" Churt answered, with a friendly clap on Kenneth's shoulder. "Norah's the only person that really matters, of course she is, and quite right too. Norah stayed in to send off a lot of Christmas cards, and I fancy she is still in her room, but she must have disposed of the cards, because they are in the letter-bag. She would have been on the look-out for you, no doubt, but your letter said you were not coming."

"Yes, I know. I thought I couldn't get away, but to-day my chief's heart was softened, and he said he would manage to do without me till the day after to-morrow. So I made a rush for the two-fifteen, and just caught it."

"And here you are as a happy surprise for your poor, disappointed Norah—and for us all," he added, genially.

"I hope you approve of my *fiancée*," Kenneth remarked, with a smile that expressed confidence as to the answer.

"My dear Kenneth," Churt replied, "I can say with sincerity that I think her both beautiful and charming. We were very glad to ask her here, and her singing is a great pleasure to us." He hesitated for a moment before continuing. "You must forgive us cautious old people if we think the engagement just a little bit precipitate. As Aunt Blaxter was saying to-day, you can't really know her very well on such a short acquaintance, and you know nothing at all of her people."

Kenneth mentally cursed Aunt Blaxter for a vinegar-blooded old killjoy, but did not express any part of the sentiment aloud.

"We must have another talk about your great affair later," Churt went on. "Now come along to the library. I am just finishing a game of chess with Sir James Winslade, and then we'll go and find where Miss Norah is hiding."

He stopped at a table in the passage that led from the hall to the library, and took a bunch of keys out of his pocket. "She was sending you a letter, so there can be no harm in our rescuing it out of the bag." He unlocked the private letter-bag and turned out a pile of letters on to the table, muttering an occasional comment as he put them back, one by one, in the bag, in his search for the letter he was looking for. "Aunt Emma—ah, I ought to have written to her too; must write for her birthday instead. Mrs.

Dunn—same thing there, I'm afraid. Red Cross—hope that won't get lost ; grand work, the Red Cross. Ah, here we are : ' Kenneth Dale, Esq., 31, Valpy Street, London, S.W.' ” He tumbled the rest of the letters back into the bag and re-locked it. “ Put it in your pocket and come along, or Winslade will think I am never coming back.”

He was delayed a few moments longer, however, to admit the servants on their return from the village, and he handed the bag to one of them to be taken to the post-office.

In the library Sir James Winslade was seated at the chess-board, and Churt's private secretary, Gornay, a tall, slender figure, with a pale complexion and dark, clever eyes, was watching the game.

The secretary greeted Kenneth rather frigidly, and turned to Churt. “ Have the letters gone to post yet ? ”

“ Yes ; did you want to send any ? ”

“ Only a card that I might have written,” Gornay answered, “ but it isn't of any consequence ” ; and he sat down again beside the chess-players.

Churt had the black pieces, black nominally only, for actually they were the little red pieces of a travelling board. He appeared to have got into difficulties, and, greatly to the satisfaction of Kenneth, who was impatient to go in quest of Norah, the game came to an end after a few more moves.

“ I don't see any way out of this,” Churt remarked, after a final, perplexed survey of the position. “ You come at me, next move, with queen or knight, and, either way, I am done for. It is your game. I resign.”

“ A lucky win for you, Sir James,” Gornay observed.

“ Why lucky ? ” Winslade asked. “ You told us we had both violated every sound principle of development in the opening, but could Black have done any better for the last few moves ? ”

“ He can win the game as the pieces now stand,” Gornay answered.

He proved the statement by making a few moves on the board, and then replaced the pieces as they had been left.

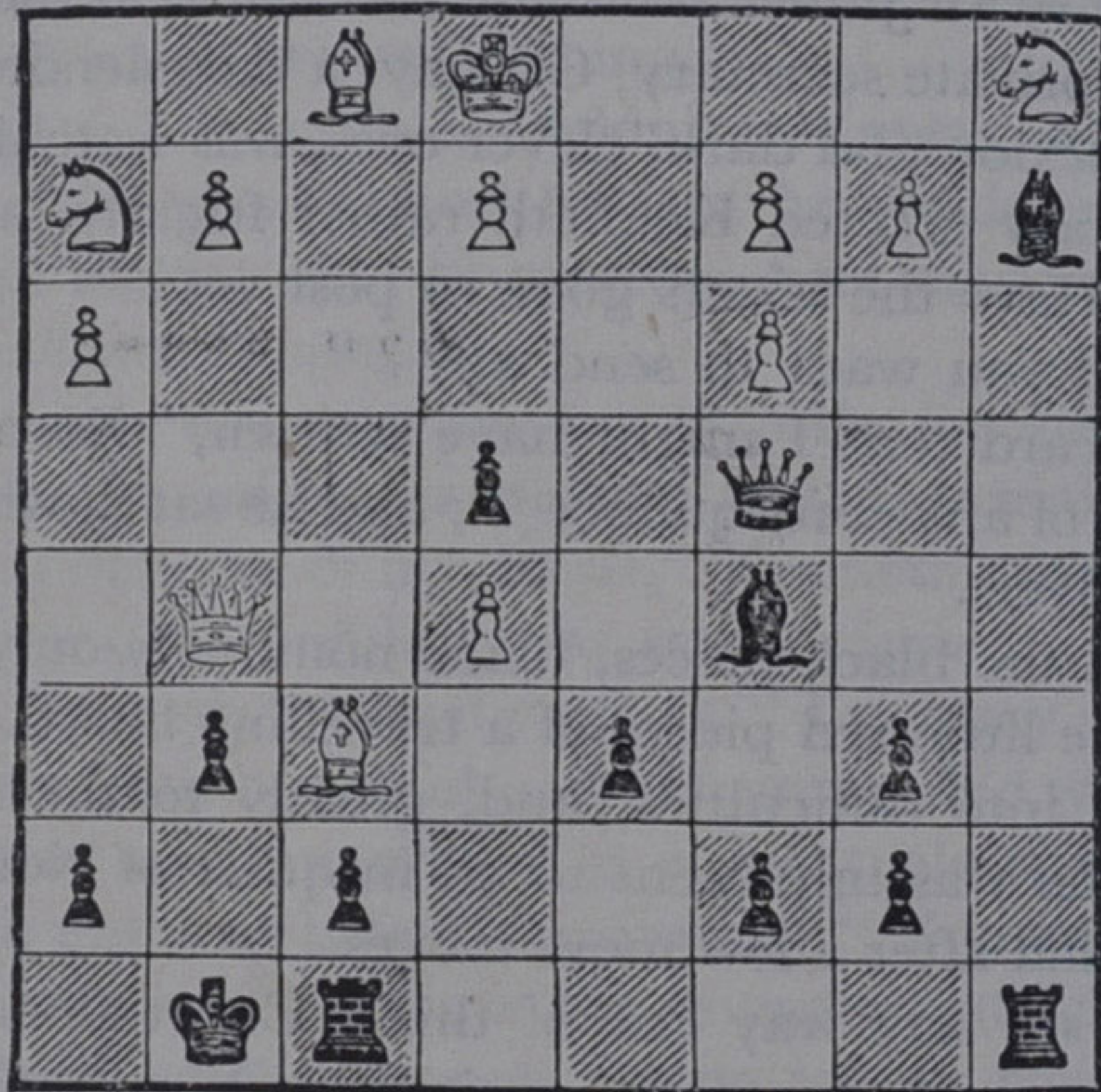
“ Well, it's your game fair and square, all the same,” Churt remarked good-humouredly. “ I should never have found the right reply for myself.”

Gornay continued to study the board with attention, and his face assumed an expression of keenness, as though he had discovered some fresh point to interest him in the position. At the

moment Kenneth merely chafed at the delay. It was an hour or so later only that the secretary's comments on the game assumed for him a vital importance that made him recall them with particularity.

"If the play was rather eccentric sometimes, I must say it was bold and dashing enough on both sides," Gornay commented. "For instance, when Lord Churt gave up his knight for nothing, and when you gave him the choice of taking your queen with

WHITE.



BLACK.

Black to play and win.

either of two pawns at your queen's knight's sixth." He turned to Churt. "Possibly you might have done better to take the queen with the bishop's pawn instead of with the rook's."

"I daresay, I daresay," Churt replied. "I should have probably got into a mess, whatever I played. But come along, now, all of you, and see if we can find some tea."

Kenneth contrived, before entering the drawing-room, to intercept Norah for an exchange of greetings in private, and her face was still radiant with the delight of the unexpected meeting as they entered the room.

After tea Sir James carried off the secretary to keep him company in the smoking-room, and Churt turned to Norah. "You must sing one of the Christmas carols you promised us, and then you young folk may go off to the library to talk over your own private

affairs. I know you must both be longing to get away from us old fogies."

"Thank you, Lord Churt, for 'old fogies,' on behalf of your wife and myself," Aunt Blaxter commented, with a mild sarcasm that somehow failed of its intended playful effect. But Norah had sat down at once to the piano, and her voice rang out in a joyous carol before he could frame a suitable reply.

A second carol was asked for, that the others might join in, and in the course of it Kenneth's hand came upon the letter in his pocket. He was opening the envelope as Norah rose from the piano. Her eye caught her own handwriting and she blushed very red. "Be careful, Ken. Don't let anything fall out!" she cried in alarm.

Thus warned, he drew the letter out delicately, being careful to leave in the envelope a little curl of brown hair, a lover's token that she would have been shy to see exposed to the eyes of the others. But, in his care for this, a thin bit of paper fluttered from the fold of the letter to the carpet, and all eyes instinctively followed it. It was a Bank of England note for a thousand pounds.

Kenneth looked at Norah in wonder, but got no enlightenment. Then at Lord Churt, as the bare possibility occurred to his mind that, in a Christmas freak of characteristic generosity, he might have somehow contrived to get it enclosed with her letter. But Churt's dumbfounded expression was not the acting of any genial comedy. His hands trembled as he put on his glasses to compare an entry in his pocket-book with the number on the note. He was the first to break the amazed silence. "This is a most extraordinary thing. This is the identical bank-note that I put into the Red Cross envelope this afternoon as my Christmas gift, the very same that I got for the purpose of sending anonymously, and that you ladies were interested to inspect at breakfast time."

Each looked at the others for an explanation, till all eyes settled on Norah, as the person who might be expected to give one.

Churt looked vexed and troubled, Aunt Blaxter severely suspicious, as she saw that the girl remained silent, with a face that was losing its colour. "As the note was found in a letter sent by Norah, she would be the natural person to explain how it got there," she remarked.

"I haven't the remotest notion how it got there," Norah replied. "I can only say that I did not put it there, and that I never saw

it again since breakfast time, until it dropped out of my letter a few moments ago."

"Very strange," Aunt Blaxter remarked, drily. Kenneth turned upon her hotly. "You don't suggest that Norah stole the note, I imagine!"

"My dear people," Churt intervened, soothingly, "do let us keep our heads cool, and not have any unpleasant scene."

Kenneth still glared. "If Norah had put the note into this envelope, she would have referred to it in her letter. I suppose you will accept my word that she doesn't."

"Read out the postscript, Ken," Norah requested. "Miss Blaxter may like to suggest that it refers to the note." The girl looked at her with a face that was now blazing with anger, and Kenneth read out: "P.S. Don't let anybody see what I am sending you!" It had not occurred to him that it could be taken as anything but a jesting reference to the lock of hair, the note of exclamation at the end giving the effect of "As though I should ever dream you would," or some equivalent. The matter was growing too serious for any shamefacedness, and he produced the lock of hair in explanation. It was cruel luck, he reflected, that the unfortunate postscript should be capable of misconstruction. He had counted on Norah's making a triumphant conquest of the Churt household, and it was exceedingly galling to find her, instead, exposed to an odious suspicion. Aunt Blaxter's demeanour was all the more maddening that he could think of no means to prove its unreasonableness. He looked gratefully at Lady Churt, as her gentle voice gave the discussion a fresh turn. "How long has Mr. Gornay been with us?" she asked her husband.

Churt looked shocked. "My dear, we musn't make any rash insinuations in a matter of this kind. What possible motive could Gornay have for putting the note into Norah's letter, if he meant to steal it? Besides, my evidence clears him."

"Would you mind telling us what you did with the note after you showed it at the breakfast table this morning?" Kenneth asked.

"I'll tell you exactly," Churt answered. "When it had made the round of the breakfast table, I put it back in my pocket-book and kept it in my pocket till this afternoon. It was while we were playing chess that I remembered that the bag would be going to post earlier than usual, and I put the note in the Red Cross envelope with the printed address and stuck it down and

put it into the bag. I came straight back to the library, and I remember being surprised at the move I found Winslade had played, because he was offering me his queen for nothing. Just at that moment it occurred to my mind that Norah had probably already put her letters into the bag, and that, if so, I might as well lock it at once, for fear of forgetting to do so later. I looked at the chess-board for a few minutes, standing up, and then went and found that Norah's letters were in the bag, and I locked it, and came back and took Winslade's queen."

"But I don't quite see what all that has to do with Mr. Gornay, or how it clears him." Lady Churt remarked.

"Why, my dear, whoever took the note out of one envelope, and put it into the other must have done so in the few minutes between my two visits to the bag. It was the only time that the letter was in the bag without its being locked. And during that time Gornay was watching the chess, so it can't have been him."

"Was he in the library all the time you were playing?" Kenneth asked.

"I can't say that," Churt replied. "I don't think he was. I didn't notice particularly. But I am positive that he did not enter or leave the room while I was standing looking at Winslade's move, and he must have been there when Winslade offered his queen and when I took it, because he was commenting on those very moves after the game was finished, and suggesting that I might have done better to take with the other pawn. You heard him yourself."

"Yes," Kenneth answered. "I follow that. But there is such a thing as picking a lock, you know."

"The makers guarantee that it can't be done to this one," Churt answered, "and the key has always been in my possession, so he couldn't have had a duplicate made, even if there had been any time."

Norah interposed in a voice that trembled with indignation. "In short, Lord Churt, you think the evidence conclusive against the only other person, except Sir James Winslade, who was in the house. I have only my word to give against it."

"It is worth all the evidence in the world," Kenneth cried, and she thanked her champion with a bright glance.

"Lady Churt is quite right," Kenneth went on. "I'd stake my life it was that sneaking Gornay. Have him in here now, and see if his face doesn't show his guilt when I call him a thief."

“Not for the world!” Churt exclaimed, aghast. “We should have a most painful scene. This is no case for rash precipitancy.” He assumed the air of judicial solemnity with which, from the local bench, he would fine a rascal five shillings who ought to have gone down for six months. “I entirely refuse to entertain any suspicion of anybody under this roof, guests, servants, or anyone else. It will probably turn out that some odd little accident has occurred, that will seem simple enough when it is explained. On the other hand, it is just conceivable that some evil-disposed person from outside should have got into the house, though I confess I can’t understand the motive of their action if they did. In any case, I feel it my duty, for the credit of my household, to have the matter cleared up by the proper authority.”

“What do you mean by the proper authority?” Lady Churt asked. “I didn’t think the local police were very clever that time when poor Kelpie got stolen.”

The Aberdeen terrier at her feet looked up at the sound of his name, and Churt continued: “I shall telephone to Scotland Yard. If Shapland is there, I am sure he would come down at once in his car. He could be here in less than two hours. Until he, or somebody else, arrives I beg that none of you say a word about this affair to anyone who is not now present in this room.”

“Quite the most proper course,” Aunt Blaxter observed. “It is only right that guilt should be brought home to the proper person, *whoever* that person may be.”

With a tact of which Kenneth had hardly thought him capable, Churt turned to Norah. “I have no doubt Shapland will clear up the mystery for us satisfactorily. Meantime, my dear girl, you and I find ourselves in the same boat, for there is only my word for it that I ever put the note into the Red Cross envelope at all.”

The kindness of his manner brought the tears to her eyes, and Kenneth took her away to the library.

“Fancy their thinking I was a thief—a thief, Ken—a common mean *thief*!”

“Nonsense, my darling girl,” he said. “Nobody could believe any such rubbish.”

“That odious Aunt Blaxter does, at any rate. She as good as said so.” She sat down in a chair, and began to grow calmer, while he paced about the room, angry but thoughtful.

“I was glad I had you to stick up for me, Ken, and Lord Churt is an old dear.”

"He's a silly old dear, all the same," he answered. "He has more money than he knows what to do with, but fancy fluttering a thousand-pound note through the Christmas post, to get lost among all the robins and good wishes!"

They were interrupted at this point by the entry of Gornay.

"I am not going to stay," he said, in answer to their not very welcoming expressions. "I have only come to ask a quite small favour. I am having a great argument with Sir James about character-reading from handwriting, and I want specimens from people we both know. Any little scrap will do."

Kenneth took up a sheet of note-paper from a writing table and wrote, "All is not gold that glitters," and Norah added below, "Birds of a feather flock together." It seemed the quickest way to get rid of him.

Gornay looked at the sheet with a not quite satisfied air. "I would *rather* have had something not written specially. Nobody ever writes quite naturally when they know that it is for this sort of purpose. You haven't got an old envelope, or something like that?"

Neither could supply what he wanted, and he went off, looking a little disappointed.

"I wonder whether that was really what he wanted the writing for," Kenneth remarked, suspiciously. "He's a quick-witted knave. Look how sharp he was to see the right move in that game of chess. It wasn't very obvious."

The chess-board was lying open on the table, where Churt had left it before tea. He glanced at it, casually at first, and then with growing interest. He took up one of the pieces to examine it, then replaced it, to do the same with others, his manner showing all the time an increasing excitement.

"What is it, Ken?" Norah asked.

"Just a glimmer of something." He dropped into a chair. "I want to think—to think harder than ever in my life."

He leant forward, with his head resting on his hands, and she waited in silence till, after some minutes, he looked up.

"Yes, I begin to see light—more than a glimmer. He's a subtle customer, is Mr. Gornay, oh, very subtle!" He smiled, partly with the pleasure of finding one thread of a tangled web, partly with admiration for the cleverness that had woven it. "Would you like to know what he was really after when he came in here just now?"

"Very much," she answered. "But do you mean that he never had any argument with Sir James?"

"Oh, I daresay he had the argument all right—got it up for the occasion; but what he really wanted was this." He took out of his pocket the envelope in which the bank-note had been discovered. "The character-reading rot was not a bad shot at getting hold of it, and probably his only chance. But no, friend Gornay, you are not going to have that envelope—not for the thousand pounds you placed in it!"

"Do explain, Ken," Norah begged.

"I will presently," he answered, "but I want to piece the whole jigsaw together. There is still the other difficulty."

He dropped his eyes to the hearthrug again, and began to do his thinking aloud for her benefit. "Churt's reasoning is that Gornay must have been in here, watching the game, at the only time when the letters could have been tampered with, because he knew afterwards the move that was played just at the beginning of that time, and the move that was played just at the end. But why might not Winslade have told him about those two moves while Churt was letting me in at the front door? That would solve the riddle. I should have thought Winslade would have been too punctilious to talk about the game while his opponent was out of the room, but I'll go and ask him. I needn't tell him the reason why I want to know."

He came back almost immediately. "No, there was no conversation about the game while Churt was out of the room. Very well. Try the thing the other way round. Assume—as I think I can prove—that Gornay *did* tamper with the letters, the question is how could he tell that those two moves had been played?"

He took up the chess-board again and looked at it so intently and so long that, at last, Norah grew impatient.

"My dear boy, what *can* you be doing, poring all this time over the chess?"

"I have a curious sort of chess problem to solve before the Sherlock Holmes man turns up from Scotland Yard. Follow this a moment. If there was any way by which Gornay could find out that the two important moves had been played, without being present at the time and without being told, then Churt's argument goes for nothing, doesn't it?"

"Clearly; but what other way was there? Did he look in through the window?"

“ I think we shall find it was something much cleverer than that. I think I shall be able to show that he could infer that those two moves had been played, without any other help, from the position of the pieces as they stood at the end of the game ; as they stand on the board now.” He again bent down over the board. “ White plays queen to queen’s knight’s sixth, not taking anything, and Black takes the queen with the rook’s pawn ; those are the two moves.”

For nearly another half-hour Norah waited in loyal silence, watching the alternations of his face as it brightened with the light of comprehension and clouded again with fresh perplexity.

At last he shut up the board and put it down, looking profoundly puzzled.

“ Can it not be proved that the queen must have been taken at that particular square ? ” Norah inquired.

“ No,” he answered. “ It might equally have been a rook. I can’t make the matter out. So many of the jigsaw bits fit in that I know I must be right, and yet there is just one little bit that I can’t find. By Jove ! ” he added, suddenly starting up, “ I wonder if Churt could supply it ? ”

He was just going off to find out when a servant entered the room with a message that Lord Churt requested their presence in his study.

The conclave assembled in the study consisted of the same persons who, in the drawing-room, had witnessed the discovery of the bank-note, with the addition of Shapland, the detective from Scotland Yard. Lord Churt presided, sitting at the table, and Shapland sat by his side, with a face that might have seemed almost unintelligent in its lack of expression but for the roving eyes, that scrutinised in turn the other faces present.

Norah and Kenneth took the two chairs that were left vacant, and, as soon as the door was shut, Kenneth asked Churt a question.

“ When you played your game of chess with Sir James Winslade this afternoon, did he give you the odds of the queen’s rook ? ”

Everyone, except Norah and the sphinx-like detective, whose face gave no clue to his thoughts, looked surprised at the triviality of the question.

“ I should hardly have thought this was a fitting occasion to discuss such a frivolous matter as a game of chess,” Aunt Blaxter remarked sourly.

"I confess I don't understand the relevance of your question," Churt answered. "As a matter of fact, he did give me those odds."

"Thank God!" Kenneth exclaimed, with an earnestness that provoked a momentary sign of interest from Shapland.

"I should like to hear what Mr. Dale has to say about this matter," he remarked. "Lord Churt has put me in possession of the circumstances."

"I have an accusation to make against Lord Churt's private secretary, Mr. Gornay. Perhaps he had better be present to hear it."

"Quite unnecessary, quite unnecessary," Churt interposed. "We will not have any unpleasant scenes if we can help it."

"Very well," Kenneth continued. "I only thought it might be fairer. I accuse Gornay of stealing the thousand-pound bank-note out of the envelope addressed to the Red Cross and putting it into a letter addressed to me. *I accuse him of using colourless ink, of a kind that would become visible after a few hours, to cross out my address and substitute another, the address of a confederate, no doubt.*"

"You must be aware, Mr. Dale," Shapland observed, "that you are making a very serious allegation in the presence of witnesses. I presume you have some evidence to support it?"

Kenneth opened the chess-board. "Look at the stains on those chess pieces. They were not there when the game was finished. They were there, not so distinctly as now, about an hour ago. Precisely those pieces, and only those, are stained that Gornay touched in showing that Lord Churt might have won the game. If they are not stains of invisible ink, why should they grow more distinct? If they are invisible ink, how did it get there, unless from Gornay's guilty fingers?"

He took out of his pocket the envelope of Norah's letter, and a glance at it brought a look of triumph to his face. He handed it to Shapland. "The ink is beginning to show there, too. It seems to act more slowly on the paper than on the polish of the chessmen."

"It is a difference of exposure to the air," Shapland corrected. "The envelope has been in your pocket. If we leave it there on the table, we shall see presently whether your deduction is sound. Meanwhile, if Mr. Gornay was the guilty person, how can you account for his presence in the library at the only time when a crime could have been committed?"

"By denying it," Kenneth answered. "What proof have we that he was there at that particular time?"

"How else could he know the moves that were played at that time?" Shapland asked.

Kenneth pointed again to the chess-board. "From the position of the pieces at the end of the game. Here it is. I can prove, from the position of those pieces alone, *provided the game was played at the odds of queen's rook*, that White must, in the course of the game, have played his queen to queen's knight's sixth, not making a capture, and that Black must have taken it with the rook's pawn. If I can draw those inferences from the position, so could Gornay. We know how quickly he can think out a combination from the way in which he showed that Lord Churt could have won the game, when it looked so hopeless that he resigned."

The detective, fortunately, had an elementary knowledge of chess sufficient to enable him to follow Kenneth's demonstration.

"I don't suggest," Kenneth added, when the accuracy of the demonstration was admitted, "that he planned this *alibi* beforehand. It was a happy afterthought, that occurred to his quick mind when he saw that the position at the end of the game made it possible. What he relied on was the invisible ink trick, and that would have succeeded by itself, if I hadn't happened to turn up unexpectedly in time to intercept my letter from Norah."

While Kenneth was giving this last bit of explanation, Shapland had taken up the envelope again. As he had foretold, exposure to the air had brought out the invisible writing so that, although still faint, it was already legible. Only the middle line of the address, the number and name of the street, had been struck out with a single stroke, and another number and name substituted. The detective handed it to Churt. "Do you recognise the second handwriting, my lord?"

Churt put on his glasses and examined it. "I can't say that I do," he answered, "but it is not that of Mr. Gornay." He took another envelope out of his pocket-book, addressed to himself in his secretary's hand, and pointed out the dissimilarity of the two writings. Norah cast an anxious look at Kenneth, and Aunt Blaxter one of her sourest at the girl. The detective showed no surprise.

"None the less, my lord, I think it might forward our investigation if you would have Mr. Gornay summoned to this room. I don't think you need be afraid that there will be any scene,"

he added, and, for an instant, the faintest of smiles flitted across his lips.

Churt rang the bell and told the servant to ask his secretary to come to him.

"Mr. Gornay left an hour ago, my lord. He was called away suddenly and doesn't expect to see his grandmother alive."

"Poor old soul! On Christmas Eve, too!" Churt muttered, sympathetically, and this time Shapland allowed himself the indulgence of a rather broader smile.

"I guessed as much," he observed, "when I recognised the handwriting in which the envelope had been redirected, or I should have taken the precaution of going to fetch the gentleman, whom you know as Mr. Gornay, myself. He is a gentleman who is known to us at the Yard by more than one name, as well as by more than one handwriting, and now that we have so fortunately discovered his present whereabouts I can promise you that he will soon be laid by the heels. Perhaps Lord Churt will be kind enough to have my car ordered and to allow me to use his telephone."

"But you'll stay to dinner?" Churt asked. "It will be ready in a few minutes, and we shall none of us have time to dress."

"I am much obliged, my lord, but Mr. Dale has done my work for me here in a way that any member of the Yard might be proud of, and now I must follow the tracks while they are fresh. It may not prove necessary to trouble you any further about this matter, but I think you are likely to see an important development in the great Ashfield forgery case reported in the newspapers before very long."

"Well," Churt observed, "I think we may all congratulate ourselves on having got this matter cleared up without any unpleasant scenes. Now we shall be able to enjoy our Christmas. I call it a happy solution, a very happy solution."

His face beamed with relief and good-humour as he once more produced his pocket-book. "Norah, my dear, you must accept an old man's apology for causing you a very unpleasant afternoon; and you must accept this as well. No, I shall not take a refusal, and it will be much safer to send a *cheque* to the Red Cross."

[The solution of the end-game given in this story, and the proof that a white queen must have been taken by the pawn at Q Kt 3, is given on page 1231.]

Percival Wilde

THE ADVENTURE OF THE FALLEN ANGELS

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I

The atmosphere in the little room was electric. The explosion, one sensed rather than felt, would come soon.

From outside, far below in the street, came the occasional clatter of a belated taxi-cab. From above came the steady, unwinking glare of high-powered lights. The clock on the mantel, and the overflowing ash-trays, indicated the hour of two in the morning. Yet the men seated about the bridge table in the Himalaya Club, cutting in and out at the end of each rubber, played with a concentration that was apparently regardless of everything else.

Straker, so he asserted afterwards, had been on the verge of an apoplectic stroke since midnight. Billings clutched his cards in a nervous hand, and impatiently awaited the moment when the accusation would be made. Chisholm, who could watch the ticker spell out fluctuations which meant tens of thousands to him without turning a hair, bit the ends of his straggly moustache from time to time, and hoped that his exterior did not betray his excitement.

Like the others, Chisholm had absolute confidence in Anthony P. Claghorn—"Tony" Claghorn to his intimates—who, by his own admission, was an expert on everything having to do with games of chance; but, as the minutes stretched into hours, and as Claghorn, with not a wrinkle in his lofty brow, confined himself to smoking the best cigars that the Himalaya Club—and his hosts—provided, and refrained from uttering a word, Chisholm's worries multiplied.

He could not assert that Tony had been an inattentive spectator. At nine, promptly, the game had begun. At nine, promptly, Tony had pulled up the most comfortable chair, and had anchored in it. At half-hourly intervals or thereabouts rubbers had ended, and the six players, cutting to determine the four to play next, had changed seats. At half-hourly intervals or thereabouts Tony, without moving, had called for a fresh cigar.

At ten Chisholm had glanced at Tony questioningly. Tony had replied with an innocent stare. At intervals from then on to midnight, Straker, Billings, Hotchkiss, and Bell had glanced questioningly at the silent young man. He had given them glance for glance—but no satisfaction. Yet during the preceding afternoon Tony had discoursed eloquently upon the ease with which he would solve the mystery.

To be sure, it had been a mystery of Tony's own creating. Roy Terriss, the suspect, had not been looked upon as such until Tony, by a few well-chosen words, had called the attention of his club-mates to the fact that Roy was a remarkably consistent winner. Before that time it had been admitted that Roy was generally successful at bridge; that he enjoyed playing in an expensive game; and that the game was rarely, if ever, expensive for him. It was Tony who pointed out that Roy's gains, during a winter's play, probably mounted well up into five figures; and it was Tony who, without making direct accusations, had raised his eyebrows significantly at moments when that simple act was not altogether beneficial to Roy's reputation.

Having created the mystery, he had been invited to solve it. With becoming modesty he had accepted the task, and, after sitting solemnly through one five-hour session, had expressed a desire to sit through another. This wish granted, he had declared his intention of being present on yet a third occasion. The results had been painful to his friends, who, expecting they hardly knew what, had thrown caution to the winds, and had been divested of large sums by Terriss, who, knowing nothing at all of what was afoot, had played calmly, coldly, and with deadly precision.

Chisholm, indeed, had explained his own mistakes to Tony that very afternoon. "I'm a conservative player," he had asserted earnestly. "I follow the book. I know the rules, and I don't try to improve on them. I don't overbid, and, if the other fellow overbids, I'm a sharp at doubling. But when I'm expecting the whole game to blow up any minute, I can't put my mind on it, and I don't play like myself."

"Even at twenty-five cents a point?"

"What does twenty-five cents a point matter when I'm waiting for you to start the fireworks? Take that hand last night: it was good for three odd. I bid up to five. That wasn't like me, was it? Then Terriss doubled—that's what any sane, level-headed player would have done, holding his cards; and, instead of shutting up

and taking my medicine like a little man, what did I do but re-double ! Claghorn, I put it to you : was that the act of a normal man ? Was that the kind of play you'd look for from me ? Then the finesses didn't hold, and I got set for eight hundred points."

Tony smiled reminiscently. "That was a most instructive hand," he commented. "Now, if you had doubled his four instead of going up yourself——"

Chisholm cut him short with a growl.

"Look here," he pointed out succinctly, "we didn't get you into this to give us bridge lessons, you know. If we wanted lessons, we could get them for about a tenth of what his performance is costing us. You said there was something queer about the game. We're waiting to be shown, that's all."

At two o'clock, ten hours later, Chisholm was still waiting.

Billings, neat and dapper, a stickler for etiquette, had, upon this third evening, to his everlasting embarrassment, been detected in a revoke. He had paid the penalty promptly—graciously ; had, indeed, insisted upon its being exacted. But the look which he had given Tony had explained more eloquently than could any number of words how he had come to be guilty. And Hotchkiss, fumbling his cards nervously, had failed to cover an honour with an honour—with results which bulked large when the score was added.

And, at two o'clock, Billings and Hotchkiss, as well as Straker, Bell, and Chisholm, were waiting—waiting.

The great moment, the long-anticipated moment, came when it was least expected. At two-fifteen the men had adjourned hopelessly. Chisholm was balancing the score ; his confederates had already opened their cheque-books ; Terriss, with folded arms, was waiting to learn the exact amount of his gains.

It was then that Tony flicked the ash from the tip of his cigar, and spoke. "Mr. Terriss is again the only winner," he murmured, as if to himself. "I wonder what he would say if I mentioned that the cards with which he has been winning are marked."

In an instant Terriss was on his feet.

"What did you say, Claghorn ?" he thundered. "What did you say ?"

Tony stood his ground stoutly. "I made the statement," he declared, "that you have been winning with marked cards." He took up the two packs that had been used in the bridge game, and balanced them in his hands. "I still make that statement."

“You —— !” shouted Terriss, and dashed at him.

Chisholm thrust his bulk between.

“Take it easy, Terriss,” he suggested, “we all know what’s been going on. Mr. Claghorn has been looking into things for us.”

Terriss gazed around the circle of faces.

“What’s this? A conspiracy?” he demanded.

Chisholm shook his head. “Terriss, you know us better than that. Bell, Hotchkiss, Straker, Billings—they’ve all got reputations to lose, not to mention me. We’ve asked Mr. Claghorn to investigate. That’s all.”

“And how is Mr. Claghorn qualified to pass upon such matters? What right has Mr. Claghorn to make accusations against me?”

A chorus answered him. Straker, it appeared, had been present upon a certain occasion when Tony had unmasked one Schwartz. Billings, who had been another witness of that feat, contributed details of the manner in which Tony had exposed a sharper at Palm Beach. Chisholm, a third witness, had half a dozen stories at his finger tips.

Tony Claghorn’s career, it was evident from their testimony, had been one long succession of triumphs. His wake was dotted with discomfited cheats, prestidigitateurs, and impostors. Once put upon the scent, he had never failed to bring down his man.

With appropriate modesty Tony bowed his head while his friends detailed his triumphs. To be sure, the credit for each victory was wholly due to one Bill Parmelee, an unassuming countryman whose acquaintance Tony had made one summer; and Tony, not once, but a dozen times, had explained how his own contribution to the various episodes which had since become famous was of the slightest. But Tony’s explanations must have lacked the convincing note, for his friends did not hesitate to trumpet his praises to the four corners of the earth.

That they should forget the quiet young man who had played the leading rôle was not unnatural; Parmelee, farmer and reformed gambler, cared nothing for advertising, and chose to remain out of sight. Almost mechanically his laurels descended upon Claghorn, who, despite his protestations, found the eminence thus forced upon him far from unpleasant.

When Terriss’s monotonous success at bridge had come to Tony’s attention, he had attempted to interest Parmelee in the

matter. He had failed. Parmelee, Cincinnatus of gamblers, cared more for his blooded cattle than for fresh laurels. And he had not agreed entirely with Claghorn's conclusions.

"Tony, because a man's a winner, it doesn't follow that he's a cheat," he had pointed out.

"No, but in this case——"

"In any case," Parmelee had interrupted, "you must remember that for every dollar won by dishonest gambling, a thousand are probably won by honest play."

"You don't really believe that!"

"I don't know whether I do or not. But that's what I like to think."

Tony's enthusiasm had been damped, but not extinguished. After revolving the subject in his mind overnight, he had decided that he himself was entirely competent, and that Bill's confidence in human nature was, to say the very least, exaggerated. Wherefore, Tony had gallantly launched himself into the breach.

He smiled at Terriss across the table. Success was his, and its taste was sweet.

"Marked cards, Mr. Terriss," he repeated, "marked cards."

Terriss glanced at the set faces about him, and his assurance decreased visibly.

"I suppose," he faltered, "that it will be quite useless for me to say that I didn't know the cards were marked."

"Quite useless," said Tony.

"I won fairly and squarely, I played the game according to the rules."

"What's the good of arguing?" enquired Straker icily.

Terriss gazed about helplessly. "No; there's no good in arguing if you're all against me," he assented. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Make good."

"How?"

"Give back what you won."

Terriss snorted. "I'll be damned if I do," he declared.

"If you don't," said Chisholm, "you will forfeit your membership in this club."

"And if I do," challenged Terriss, "will I hold on to it? Am I the kind of man whom you want to remain? What's the difference whether I give back my winnings or not—except to me? I've been caught cheating, haven't I? That makes me an

undesirable member by itself, doesn't it? Of course, I say that I played honestly: that's what you'd expect me to say. But, even if I give back my winnings, you won't believe me."

"It's the correct thing to do, Terriss," said Straker quietly.

"What does the correct thing matter to a man who has been caught cheating? No; if I'm to be hanged, I'd rather be hanged as a wolf than as a lamb." He took up the score, and surveyed the totals. "Gentlemen, you owe me money. Write your cheques."

"What?" gasped Chisholm.

"You've lost. Pay me."

"What about the marked cards?"

"Well, what about them? If there are marked cards, you may have profited by them yourself. Try and prove you didn't."

"I lost!" spluttered Chisholm, nearly speechless.

"What of that? If the cards hadn't been marked you might have lost still more. And that applies to all of us." With supreme self-confidence he beamed upon the players. "Pay me," he invited; "pay me, or I'll bring suit against every man jack of you. You see, I no longer have a reputation to lose, and it won't hurt me to go to court. But if you fellows think you will enjoy the publicity, if you look forward to seeing your names decorating the front pages of the newspapers, just try getting out of your debts."

Helplessly the conspirators turned to Tony. "What do you advise?" they asked as one man.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "This is out of my department," he said modestly.

Straker glanced about keenly. "You know," he said brightly, "Terriss may be bluffing."

Terriss grinned. "If that's what you think, why don't you call his bluff?"

There was a pause. Then Billings seized his pen and dashed off a cheque.

"Here you are," he said ungraciously, "I have a wife and two daughters. I can't afford to get mixed up in a scandal."

"Quite so," said Terriss. "I thought you'd see the point after I'd explained it to you."

One by one the men wrote cheques, and passed them to the lone winner. He pocketed them carefully, rose, surveyed the conspirators. "Gentlemen," he murmured, "I am about to leave you, to return to my poor but honest domicile. And I have one last request to make of you: don't tell anybody what happened

in this room to-night ; don't breathe a word of it to your closest friend."

Straker laughed aloud. " Won't we ? " he cackled, " Oh, won't we ? I'll make it my business to see that every man in this club knows just what took place in twenty-four hours ! "

Terriss smiled ominously. " In that event, Straker," he warned, " don't pretend you're surprised when I bring suit for criminal libel. "

" What ? "

" Against each and every one of you. " At the threshold he paused. " I can't stop you from blackening my reputation among yourselves ; you seem to have done that pretty thoroughly, anyhow. But let me hear that any one of you has dared to say a word against me outside of this room, and I'll hit back ? By George, I will ! I'll hit back, and I'll hit back hard ! Marked cards ! Who brought them into the game ? Who profited by them ? Who didn't profit by them ? " A mocking smile hovered upon his lips as he opened the door. " Gentlemen, think it over ! Before you do anything, think it over—and then don't do it ! "

The latch clicked, and he was gone.

It was Billings who first broke an agonised silence. " Another such victory," he soliloquised, " and we'll all be broke. What do we do next, Claghorn ? "

But that worthy, pausing only to light a fresh cigar, had prudently retreated to the threshold.

" What do we do next, Claghorn ? " Hotchkiss echoed.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. " This is out of my department," he said modestly.

Long, long after he had left, gently closing the door behind him, the conspirators sat round the table, comparing notes, exchanging advice, and sympathising with each other's misfortunes. But that, however interesting in itself, has nothing to do with this story.

II

There are always several ways of looking at a matter. A disinterested judge, for example, might hesitate to characterise the episode which we have recounted as a triumph for Mr. Anthony P. Claghorn. But Claghorn himself spoke of it as a triumph without question. He had set out to expose a sharper ; he had succeeded. That the operation had been monstrously costly to his

friends was not so important as the fact that it had attained its object. Tony, indeed, did not use stronger terms than "triumph" only because stronger terms did not occur to him.

To his pretty wife he related his exploit with gusto. She understood nothing of cards, but Tony wanted admiration, and her admiration was better than none. But the approbation which mattered most was that of Bill Parmelee, and to that Tony looked forward eagerly. Half a dozen times Tony had been a mystified spectator while Bill, moving along curious lines, had laid the foundations of one of his many victories. It had been Tony's part to observe, to wonder, and to applaud at the conclusion of each carefully planned campaign.

Now, Tony felt modestly, the rôles were reversed. Without help from his friend, acting entirely upon his own initiative he—Tony—had brought his attack to a successful conclusion. It would be Bill's turn to listen while Tony condescended to explain. In the anticipation it was all very pleasant, and Tony lost no time in scurrying to the little town in which Parmelee had immured himself.

"I was satisfied that something was wrong," Tony began magisterially, "oh, long ago; ever so long ago."

"In spite of what I said?" Bill enquired.

"What did you say?" asked Tony tolerantly.

"I tried to convince you that a man can be a winner without being a cheat."

"Oh, yes; I remember that."

"I said that for every dollar won by dishonest gambling, a thousand are probably won by honest play."

"I remember that also," Tony admitted, and lighted a cigar, "but your faith in human nature is—shall we say—exaggerated? In this case the suspect—I'd rather not tell you his name—broke down and admitted everything."

"Well! Well!" said Bill. "Go on with your story."

"I investigated the case carefully. I used a process of elimination. The game was bridge. Certain methods of cheating were, therefore, useless."

"Quite correct."

"A hold-out, for example, would be of no value," said Tony, and went on to explain the nature of a hold-out to the man who had initiated him into its mysteries. "By a hold-out," he volunteered graciously, "I mean a device which can be used for

the purpose of keeping one or more cards in concealment until the player wants them in his own hand."

Not a vestige of a smile was visible on Bill's placid countenance. "I have heard there were such devices," he murmured.

"Quite so ; but as I have explained to you, the suspect—whom I prefer not to call by name—could not possibly have used one. It would have meant introducing a fifty-third card into a complete deck, and that would have been detected at once. You see, if Ter—the suspect had introduced a fifth ace into his hand it would inevitably have duplicated an ace in some other hand. Whenever all the cards are dealt out, a hold-out becomes worthless."

Bill stared at the carpet intently. "Not altogether worthless," he qualified.

"Altogether worthless," Tony insisted.

"A hold-out might be used on the deal itself," murmured Bill, as if to himself. "The—ahem!—suspect might put all four aces and all four kings as well into a hold-out, offer the pack to be cut without them, and pass them into his own hand on the deal."

"What?" gasped Tony.

Bill continued unemotionally. "Of course, that would be pretty raw. Nobody but a beginner would try to get away with anything like that. A really sharp player, playing bridge, would pass the top cards into his partner's hand. His partner, you see, wouldn't have to be a confederate : give him more than his share of aces and kings, and he'd go a no-trumper, wouldn't he? In all innocence he'd make the correct bid. It would be quite enough for the sharper, sitting across the table, to give him the cards warranting it."

"By George!" ejaculated Tony. "I never thought of that!"

"There are still other ways in which a hold-out might be used without duplicating any one of the fifty-two cards in the deck, but it's not necessary to discuss them. Go on, Tony."

It was with a sensation that the wind had been taken out of his sails that the young man continued. "Rightly or wrongly, I decided that the suspect was not using a hold-out. You don't think he was, Bill?" he interjected anxiously.

"No."

"I continued with my process of elimination. There are many cheating devices. In bridge most of them are useless. But one cheating device is useful in every card game." He paused, to aim

a long forefinger at his friend. "I refer, of course, to marked cards."

"Ah-ha!"

"I examined the cards carefully. They were not marked. But I risked everything on a bold bluff," chortled Tony, "and it worked. I made one heap of all my winnings," he misquoted, "and I risked it all on one pitch—on one pitch—I forget how it goes on."

"Cut out the poetry and tell me what happened."

"I picked the psychological instant. I've always been good at that—picking the psychological instant—and I boldly accused Ter—the suspect of using marked cards. I knew well enough he wasn't using them. Here"—and Tony produced the cards themselves from capacious pockets—"here they are—unmarked. But I understand human nature, and I felt sure that if I accused a cheat of cheating he would—ahem!—collapse. Whether or not I happened to mention the exact method he was using did not matter; the accusation would be enough."

"Did it work?"

"To perfection. Ter—the suspect was silent, and silence is confession."

Bill smiled. "Is it?" he queried. "If so, a sleeping man is guilty of anything and everything."

"The suspect knew the game was up."

"Perhaps he felt you were carrying too many guns for him. What was the use of pleading innocence when you—and your friends—were convinced he was guilty?"

"I made it a point to treat—ahem!—the suspect with scrupulous fairness."

"Why not call him by his name? Roy Terriss?"

"How did you know?" gasped Tony.

"That's neither here nor there. Go on."

But Tony was too astonished to continue. "How did you know?" he demanded. "How on earth did you know?"

Bill shook his head. "We'll skip that for the time being. Finish your story."

Tony gazed at his friend with some bewilderment. He had looked forward to this moment of triumph. In the realisation it was not so satisfactory as in prospect. He passed a shaky hand over his brow. "Perhaps you can finish the story yourself, Bill?"

"Perhaps I can. Terriss admitted nothing. Terriss denied

nothing. He refused to give back the money he had won. That took nerve, and I admire him for it. He knew he had no chance of vindicating himself. He decided to wait for a better opportunity."

Tony nodded reluctantly. "Most of that's quite correct," he admitted grudgingly.

"You accused Terriss of playing with marked cards. He replied that if the cards were marked he hadn't benefited by it. And he added what was, after all, a logical conclusion: that the marks might have been of value to your friends."

"Absurd on the face of it," commented Tony "the cards aren't marked."

"Not so absurd as you think," qualified Bill, and his face set in stern lines. "The cards *are* marked."

III

Sometimes the word "surprise" is too feeble fully to express a state of mind. Indeed, to picture Tony's reaction to his friend's simple announcement in reasonably accurate terms, it would be necessary to overhaul, refurbish, and expand the English dictionary.

Tony gazed at Bill with eyes that popped out of his head, opened his mouth two or three times, wetted his lips, and sputtered, "Wh-what did you say?"

"I said," repeated Bill, "that these cards are marked."

"But they can't be!" exploded Tony. "Don't you see? That was the whole beauty of my bluff—that the cards were what they should be, and that I made him believe they were something else."

Bill smiled grimly. "Sometimes a bluff isn't a bluff. Sometimes a man shoots in the dark and hits the bull's-eye. Sometimes a well-meaning blunderer like you, Tony, tells the truth when he least suspects it."

"But it's impossible! I've examined those cards with a magnifying glass! I've gone over them not once, but a dozen times! I haven't found a thing!"

"Tony, you didn't know what to look for." Bill spread half a dozen cards on a convenient table. "In the first place, the cards are of an uncommon pattern. You notice the two little angels in the centre? They're what is known as 'Angel-Backs!'"

"They're the cards that the club supplies."

"I don't doubt that."

"For the last eight months no other cards have been used at the Himalaya."

"Then how about these?" Bill spread half a dozen cards from the second pack on the table.

Tony gave the cards, decorated with a conventional geometrical design, only a glance. "Oh, those? Those are poorer-class cards which the club laid in when it began to run short of the better ones."

"The Angel-Backs being the better class?"

"Of course. You can see that in a minute."

Bill half-closed his eyes reminiscently.

"When I made my living as a gambler—when I was just beginning to learn the ropes—Angel-Backs were fairly common. They were good cards. They were high-priced, but they were worth it. They gradually dropped out of use; cheaper cards took their place. To-day people don't care about quality; it is price that matters. In fact, this pack of Angel-Backs is the first that I have seen in some years. I was under the impression that they were no longer being manufactured."

Tony could not restrain his impatience.

"Come back to the subject, Bill," he begged. "You said the cards were marked. Which pack? And how are they marked?"

"The Angel-Backs, of course. Look at the angels closely."

"I see nothing."

Bill smiled. "This angel, for example, must have gone walking in the mud. His right foot is not as clean as it might be."

"What of that?"

"This other angel evidently put one hand into the mud. You'll notice it's dirty. This third angel knelt in it: there's some on one of his knees. And this fourth angel must have been doing somersaults; you'll notice his complexion has become decidedly swarthy."

"By George!" ejaculated Tony.

"Go through the pack," invited Bill, "and you'll find that there isn't an angel in it who wouldn't be the better for a bath. And you'll find—it's a pure coincidence, doubtless—that the kings have marks on their right shoulders, the queens marks on their left shoulders, the jacks marks at the waist-line, and so on through the lot. The angels are small—and the marks are still smaller—but they're very evident when you're looking for them."

Without a word Tony whipped out a magnifying glass, and bent over the cards. "You're right!" he said excitedly; "you're right. And that proves my case beyond a doubt."

"What do you mean?"

"Terriss was using marked cards. My guess hit the nail on the head. Terriss marked the cards while the game was under way."

"Marked them as delicately as this? As accurately? Tony, don't you believe it!"

"But cards can be marked during the progress of a game."

"Yes—with a prick, or with a spot of colour. But to mark cards like this? To select a minute speck on the back of each, and dot it as neatly as these are dotted? That takes time, skill, and privacy. The man who marked those cards did it in his room."

"You mean Terriss brought the marked pack with him, and substituted it for one we were using?"

"Not likely."

"Why not? It could have been done."

"It's most improbable. You'll notice that every card in the pack is marked—not the high cards alone."

"What of that?"

"What would be the object—in bridge? Really fine players place the cards as far down as the sevens and eights. But who ever heard of taking a finesse against a three-spot? Or a four? Or a five? Why should any sane man take the trouble—and the risk—to mark them?"

Tony corrugated his brow. "Perhaps," he hazarded, "perhaps the man who marked the cards was keen on doing a thorough job. Having begun, he didn't know when to stop."

Bill shook his head decisively. "It won't do, Tony. It won't do at all. An amateur might have done that—you might have done that at a first attempt—but the man we are looking for is a professional, or I know nothing about gambling and gamblers. Look at the beauty of the work! See how perfectly his shading matches the colour of the backs! And, remember, if he marked the twos and threes there was a good reason."

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "Reason or no reason, I can't see that it's of any particular importance."

But Bill was already studying a time-table. "The next train for town leaves in forty minutes," he mentioned. "I'm going to pack my bag."

Tony gazed at him with surprise.

“Going to town because the twos and threes are marked? Really, I think you’re exaggerating their importance.”

“It would be difficult to do that,” said Bill. He rose and glanced keenly at his friend. “In the first place, they prove that Roy Terriss is innocent.”

“How so?”

“I have been given to understand that he plays no other game than bridge.”

“Yes; that’s so.”

“Well, the man who marked these cards didn’t expect to play bridge at all. That’s my second point, Tony. The man who marked these cards didn’t neglect the little ones for the soundest reason in the world.”

“And what’s that?” asked Tony scornfully.

Bill opened his valise, and began to jam articles of clothing into it. He glanced at his friend and smiled, opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and smiled again. “Tony, hasn’t it struck you yet?” he demanded at length. “The man who marked these cards expected to play poker!”

IV

Upon every other occasion that Parmelee had accompanied him to town, Tony had been filled with happy anticipation. It had meant, invariably, that the man-hunt was on in earnest; that a pursuit which would end only with the exposure of the guilty individual was under way. In the past Tony—a privileged spectator, knowing enough to whet his curiosity to the utmost, but never knowing quite as much as he wanted to—had enjoyed a long succession of happy thrills.

Not once, but half a dozen times, had he observed Parmelee picking up a scent like a well-trained bloodhound, disentangling it from others, following it to a surprising conclusion. Tony had watched, wondered, admired; here was drama, hot off the griddle, served in the most appetising fashion, and the clubman, whose chief entertainment, in earlier days, had been provided by the headlines of the sensational newspapers, had come to learn that a thrill at first hand was worth a dozen relayed through print. It had all been most enjoyable—yet Tony, upon this particular occasion, was conscious of no pleasurable feelings.

He gazed gloomily out of the window and gave himself up to unhappy reflections. The cards had been marked; Terriss was not

the guilty man. Both facts, Tony was compelled to admit, were crystal clear. It followed, as night follows day, that the criminal must be one of his own particular cronies: Chisholm, Billings, Hotchkiss, Bell, or Straker. Tony reviewed the list to the accompaniment of the click of the wheels. Man-hunting, he admitted, was a sport which eclipsed all other sports; but somehow it lost its zest when the prospective victim was one of his own friends.

After half an hour's gloomy meditation he turned to the quiet countryman at his side. "Bill," he ventured tentatively, "I take it that when you reach town you will want to go to the Himalaya Club."

"You take it correctly."

"It's not necessary, you know."

"Why not?"

"Well, really, I haven't asked you to investigate anything."

"That's all right, old fellow," Bill responded heartily; "I haven't waited to be asked."

Tony's voice carried a gentle tinge of reproof. "Don't you think," he enquired tactfully, "that you should wait until you are asked?"

Bill laughed. "Meaning, I suppose, that I'm butting in——"

"I wouldn't say that."

"No; but it's what you're thinking." He glanced shrewdly at Claghorn. "Tony, old fellow, you shot in the dark, and you brought down the wrong man. You have branded Roy Terriss a crooked gambler—a cheat, a thief—a man unfit to be received in decent society. Do you want him to rest under that cloud?"

"No, no, indeed," began Tony vociferously, "that's not what I mean at all——"

"Of course not," Bill chimed in; "you're too fair and square to tolerate anything like that. You want Terriss cleared—cleared triumphantly—only"—and Bill smiled shrewdly—"only you're rather scared that I'm going to fix the blame on one of your very best friends. Isn't that so?"

Tony nodded.

Bill grinned. "That's what might happen, no doubt. I'm not denying it. If I merely wanted to bag a man, and didn't care how I did it, I think I could convict any one of your friends—or you yourself, for that matter."

"Convict me?" gasped Tony.

"It could be done. How did you come by those marked cards?"

"Why, why, I took them from the table."

“How did they get there? How do I know you didn't mark them yourself? How do I know that you and your friends weren't banded together to rob Terriss?”

It was Tony's turn to grin. “Well, we lost.”

“To Terriss, perhaps. But the night before the same crowd won pretty heavily from somebody else—what?”

“How did you know that?”

“It doesn't matter,” said Bill; “I know it—that's enough. I'm simply trying to show you how easy it would be to find a victim if I were after no more than that. You and your friends have touched pitch, Tony, and you can't touch pitch without being defiled.”

Tony's brain whirled. “You mean, then,” he sputtered, “you mean that the guilty man is Chisholm—or Billings—or Straker—or Bell—or Hotchkiss—or—or me?”

Bill laughed. “If it will comfort you—and I think it will—I'll let you into a secret, and tell you that I don't suspect any of them—or you, I mean,” he corrected gravely.

Tony felt a crushing weight rising buoyantly, easily, happily. “Do you mean that?” he cried.

“We're looking for a professional cheat,” said Bill. “Remember that. Hold fast to that. It's the only thing, Tony, between you yourself and the deep sea. You've been worrying about your friends so much that you've completely overlooked what a suspicious character somebody else is.”

“Who?” begged Tony.

“Tony Claghorn,” said Bill—he smiled at his friend's consternation—“Tony Claghorn has been running around with me so much that he has acquired a first-hand knowledge of cheating devices. How do you know he hasn't used that knowledge? How do you know he hasn't tried to convert theory into practice? It would be profitable—very profitable—and he might get away with it. No, Tony,” said Bill, “Roy Terriss is safe. It's Tony Claghorn we have to look after now. And if I'm going to town it's because I think I see a chance to save his skin.”

Tony was so completely dumbfounded that he was silent for the rest of the trip.

v

It was between hours at the Himalaya Club when the two men walked in. The regulars, who ate their lunch in the raftered

dining-hall every day, had departed, and the even-more regulars, who experimented with games of chance in its card-room from late afternoon until early morning, had not yet arrived.

"We'd better go away and come back later," said Tony.

"Why not wait here?" suggested Bill. He seated himself at a table. "Tony, how would you like to play some cold hands?"

Tony gazed at his friend with a suspicious eye. "What stake?" he enquired.

"Why any stake at all?" countered Bill. "We'll play for nothing—and the fun of it."

Tony assented doubtfully. Ordinarily filled with implicit trust in his friends, his adventure on the train had sadly shook his equilibrium. He—Tony—was under suspicion. Any move of Bill's might therefore be dangerous to him. In some vague, incomprehensible manner disaster threatened—with the most innocent exterior.

With noticeable lack of enthusiasm he seated himself at the table and rang for cards.

Bill glanced at the box and did not open it. "I don't care for these cards," he announced. "Can't we have some Angel-Backs?"

"I'll see, sir," said the man.

Tony's suspicions redoubled. "What's the matter with the cards," he enquired.

"I like to play with cards of better quality," the countryman alleged. His eyes shone as the waiter returned with a pack of the required pattern.

He broke the seal, opened the box, and riffled the cards thoughtfully.

"Do you like these better?" Tony asked.

"Much better. Very much better." He dealt the cards, face down, with amazing speed. "King of hearts. Two of diamonds. Eight of hearts. Ace of spades. Three of clubs. Seven of spades. Ten of hearts. Seven of clubs. Five of hearts. Seven of hearts."

"What's this?" demanded Tony—"legerdemain?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "Call it what you like. But if you will look at your cards you will find that you have a four-flush in hearts. You will fill on the draw. The card on top of the pack is another heart."

"And you?" gasped Tony.

"Triplets; nothing but triplets," smiled Bill; "three sevens."

"And they'll be four of a kind on the draw?"

"That would be too raw, old fellow. No, a full house will be enough. That will beat your flush."

Tony broke into a roar of laughter. "I see it!" he cried. "Of course I see it!"

"What do you see?"

"You stacked the cards!"

"That's pretty evident."

"And they weren't hard to stack because you substituted the marked pack—the pack I brought up to the country—for the new pack the waiter handed you!"

"Is that so?" challenged Bill.

"These cards are marked!"

"Admitted."

"They must be the same pack, unless—unless——"

"Well, say it."

"Unless," faltered Tony, with cold sweat breaking out suddenly on his brow, "unless every pack of Angel-Backs in the club is marked!"

Bill smiled. "That's what I'm trying to find out," he granted. "They may all be—shall we say?—Fallen Angels."

Without a word Tony rang for the waiter. "We want another pack—two more packs—of Angel-Backs," he snapped.

The waiter shook his head. "Sorry, sir, I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"We're running very short of the Angel-Backs, and the members prefer them to the other cards. They're better quality. The steward instructed me not to give out more than one pack to a party."

Tony extracted a banknote from his pocket. "I want two packs of Angel-Backs," he repeated. "Do you understand?"

"I'll do what I can," said the waiter. He was back in a few minutes with a single pack. "I couldn't get you two," he apologised. "There's not a gross left, sir. I'm breaking orders as it is, sir."

In silence Tony passed the unopened box to his friend. "Open it, Bill."

Parmelee put his hands behind his back. "Open it yourself. You might accuse me of substituting another pack."

Without a word Tony broke the seal, inverted the box, and allowed the cards to cascade upon the table.

"Well?" Bill enquired.

“Marked—marked ; every blamed one of them !”

“Fallen Angels !” murmured Parmelee, “Fallen Angels ! Tony, don’t you think we might have a chat with the steward ?”

Tony clenched his fists. “If he’s the man who marked them I’ll see that he’s out of a job in ten minutes !”

“Why so excitable ?” soothed Bill. “What would the steward have to gain by trickery ? He isn’t the man we want, you can depend upon that.”

He listened quietly while his explosive friend summoned the steward, and explained the state of affairs to that worthy. The man examined the cards, paled, bit his lips. “Really, sir,” he stammered, “this is most surprising—most surprising——”

“It is !” asseverated Tony.

“I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes. It’s monstrous—incredible !”

“How do you explain it ?”

“I—I don’t.”

“How do we know that you’re not the guilty man ?”

“Oh, sir, I’ve been in the employ of this club for twenty-eight years ! It would be late in life for me to turn round and become a common cheat. Really, sir, you don’t think that I could be capable of such a thing ?”

Bill broke into the conversation. “How many more packs of Angel-Backs have you ?”

“Less than a gross.”

“Why didn’t you order more ?”

“I did. The jobber couldn’t fill my orders.”

“Oh !” Bill half closed his eyes. “When did you first buy Angel-Backs ?”

“About a year ago, sir. Shall I tell you about it ?”

“I wish you would.”

“A sample pack was sent us by a mail-order house. The International Supply Company, they called themselves.”

“What was their address ?”

“A post-office box at Times Square Station, New York City, sir.”

“Go on.”

“Samples are sent to us frequently, but this sample was unusually good.”

“Angel-Backs—I should think so !”

“Not only that, but the cards were remarkably cheap ; so

cheap, in fact, that the club could sell them at the same price as inferior cards and still make money."

"Didn't that make you suspicious?"

"The International Supply Company explained that the pattern was about to be discontinued, and that they had a large quantity on hand. If we would take them all, they would make us a special price, sir. I didn't make the purchase on my own responsibility. I referred the matter to the House Committee. They told me to go ahead."

"What else?"

"That's all, sir. The members liked the cards, as I explained they would. We used nothing else for many months. Then the Angel-Backs began to run short. I tried to buy more."

"Your letters to the International Supply Company were returned unclaimed?"

"Yes, sir. They had gone out of business."

Bill smiled. "The scent becomes more interesting as we follow it." He turned to his friend. "Tony, what's the next move?"

"To examine the rest of the cards, of course."

Bill's eye twinkled, but he nodded soberly. "Suppose you do that, Tony. There are over a hundred packs left, so it will take time. But be thorough about it: go through every pack, and tabulate your results in writing."

VI

After his volcanic friend had departed Bill motioned the steward to a chair at his side. "I have a good many questions to ask you," he began, "but Mr. Claghorn is safely out of the way for at least an hour. He will examine every pack of Angel-Backs in the store-room, and he will find every card marked." The steward waited for him to continue. "In the first place, the membership of this club changes rapidly, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"New members are elected—old members resign, or become inactive."

"More frequently than I like. Yes, sir."

"At a rough guess, how many members, very active a year ago, are inactive to-day?"

"Twenty, perhaps," said the steward.

"Write their names on a piece of paper."

The man did so.

"Play for high stakes is common here?" pursued Bill.

"It is a rule, sir."

"But not all of the twenty played poker."

"No, sir."

"Scratch out the names of those who played other games. That leaves how many?"

"An even dozen, sir."

"Now let us take another angle. There have been big winners in the club during the past year?"

"Yes, sir. At least eight or ten."

"How many of them did their winning at poker?"

"Five or six."

"Write down their names. Compare the two lists. How many of the big winners—at poker—do you find among the inactive members?"

"Only one, sir."

"That's easy to explain, isn't it? A big winner doesn't become inactive. A big winner sticks to the game just as long as he continues winning."

"Naturally, sir."

"Yet one man who was a big winner—at poker—didn't wait for his luck to change. He stopped coming to the club."

The steward nodded. "That always puzzled me, sir. He played poker, and he had the reputation of being the strongest player that ever sat down to a table in these rooms. He played nearly every night for six months——"

"And then?"

"I never could understand it, sir, but he simply stopped coming."

Bill looked keenly at the other. "Was this man—by some curious coincidence—elected to membership just about a year ago?"

The steward nodded with dawning comprehension. "He was, sir. Mr. Ashley Kendrick was proposed one week after I had purchased the Angel-Backs. The Membership Committee has always been notoriously lax; it's easy to get into the Himalaya. Mr. Kendrick was elected five days after his name had been posted."

"He played poker?"

"Yes, sir."

"With the Angel-Backs?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he won?"

"Invariably, sir."

"Then, six months later, when the cards began to run short, he stopped coming?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"He stopped coming; that part's correct, sir. But at the time we hadn't begun to run short of Angel-Backs."

Bill whistled. "This gets more interesting as we go along!"

"We were using nothing but Angel-Backs at that time; the supply was very plentiful. Mr. Kendrick simply failed to show up one evening—that was all."

"You had his address?"

"Yes, sir, but it was an address which won't help. His address was right here—in care the Himalaya Club."

"No forwarding address, I suppose?"

"None needed, sir. From the moment he joined until the last evening he spent here Mr. Kendrick never received a letter."

It was at this juncture that Tony Claghorn thrust his exuberant self into the picture. "Bill," he announced, "I've examined the Angel-Backs."

"All of them? So soon?"

"It wasn't necessary to look at more than a card or two from each pack. They're all marked."

He had expected his announcement to produce a sensation. He was disappointed.

"Yes; I expected to hear that," said Bill calmly. "In the meantime, I've been busy."

Tony swallowed his chagrin. "With what result?" he demanded.

"Tony, I've run up a blind alley. I've found out something, but it doesn't help—not a darn bit. I'm stumped. I found the trail getting hotter and hotter, and I followed it. I fetched up against a blank wall."

"If you had allowed me to help you," Tony declared, "that wouldn't have happened."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps not."

"It's not too late now," invited Tony.

Bill grinned ruefully. "All right, Tony. Show me how to lay my hands on a fellow named Ashley Kendrick."

"Ashley Kendrick? Ashley Kendrick? Why, he hasn't been in here for months."

"I know that already."

"I can't tell you how to reach him, but I can put you in touch with his best friend."

"Also a member of this club?"

"He used to be," said Tony. "He's a chap by the name of Venner; a nice chap, but the unluckiest there ever was."

Bill glanced at the steward. "Is his name on your list of inactives?"

"Yes, sir."

"But not on the list of winners?"

"No, sir. As Mr. Claghorn says, Mr. Venner was—unfortunate."

Bill sucked in his breath sharply. "I wonder . . . I wonder . . . if by any chance his misfortunes began about the time that the Angel-Backs started to run short."

The steward started. "Come to think of it, they did, sir."

Bill leaped to his feet and flung his arms above his head with excitement unusual for him. "What a fool I was! What a dunderhead! What a numbskull! I should have seen it at once! I should have guessed it right off! Why, it's as plain as the nose on a man's face!"

Tony neither understood nor shared his enthusiasm. "I don't see what you're driving at."

"Don't you see how Venner explains everything?"

Tony fixed a look of mild reproach upon him. "Bill," he cautioned, "don't let me hear you say a word against Venner! He's as fine a fellow as there ever was—even if his luck turned—and I don't see how he explains anything."

By a superhuman effort Bill composed his face, and seated himself again. "Sorry, Tony. Perhaps I was too enthusiastic. But tell me about Venner; tell me all about him."

Tony stood on his dignity. "I don't see what Venner has to do with this case."

"All right, you don't see," said Bill, controlling his impatience with difficulty, "but tell me what I want to know, anyhow."

Tony had acknowledged his friend's authority too long to shake it off easily. "If you insist——"

"I do."

"Then I'll tell you; though I warn you in advance that it won't

help you at all." He bent a searching look on the steward. "This must go no further," he warned. "This is to remain a secret among the three of us."

"I shan't say a word, sir. But if you'd prefer to have me go away——"

Magnanimously Tony shook his head.

"Inasmuch as I suspected you, you have a right to listen." He turned to Parmelee. "Bill," he began, "Venner joined the club something less than a year ago—a fine fellow—a gentleman, every inch of him."

"Go on."

"He played poker. I played with him myself any number of times. He rarely played for high stakes—that is, in the beginning. He played a fair game—broke a little better than even. Then, to his misfortune, he met Kendrick.

"Of course, I needn't tell you about Kendrick, one of the best poker players I ever saw; a man who could almost read your mind; who always played in the biggest game, and kicked because it wasn't bigger. Venner met Kendrick, and was fascinated by him. He gave up playing himself to watch Kendrick play: he said he had never seen anything so wonderful. And Kendrick used to like it; Kendrick always saved a chair near him for Venner.

"The two came to be close friends. You'd never see one without the other. Kendrick seemed to like teaching Venner; and Venner's eyes never left Kendrick. And when the game broke up they'd go away together. Kendrick used to live here in the club. For a time, I believe, Venner shared Kendrick's rooms.

"Then, one night Kendrick didn't show up, and Venner acted as if he had lost the best friend he had in the world. He hovered round the table at which Kendrick used to play; he kept his eyes on the door as if Kendrick might come through it any minute; he asked every man he met if he had seen Kendrick.

"For a week Venner watched. He told more than one of us that he suspected Kendrick had met with foul play. Then he gave him up for lost."

Parmelee's eyes were fixed on vacancy.

"It was then that Venner took Kendrick's place in the game—the big game?"

"Yes, it was an asinine thing to do, but Venner thought he had learnt enough from Kendrick to fill his boots. He did—for a night or so. He won—won heavily—and then his luck turned.

He'd win one evening. He'd lose twice as much the next. He'd win a thousand—and lose three. He'd win two thousand—and lose five.

“I urged him to stop. I urged him any number of times, but he always explained that out of ordinary courtesy he couldn't. He had won from the other fellows. He had to do the fair thing by giving them a chance for revenge.”

Tony paused and nodded gravely.

“That's what Venner did : a chivalrous, gentlemanly, insane performance. Don't you think so ? ”

Bill turned to the steward. “What do you think ? ” he enquired.

“After twenty-eight years in the employ of this club I have learnt that there are times when it is wiser not to think.”

Bill nodded. “I can understand how you lasted twenty-eight years.” He turned to Tony. “Finish your story.”

Tony lowered his voice. “I'm coming to the part I want kept secret. Venner lost. Venner lost every cent he had. Venner had to stop coming to the club. He was posted for non-payment of dues.”

“Where is he now ? And what is he doing ? ”

“Never tell a soul, will you ? Venner's down and out. He's had to take a job as a waiter in a cheap restaurant, and I have to ruin my digestion by having a meal there every once in so often.”

Parmelee grinned and cast a grateful glance at his friend. “Tony, you've helped ! You have no idea how you've helped ! ”

He rose and deliberately winked at the steward. “Are you good at riddles ? ”

“What's the riddle, sir ? ”

“This is a hard one. See if you can guess it.” Gravely he propounded : “If a farmer, twenty-five years old, lives in Connecticut, goes to New York on the midday train, spends the afternoon at the Himalaya Club, and then, because he has a cast-iron digestion, has his dinner at a cheap restaurant, what—what is the waiter's name ? ”

“Venner, sir,” said the steward promptly.

“Go to the head of the class,” said Bill.

VII

While Parmelee and his much-mystified friend proceed to a frowsy, second-class eating-place on lower Eighth Avenue, there to be served by one Venner, there to corral the said Venner in an

untidy, private dining-room, there to tempt the said Venner with promises of immunity and gradually increasing amount of currency until his silent tongue becomes exceedingly loquacious, let us turn back the pages of time two years to the very beginning of an exceedingly strange story.

The day was unbearably hot and sultry. Layers of heated air, writhing and twisting like heavy oil in their ascent, floated lazily upwards from the broiling streets. The asphalt itself was soft and gummy ; choking dust, the accumulation of a rainless week, lay in ambush to take suffering humanity by the throat ; and in innumerable windows sickly geraniums drooped and wilted under the merciless rays of the sun.

A thermometer, hung at street level, would have indicated a temperature well into the nineties. The same thermometer, carried up five flights of stairs in any one of the nearby tenements would gradually have registered higher and higher figures, until, under the metallic roof, assailed from above by the burning glare of the sun, and from below by the out-pour of scorching air, it would actually have indicated a temperature in excess of one hundred. Yet the man who bent over a little table in the inferno known as a hall bedroom, in the topmost storey of one of the most dilapidated buildings in the section, was too intent upon his labours to notice such minor matters as the weather.

His single window was closed, its inside covered with soap, so that no observer across the street might peer through it. His door was locked—not merely locked, but barricaded by pieces of furniture which had been moved against it. And, despite the heat, for not a breath of air travelled through the room, a kettle, placed on a portable oil-stove, boiled briskly at the man's elbow.

On the table before which he sat, paper cartons—dozens and scores of them—were stacked in orderly fashion until they reached the ceiling. At his right-hand was a saucer containing a reddish liquid with an alcoholic odour. At his left-hand was a second saucer containing a bluish liquid. Half a dozen minute camel's-hair brushes were carefully ranged before him. And, as if the weather and the stove and the tightly closed openings had not made the room hot enough, a high-powered electric light was suspended from a cord, casting a blinding glare upon the man's hands, and upon the objects which were engrossing his attention.

He rose, removed a carton from the huge pile, and, holding it dexterously, allowed the steam from the boiling kettle to hiss upon

the paper seal. The carton flew open. With delicate care he set it upon the floor and emptied it of its contents : an even gross of individually sealed small paper boxes. Each seal in turn was held for an instant in the jet of escaping steam ; each gave way almost instantly.

The man placed the open boxes at one side, seated himself again, and, wiping his hands carefully so that no moisture from them might make a mark, shook one of the boxes, and removed from it a new pack of playing-cards. He spread them out on the table, took up one of his brushes, dipped it in the coloured liquid, and, with the expertness gained by long practice, placed a microscopic dot on the back of each card.

Had an observer been present he would have noted that the colour applied matched the back of the card perfectly ; stranger yet, he would have noted that after the minute spot of moisture had dried the closest scrutiny would have been required to show that the card had been tampered with. While moist, the tiny speck of liquid was visible ; when dry, it blended with the surrounding colour so excellently that no person unacquainted with the secret would have been able to discover a mark.

During his manipulations the man had been careful not to disturb the order of the cards : factory-packed playing-cards are always arranged in the same manner. He examined six or eight cards closely, satisfied himself that the marks which he had made were indistinguishable, levelled the pack, and returned it to its box. For a second time he held the seal in the jet of steam. Then he closed the flap, pressed the seal so that it adhered again, and laid the box to one side.

A dozen cartons under the table represented the labour of several weeks. Working at the greatest speed which he would permit himself, his output did not exceed ten packs an hour—and each carton contained a gross of packs—and the huge pile before him numbered at least several hundred cartons. Had he paused to calculate he might well have been terrified at the result : ten packs an hour ; eighty to a hundred a day ; at the very best, not more than five gross a week. And nearly a year would elapse before he might reach the completion of his gigantic task.

Presumably, the man had made his calculations before commencing ; had estimated the expenditure of time, and had decided that it was worth his while, for he paused not an instant upon finishing one pack before beginning on another. He worked

rapidly yet carefully, with a concentration which might have been explained only had a slave-driver, with a whip, been standing behind him. Practice had brought him surprising skill. There was no waste motion ; no misdirected energy. Little by little the pile of unfinished work diminished ; little by little the pile of finished work grew.

At seven o'clock, or thereabouts, he extinguished the oil-stove, drew a clean white sheet over the mountain of cartons, washed, and made himself presentable, and went out, padlocking the door of his room behind him. Other tenants of the building, gathered at the entrance for a breath of air, nodded to him as he strode by them. " Good evening, Mr. Kendrick," they chorused.

" Good evening," said Kendrick, and went on his way—to a lunch-room round the corner.

" What's he do for a living ? " enquired one of the neighbours.

" He's a literary man," said one better informed.

" A which ? "

" A literary man. He writes novels and books and stories. Locks himself in his room from morning till night, and writes—just writes. He told me so himself. Keeps regular hours, just like a working man, too."

" That ain't work—just writing," commented a listener, and broke off to enquire. " Have you ever read anything he's wrote ? "

" Not yet. He says there'll be nothing of his published for a year. But he's going to let me know when something comes out."

Let us dive headlong for the end of that year. The pile of unfinished work had shrunk—finally vanished. The little room was filled with neatly stacked cartons, which one might have examined and sworn had never been opened. And the International Supply Company—alias Kendrick—having offered samples of superior quality playing-cards at ruinous prices to three clubs, equally notorious for the size of the games played under their roofs, and for the ease with which a stranger might secure membership, had arranged to sell the entire quantity to the Himalaya.

The following day a horse-drawn truck, specially hired for the occasion, and personally driven by the International Supply Company—alias Kendrick—delivered several hundred gross of marked cards to the Himalaya Club.

Within a week Mr. Ashley Kendrick was proposed for membership in that notorious organisation.

He was elected five days later.

Within less than a month he was voted the best poker-player who had ever seated himself at one of the Himalaya's card-tables, and his former neighbours, who had looked forward to reading his books, novels, and stories, waited a while—and then forgot him.

VIII

A gambler's paradise : a place where the play is continuous, where the stakes are high, where the players are liberal, and where every card is marked. It was in such an unbelievably blissful spot that Kendrick now found himself. For a whole year he had worked and planned ; for a whole year he had lived economically on his savings ; if he was at length to be rewarded, he felt that he deserved it.

Yet he did not make the mistake of playing too well. An infallible player discourages his opponents, whereas an occasional loss is not expensive, and greatly heartens the victim. Kendrick, who knew every card in the pack, who could read his opponents' hands as readily as if they had been exposed, who could tell every time whether or not it was worth while to draw, could have won far more than he actually permitted himself to. Hardly an evening went by without Kendrick sustaining at least one sensational loss ; hardly a session without his going down to defeat on at least one well-advertised hand. But never did the gambler rise from his seat poorer than when he had settled himself into it ; never did the end of a session make it necessary for Kendrick to produce his cheque-book.

He limited himself strictly to a maximum winning, and his self-control was such that he never exceeded the fixed amount. Yet the maximum was a liberal maximum, for at the end of ten days he had recouped himself for the expenditure of the preceding year, and at the end of three months his bank account had begun to assume formidable proportions.

At the end of four months he increased his maximum liberally, and doubled his bank account, and at the end of five months he began to fling off all restraint. He began to play poker of a brand unheard of even at the Himalaya, where fine players abounded. He had put by a gigantic nest-egg ; and it was his programme to win as much as possible against the day when the Angel-Backs would begin to run short.

It was at this juncture that Venner, so he confessed to Parmelee, projected himself into the situation.

Venner, a shiftless ne'er-do-well of pleasing personality, had dissipated a modest inheritance, and was fast nearing the end of his slender resources. He played poker tolerably; upon occasion he had not hesitated to cheat, and, in the hope of extending his dishonest operations enough to make a killing, he had purchased half a dozen packs of cards at the club, and had taken them home with him with the laudable intention of marking them. Once marked, he would find opportunities to substitute them for the club's cards.

He had marked two or three packs before he made the astounding discovery that the cards were already marked. He could not believe the evidence of his eyes. Feverishly he broke open the sealed boxes, to find that some pioneer in knavery had been before him. More cards, covertly examined at the Himalaya itself, confirmed the amazing truth.

Venner had intended to indulge in cheating on a small scale. His discovery of the existence of a swindle of such gigantic dimensions left him simply thunderstruck. For an instant he reflected that, knowing the secret, he, too, could win as he pleased. But upon second thought it occurred to him that there would be quite as much gain, and far less risk, were he to make a cat's-paw of the daring sharper who was doubtless at work this instant.

For months Kendrick had been a sensational winner. Within twenty-four hours after penetrating his secret Venner confronted him.

"You can't prove anything," Kendrick said.

"I know it," said Venner.

"I'm the most surprised man in the world to learn that the cards are marked," Kendrick alleged.

"Then you won't object if I pass the word on to the other members, and see that other cards are used?"

Kendrick's eyes narrowed. Venner was easy for him to see through. "What's the alternative?" he demanded.

"Divvy up with me," murmured Venner. "Pay me half of whatever you win, and I'll be silent as the grave."

He paused. "If you don't, I'll expose you. I'll say that you confessed everything——"

"Nobody will believe it."

"If that's what you think, turn down my offer."

Kendrick was in an unpleasant position, and was fully aware of it. The solution—the solution that flashed upon him at once—was to pretend to accept Venner's terms, and to disappear for ever from the scene. But the weak point was painfully obvious: Venner, out of spite, might set the authorities upon his trail. It would be better, Kendrick decided instantaneously, to wait until Venner, too, was thoroughly besmirched; to make Venner an accomplice who dared not open his mouth without imperilling his own freedom. And then, also, even if he had to divide his future winnings, a great deal of money might be amassed in a short time—say, two or three weeks.

He shook Venner's hand heartily.

"You're a man after my own heart," he said. "I accept your proposition."

Then began the short but interesting period during which Venner, according to Tony's description, sat at Kendrick's side and ostensibly studied his game, but during which Venner, according to his own confession, followed the play with an eagle eye to make sure that his partner in crime did not win more than he would admit, and thus defraud him of his share.

After a few days Venner invited himself to live in Kendrick's rooms; he could keep a closer watch on him in that manner, and for two brief but happy weeks Venner's income was exceedingly large. He treated himself to a new outfit of clothing, and began to sport small but costly scarfpins. He even looked at automobiles; his improved circumstances would warrant him in purchasing one.

Then, upon the evening of the day that Venner, after convening himself in executive session, had voted that Kendrick should henceforth pay him three-quarters and not merely half of his winnings, the astute gambler disappeared. Venner was worried; honestly believed that his partner had met with foul play. At the end of a week a letter, mailed en route to Mexico City, told Venner the truth. Kendrick had disappeared for good. He had won enough to support him in comfort the rest of his life. He did not propose to share his winnings, even with so likeable a chap as Venner. Nevertheless, he gave Venner his blessing, and mentioned that he admired Venner's collection of scarfpins, which he had taken to Mexico with him.

At once Venner found himself in straitened circumstances. His income had vanished; his expenditure continued. But the Angel-Backs promised relief.

He took Kendrick's place in the big game, and won heavily for two nights. On the third night, to his unutterable horror, cards of a strange pattern were used, and Venner, compelled to play honest poker against men who qualified as experts, lost more than he had won in the two preceding sessions.

On the fourth night the Angel-Backs returned, and Venner did well. But on the fifth and sixth nights other cards were supplied, and the results were harrowing.

What followed partook of the nature of a nightmare. Venner had run into debt ; willing or unwilling, was compelled to play. And he was suddenly confronted with a situation far more dangerous than any that had ever faced Kendrick : the Angel-Backs were running short, other cards were being substituted, and, if Venner invariably won with the Angel-Backs and lost upon all other occasions, it would not be long before some astute observer called attention to the circumstance.

He used to lie awake at night, summoning up hideous pictures, visioning the possibilities. It occurred to him that he might purchase more Angel-Backs, mark them and introduce them into the play. He found that cards of that pattern were not obtainable at any price. Even had they been obtainable, he could not bring them to the table without inviting suspicious comment.

He thought of marking the cards which the club had substituted for the Angel-Backs ; but he realised that the sleight-of-hand necessary to exchange them for the pack in use was far beyond him. In his petty cheating in the past he had occasionally indulged in the form of dishonesty known as ringing in a cold pack. That was possible, playing for moderate stakes, with no spectators. It was impossible, save for some sharper far more expert than he, in a big game closely watched by twenty or more men.

For a ghastly week Venner endured the tortures of the damned. Like Kendrick, he found it well to limit his winnings when the gods were good to him, and when chance brought a deck of marked cards to the table. But, unlike Kendrick, he was compelled too often to play with strange cards—and he found it quite impossible to limit his losings.

For all his sins in the past the cheat paid a thousand times over during that week. To put in an appearance each night, smiling and jovial, while his soul writhed in torment ; to forego pot after pot when the Angel-Backs offered it to him, because to win too much might create suspicion ; to lose upon other nights, and

lose heavily—disastrously—because he dared not change his style of play ; no wonder the man cracked under the strain.

He began to play wildly, recklessly. His opponents, shrewd students of psychology, sensed the change in the wind. In two consecutive sessions they stripped him.

Courtesy prohibits a man from taking another's last cigarette, but it does not prohibit a man from taking another's last dollar. His opponents showed him no mercy. When Venner left the Himalaya Club for the last time, he had borrowed as much as his friends would lend, he owned nothing, and his pockets were empty.

This, coming by dribblets in the beginning, coming faster and faster as the man's emotions mastered him in the end, was the story that Parmelee and Claghorn heard from the lips of one Venner, a waiter in a frowsy, second-class eating-place on lower Eighth Avenue.

IX

It was not until half an hour after they had left the restaurant, on their walk uptown, that Bill opened his mouth. Tony, completely floored, for once in his life, had marched at his side in silence.

"We started, didn't we," said Bill, "to find out whether or not Roy Terriss cheated at bridge? It's funny over what a long trail it has led us! Terriss—the Angel-Backs—the Himalaya—Kendrick—Venner——"

"Don't mention that man's name to me!" interrupted Tony.

"Why not?"

"When I think of what I've been doing to my digestion on his account: eating in that miserable restaurant at least once a week because I sympathised with him! Ugh!"

"Venner is a whole lot worse off, isn't he? You have been a guest of the restaurant; he is a waiter in it."

"Serves him right!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps. Something—call it what you will—has a great way of getting even with the man who doesn't play fair. Venner is paying—Venner is paying heavily. If you're a real man, Tony, you might go on eating a meal in that restaurant once in a while."

"Why?"

"Some day you may be able to set Venner on the right path,

and that would be your way of paying whatever you owe. How about it Tony ? ”

“ Er—I’ll think about it.”

Bill nodded his approval. “ Pay ! Pay ! Pay ! You can’t get out of it ! ”

“ No ? How about Kendrick ? ”

“ He’ll be no exception. Think of the year’s slavery he endured before he could bring off his coup ! Think what he could have done—where he could have been to-day—had he applied the same energy to any honest pursuit ! ”

“ He’s living in luxury, in Mexico.”

“ Yes, for six months, perhaps.”

“ He won enough to support him the rest of his life.”

“ Lots of gamblers have done that, but somehow the money doesn’t last. Money made that way never lasts. Like the angels—the fallen angels—it has wings ! An honest man can call on the law to protect his property. Kendrick can’t. The moment the others find that out—in Mexico—what chance will he have ? ” Bill shook his head vigorously. “ No, of the two, I think Venner is the lucky one. He’s alive, and I’ll bet two to one this minute that Kendrick isn’t. He worked too hard for his money to give it up alive ; and in Mexico life is cheap—very cheap.”

“ Maybe,” said Tony ; “ maybe.” He thought hard for a minute. Then he turned to his friend. “ From the very beginning I’ve never understood why you’ve been so keenly interested in this affair. What was it ? Love of adventure ? ”

“ Not after six years of drifting about the country, old fellow.”

“ Then what was it ? ”

Bill permitted himself the luxury of a smile. “ As I told you this morning—it seems so long ago, doesn’t it ?—it was nothing but a friendly desire to save your reputation.”

“ My reputation,” repeated Tony incredulously.

“ That was all. You see, after you had exposed Terriss, it occurred to him that you were a pupil of mine, and he came straight to headquarters, with his troubles.”

“ He went to you ? ” gasped Tony.

“ That is the thought I am trying to convey,” Bill assented. “ Terriss was innocent. You know that now. He knew it then, and he convinced me like a shot. He wanted to be vindicated, but that wasn’t all ; he was dead sure that if the cards were marked you had marked them yourself, and he wanted to see you—you and

your friends—behind the bars! He is a clever man, a mighty quick-thinking man, and I'm pretty sure that if I hadn't taken the case he'd have turned the tables on you before now!"

Tony's face became purple. "But I'm innocent! You know I'm innocent!"

"Sometimes it's very hard to prove, Tony. Terriss was innocent, but he couldn't make you see it."

Tony swallowed hard. "My friends and I owe Terriss a handsome apology."

"You do!"

"I shall see that it is forthcoming. And, by the way, whatever fee you charge Terriss will be paid by me."

"Fair enough."

"Your expenses, too. Whatever they were. I will reimburse you."

Bill smiled. "Well, you heard me promise Venner a hundred dollars if he'd tell his story."

"I'll pay that."

"When you make out your cheque to Venner, make a mistake and slip in an extra nought before the decimal point."

"Why on earth should I do that?" protested Tony.

"No reason at all," said Bill, "except that I'm sentimental. For a hundred dollars—a contemptible hundred dollars—Venner turned his soul inside out. I'm going to improve his self-respect by convincing him that his soul is worth at least a thousand."

Tony nodded. "I get your point. The cheque will read a thousand. And now, your fee."

"That will come high."

"I expect that."

"Terriss expected it too, the quick-thinking devil! He insisted on your friends paying up because he wanted plenty of ready money on hand to satisfy me."

Tony smiled. His finances had taken a turn for the better since he had followed his friends' example and had become merely a spectator, and not a participant, in games of chance. His bank account had become plethoric, and the knowledge was pleasant.

"Bill," he said, "you can't frighten me. Name what you want."

"It will come hard."

"If it does, it's worth it."

"All right, Tony, here goes." Bill stretched out his hand. "Pay me fifty-two Angel-Backs—fifty-two marked cards—fifty-two

Fallen Angels. I'm going to nail them to the walls of my bedroom as a souvenir !”

AUTHOR'S NOTE :

The central episode of this story, extraordinary as it is, is founded on facts recounted by the celebrated Robert Houdin.

Bianco, a Spanish sharper, marked an immense number of playing-cards, resealed them in their original boxes, and sold them to clubs in Havana at bargain-counter prices. Following his cards to Cuba, he won large sums of money.

Everything went well until a second sharper, Laforcade, a Frenchman, wishing to mark cards for his own uses, took home a quantity, and, to his astonishment, discovered that they were already marked. Knowing of Bianco's sensational successes, Laforcade quickly satisfied himself that the Spaniard was the guilty man, and, instead of exposing him, invited him to share his winnings.

To this proposal Bianco reluctantly acceded, but, tiring of it after some months, disappeared. Laforcade, left to shift for himself, lacked Bianco's expertness, was detected cheating, and was arrested. At his trial it was proved that Laforcade had not marked the cards, and that he had not imported them ; it was impossible to prove that he was aware the cards were marked. The prosecution broke down, and Laforcade was acquitted.

In his turn, Laforcade vanished, and neither he nor Bianco was ever heard of again.

P. W.

Victor L. Whitechurch

SIR GILBERT MURRELL'S
PICTURE

from THRILLING STORIES OF THE RAILWAY

Pearson, 1912

The affair of the goods truck on the Didcot and Newbury branch of the Great Western Railway was of singular interest, and found a prominent place in Thorpe Hazell's note-book. It was owing partly to chance, and partly to Hazell's sagacity, that the

main incidents in the story were discovered, but he always declared that the chief interest to his mind was the unique method by which a very daring plan was carried out.

He was staying with a friend at Newbury at the time, and had taken his camera down with him, for he was a bit of an amateur photographer as well as book-lover, though his photos generally consisted of trains and engines. He had just come in from a morning's ramble with his camera slung over his shoulder, and was preparing to partake of two plasmon biscuits, when his friend met him in the hall.

"I say, Hazell," he began, "you're just the fellow they want here."

"What's up?" asked Hazell, taking off his camera and commencing some "exercises."

"I've just been down to the station. I know the station-master very well, and he tells me an awfully queer thing happened on the line last night."

"Where?"

"On the Didcot branch. It's a single line, you know, running through the Berkshire Downs to Didcot."

Hazell smiled, and went on whirling his arms round his head.

"Kind of you to give me the information," he said, "but I happen to know the line. But what's occurred?"

"Well, it appears a goods-train left Didcot last night bound through to Winchester, and that one of the waggons never arrived here at Newbury."

"Not very much in that," replied Hazell, still at his "exercises," "unless the waggon in question was behind the brake and the couplings snapped, in which case the next train along might have run into it."

"Oh, no. The waggon was in the middle of the train."

"Probably left in a siding by mistake," replied Hazell.

"But the station-master says that all the stations along the line have been wired to, and that it isn't at any of them."

"Very likely it never left Didcot."

"He declares there is no doubt about that."

"Well, you begin to interest me," replied Hazell, stopping his whirligigs and beginning to eat his plasmon. "There may be something in it, though very often a waggon is mislaid. But I'll go down to the station."

“ I’ll go with you, Hazell, and introduce you to the station-master. He has heard of your reputation.”

Ten minutes later they were in the station-master’s office, Hazell having re-slung his camera.

“ Very glad to meet you,” said that functionary, “ for this affair promises to be mysterious. *I can’t make it out at all.*”

“ Do you know what the truck contained ? ”

“ That’s just where the bother comes in, sir. It was valuable property. There’s a loan exhibition of pictures at Winchester next week, and this waggon was bringing down some of them from Leamington. They belong to Sir Gilbert Murrell—three of them, I believe—large pictures, and each in a separate packing-case.”

“ H’m—this sounds very funny. Are you *sure* the truck was on the train ? ”

“ Simpson, the brakesman, is here now, and I’ll send for him. Then you can hear the story in his own words.”

So the goods-guard appeared on the scene. Hazell looked at him narrowly, but there was nothing suspicious in his honest face.

“ I know the waggon was on the train when we left Didcot,” he said in answer to enquiries, “ and I noticed it at Upton, the next station, where we took a couple off. It was the fifth or sixth in front of my brake. I’m quite certain of that. We stopped at Compton to take up a cattle-truck, but I didn’t get out there. Then we ran right through to Newbury, without stopping at the other stations, and then I discovered that the waggon was not on the train. I thought very likely it might have been left at Upton or Compton by mistake, but I was wrong, for they say it isn’t there. That’s all I know about it, sir. A rum go, ain’t it ? ”

“ Extraordinary ! ” exclaimed Hazell. “ You must have made a mistake.”

“ No, sir, I’m sure I haven’t.”

“ Did the driver of the train notice anything ? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ Well, but the thing’s impossible,” said Hazell. “ A loaded waggon couldn’t have been spirited away. What time was it when you left Didcot ? ”

“ About eight o’clock, sir.”

“ Ah !—quite dark. You noticed nothing along the line ? ”

“ Nothing, sir.”

“ You were in your brake all the time, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes, sir—while we were running.”

At this moment there came a knock at the station-master's door and a porter entered.

"There's a passenger train just in from the Didcot branch," said the man, "and the driver reports that he saw a truck loaded with packing-cases in Churn siding."

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the brakesman. "Why, we ran through Churn without a stop—trains never do stop there except in camp time."

"Where is Churn?" asked Hazell, for once at a loss.

"It's merely a platform and a siding close to the camping ground between Upton and Compton," replied the station-master, "for the convenience of troops only, and very rarely used, except in the summer, when soldiers are encamped there."

"I should very much like to see the place, and as soon as possible," said Hazell.

"So you shall," replied the station-master. "A train will soon start on the branch. Inspector Hill shall go with you, and instruction shall be given to the driver to stop there, while a return train can pick you both up."

In less than an hour Hazell and Inspector Hill alighted at Churn. It is a lonely enough place, situated in a vast, flat basin of the Downs, scarcely relieved by a single tree, and far from all human habitation, with the exception of a lonely shepherd's cottage some half a mile away.

The "station" itself is only a single platform, with a shelter and a solitary siding, terminating in what is known in railway language as a "dead end"—that is, in this case, wooden buffers to stop any trucks. This siding runs off from the single line of rail at points from the Didcot direction of the line.

And in this siding was the lost truck, right against the "dead end," filled with three packing-cases, and labelled "Leamington to Winchester, via Newbury." There could be no doubt about it at all. But how it had got there from the middle of a train running through without a stop was a mystery even to the acute mind of Thorpe Hazell.

"Well," said the inspector, when they had gazed long enough at the truck, "we'd better have a look at the points. Come along."

There is not even a signal-box at this primitive station. The points are actuated by two levers in a ground frame, standing close by the side of the line, one lever unlocking and the other shifting the same points.

“How about these points?” said Hazell as they drew near. “You only use them so occasionally that I suppose they are kept out of action?”

“Certainly,” replied the inspector. “A block of wood is bolted down between the end of the point rail and the main rail, fixed as a wedge—ah! there it is, you see, quite untouched; and the levers themselves are locked—here’s the keyhole in the ground frame. This is the strangest thing I’ve ever come across, Mr. Hazell.”

Thorpe Hazell stood looking at the points and levers, sorely puzzled. They *must* have been worked to get that truck in the siding, he knew well. But how?

Suddenly his face lit up. Oil evidently had been used to loosen the nut of the bolt that fixed the wedge of wood. Then his eyes fell on the handle of one of the two levers, and a slight exclamation of joy escaped him.

“Look,” said the inspector at that moment, “it’s impossible to pull them off,” and he stretched out his hand towards a lever. To his astonishment Hazell seized him by the collar and dragged him back before he could touch it.

“I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed, “hope I’ve not hurt you, but I want to photograph those levers first, if you don’t mind.”

The inspector watched him rather sullenly as he fixed his camera on a folding tripod stand he had with him, only a few inches from the handle of one of the levers, and took two very careful photographs of it.

“Can’t see the use of that, sir,” growled the inspector. But Hazell vouchsafed no reply.

“Let him find it out for himself,” he thought.

Then he said aloud:

“I fancy they must have had that block out, inspector—and it’s evident the points must have been set to get the truck where it is. How it was done is a problem, but, if the doer of it was anything of a regular criminal, I think we might find *him*.”

“How?” asked the puzzled inspector.

“Ah,” was the response, “I’d rather not say at present. Now, I should very much like to know whether those pictures are intact?”

“We shall soon find that out,” replied the inspector, “for we’ll take the truck back with us.” And he commenced undoing the bolt with a spanner, after which he unlocked the levers.

"H'm—they work pretty freely," he remarked as he pulled one.

"Quite so," said Hazell, "they've been oiled recently."

There was an hour or so before the return train would pass, and Hazell occupied it by walking to the shepherd's cottage.

"I am hungry," he explained to the woman there, "and hunger is Nature's dictate for food. Can you oblige me with a couple of onions and a broomstick?"

And she talks to-day of the strange man who "kept a swingin' o' that there broomstick round 'is 'ead and then eat them onions as solemn as a judge."

The first thing Hazell did on returning to Newbury was to develop his photographs. The plates were dry enough by the evening for him to print one or two photos on gaslight-paper and to enclose the clearest of them with a letter to a Scotland Yard official whom he knew, stating that he would call for an answer, as he intended returning to town in a couple of days. The following evening he received a note from the station-master, which read :

"DEAR SIR,—I promised to let you know if the pictures in the cases on that truck were in any way tampered with. I have just received a report from Winchester by which I understand that they have been unpacked and carefully examined by the Committee of the Loan Exhibition. The Committee are perfectly satisfied that they have not been damaged or interfered with in any way, and that they have been received just as they left the owner's hands.

"We are still at a loss to account for the running of the waggon on to Churn siding or for the object in doing so. An official has been down from Paddington, and, at his request, we are not making the affair public—the goods having arrived in safety. I am sure you will observe confidence in this matter."

"More mysterious than ever," said Hazell to himself, "I can't understand it at all."

The next day he called at Scotland Yard and saw the official.

"I've had no difficulty with your little matter, you'll be glad to hear," he said. "We looked up our records and very soon spotted your man."

"Who is he?"

"His real name is Edgar Jeffreys, but we know him under several aliases. He's served four sentences for burglary and robbery

—the latter a daring theft from a train, so he's in your line, Mr. Hazell. What's he been up to, and how did you get that print?"

"Well," replied Hazell, "I don't quite know yet what he's been doing. But I should like to be able to find him if anything turns up. Never mind how I got the print—the affair is quite a private one at present, and nothing may come of it."

The official wrote an address on a bit of paper and handed it to Hazell.

"He's living there just now, under the name of Allen. We keep such men in sight, and I'll let you know if he moves."

When Hazell opened his paper the following morning he gave a cry of joy. And no wonder, for this is what he saw :

"MYSTERY OF A PICTURE

"Sir Gilbert Murrell and the Winchester Loan Exhibition

"An Extraordinary Charge

"The Committee of the Loan Exhibition of Pictures to be opened next week at Winchester are in a state of very natural excitement brought about by a strange charge that has been made against them by Sir Gilbert Murrell.

"Sir Gilbert, who lives at Leamington, is the owner of several very valuable pictures, among them being the celebrated 'Holy Family,' by Velazquez. This picture, with two others, was despatched by him from Leamington to be exhibited at Winchester, and yesterday he journeyed to that city in order to make himself satisfied with the hanging arrangements, as he had particularly stipulated that 'The Holy Family' was to be placed in a prominent position.

"The picture in question was standing on the floor of the gallery, leaning against a pillar, when Sir Gilbert arrived with some representatives of the Committee.

"Nothing occurred till he happened to walk behind the canvas, when he astounded those present by saying that the picture was not his at all, declaring that a copy had been substituted, and stating that he was absolutely certain on account of certain private marks of his at the back of the canvas, which were quite indecipherable, and which were now missing. He admitted that the painting itself in every way resembled his picture, and that it was the cleverest forgery he had ever seen ;

but a very painful scene took place, the hanging Committee stating that the picture had been received by them from the railway company just as it stood.

“At present the whole affair is a mystery, but Sir Gilbert insisted most emphatically to our correspondent, who was able to see him, that the picture was certainly not his, and said that, as the original is extremely valuable, he intends holding the Committee responsible for the substitution which, he declares, has taken place.”

It was evident to Hazell that the papers had not, as yet, got hold of the mysterious incident at Churn. As a matter of fact, the railway company had kept that affair strictly to themselves, and the loan Committee knew nothing of what had happened on the line.

But Hazell saw that enquiries would be made, and determined to probe the mystery without delay. He saw at once that if there was any truth in Sir Gilbert's story the substitution had taken place in that lonely siding at Churn. He was staying at his London flat, and five minutes after he had read the paragraph had called a hansom and was being hurried off to a friend of his who was well known in art circles as a critic and art historian.

“I can tell you exactly what you want to know,” said he, “for I've only just been looking it up, so as to have an article in the evening papers on it. There was a famous copy of the picture of Velazquez, said to have been painted by a pupil of his, and for some years there was quite a controversy among the respective owners as to which was the genuine one—just as there is to-day about a Madonna belonging to a gentleman at St. Moritz, but which a Vienna gallery also claims to possess.

“However, in the case of ‘The Holy Family,’ the dispute was ultimately settled once and for all years ago, and, undoubtedly, Sir Gilbert Murrell held the genuine picture. What became of the copy no one knows. For twenty years all trace of it has been lost. There—that's all I can tell you. I shall pad it out a bit in my article, and I must get to work on it at once. Good-bye!”

“One moment—where was the copy last seen?”

“Oh! the old Earl of Ringmere had it last, but when he knew it to be a forgery he is said to have sold it for a mere song, all interest in it being lost, you see.”

“Let me see, he's a very old man, isn't he?”

“Yes—nearly eighty—a perfect enthusiast on pictures still, though.”

“Only *said* to have sold it,” muttered Hazell to himself, as he left the house; “that’s very vague—and there’s no knowing what these enthusiasts will do when they’re really bent on a thing. Sometimes they lose all sense of honesty. I’ve known fellows actually rob a friend’s collection of stamps or butterflies. What if there’s something in it? By George, what an awful scandal there would be! It seems to me that if such a scandal were prevented I’d be thanked all round. Anyhow, I’ll have a shot at it on spec. And I *must* find out how that truck was run off the line.”

When once Hazell was on the track of a railway mystery he never let a moment slip by. In an hour’s time, he was at the address given him at Scotland Yard. On his way there he took a card from his case—a blank one—and wrote on it, “From the Earl of Ringmere.” This he put into an envelope.

“It’s a bold stroke,” he said to himself, “but, if there’s anything in it, it’s worth trying.”

So he asked for Allen. The woman who opened the door looked at him suspiciously, and said she didn’t think Mr. Allen was in.

“Give him this envelope,” replied Hazell. In a couple of minutes she returned, and asked him to follow her.

A short, wiry-looking man, with sharp, evil-looking eyes, stood in the room waiting for him and looking at him suspiciously.

“Well,” he snapped, “what is it—what do you want?”

“I come on behalf of the Earl of Ringmere. You will know that when I mention Churn,” replied Hazell, playing his trump card boldly.

“Well,” went on the man, “what about that?”

Hazell wheeled round, locked the door suddenly, put the key in his pocket, and then faced his man. The latter darted forward, but Hazell had a revolver pointing at him in a twinkling.

“You—detective!”

“No, I’m not—I told you I came on behalf of the Earl—that looks like hunting up matters for his sake, doesn’t it?”

“What does the old fool mean?” asked Jeffreys.

“Oh! I see you know all about it. Now, listen to me quietly, and you may come to a little reason. You changed that picture at Churn the other night.”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” sneered the other, but less defiantly.

"Well, I do—but not quite all. You were foolish to leave your traces on that lever, eh?"

"How did I do that?" exclaimed the man, giving himself away.

"You'd been dabbling about with oil, you see, and you left your thumb-print on the handle. I photographed it, and they recognised it at Scotland Yard. Quite simple."

Jeffreys swore beneath his breath.

"I wish you'd tell me what you mean," he said.

"Certainly, I expect you've been well paid for this little job."

"If I have, I'm not going to take any risks. I told the old man so. He's worse than I am—he put me up to getting the picture. Let him take his chance when it comes out. I suppose he wants to keep his name out of it—that's why you're here."

"You're not quite right. Now, just listen to me. You're a villain, and you deserve to suffer; but I'm acting in a purely private capacity, and I fancy if I can get the original picture back to its owner that it will be better for all parties to hush this affair up. Has the old Earl got it?"

"No, not yet," admitted the other, "he was too artful. But he knows where it is, and so do I."

"Ah—now you're talking sense! Look here! You make a clean breast of it, and I'll take it down on paper. You shall swear to the truth of your statement before a commissioner for oaths—he need not see the actual confession. I shall hold this in case it is necessary; but, if you help me to get the picture back to Sir Gilbert, I don't think it will be."

After a little more conversation, Jeffreys explained. Before he did so, however, Hazell had taken a bottle of milk and a hunch of wholemeal bread from his pocket, and calmly proceeded to perform "exercises" and then to eat his "lunch" while Jeffreys told the following story:

"It was the old Earl who did it. How he got hold of me doesn't matter; perhaps I got hold of him—maybe I put him up to it—but that's not the question. He'd kept that forged picture of his in a lumber room for years, but he always had his eye on the genuine one. He paid a long price for the forgery, and he got to think that he *ought* to have the original. But there, he's mad on pictures.

"Well, as I say, he kept the forgery out of sight and let folk think he'd sold it, but all the time he was in hopes of getting it changed somehow for the original.

"Then I came along and undertook the job for him. There

were three of us in it, for it was a ticklish business. We found out by what train the picture was to travel—that was easy enough. I got hold of a key to unlock that ground frame, and the screwing off of the bolt was a mere nothing. I oiled the points well so that the thing should work as I wanted it to.

“One pal was with me—in the siding, ready to clap on the side-brake when the truck was running in. I was to work the points, and my other pal, who had the most awkward job of all, was on the goods train—under a tarpaulin in a truck. He had two lengths of very stout rope with a hook at each end of them.

“When the train left Upton, he started his job. Goods trains travel very slowly, and there was plenty of time. Counting from the back brake-van, the truck we wanted to run off was No. 5. First he hooked No. 4 truck to No. 6, fixing the hook at the side of the end of both trucks, and having the slack in his hand, coiled up.

“Then, when the train ran down a bit of a decline, he uncoupled No. 5 from No. 4, standing on No. 5 to do it. That was easy enough, for he'd taken a coupling staff with him; then he paid out the slack till it was tight. Next he hooked the second rope from No. 5 to No. 6, uncoupled No. 5 from No. 6, and paid out the slack of the second rope.

“Now you can see what happened. The last few trucks of the train were being drawn by a long rope reaching from No. 4 to No. 6, and leaving a space in between. In the middle of this space No. 5 ran, drawn by a short rope from No. 6. My pal stood on No. 6, with a sharp knife in his hand.

“The rest was easy. I held the lever, close by the side of the line, coming forward to it as soon as the engine passed. The instant the space appeared after No. 6 I pulled it over, and No. 5 took the siding points, while my pal cut the rope at the same moment.

“Directly the truck had run by and off I reversed the lever so that the rest of the train following took the main line. There is a decline before Compton, and the last four trucks came running down to the main body of the train, while my pal hauled in the slack and finally coupled No. 4 to No. 6 when they came together. He jumped from the train as it ran very slowly into Compton. That's how it was done.”

Hazell's eyes sparkled.

“It's the cleverest thing I've heard of on the line,” he said.

“Think so? Well, it wanted some handling. The next thing

was to unscrew the packing-case, take the picture out of the frame and put the forgery we'd brought with us in its place. That took us some time, but there was no fear of interruption in that lonely part. Then I took the picture off—rolling it up first—and hid it. The old Earl insisted on this. I was to tell him where it was, then he was going to wait for a few weeks and get it himself."

"Where did you hide it?"

"You're sure you're going to hush this up?"

"You'd have been in charge long ago if I were not."

"Well, there's a path from Churn to East Ilsley across the downs, and on the right hand of that path is an old sheep well—quite dry. It's down there. You can easily find the string if you look for it—fixed near the top."

Hazell took down the man's confession, which was duly attested. His conscience told him that perhaps he ought to have taken stronger measures.

"I told you I was merely a private individual," said Hazell to Sir Gilbert Murrell. "I have acted in a purely private capacity in bringing you your picture."

Sir Gilbert looked from the canvas to the calm face of Hazell.

"Who are you, sir?" he asked.

"Well, I rather aspire to be a book-collector; you may have read my little monogram on *Jacobean Bindings*?"

"No," said Sir Gilbert, "I have not had that pleasure. But I must enquire further into this. How did you get this picture? Where was it—who——?"

"Sir Gilbert," broke in Hazell, "I could tell you the whole truth, of course. I am not in any way to blame myself. By chance, as much as anything else, I discovered how your picture had been stolen and where it was."

"But I want to know all about it. I shall prosecute—I——"

"I think not. Now, do you remember where the forged picture was seen last?"

"Yes; the Earl of Ringmere had it—he sold it."

"Did he?"

"Eh?"

"What if he kept it all this time?" said Hazell, with a peculiar look.

There was a long silence.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Gilbert at length. "You don't

mean *that*. Why, he has one foot in the grave—a very old man—I was dining with him only a fortnight ago.”

“ Ah ! Well, I think you are content now, Sir Gilbert ? ”

“ It is terrible—terrible ! I have the picture back, but I wouldn't have the scandal known for worlds.”

“ It never need be,” replied Hazell. “ You will make it all right with the Winchester people ? ”

“ Yes—yes—even if I have to admit I was mistaken, and let the forgery stay through the exhibition.”

“ I think that would be the best way,” replied Hazell, who never regretted his action.

“ Of course, Jeffreys ought to have been punished,” he said to himself ; “ but it was a clever idea—a clever idea ! ”

“ May I offer you some lunch ? ” asked Sir Gilbert.

“ Thank you ; but I am a vegetarian, and——”

“ I think my cook could arrange something ; let me ring.”

“ It is very good of you, but I ordered a dish of lentils and a salad at the station restaurant. But if you will allow me just to go through my physical training ante-luncheon exercises here, it would save me the trouble of a more or less public display at the station.”

“ Certainly,” replied the rather bewildered baronet ; whereupon Hazell threw off his coat and commenced whirling his arms like a windmill.

“ Digestion should be considered *before* a meal,” he explained.

G. K. Chesterton

THE HAMMER OF GOD

from THE INNOCENCE OF FATHER BROWN

Cassell, 1911

The little village of Bohun Beacon was perched on a hill so steep that the tall spire of its church seemed only like the peak of a small mountain. At the foot of the church stood a smithy, generally red with fires and always littered with hammers and scraps of iron ; opposite to this, over a rude cross of cobbled paths, was “ The Blue Boar,” the only inn of the place. It was upon this

crossway, in the lifting of a leaden and silver daybreak, that two brothers met in the street and spoke ; though one was beginning the day and the other finishing it. The Rev. and Hon. Wilfred Bohun was very devout, and was making his way to some austere exercises of prayer or contemplation at dawn. Colonel the Hon. Norman Bohun, his elder brother, was by no means devout, and was sitting in evening dress on the bench outside "The Blue Boar," drinking what the philosophic observer was free to regard either as his last glass on Tuesday or his first on Wednesday. The colonel was not particular.

The Bohuns were one of the very few aristocratic families really dating from the Middle Ages, and their pennon had actually seen Palestine. But it is a great mistake to suppose that such houses stand high in chivalric tradition. Few except the poor preserve traditions. Aristocrats live not in traditions but in fashions. The Bohuns had been Mohocks under Queen Anne and Mashers under Queen Victoria. But like more than one of the really ancient houses, they had rotted in the last two centuries into mere drunkards and dandy degenerates, till there had even come a whisper of insanity. Certainly there was something hardly human about the colonel's wolfish pursuit of pleasure, and his chronic resolution not to go home till morning had a touch of the hideous clarity of insomnia. He was a tall, fine animal, elderly, but with hair still startlingly yellow. He would have looked merely blond and leonine, but his blue eyes were sunk so deep in his face that they looked black. They were a little too close together. He had very long yellow moustaches ; on each side of them a fold or furrow from nostril to jaw, so that a sneer seemed cut into his face. Over his evening clothes he wore a curious pale yellow coat that looked more like a very light dressing-gown than an overcoat, and on the back of his head was stuck an extraordinary broad-brimmed hat of a bright green colour, evidently some oriental curiosity caught up at random. He was proud of appearing in such incongruous attires—proud of the fact that he always made them look congruous.

His brother the curate had also the yellow hair and the elegance, but he was buttoned up to the chin in black, and his face was clean-shaven, cultivated, and a little nervous. He seemed to live for nothing but his religion ; but there were some who said (notably the blacksmith, who was a Presbyterian) that it was a love of Gothic architecture rather than of God, and that his haunting of

the church like a ghost was only another and purer turn of the almost morbid thirst for beauty which sent his brother raging after women and wine. This charge was doubtful, while the man's practical piety was indubitable. Indeed, the charge was mostly an ignorant misunderstanding of the love of solitude and secret prayer, and was founded on his being often found kneeling, not before the altar, but in peculiar places, in the crypts or gallery, or even in the belfry. He was at the moment about to enter the church through the yard of the smithy, but stopped and frowned a little as he saw his brother's cavernous eyes staring in the same direction. On the hypothesis that the colonel was interested in the church he did not waste any speculations. There only remained the blacksmith's shop, and though the blacksmith was a Puritan and none of his people, Wilfred Bohun had heard some scandals about a beautiful and rather celebrated wife. He flung a suspicious look across the shed, and the colonel stood up laughing to speak to him.

"Good morning, Wilfred," he said. "Like a good landlord I am watching sleeplessly over my people. I am going to call on the blacksmith."

Wilfred looked at the ground, and said: "The blacksmith is out. He is over at Greenford."

"I know," answered the other with silent laughter; "that is why I am calling on him."

"Norman," said the cleric, with his eye on a pebble in the road, "are you ever afraid of thunderbolts?"

"What do you mean?" asked the colonel. "Is your hobby meteorology?"

"I mean," said Wilfred, without looking up, "do you ever think that God might strike you in the street?"

"I beg your pardon," said the colonel; "I see your hobby is folk-lore."

"I know your hobby is blasphemy," retorted the religious man, stung in the one live place of his nature. "But if you do not fear God, you have good reason to fear man."

The elder raised his eyebrows politely. "Fear man?" he said.

"Barnes the blacksmith is the biggest and strongest man for forty miles round," said the clergyman sternly. "I know you are no coward or weakling, but he could throw you over the wall."

This struck home, being true, and the lowering line by mouth and nostril darkened and deepened. For a moment he stood with the heavy sneer on his face. But in an instant Colonel Bohun had

recovered his own cruel good humour and laughed, showing two dog-like front teeth under his yellow moustache. "In that case, my dear Wilfred," he said quite carelessly, "it was wise for the last of the Bohuns to come out partially in armour."

And he took off the queer round hat covered with green, showing that it was lined within with steel. Wilfred recognised it indeed as a light Japanese or Chinese helmet torn down from a trophy that hung in the old family hall.

"It was the first hat to hand," explained his brother airily; "always the nearest hat—and the nearest woman."

"The blacksmith is away at Greenford," said Wilfred quietly; "the time of his return is unsettled."

And with that he turned and went into the church with bowed head, crossing himself like one who wishes to be quit of an unclean spirit. He was anxious to forget such grossness in the cool twilight of his tall Gothic cloisters; but on that morning it was fated that his still round of religious exercises should be everywhere arrested by small shocks. As he entered the church, hitherto always empty at that hour, a kneeling figure rose hastily to its feet and came towards the full daylight of the doorway. When the curate saw it he stood still with surprise. For the early worshipper was none other than the village idiot, a nephew of the blacksmith, one who neither would nor could care for the church or for anything else. He was always called "Mad Joe," and seemed to have no other name; he was a dark, strong, slouching lad, with a heavy white face, dark straight hair, and a mouth always open. As he passed the priest, his moon-calf countenance gave no hint of what he had been doing or thinking of. He had never been known to pray before. What sort of prayers was he saying now? Extraordinary prayers surely.

Wilfred Bohun stood rooted to the spot long enough to see the idiot go out into the sunshine, and even to see his dissolute brother hail him with a sort of avuncular jocularly. The last thing he saw was the colonel throwing pennies at the open mouth of Joe, with the serious appearance of trying to hit it.

This ugly sunlight picture of the stupidity and cruelty of the earth sent the ascetic finally to his prayers for purification and new thoughts. He went up to a pew in the gallery, which brought him under a coloured window which he loved and always quieted his spirit; a blue window with an angel carrying lilies. There he began to think less about the half-wit, with his livid face and mouth like

a fish. He began to think less of his evil brother, pacing like a lean lion in his horrible hunger. He sank deeper and deeper into those cold and sweet colours of silver blossoms and sapphire sky.

In this place half an hour afterwards he was found by Gibbs, the village cobbler, who had been sent for him in some haste. He got to his feet with promptitude, for he knew that no small matter would have brought Gibbs into such a place at all. The cobbler was, as in many villages, an atheist, and his appearance in church was a shade more extraordinary than Mad Joe's. It was a morning of theological enigmas.

"What is it?" asked Wilfred Bohun rather stiffly, but putting out a trembling hand for his hat.

The atheist spoke in a tone that, coming from him, was quite startlingly respectful, and even, as it were, huskily sympathetic.

"You must excuse me, sir," he said in a hoarse whisper, "but we didn't think it right not to let you know at once. I'm afraid a rather dreadful thing has happened, sir. I'm afraid your brother——"

Wilfred clenched his frail hands. "What devilry has he done now?" he cried in involuntary passion.

"Why, sir," said the cobbler, coughing, "I'm afraid he's done nothing, and won't do anything. I'm afraid he's done for. You had really better come down, sir."

The curate followed the cobbler down a short winding stair, which brought them out at an entrance rather higher than the street. Bohun saw the tragedy in one glance, flat underneath him like a plan. In the yard of the smithy were standing five or six men mostly in black, one in an inspector's uniform. They included the doctor, the Presbyterian minister, and the priest from the Roman Catholic chapel, to which the blacksmith's wife belonged. The latter was speaking to her, indeed, very rapidly, in an undertone, as she, a magnificent woman with red-gold hair, was sobbing blindly on a bench. Between these two groups, and just clear of the main heap of hammers, lay a man in evening dress, spread-eagled and flat on his face. From the height above Wilfred could have sworn to every item of his costume and appearance, down to the Bohun rings upon his fingers; but the skull was only a hideous splash, like a star of blackness and blood.

Wilfred Bohun gave but one glance, and ran down the steps into the yard. The doctor, who was the family physician, saluted him, but he scarcely took any notice. He could only stammer out:

"My brother is dead. What does it mean? What is this horrible mystery?" There was an unhappy silence; and then the cobbler, the most outspoken man present, answered: "Plenty of horror, sir," he said, "but not much mystery."

"What do you mean?" asked Wilfred, with a white face.

"It's plain enough," answered Gibbs. "There is only one man for forty miles round that could have struck such a blow as that, and he's the man that had most reason to."

"We must not prejudge anything," put in the doctor, a tall, black-bearded man, rather nervously; "but it is competent for me to corroborate what Mr. Gibbs says about the nature of the blow, sir; it is an incredible blow. Mr. Gibbs says that only one man in this district could have done it. I should have said myself that nobody could have done it."

A shudder of superstition went through the slight figure of the curate. "I can hardly understand," he said.

"Mr. Bohun," said the doctor in a low voice, "metaphors literally fail me. It is inadequate to say that the skull was smashed to bits like an egg-shell. Fragments of bone were driven into the body and the ground like bullets into a mud wall. It was the hand of a giant."

He was silent a moment, looking grimly through his glasses; then he added: "The thing has one advantage—that it clears most people of suspicion at one stroke. If you or I or any normally made man in the country were accused of this crime, we should be acquitted as an infant would be acquitted of stealing the Nelson Column."

"That's what I say," repeated the cobbler obstinately; "there's only one man that could have done it, and he's the man that would have done it. Where's Simeon Barnes, the blacksmith?"

"He's over at Greenford," faltered the curate.

"More likely over in France," muttered the cobbler.

"No; he is in neither of those places," said a small and colourless voice, which came from the little Roman priest who had joined the group. "As a matter of fact, he is coming up the road at this moment."

The little priest was not an interesting man to look at, having stubbly brown hair and a round and stolid face. But if he had been as splendid as Apollo no one would have looked at him at that moment. Everyone turned round and peered at the pathway which wound across the plain below, along which was indeed walking,

at his own huge stride and with a hammer on his shoulder, Simeon the smith. He was a bony and gigantic man, with deep, dark, sinister eyes and a dark chin beard. He was walking and talking quietly with two other men ; and though he was never specially cheerful, he seemed quite at his ease.

“ My God ! ” cried the atheistic cobbler, “ and there’s the hammer he did it with.”

“ No,” said the inspector, a sensible-looking man with a sandy moustache, speaking for the first time. “ There’s the hammer he did it with over there by the church wall. We have left it and the body exactly as they are.”

All glanced round, and the short priest went across and looked down in silence at the tool where it lay. It was one of the smallest and the lightest of the hammers, and would not have caught the eye among the rest ; but on the iron edge of it were blood and yellow hair.

After a silence the short priest spoke without looking up, and there was a new note in his dull voice. “ Mr. Gibbs was hardly right,” he said, “ in saying that there is no mystery. There is at least the mystery of why so big a man should attempt so big a blow with so little a hammer.”

“ Oh, never mind that,” cried Gibbs, in a fever. “ What are we to do with Simeon Barnes ? ”

“ Leave him alone,” said the priest quietly. “ He is coming here of himself. I know those two men with him. They are very good fellows from Greenford, and they have come over about the Presbyterian chapel.”

Even as he spoke the tall smith swung round the corner of the church, and strode into his own yard. Then he stood there quite still, and the hammer fell from his hand. The inspector, who had preserved impenetrable propriety, immediately went up to him.

“ I won’t ask you, Mr. Barnes,” he said, “ whether you know anything about what has happened here. You are not bound to say. I hope you don’t know, and that you will be able to prove it. But I must go through the form of arresting you in the King’s name for the murder of Colonel Norman Bohun.”

“ You are not bound to say anything,” said the cobbler in officious excitement. “ They’ve got to prove everything. They haven’t proved yet that it is Colonel Bohun, with the head all smashed up like that.”

“ That won’t wash,” said the doctor aside to the priest. “ That’s

out of the detective stories. I was the colonel's medical man, and I knew his body better than he did. He had very fine hands, but quite peculiar ones. The second and third fingers were the same in length. Oh, that's the colonel right enough."

As he glanced at the brained corpse upon the ground the iron eyes of the motionless blacksmith followed them and rested there also.

"Is Colonel Bohun dead?" said the smith quite calmly. "Then he's damned."

"Don't say anything! Oh, don't say anything," cried the atheist cobbler, dancing about in an ecstasy of admiration of the English legal system. For no man is such a legalist as the good Secularist.

The blacksmith turned on him over his shoulder the august face of a fanatic.

"It's well for you infidels to dodge like foxes because the world's law favours you," he said; "but God guards His own in His pocket, as you shall see this day."

Then he pointed to the colonel and said: "When did this dog die in his sins?"

"Moderate your language," said the doctor.

"Moderate the Bible's language, and I'll moderate mine. When did he die?"

"I saw him alive at six o'clock this morning," stammered Wilfred Bohun.

"God is good," said the smith. "Mr. Inspector, I have not the slightest objection to being arrested. It is you who may object to arresting me. I don't mind leaving the court without a stain on my character. You do mind, perhaps, leaving the court with a bad set-back in your career."

The solid inspector for the first time looked at the blacksmith with a lively eye; as did everybody else, except the short, strange priest, who was still looking down at the little hammer that had dealt the dreadful blow.

"There are two men standing outside this shop," went on the blacksmith with ponderous lucidity, "good tradesmen in Greenford whom you all know, who will swear that they saw me from before midnight till daybreak and long after in the committee-room of our Revival Mission, which sits all night, we save souls so fast. In Greenford itself twenty people could swear to me for all that time. If I were a heathen, Mr. Inspector, I would let you walk on to your downfall. But as a Christian man I feel bound to give

you your chance, and ask you whether you will hear my alibi now or in court."

The inspector seemed for the first time disturbed, and said, "Of course I should be glad to clear you altogether now."

The smith walked out of his yard with the same long and easy stride, and returned to his two friends from Greenford, who were indeed friends of nearly everyone present. Each of them said a few words which no one ever thought of disbelieving. When they had spoken, the innocence of Simeon stood up as solid as the great church above them.

One of those silences struck the group which are more strange and insufferable than any speech. Madly, in order to make conversation, the curate said to the Catholic priest:

"You seem very much interested in that hammer, Father Brown."

"Yes, I am," said Father Brown; "why is it such a small hammer?"

The doctor swung round on him.

"By George, that's true," he cried; "who would use a little hammer with ten larger hammers lying about?"

Then he lowered his voice in the curate's ear and said: "Only the kind of person that can't lift a large hammer. It is not a question of force or courage between the sexes. It's a question of lifting power in the shoulders. A bold woman could commit ten murders with a light hammer and never turn a hair. She could not kill a beetle with a heavy one."

Wilfred Bohun was staring at him with a sort of hypnotised horror, while Father Brown listened with his head a little on one side, really interested and attentive. The doctor went on with more hissing emphasis:

"Why do these idiots always assume that the only person who hates the wife's lover is the wife's husband? Nine times out of ten the person who most hates the wife's lover is the wife. Who knows what insolence or treachery he had shown her—look there?"

He made a momentary gesture towards the red-haired woman on the bench. She had lifted her head at last and the tears were drying on her splendid face. But the eyes were fixed on the corpse with an electric glare that had in it something of idiocy.

The Rev. Wilfred Bohun made a limp gesture as if waving away all desire to know; but Father Brown, dusting off his sleeve some ashes blown from the furnace, spoke in his indifferent way.

“You are like so many doctors,” he said; “your mental science is really suggestive. It is your physical science that is utterly impossible. I agree that the woman wants to kill the co-respondent much more than the petitioner does. And I agree that a woman will always pick up a small hammer instead of a big one. But the difficulty is one of physical impossibility. No woman ever born could have smashed a man’s skull out flat like that.” Then he added reflectively, after a pause: “These people haven’t grasped the whole of it. The man was actually wearing an iron helmet, and the blow scattered it like broken glass. Look at that woman. Look at her arms.”

Silence held them all up again, and then the doctor said rather sulkily: “Well, I may be wrong; there are objections to everything. But I stick to the main point. No man but an idiot would pick up that little hammer if he could use a big hammer.”

With that the lean and quivering hands of Wilfred Bohun went up to his head and seemed to clutch his scanty yellow hair. After an instant they dropped, and he cried: “That was the word I wanted; you have said the word.”

Then he continued, mastering his discomposure: “The words you said were, ‘No man but an idiot would pick up the small hammer.’”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “Well?”

“Well,” said the curate, “no man but an idiot did.” The rest stared at him with eyes arrested and riveted, and he went on in a febrile and feminine agitation.

“I am a priest,” he cried unsteadily, “and a priest should be no shedder of blood. I—I mean that he should bring no one to the gallows. And I thank God that I see the criminal clearly now—because he is a criminal who cannot be brought to the gallows.”

“You will not denounce him?” inquired the doctor.

“He would not be hanged if I did denounce him,” answered Wilfred with a wild but curiously happy smile. “When I went into the church this morning I found a madman praying there—that poor Joe, who has been wrong all his life. God knows what he prayed; but with such strange folk it is not incredible to suppose that their prayers are all upside down. Very likely a lunatic would pray before killing a man. When I last saw poor Joe he was with my brother. My brother was mocking him.”

“By Jove!” cried the doctor, “this is talking at last. But how do you explain——”

The Rev. Wilfred was almost trembling with the excitement of his own glimpse of the truth. "Don't you see ; don't you see," he cried feverishly ; " that is the only theory that covers both the queer things, that answers both the riddles. The two riddles are the little hammer and the big blow. The smith might have struck the big blow, but would not have chosen the little hammer. His wife would have chosen the little hammer, but she could not have struck the big blow. But the madman might have done both. As for the little hammer—why, he was mad and might have picked up anything. And for the big blow, have you never heard, doctor, that a maniac in his paroxysm may have the strength of ten men?"

The doctor drew a deep breath and then said, " By golly, I believe you've got it."

Father Brown had fixed his eyes on the speaker so long and steadily as to prove that his large grey, ox-like eyes were not quite so insignificant as the rest of his face. When silence had fallen he said with marked respect : " Mr. Bohun, yours is the only theory yet propounded which holds water every way and is essentially unassailable. I think, therefore, that you deserve to be told, on my positive knowledge, that it is not the true one." And with that the old little man walked away and stared again at the hammer.

" That fellow seems to know more than he ought to," whispered the doctor peevishly to Wilfred. " Those popish priests are deucedly sly."

" No, no," said Bohun, with a sort of wild fatigue. " It was the lunatic. It was the lunatic."

The group of the two clerics and the doctor had fallen away from the more official group containing the inspector and the man he had arrested. Now, however, that their own party had broken up, they heard voices from the others. The priest looked up quietly and then looked down again as he heard the blacksmith say in a loud voice :

" I hope I've convinced you, Mr. Inspector. I'm a strong man, as you say, but I couldn't have flung my hammer bang here from Greenford. My hammer hasn't any wings that it should come flying half a mile over hedges and fields."

The inspector laughed amicably and said : " No, I think you can be considered out of it, though it's one of the rummiest coincidences I ever saw. I can only ask you to give us all the assistance you can in finding a man as big and strong as yourself. By George !

you might be useful, if only to hold him ! I suppose you yourself have no guess at the man ? ”

“ I may have a guess,” said the pale smith, “ but it is not at a man.” Then, seeing the scared eyes turn towards his wife on the bench, he put his huge hand on her shoulder and said : “ Nor a woman either.”

“ What do you mean ? ” asked the inspector jocularly. “ You don’t think cows use hammers, do you ? ”

“ I think no thing of flesh held that hammer,” said the blacksmith in a stifled voice ; “ mortally speaking, I think the man died alone.”

Wilfred made a sudden forward movement and peered at him with burning eyes.

“ Do you mean to say, Barnes,” came the sharp voice of the cobbler, “ that the hammer jumped up of itself and knocked the man down ? ”

“ Oh, you gentlemen may stare and snigger,” cried Simeon ; “ you clergymen who tell us on Sunday in what a stillness the Lord smote Sennacherib. I believe that One who walks invisible in every house defended the honour of mine, and laid the defiler dead before the door of it. I believe the force in that blow was just the force there is in earthquakes, and no force less.”

Wilfred said, with a voice utterly undescribable : “ I told Norman myself to beware of the thunderbolt.”

“ That agent is outside my jurisdiction,” said the inspector with a slight smile.

“ You are not outside His,” answered the smith ; “ see you to it,” and, turning his broad back, he went into the house.

The shaken Wilfred was led away by Father Brown, who had an easy and friendly way with him. “ Let us get out of this horrid place, Mr. Bohun,” he said. “ May I look inside your church ? I hear it’s one of the oldest in England. We take some interest, you know,” he added with a comical grimace, “ in old English churches.”

Wilfred Bohun did not smile, for humour was never his strong point. But he nodded rather eagerly, being only too ready to explain the Gothic splendours to someone more likely to be sympathetic than the Presbyterian blacksmith or the atheist cobbler.

“ By all means,” he said ; “ let us go in at this side.” And he led the way into the high side entrance at the top of the flight of